



The Tarandus' Bite by Matias Travieso-Diaz - March 9

The Tarandus is as bigge as an oxe, with a head not unlike to a stagges, but that it is greater, namely, carrying braunched hornes: cloven hoofed, and his haire as deepe as is the Beares.... He taketh the colour of all trees, shrubs, plants, flowers, and places wherein he lieth when he retireth for feare; and therefore seldome is he caught.

C. Plinius Secundus, *The History of the World*, Book VIII

As a diplomat, I have traveled to all corners of the known world at the behest of my liege, the Emperor. The following experience took place during my recent trip into the accursed land of the Scythians.

The Scythians are a nomadic people that dwell in the grassy, treeless lands that extend in all directions from the northern shore of the Pontus Euxinus. They have no cities but live in wagons and tents, thus I cannot name where this story occurred. The best I can say is that my encounter took place north of the range of the Kaukasos mountains.

I was traveling on horseback and, after crossing the mountains, found myself coming to a tent and wagon encampment by a river, holding a host of fully armed men carrying their customary bows and arrows, plus other weapons. There were numerous heads of cattle and horses under the care of the tribe's women, since men spent most of their lives on horseback, making war against other races of barbarians and even, at times, against civilized people.

The chieftain of this settlement was away on campaign, so I was received by one of the leaders in his cohort, a man by the name of Lykos, who greeted me amiably once I indicated that I was an envoy of the Emperor, who is the Scythians' overlord. Lykos escorted me to the chieftain's wagon, which was then unoccupied. There, he began serving me pieces of uncooked horse meat and washing them down with kumys (fermented milk liquor) and undiluted red wine, which we drank out of the tops of enemies' skulls that had been made into drinking bowls. As we ate and drank, he related tales of the lives of the members of the tribe and their military conquests.

We both became somewhat inebriated, he far more than I. At one point, Lykos declared: "I rose from my early life as a low-born serf to become the right-hand man of our chieftain. My

ascension was a reward for an act of personal sacrifice I performed. It was a hard task, but I undertook it for the good of our people.”

“What sacrifice was that?”

He answered my question with one of his own: “Have you ever heard of the tarandus?”

I shook my head.

“A tarandus is an animal that resembles a big bull, with a head like a stag’s, crowned by large, sharp, branched horns. It has cloven feet, glowing red eyes, long thick hair like that of a bear, and a skin almost as hard as armor. Its main peculiarity is that it adopts the color of the things that surround it, so that it is essentially invisible unless it chooses to display a contrasting color.”

“That seems like a very interesting beast” I replied. “Are they friendly?”

He sighed: “Not at all.” Then he continued: “Several years ago, through a caprice of some evil spirit, a fearsome tarandus appeared in our land that was unlike any other. It was even larger and more powerful than those of its kind, and when it came upon our encampments it would attack and devour our horses and cattle, leaving half-eaten carcasses strewn all over the fields. Our men organized hunting parties but were unable to slay the beast because of the difficulty in seeing the tarandus until the monster stood right next to the hunters, ready to attack them. We lost many brave warriors that way.”

“So, what did you do?”

“Our priests opined that a deliberate human sacrifice would be necessary to appease the tarandus and perhaps drive him away. That created a problem, because nobody wished to offer his or her life to the beast.”

“The candidate selection remained unresolved until someone mentioned my name. I was looked down upon by the members of our cohort due to my low status and it was considered expedient to offer me, so I was asked to volunteer for the sacrifice.”

“Did you consent?”

“I realized I could not prevail against the will of a band of warriors, thus I reluctantly had to yield to their choice to offer me to the beast. I trusted my wits and hoped I would manage somehow to survive the encounter. So, an altar in the form of a bed of fragrant branches, leaves and flowers was constructed in an open area in the middle of our encampment, and I was made to lie on it from sunset to sunrise, in expectation of a visit by the tarandus. This was repeated time and again until, on the fourth night, there were loud poundings on the ground as an unseen beast approached the spot where I lay. I was anxious with dread and almost rose to

escape; only fear of being shot to death by the warriors stationed around the clearing forced me to lay still and await my probable demise.”

“I finally was able to detect the approaching monster, or at least part of it. I saw a very large dark mass and eyes that shone bright red under the light of the moon. Its massive form was near the altar and was moving deliberately in my direction.”

“I sat up from my spot on the altar and remained, cross-legged, watching in stupefied horror as the tarandus came to a halt above me. I bowed my head to the ground in obeisance and then raised my arms in supplication. The tarandus pounded the ground with its hooves, releasing a cloud of dirt into the air, and issued a hoarse utterance that seemed an expression of hunger and anticipated pleasure. I was in no position to observe the body of the beast in its entirety, but it seemed that it was no longer changing colors and the hairs covering its body had assumed a visible reddish hue, as if blood was coursing violently through the beast’s veins.”

“I then proffered my bare chest to the beast, who bit into my flesh and proceeded to mewl with what I assume must have been pleasure – a sound that turned into sheets of pain as a cloud of arrows pierced its immense body. I had the presence of mind to crawl to the side as the archers pelted the beast with volley after volley of projectiles.”

“I fainted from the intense pain, and awoke as I was being carried away by soldiers. My last look at the clearing where I had lain showed the tarandus, twisting in agony as a dozen arrows protruded from its body. The beast was being hacked to pieces by several men brandishing battle axes. Blood, bits of flesh, and gore littered the ground. It was carnage on a scale I hope not to ever see again. Afterwards, the dead animal was cast into the river that flowed by the camp and was carried away by the current.”

“How badly were you injured?”

“Very badly; it took me many weeks to recover and to this day I keep my scarred and partly consumed chest covered, as you will notice.” He pointed to the thick shawl that covered his upper body.

He must have observed the horror showing on my face once his recitation was over, for he smiled beatifically and added: “So, I accomplished two good deeds that night: I saved my people from the threat from a ferocious beast, and gave a poor animal one final moment of pleasure before its demise. And yet there was a higher price that I still had to pay, as became clear with the passage of time.”

With that, he finished his cup of wine in a single gulp.

“What was the price?”

“I developed these ... cravings, similar to those exhibited by the beast.”

“What do you mean by cravings?”

Lykos did not answer, but suddenly lunged towards me, his mouth opening and closing rapidly, saliva issuing from his lips as he seemed intent on biting me.

He was quite drunk and his progress was slowed by his condition. I was also drunk, but fright must have granted me wings, for I sprung up from my stool and sprinted towards the wagon’s door as he charged. At the entrance, he tried to seize me and I took hold of one of his wrists, twisting it until something broke with a crunch. I then ran out into the night, sprinting towards the corral where my horse was lodged. I was able to escape the camp unscathed because the guards were too busy handling Lykos to give me chase.

I have no way to corroborate Lykos’ story, but I offer it as proof of the savage and debased nature of the Scythians and the wildness of the lands they occupy. Perhaps someday another traveler will be able to confirm the existence of this fabulous animal or demonstrate that it only inhabited Lykos’ imagination, fanned by the cannibalistic traditions of his people.



Anonymous, *Tarandus*, Middle Ages

Born in Cuba, **Matias Travieso-Diaz** migrated to the United States as a young man. He became an engineer and lawyer and practiced for nearly fifty years. After retirement, he took up creative writing.

Over one hundred and eighty of his short stories have been published or accepted for publication in a wide range of story anthologies, magazines, blogs, audio books and podcasts. Four anthologies of his stories have also been published.