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XVIII.19 On the freedom of the Arabs and the servitude of the Tartars

- The Spirit of Law - Book XVIII. On laws in their relationship to the nature of the terrain -

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XVIII.19 On the freedom of the Arabs and the servitude of the Tartars

The Arabs and the Tartars are pastoral peoples. The Arabs are in the broad category we have mentioned, and are free, whereas the Tartars (the most singular people on earth) live in political slavery. I have already given some of the reasons for this latter fact, and have some to add.

They have no cities, they have no forests, they have few marshes, their rivers are almost always iced over, they inhabit an immense plain, and they have grazing lands and herds, and consequently possessions ; but they have no kind of retreat or defense. The minute a khan is defeated, they cut off his head ; his children are given the same treatment, and all his subjects belong to the victor. [1] They are not condemned to civil slavery : they would be a burden to a simple nation which has no land to till and requires no domestic service. So they add to the nation ; but in lieu of civil slavery, we can imagine that political slavery must have been introduced.

Indeed, in a country where the various hordes are continually warring with and conquering each other, in a country where by the chief's death the political body of each defeated horde is always destroyed, the nation in general can hardly be free, for there is not a single part of it that must not have been subjugated many times over.

The vanquished peoples may preserve some freedom when thanks to the strength of their situation they are in a position to make treaties after their defeat. But the Tartars, ever defenseless, have never been able to make conditions once defeated.

I said in chapter ii that the inhabitants of cultivated plains were hardly free ; circumstances would have it that the Tartars, inhabiting a uncultivated plain, are in the same situation.

[1] Thus we should not be surprised if Mir Vais, after making himself master of Ispahan, had all the princes of the blood killed.