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Arab Horse in the Culture of Orient

Purebred Arab horses are acknowledged to be the most noble and perfect regarding their movement and conformation. The oriental horse type is a quintessence of beauty and elegance. It has been established beyond doubt that this is the oldest purebred horse breed in the world and that it has had the greatest influence on the development of other types of horses.¹ Nearly all outstanding breeds have at the root of their genealogical tree a purebred Arabian, imported from the desert.² To give an example it is sufficient to mention the renowned Russian Orlov Trotters or the Arabian ancestors of the English Thoroughbred.³ Today the Arab horse blood is the most widespread among the saddle horse breeds in the world. In almost every country both public and private sector breeders can be found, affiliated with the World Arabian Horse Organization (WAHO).⁴

The original Arab horse is characterised by a small, dry head, with a straight or concave face. The eyes are big, the nostrils enormous, ears small and crescent-shaped. The neck is arched and outstandingly delicate. Legs are

¹ T. Piechocki, *Konie krwi orientalnej i ich hodowla w Polsce* [Horses of oriental blood and their breeding in Poland], Poznań 1924.

² W. Poklewski-Kozieł, "Krew arabska u konia wojskowego" [Arab blood in the army horse], in: *Sprawozdanie z Obrad Sekcji Hodowców Koni Arabskich Pierwszego Ogólnego Zjazdu Hodowców Koni w Polsce* [A report from the session of the Section of Arab Horse Breeders of the First General Convention of Horse Breeders in Poland], Warszawa 1930, p. 39.

³ F. Raciborski, "Import pustynnych arabów. Kwestja przyszłości polskiej hodowli koni arabskich" [Import of the desert Arabians: The issue of the future of Polish breeding of Arabian horses], in: *Sprawozdanie z Obrad Sekcji...*, p. 27.

⁴ M. Kulisa, M. Pieszka, J. Łuszczzyński, *Konie [Horses]*, Ed. R. Andruszko, Kraków n. d., p. 36.

dry and of perfect quality.⁵ The whole conformation of the animal is light and harmonious, the skin is delicate and the coat is silky. The hooves are strong and very resilient.⁶ These horses display the peak of their qualities during movement. They give the impression of gliding through air, so it is not surprising that no other breed can compare to them regarding grace, beauty and nobility.⁷ The Arab horse is the only breed in the world with its specific bouquet (the term “Arab horse bouquet” indicates its grace, beauty, its unique harmony of movements etc.) and it is deemed to be the most beautiful breed.⁸

The present-day appearance of the Arab horse has been shaped by many factors. Assuredly one of the most important ones was the climate and the general conditions of life specific to the Arabian Peninsula.⁹ Another equally important factor was the way of rearing implemented by the desert nomads. The Bedouin horse husbandry was very peculiar, as its principles stemmed from the Bedouin mentality and from the enormous role that horses played in their lives. The status of riding horses, especially war horses, was so high in the Arab society that we can speak of an entire sphere of customs associated with them, of the place of the horse in culture, or even in religion. The oriental husbandry was characterised by aspects unprecedented elsewhere in the world. There is no doubt that the origins of its specialisation were associated with the figure of Prophet Muhammad.¹⁰

1 Roots of Arabian breed

It is very difficult to establish when and in what circumstances the horse migrated to the Arabian Peninsula and, consequently, to determine the ancestor of the Arab breed. There is a multitude of hypotheses, many of them contradictory.¹¹ It was established beyond doubt that the contemporary Arabian type was formed in the 7th century A.D., and that this process was directly associated with the religion of Islam, which was born at that time.

⁵ M. Haller, *Rasy koni [Horse Breeds]*, Warszawa 2006, p. 43.

⁶ M. Kulisa, M. Pieszka, J. Łuszczynski, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 37.

⁸ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *Rolnik Polski [The Polish farmer]*, Poznań 1861, vol. 2, p. 24.

⁹ J. Bielawski, “Koń arabski” [The Arab horse], in: *Mały słownik kultury świata arabskiego [The little dictionary of the culture of the Arab world]*, ed. by J. Bielawski, Warszawa 1971, p. 283.

¹⁰ S. Wotowski, “Konie arabskie” [The Arab Horses], *Sprawozdanie z Obrad Sekcji...*, p. 7.

¹¹ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, pp. 22-23.

Until the sixth century A.D., the Arabian Peninsula had been inhabited by nomadic tribes, who lived by keeping camels, horses, sheep, and goats, as well as engaging in trade. The Bedouin tribal system dominated. The basic social unit was a group connected by the need to act together to protect themselves from dangers and hardships associated with life in the desert, as well as by bonds of blood.¹² In the second half of the sixth century, the Arab world was undergoing a deep crisis, related to the disintegration of the primal community and overpopulation as well. This situation was conducive to the creation of new ideas and beliefs, preached by self-appointed prophets.¹³ These preachers gained recognition especially among the poor strata of society, persuading them to accept their religious beliefs, but also calling for a fight to change the existing social relations.

The most prominent among them was Muhammad Ibn Abd Allah, who went down in history as Prophet Muhammad. He was born in Mecca, around the year 570. His life and ministry not only changed the fate of the Arabian Peninsula, but also influenced the history of the whole world.¹⁴ The religion he created, almost from the very beginning, emphasised the importance of the need for armed struggle with infidels.¹⁵ Initially it was concerned with the Quraish opposition from Mecca, disapproving of the Prophet, later on it focused on a conquest of neighbouring tribes and states.¹⁶ This state of affairs was brought about by overpopulation of the Arabian Peninsula, which forced the expansion. The conquests were initiated by the Prophet himself and continued by the first Caliph, Abu Bakr. The age of Muslim expansion lasted for many centuries and has fundamentally influenced the history of Asia, Europe and Africa.¹⁷

Arab cavalry played an enormous role in these conquests, using a peculiar breed of oriental horses. Muhammad, and subsequently his successors, understood perfectly well that, taking into account the topographic conditions of the Arab state, which was largely a desert, they should focus on strong and numerous cavalry. Thus, together with the onset of the conquests, a new, equestrian era began in the East.¹⁸ Of course, the Bedouin nomads had been breeding horses long before that, and as early as in the second century

¹² E. Szymański, "Historia świata arabskiego" [The History of the Arab World], in: *Mały słownik...*, p. 534.

¹³ P. K. Hitti, *Dzieje Arabów* [The History of Arabs], Warszawa 1969, p. 93.

¹⁴ E. Szymański, *op. cit.*, p. 535.

¹⁵ *Koran* [The Quran], transl. by J. Bielawski, Warszawa 1986, VII, 65- 66; XLIX, 29.

¹⁶ B. Lewis, *Arabowie w historii* [The Arabs in History], Warszawa 1995, pp. 55-58.

¹⁷ H. A. R. Gibb, *Mahometanizm* [Islam: An historical survey], Warszawa 1965, p. 7.

¹⁸ S. Wotowski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

A.D. they were somewhat successful in this field. However, since the time of Muhammad, this process has seen major changes.

The legend says that all purebred Arabian horses are descended from the five mares of the Prophet, on which in 622 he escaped from Mecca to Medina, fleeing his foes, opponents of the at the time still weak religion.¹⁹ It is said that Muhammad had chosen the mares from among other horses through a certain kind of trial. Namely, he ordered his riding horses to be locked on a small paddock next to a stream, but without access to water. When the horses were released, five mares, despite their thirst, obeyed his call and, instead of towards the stream, they directed their steps towards their master. The mares were half-sisters, since they were descended from the same father *Dinar al Ansari*, and for this reason they were called *Al Khamsa*, or “the five.”²⁰ These five horses are said to be the ancestors of the two hundred bloodlines of purebred Arabian horses, twelve of which were considered the most perfect.

Three years after the famous *Hijra*, in 625, the Muslim armies clashed with the forces of the Quraish tribe in the Battle of Uhud. Thanks to a daring manoeuvre of the cavalry under the command of Khalid ibn al-Walid, the enemies of the Prophet achieved a fine victory. Muhammad, injured in the face by a stone, was forced to flee the battlefield; some time later he concluded that the reason for his defeat was the lack of cavalry. He is said to have spoken highly of the enemy’s horses and become a custodian of the breeding of this animal from that moment on.²¹ Recognising that cavalry must become the basis of the Arab forces, Muhammad introduced new terms into the Bedouin husbandry, such as bloodline and concern for the purity of a bloodline through breeding only the noble horses with one another. Husbandry no longer relied on great herds, but rather on the separation of animals depending on their sex, age, and noble ancestry. Because of that it has become more specialised and breed-oriented.²²

A great care was taken in adherence to the rule saying that only the best individuals, with a proven and certain ancestry, can be used for breeding. Apart from the ordinary stock of horses, called *kadish* by the Bedouins, there also existed an elite stock called *asil*, that is, the riding horses of the purest

¹⁹ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

²⁰ S. Noskowski, “Sytuacja hodowlana w Arabji wedle p. C. Radwana, który importował w r. 1928 konie arabskie do Stanów Zjednoczonych” [The breeding circumstances in Arabia according to Mr. C. Radwan, who in 1929 imported Arab horses to the United States], *Sprawozdanie z Obrad Sekcji...*, p. 32.

²¹ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

²² S. Wotowski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

blood. This elite stock included the five mares of Muhammad's *Al Khamsa* from the Najd desert, as well as the offspring of mares not belonging to the five, but like them coming from the Najd and described as *ancient, noble, and unmixed*. All these mares started the maternal bloodlines of purebred Arabian horses, that is, the *asil*.²³

It is an extremely interesting fact that it was the mares which were seen to be the basis of Bedouin horse breeding, and the evaluation criteria used for them were harsher than in the case of stallions. Until today the Bedouins call their horses by a general term of *haras*, which means mare, as they believe that the stallion merely passes on the desirable traits of the mare to following generations.²⁴ This belief was probably influenced by practical considerations, since a mare, in addition to the benefits coming from her daily use, can also provide her owner with offspring, which a stallion cannot do.²⁵ What is more, stallions were used mostly for entertainment or official purposes, while the mares were used for nocturnal plundering raids. During the stealthy approach towards a hostile village or caravan, the neighing of stallions would surely betray the attackers.²⁶ A French explorer, Constantin-François de Volley, who travelled the Arabian Peninsula in 1782–1785, confirms this version and writes in his reports that a Bedouin's wealth is measured by the mares in his possession, without which he would not be able to defend his tent or take part in raids on the enemies.²⁷ For these reasons an owner of a good purebred mare would go to great lengths in order to find a proper partner for her. If his tribe did not possess an adequately noble stallion, he would leave her barren for a few years, or would undertake long and dangerous travels in search of such an animal.²⁸ To prevent an accidental insemination by a horse of not good enough ancestry, some breeders would go as far as to lock the genitalia of their mares with a kind of a special padlock. If the insemination took place in spite of this, various measures were then used to prevent the conception of the foal.²⁹ All this was done in accordance to the rule that the mares of the elite families may only be covered by *asil*

²³ J. Grabowski, *Hipologia dla wszystkich* [Hippology for All], Warszawa 1982, p. 179.

²⁴ S. Noskowski, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

²⁵ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

²⁶ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, pp. 35–36.

²⁷ C. F. de Volley, "Voyage en Égypte et en Syrie" [Voyage to Egypt and Syria], in: J. Zdanowski, *Arabia w opisach europejskich podróżników i badaczy XVIII–XX w.* [Arabia in the descriptions of European travellers and explorers], Warszawa 1993.

²⁸ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 26.

²⁹ M. Czapski, *Historia powszechna konia* [The general history of horse], vol. 1, Poznań 1874, p. 194.

stallions, descended from noble ancestors, who are known by their name and qualities.

Even though the ancestry of the horses would not be put down in writing, their tribal bloodlines were cultivated by keeping their genealogy in memory.³⁰ The nomads knew their horses' lineage as well as that of their own family.³¹ When somebody bought a particularly valuable animal, the owner would prepare an appropriate document, in which he would clearly outline the roots of the horse, often reaching many generations in the past. He would describe the family and bloodline of the horse there. The names of the particular bloodlines were derived from the names of Bedouin families who bred them.³² An example of a similar document can be found in an equestrian treatise *The General History of the Horse* by an excellent expert on the subject, Marian Czapski:

In the name of God the Merciful, Lord of all creation, may peace and prayers remain with our Lord, Muhammad and with his family and disciples until the Day of the Judgment may peace be with those who would read this letter and comprehend the meaning of it!

This very act serves a foal... of the true tribe of Saklawi, gray with four legs white and a blaze on its head, whose skin is as clear and fine as honey. This foal is compared to those horses, of whom the Prophet said: the true wealth is the noble and brave race of horses, and of whom God said: war horses are those, who cast themselves at the enemy with distended nostrils, who from the very morn endanger themselves in fight. And God said the truth in His unequalled book... The father of this foal is the superb bay stallion, called Merdza, of the koheilan breed, the mother is the famed Saklawi mare, named Zherna.

From what we have seen, we hereby attest our hope of prosperity and we swear by our belts, oh Sheikhs of wisdom and owners of horses! that this foal aforementioned is more noble than its father and mother. This we testify in accordance to our most accurate knowledge through this act valid and complete.

May thanks be given to God, Lord of all creation!

Written...date.³³

Interestingly, apart from the care about the purity of blood of their riding horses, the Arabs paid special attention to the colour of their coats. There were

³⁰ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

³¹ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

³² S. Noskowski, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³³ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, pp. 203-204.

many superstitions and shibboleths associated with it.³⁴ The Arabs believed liver chestnut horses to be the fastest, and the white ones to be the most enduring. Bays were the combination of speed and endurance, while the most popular horses were the blond chestnuts, with a coat shade resembling that of lions or gazelles. Another well-liked coat colour was called *Kumait*, the colour of a golden date.³⁵ The colour of the coat was also believed to be associated with the horse's ability to endure the environmental conditions; it was believed that white horses are most sensitive to them, as they "melt like butter in the sun, thaw like sugar in the rain."³⁶

2 Islam and purebred horses

The role of Muhammad was not limited to the care of the purity of blood of Arab horses. The Prophet also passed on certain recommendations regarding the way riding horses should be treated³⁷, so that they became nearly an object of a religious cult.³⁸ The Muslim religion from the very beginning placed a great emphasis on the relations between humans and animals. Showing them respect and treating them well was one of the commands of the new religion. In parables known as *hadith*, the founder of Islam taught:

"Whoever will show mercy even unto the tiniest bird, he shall be shown mercy by God on the Day of the Resurrection."

And in another place, "Do not torture animals, for God will curse any man who would do so."³⁹

The harshest and most elaborate rules concerned the purebred horses. The Prophet knew that without good riding horses his conquests would be impossible. This is why already during his life the war steed became an object of passionate love of man, and showing them respect was raised to the rank of religious duty.⁴⁰ The Holy Book of Islam, the Quran, often reaches for the symbolism associated with a purebred horse, especially in those verses which are meant to emphasise the courage and zeal of warriors fighting in the God's cause:⁴¹

³⁴ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

³⁵ S. Noskowski, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

³⁶ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 202.

³⁷ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

³⁸ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

³⁹ J. Danecki, *Mądrości proroka* [Wise Sayings of the Prophet], Warszawa 2000, p. 99.

⁴⁰ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, pp. 187-189.

⁴¹ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

In the name of Allah the Most Gracious,
the Most Merciful.
By the (steeds) that run, with panting (breath),
Striking sparks of fire
(by their hooves),
And scouring to the raid at dawn,
And raise the dust in clouds the while,
And penetrating forthwith as one into
the midst (of the foe).⁴²

The comments of theologians concerning this fragment are of particular interest. One of them, Rūh al-Ma'āni, believes that even the title of the surah—'Adiyāt—denotes both the warriors and their steeds. Following his lead, other exegetes conclude that God must love his knights dearly, since in the Holy Book He refers not only to them, but also to their horses. The Muslims believe that this verse speaks about the enthusiasm and the readiness to give one's life in fight for Islam, and also that it constitutes a certain prophecy, as the text was revealed in Mecca, at a time when the Muslims did not yet have riding horses: the future would show that soon they will be renowned for their cavalry.⁴³

In the same spirit Quran speaks of Solomon and his war steeds. God gave him wealth, power and a great kingdom. Solomon had to keep a vast army, and since cavalry constituted a strong part of his forces, he very much liked horses of good blood:

Behold, there were brought before him,
at eventide coursers
of the highest breeding, and swift of foot;
And he said, "Truly do I love
the love of good, with a view to the glory

⁴² *Święty Koran [The Holy Quran]*, published by The Muslim Society of Ahmadijja in Poland (Pol. *Stowarzyszenie Muzułmańskie Ahmadijja w Polsce*), Warszawa 1989, C, 1-6. English quotation from: Surah 100: *Al 'Adiyāt*, Muhsin Khan Translation. [Translator's note: Due to considerable differences in various translations of the Quran, several different English translations have been used to best convey the meaning of the passages quoted by the author in Polish].

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 1399.

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of my Lord”—until (the sun)
was hidden in the veil (of night):
“Bring them back to me.”
then began he to pass his hand over
(their) legs and their necks.⁴⁴

Again I shall refer to the commentary: the text uses the Arabic word *safinat* (coursers).⁴⁵ It is the plural of *safinah*, which is a feminine form of the word *safin*, meaning a horse standing on three legs and the tip of the hoof of the fourth leg. This stance is considered to be specific to purebred Arab horses. Solomon could not have had such horses, but the surah was meant to emphasise the nobility of the horses of the Jewish king. To achieve this goal it attributed to them the traits of the desert horses. Another rather interesting commentary describes a unique kind of love between Solomon and his animals:

Solomon’s love of horses was not like the love of the horse racing enthusiasts or professional horse breeders. His love of horses stemmed from his love of his Creator, since horses were used in the fight for God’s cause.⁴⁶

Again, the author stresses the fact that the uniqueness of the Arab horses comes from the service they render in war. Another surah speaks of a reward for such service:

And prepare against them
whatever you are able of power and of steeds of war
by which you may terrify
the enemy of Allah and your enemy
and others besides them
whom you do not know

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, XXXVIII, 32-34. English quotation from: Surah 38: 31-33, *Saad*, Yusuf Ali translation.

⁴⁵ Translator’s note: different English translations of Quran use diverse descriptions of such horses: Sahih International, “the poised racehorses;” Muhsin Khan, “well trained horses of the highest breed;” Pickthall, “lightfooted coursers;” Yusuf Ali, “coursers of the highest breeding, and swift of foot;” Shakir, “(horses) still when standing, swift when running;” Dr. Ghali, “light-footed (literally: standing on three feet) coursers.”

⁴⁶ *Święty Koran*, p. 990.

[but] whom Allah knows.
And whatever you spend in the cause of Allah
will be fully repaid to you
and you will not be wronged.⁴⁷

In this fragment we can see the reflection of a deep-rooted Bedouin belief that breeding of horses and caring for them is well liked by God and will not be left unrewarded. Belief in this reward is often a part of Arabian sayings and proverbs, which are an interesting source of knowledge about the customs and mentality of the nomads. Here are some of the most interesting ones:

God aids those who look after their horses and gives relief in the costs that they spend on them.⁴⁸

If someone cannot fulfill the duties, let him keep a horse for the God's cause, and all his sins will be absolved.⁴⁹

He who trains a horse in the God's way, he is praised in equal measure to those who give alms both night and day, publicly or secretly: he will be rewarded for it, as fright will not soil his heart.⁵⁰

A coin spent on the horses is in the eyes of God alms given by your own hand.⁵¹

The Arabs treated these commands very seriously, as they believed the horse to be an extraordinary creature, which should be treated as such. They would say:

The evil spirit does not dare to enter a tent in which there is a horse of pure blood, and the angels are attendant only to three of the human pleasures: the exercises of war, the caresses of spouses, and the races of horses.⁵²

3 Horse in literature

Interestingly, secular Arab literature would also eagerly pick up the theme of horses, as exemplified by the poems, so called *qasā'id*, written in the

⁴⁷ *Święty Koran*, VIII, 60. English quotation from: Surah 8:60 *Al-Anfal*, Sahih International translation.

⁴⁸ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁴⁹ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁵⁰ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 189.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.

⁵² *Ibid.*

pre-Muslim time of *Jahiliyyah*. These works consisted of several dozen *abyāt* (from *bait*, a verse divided in two halves) and were usually organised around a particular theme, called a goal (*kasd* in Arabic).⁵³ Initially they were transmitted orally, but were gathered and put into writing at the turn of the 9th century. They exerted enormous influence on the whole subsequent Arabic poetry. They constitute a specific kind of chivalric literature, praising the deeds of the Bedouin warriors, which necessarily included the descriptions of the loyal and brave steed. This animal was so important to the nomads, that even today their vocabulary concerning horses includes more than 100 different names and terms.⁵⁴

Below are fragments of a poem by Antar ibn Shaddad, who belonged to the so-called *suluk*, the independent, travelling knights, renowned for their heroism, courage and honor:

...I pass my nights on the back of a bridled black horse;
and my couch is a saddle upon a horse big-boned in the leg,
big in his flanks, great of girth.

Then he turned on account of the falling of the spears on his breast, and complained to me with tears and whinnings.

If he had known what conversation was, he would have complained with words,

and verily he would have, had he known speech, talked with me.⁵⁵

Another famous poet extolling the qualities of the Arab steeds was Imru' al-Qais. Legend has it that this warrior went to see Emperor Justinian to ask for help in his fight against hostile tribes (he wanted to avenge his father). He did not receive help, but he did seduce the Emperor's daughter. Knights of the Asad tribe have informed Justinian about this. The Emperor did not show any anger and gave the warrior a beautiful robe which was, sadly, poisoned. On the way back from Byzantium the body of the hero erupted with boils and he soon died in horrible agony. Some scholars explain this legend by claiming that he simply died of smallpox.⁵⁶ About horses Al-Qais wrote:

⁵³ J. Danecki, *Klasyczna poezja arabska. Poezja epoki Abbasydów (VIII–XIIIw.)* [Classic Arab Poetry. Poetry of the Abbasid Era (8th–13th Century)], Warszawa 1988, p. 6.

⁵⁴ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 283.

⁵⁵ *Święty Koran*, p. 755. English translation from <http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/the-poem-of-antar/>, translator unknown (accessed: 24.10.2013).

⁵⁶ J. Danecki, *Poezja arabska wiek VI–XIII* [The Arab Poetry of the 6th–13th Century], Wrocław 1997, p. 25.

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Do I not buy wine in great wineskins,
And say unto my horse: Off you go to gallop!
Have I not seen the charge of the cavalry at dawn
on the horses on swift and very strong legs?
Of healthy pasterns, of strong muscle and hoof,
of hips protruding over tendons of their rumps.
Hard hooves need no shoes,
the loin like the back of an ostrich.
I leave in the morning, while birds sleep in their nests
for a lone roam across the dewy meadows
well protected by the blades of our spears.
The heavy rains were generous to them.
On a strong horse, slim from the speedy run,
bay and hard like the wood of the loom.
I rushed straight towards the herd of the whitest antelopes;
on their legs there are stripes like on the Yemeni coats.
Here is the herd forced into run in the Jamaz,
and over them proudly rise the horses.⁵⁷

Thus, the horse is seen as a friend, an ally in war and an inseparable companion. No wonder then that human and animal were connected through such close bonds. There were cases in which, when the desert camp had run out of water, an owner of a noble horse would rather give water to his steed than to his own children.⁵⁸ The love of the nomads towards their horses was so great and so widespread that even in the second half of the nineteenth century Maurycy Mann, a Polish traveller and explorer of the Arabian Peninsula, described it in his diaries as follows:

A Bedouin, however many times a day would he dismount his horse, whether for a moment or for a longer time, at once he grabs the hem of his burnoose, wipes his companion's sweat with it, strokes him constantly, stands by him, caresses with his hand with no interruption, for the longest time; and when the night comes, he shares with him his piece of bread, if

⁵⁷ I. al-Qais, "Ślady obozowiska! Cieszcie się porankiem" [Traces of the camp! Enjoy the morning], in: *Ibid.*, p. 40. Own translation.

⁵⁸ P. K. Hitti, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

there is no barley; on him are his thoughts when he falls asleep, and the first thought of the morning goes towards him as well... The horse is indeed the true lover of the Bedouin.⁵⁹

The reason for this great love was the fact that it was thanks to their riding horses that Bedouins roamed the desert areas, moved from place to place, and were free. That is why they would say: "Horses are birds without the wings. Nothing is distant to a horse."⁶⁰

It might be worth mentioning here that not just the Arab poets would describe horses. Worthy of notice is also a prose writer, Badi az-Zaman al-Hamadani, who lived in the 10th century and wrote *maqamat*, i.e., short stories describing adventures of educated vagabonds and shrewd beggars, which were the medieval equivalent of modern sensational pulp fiction literature. In one of the *maqamat*, known as the *maqama* of Hamdan, al-Hamadani included one of the most beautiful descriptions of a purebred horse in literature.⁶¹

3 Use of the desert horses

Despite such an ardent feeling between the horse and the rider, the horse was never spared.⁶² Its whole life, almost from birth till death, was filled with hard work. From the very beginning the Arab horse had to adjust to the harsh demands of the life on the desert, even though to a large extent it was these very demands that had shaped it. The nomad way of life forced the horses to become inured to hardship and toil and caused natural selection regarding endurance, resilience and aptitude for swiftness.⁶³ The animals were constantly in motion and, during wars, they covered considerable distances. An admirer and connoisseur of horses, Emir of Algiers Abd al-Kadir, claims in his letter to a French general, Eugène Dumas, that an Arab horse should easily cover 40 miles, i.e., approximately 295 kilometres, in a day.⁶⁴ This opinion was confirmed by the son of a British consul in Beirut, Harold R. P. Dickson, an orientalist and a scholar. In his description of the war between the Shammar and Mutayr tribes, which broke out in August 1929, Dickson mentions the mare of the chief of the latter tribe, who, after

⁵⁹ M. Mann, *Podróż na wschód [The Journey East]*, Kraków, 1854, pp. 433-434.

⁶⁰ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁶¹ Al-Hamadani, *Opowieści łotrzykowskie [The scoundrel tales]*, Wrocław 1983, pp. 129-131.

⁶² J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁶³ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁶⁴ Z. Gawarecki, a. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 28.

the death of her master, travelled 180 miles across the desert in three days, not being watered even once.⁶⁵

Even though the Bedouin horses often had to cover hundreds of kilometres at a gallop, without previous training or preparation, after a short rest they would quickly regain their strength. In the time of peace they would spend entire days tied in the open air by the tents, exposed to the enormous differences in temperatures occurring in the desert. During the day they were troubled by the heat reaching up to 50 degrees Celsius, while at night the temperature would plummet to minus ten degrees; strong winds and sand storms were also a frequent occurrence. Only the foals and pregnant mares were taken into the tents for the night.⁶⁶

Neither were the horses spared during travel, as they were forced to effort at every opportunity. During a halt the Bedouins would not let them rest, but would jump all over rocks, organise races and competitions in throwing the djerid at the target in full gallop. To the European travellers this was incomprehensible, especially when seen alongside so many signs of love and adoration shown to the horses at nearly all times. However, the behaviour of the nomads did not come from the lack of respect or caring about their horses, but from the need to constantly harden and inure them to the conditions of battle. The races and exercises served only to constantly raise the fitness of the horse so that in case of danger it would be able to save the life of itself and of its rider. Interestingly, use of a purebred horse for any tasks not related to war or hunting, like ploughing or transport, was avoided. It was said:

There is no blessing for our land, since we made our steeds into animals for work and draught. Had not God created the horse for the run, the ox for the plough and the camel to carry the load? Nothing is gained by him who changes the verdicts of God.⁶⁷

Nevertheless, the life of the horse was full of toil and difficulty since its very birth, and even before it was born, as the pregnant mare was not spared in any way. She was used nearly until the last day before giving birth, as it was believed that excessive tenderness and care are detrimental to the developing foetus. To provide the mare with appropriate amount of exercise she was forced to work. Tied with a rope to the saddle of a riding camel, she would gallop across the desert 20 miles a day or more.⁶⁸

⁶⁵ H. R. P. Dickson, "The Arab of the Desert. A Glimpse into Badawin Life in Kuwait and Sa'udi Arabia", in: J. Zdanowski, *Arabia w opisach...*, p. 137.

⁶⁶ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁶⁷ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

⁶⁸ S. Noskowski, *op. cit.*, p. 33.

If the mother was about to give birth in the middle of an ongoing battle, she was taken away from the battlefield into a calm place just for the moment of birth. She was given a short rest and some food and was then ridden back into the desert. After giving birth the mare was given just one measure of burnt barley, then her stomach was tied up to bring her to her normal state. After seven days she was given a little bit of rancid butter, which acted as a laxative. The foal was separated from the mother at six months of age at the latest, or even earlier in the case of horses of the purest blood.⁶⁹ This was done according to the belief that long feeding weakens and damages the mother; besides, it was believed that prolonged suckling will make the foal's muzzle hard and more difficult to steer in the future.⁷⁰

The description of raising of foals is extremely interesting. They were treated as members of the family and for this reason were never beaten. A young horse would meet only with leniency, friendship, and caresses. It would be fed with camel's milk. The foal would spend all the time around people, which prevented it from forming bad habits and becoming skittish. Very early, as early as five or six months of age, work on the foal's proper movement would begin. It was believed that, similarly to humans, horses learn fastest when they are young.⁷¹ Abd- al Kadir wrote:

The training of a foal usually begins very early; it is a fine custom, and its negligence is a disgrace to the trainer and makes the horse unsuited for the service in war. The animal who is not trained early may happen to disobey, sweats from the lightest work, and is good for nothing.⁷²

In order to prompt the proper movement of the future riding horse, the foal would be tied to the back of a camel, which taught it to move in long strides. After another four months it would take a stroll in the desert, after which it would be led through everything that was strange and unusual: water, noise, wild animals, waving fabric, clamorous music—this allowed the horse to gain confidence and not become skittish. An evidence of the great emphasis placed on working with the animal from its earliest months is a popular Arab saying:

The rider educates his horse like the husband educates his wife.⁷³

At eighteen months of age, the adolescents were “saddled” for the first time, with the use of a bag of sand, and after a few days they were mounted

⁶⁹ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 195.

⁷⁰ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 30.

⁷¹ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

⁷² M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, s. 196.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

by small boys. They galloped into the desert until the foal started to weaken. It was then stopped and rested; often they would halt for the night in this spot. Such runs lasted until the foal could easily and without rest cover twice the distance that it traversed on the seventh day of its training.⁷⁴ All was done gradually, calmly, and with pauses for rest. As the horse was still developing, the demands placed on it were never excessive. There were no attempts to break the horse, but rather a patient increasing of the demands put on it. Abd al Kadir says:

Too great fatigue and too long journeys do not suit the colt because they prevent the development of his strength and stature. The djeda, or less than three years old colt is like a shrub—any impediment in his way stops his growth. But what does suit the colt is exercise and a cautiously graduated fatigue. He must be accustomed to the saddle and bridle, but should only be ridden by a child or by a man of discretion whose weight is in proportion to the age and strength of the animal.⁷⁵

In another place he explains:

Remonstrate with your horses, and they will avoid the faults which have brought down your anger upon them, for they understand the wrath of man.⁷⁶

The Arab horse matures slowly and does not finish its growth and development until the fifth year of age. On the other hand, it is long-lived, which is why it can retain the ability to work even after twenty years of age. For this reason the most intensive training of the riding horse would start when it has reached the third year of age and could easily work under the weight of the rider. In order to train and use the horse, great care was given to its proper feeding. Truly valuable horses were not fed grass, as it was believed that it fattens the animal and distends its stomach. It was substituted with barley, which promotes swiftness, and camel's milk,⁷⁷ which gives the persistence of a camel. The barley must have been light, loose, completely cleaned of the dirt and of the best quality. Horses were watered once a day, always at the same time. Some breeders, even during the days of highest heat, watered their horses every other day, since they believed it to be most beneficial.⁷⁸ It was carefully observed to allow the horse to dry after

⁷⁴ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 29

⁷⁵ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 195–196. English quotations from: http://archive.org/stream/horsesofсахарамa00daum_0/horsesofсахарамa00daum_0_djvu.txt (accessed: 25.10.2013).

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 196.

⁷⁷ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 282.

⁷⁸ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

an exhausting training, before it would be fed or watered; for this purpose special blankets were used. The owner whose horse would wear a torn or dirty blanket was scorned by others.⁷⁹

An immensely important stage in the horse's life was its participation in numerous races, which, known already in the time of *Jahiliyyah*, were developed during the rule of Caliph Abd al-Malik (end of the 7th and the beginning of the 8th century) of the Umayyads, to reach their peak under the Abbasid dynasty (end of the 8th and the 9th century), when many Persian sports customs were imported into the Baghdad court.⁸⁰ The disciplines covered a wide range of distances, from two to twenty kilometres. Occasionally additional complications would be introduced, like not allowing the horses to be fed or watered. Normally, ten riders would compete in any given race. The first seven would receive rich rewards and gain admiration and respect. The other three horses and their riders would be despised and reviled, often even flogged. This went against the teaching of Muhammad, who commanded that all animals should be loved.⁸¹ The best example of the kind of passion such races evoked in the Bedouins is a history of a conflict between two tribes, the Subay' and the Banu 'Abs, which is said to have taken place even before the revelations of Muhammad. Supposedly, the cause of the quarrel was cheating by one of the Subay' during races between their stallion Dahis and the mare Al-Ghabra, which belonged to the Banu 'Abs. This war went down in the history of Arabs as the War of Dahis and Al-Ghabra. During the 40 years of fighting many people died on both sides.⁸²

Apart from participating in races, a nomad's horse was constantly subjected to numerous tests and trials, which were meant to prove its quality and suitability for breeding. One of the most extraordinary tests was the "trial of water." Riders would take turns to ride the horses continuously for 48 hours. During this time the horses were constantly in motion, and were denied food and water. Next, their behaviour was carefully observed when they were led to a stream. Those horses who drank with their lips only slightly touching the water and did it completely at leisure, were deemed to be good. Animals who rolled in the water or bent their front legs to drink deeply and greedily, were rejected by the Bedouins.

The last and most important test of the horse's usefulness was the evaluation of its capability under battle conditions. It was only during battle and the clashes with the enemy, or during the Bedouin raids, known

⁷⁹ M. Czapski, *op. cit.*, p. 201-201.

⁸⁰ J. Bielawski, *op. cit.*, p. 284.

⁸¹ I Kamiński, *Konie rubinowe* [The Ruby Horses], Lublin 1982, p. 17.

⁸² J. Danecki, *Poezja arabska...* [The Arab Poetry...], p. 105.

as *g azw*, that the true value of the animal could be assessed.⁸³ An example of the quality and loyalty of an oriental riding horse towards its owner was described by Michał Czajkowski in his diaries. In 1850 the Arabs started an uprising against the Turks; a cavalry unit under the command of Shamil Bey (Sokolnicki from the second cavalry regiment) was sent to suppress it. There was a clash and some shooting, in which the commander of the insurgents, Abdullah, was killed. He fell off a beautiful, white stallion, which then went mad with grief. He lunged upon the surrounding riders, kicking, biting and bucking. He was shot at and wounded, but he fought on. It was only the fifth shot, which hit his front leg, that managed to immobilise him. This courageous, injured stallion was then sent to Czajkowski by the Polish officers who took part in the skirmish. In time the horse healed enough to be ridden and could even jump over obstacles.⁸⁴ The above incident properly captures the most important character traits of the Arab horses, and testifies to their loyalty and great fighting spirit.

Summary

Skilful breeding and the climatic conditions of the Arabian Peninsula caused a positive development of purebred Arab horses not only regarding their balanced conformation, but also the character traits. Until today they are distinguished by their cleverness, even intelligence. They are loyal and devoted to man, but distrustful of strangers. Of gentle and patient personality, they do not tend to become skittish.⁸⁵ An Arab proverb says, "Purebred horses have no malice."⁸⁶ Despite that, the oriental riding horses are very courageous and brave. The Arab horse is small (originally 150cm at the withers, nowadays 155cm), but very resilient, makes great use of the fodder and can endure thirst without difficulty. Interestingly, all of these valuable traits and attributes of the riding horse, in conformation as well as in psychology, are preserved genetically and are passed faithfully onto the offspring,⁸⁷ and the animals maintain their characteristic traits in environments extremely different from Arabia.⁸⁸

⁸³ P. K. Hitti, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁸⁴ S. Wotowski, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

⁸⁵ J. Grabowski, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

⁸⁶ Z. Gawarecki, A. Kohn, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

⁸⁷ T. Piechocki, *op. cit.*, p. 71.

⁸⁸ J. Grabowski, *op. cit.*, p. 185.

ARAB HORSE IN THE CULTURE OF ORIENT

Our country as well has a rich tradition and fine results in breeding of Arab horses. As a result of a long-lasting work of several generations of breeders, a Polish type of the Arab horse was created, differing positively not only from its desert ancestors, but also from purebred horses bred in other parts of Europe. There are official accounts kept for our horses, published since 1899, as well as genealogical tables of maternal and paternal bloodlines. Pedigree certificates of Polish Arabs, documented by a note in official herd accounts, are the furthest reaching into the past in the world. The great value of these animals is certified by their popularity across the globe. The demand for them grows constantly, and horses from Janów, Białka, Michałów—the leading Polish herds—play an important role in the elite horse husbandry of many countries.

Arab Horse in the Culture of Orient

by Filip Kucera

Abstract

The Arabian is one of the most easily recognizable horse breeds in the world. It is also one of the oldest breeds. Muslims believed, that Arabian horses came from Allah. From the very beginning of Islamic religion horses were very important part of this tradition and for this reason horses were the topic of many myths and legends. One original story tells how Muhammad chose his foundation mares by a test of their courage and loyalty: after a long journey through the desert, the Prophet turned his herd of horses loose to race to an oasis because they desperately needed a drink of water. Before the herd reached the water, Muhammad called for the horses to return to him. Only five mares responded. Because they faithfully returned to their master, though desperate with thirst, these mares became his favorites and were called *Al Khamsa*, meaning, *the five*. These mares became the legendary founders of the five “strains” of the Arabian horse. Muslims loved Arabians, horses were the subject of poems, they were described in Koran. Nevertheless, the Nomads train this animals very hard. This training and desert climate make Arabians very strong and tough, and today they are the most expensive horses in the world.

Keywords: Arabian horse, the Culture of Orient, tradition of Muslims, Animals in Islam, Koran, the prophet Muhammad.