



The Horse of Pure Heritage

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Arabians are one of the oldest human-developed breeds in the world. 'Proto-Arabian' horses with oriental characteristics similar to the modern Arabian horse appeared in rock paintings and inscriptions in the Arabian Peninsula as far back as 2,500 B.C. Likewise, horses with refined heads and high-carried tails were depicted in artwork throughout the Ancient Near East.

History Of The Origins Of The Arabian Horse

Although natural selection was an important factor in the development of the Arab breed, man's influence was the major contribution. The Arab horse's lineage and the purity of its blood were the result of a process of selections, the development of other characteristics and the result of further selection. Each of the early breeders in the desert tribes had his own particular idea of what constituted equine perfection towards which he would strive. An outstanding mare would be procured, and with good fortune would prove fertile and pass on her merits to offspring. In this way, different strains were to develop. Even today, every breeder has his own idea of equine perfection, and it maybe argued that all successful programmes in the Arabian horse breeding have depended on exceptional foundation mares.

There are different theories about where the wild ancestor of the Arabian originally lived. Some suggest the horse came from the area along the northern edge of the Fertile Crescent. Others argue for the south-western corner of the Arabian Peninsula, in modern-day Yemen, where three now-dry riverbeds suggest good natural pastures existed long ago. Yemen is one of the oldest continuous civilisations in the world that has some of the most diverse landscape in the region. For this reason, horses were used from the earliest times to work in the often rugged terrain.

The Arabian prototype was originally tamed by the people of the Arabian Peninsula known today as the Bedouin, probably domesticated shortly after the Bedouin learned to use the camel.

Gladys Brown Edwards, a noted scholar of the Arabian horse theorised that the Arabian came from a separate subspecies of horse, *Equus agillius*. However, other scholars believe that the 'dry' oriental horse of the desert from which the modern Arabian developed was one of four basic subtypes of *Equus Caballus* that had specific characteristics based on the environments in which they lived. Other horses with similar physical characteristics include the Barb of North Africa and the Akhal-Teke of western Asia.

The desert environment produced a horse that had to cooperate with humans to survive. Weak individuals were weeded out of the breeding pool, and the animals that remained were honed by centuries of human warfare. Likewise, humans needed horses: Arabians were bred by the Nomadic Bedouin as a warhorse with speed, endurance, soundness, and intelligence. The desert horse needed to thrive on very little food, and possess anatomical traits to compensate for life in a dry climate with temperature extremes from day to night. A good disposition was critical; prized war mares were often brought inside family tents to prevent theft and for protection from predators. Though appearance was not necessarily a survival factor, the Bedouin bred for refinement and beauty in their horses as well as for more practical features.

For centuries, the Bedouin tracked the ancestry of each horse through an oral history tradition. The first written pedigrees in the Middle East that specifically used the term "Arabian" date to 1330 A.D. Horses of the purest blood were known as Aseel and crossbreeding with non-Aseel horses was forbidden. Mares were the most valued, both for riding and breeding, and pedigree families were traced through the female line. The Bedouin did not believe in gelding male horses, thus most stallions were sold to city-dwellers.

Over time, the Bedouin developed several sub-types or strains of Arabian horses, each with unique characteristics. According to the Arabian Horse Association, the five primary strains were known as the Keheilan, Seqlawi, Abeyan, Hamdani and Hadban. There were also lesser strains, sub-strains, and regional variations in strain names. Thus, many Arabian horses were not only Aseel, that of pure blood, but also bred to be pure in strain as well, with crossbreeding between strains discouraged, though not forbidden, by some tribes.

This complex web of bloodline and strain was an integral part of Bedouin culture. Tribes people knew the pedigrees and history of the best war mares as well as their own family or tribal history. **HT**