

Searching for the Origin of the Arabian Horse

Bedouin Breeding Part IV

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What ever happend to the Arabian Horse from the Nejd?

“...so that no Arabian Horse can be considered a real pure-bred except that descendant from the choice lines of the Nejd or the few studs outside Arabia based on their progeny...”

Why are not all asil Arabian horses „straight Egyptians“ but all straight Egyptians always ASIL? Does the classification ASIL embody a mainstream and the straight Egyptian breed an under order? Was Egypt of old an import country of the famous Arabian horsebred? And if so, how did the desert-horse came to Arabia? Many discussions about the origin of the best horses ara surely a geopolitical debate concerning territorial points of view, and to protect ones own market, as the asil Arabian of today is a world citizen and genotypically spoken - no matter on what continent residing - their roots trace back to the same origin. Phenotypically spoken things look quite different, as the desert-Arabian was formed by its inhabitants an incomparable climate.*

In the 4th part of our historical search after the desert heritage of the Bedouins and their horses we shall try to look into these questions.

** asil = Arabian for: from the root, pure in origin*



Where did the Arabian horse come from?

The exact origin of the Arabian horse has not been unrevealed up to today. There are many explanations and most of them try to prove that many thousand years ago there already was an Arabian wild horse, out of which the breeds existing today were developed (Raswan, 1930). Others doubt that, a horse who as we know needs a lot of water to survive, could therefore not survive outside the oases. They say that this wild horse was imported by humans and was a (already) domesticated animal. Probably coming from more fertile grounds such as Africa or Asia a few thousand years ago, and this could explain his survival and

genetic refinement through selection in the desert of Arabia (v. Wrangel 1908)

Other scholars do not think the origin of the Arabian horse so one-sided but let them trace back to different bloodstock and influence. (see also Kirsch 1987 and Schiele 1972)

“The Arabian horses were cast from the Assyrian and Caspian horses in the Northeast, in north-western Arabia mostly from Egyptian and Libyan horse of king Salomon and in the south from horses out of Yemen, originally coming from Ethiopia. Because of the nomadic

lifestyle of the Bedouins wandering from south to north, these horse-populations melted together, out of which eventually the uniform type of the Arabian horse developed, while the uniform typecasting element was performance“ (Mercier,1924).

The desert traveller and adventurer Ammon wrote in 1834 about this question: “that Arabia in early days (before Christ) probably did not have horses of their own“. To prove this he quotes several Bible-texts of the old testament, like the 4th book of Moses verse 32-36, where Moses stated that after the victory over the Arabic people, the ware confiscated by the Israelis contained sheep, cattle, donkeys and female slaves and no horses are mentioned. Also in the book of kings, 10, Bible, verse 28 does Ammon find proof that Salomon got his horses in Egypt and not in Arabia.



Arabian peninsula, that, wherever it came from, it is the forebear of today's Arabian breeding. Also is clear that this noble end-product is the result of 2 important facts:

1) The selection standard with asil breeding of the Bedouins, because of the common needs sharing a breeding goal about their horses: a gentle very fast mare, ensuring the safety of their owner during raid or hunt, and a dependable broodmare

2) The climate and the geological circumstances under which these horses live, in the extremely dry climate of the Arabian peninsula and a sober diet caused a merciless natural selection in the horse population.

For the desert horses, life was a constant performance test “In those regions of the world where certain habits were formed through many generations, where year after year the same climate and environmental conditions shaped the rhythms of life, a relatively stable balance could develop. All life forms in such regions conform to typical characteristics and shapes.

Without doubt, the Arabian peninsula is such a region, especially in its central areas. Its geographical position and its climate throughout the year have been constant for thousand of years, and as a peninsula it became the end for migrations of all kind...there certain forms were able to stabilise and develop according to their environment with little interference from outside...the deserts as they are found in Arabia and especially in its central area, Nejd, developed special breeds of sheep, camels and horses.” (Nagel, 1998)

The vegetation of the Arabian peninsula is formed through an extreme climate: in summer temperatures can reach 54 degree C. And in winter in the mountains and highlands, temperatures can sink to 11 below zero degree C.

When it rains, even in the Nejd there is a rich vegetation. „Nejd is famous all over Arabia for its rich pastures, that turn green after the rain even in the desert (Burckhardt 1829)

During the summer period life can only survive near oases. In Nejd, Hayil and Riyadh are the biggest and most famous oases, also Mekka and Taif are famous and well known for horse breeding

The original breeding area of the desert-Arabian was the

Arabian peninsula, including the deserts of Syria, Irak, Dschesira (together named the great Arabian desert) and the more southern positioned stone and sand deserts of the highlands of Nejd and Hadschar. The extreme climate of these surroundings have had an important influence on the origin and development of today's ASIL Arabian horse. The harshness of climate and struggle for survival of man and animal in these areas has through time genetically fixed the typed of the Arabian horse.

In the diversity of facts written about „Wild Arabia“ and its horses, historically, academic or fantastic they may be one thing was similarly stated: the best and most beautiful horses were to be found with the Bedouins, especially among the tribes of the central highlands of the Nejd.

“If centuries of unsullied descent, a masterful prepotency a gift that long and stainless purity of breed alone bestow - mien and bearing haught and high, rounded symmetry of form, the ability to travel far and fast, courage and resolution to struggle and endure, highly developed intelligence, a generous disposition, a constitution of iron, bone of hardest texture, sinews and flinty hoof- if these go to make up equine perfection, then the true high-caste horses of Nejd, and those shapely steeds of equal birth, bred in the plain between the two rivers that drank of the waters of the Tigris and Euphrates, are assuredly the nobles of their race. Were proof needed of the Arabian's far back and jealously-guarded pedigree, it will be found in his fixity of type, in the characteristic spring of the tail from the cropper. A Seglawi Jedran , a Managhi, or any asil Arab is distinct from other breeds, and could be produced from no other stock in the known world. „All the pride of his race in himself reflected lives!“ (W.R. Brown, 1929)

The Nejd, the real origin of the noble desert bred The Nejd was the real origin of the Arabian horse where



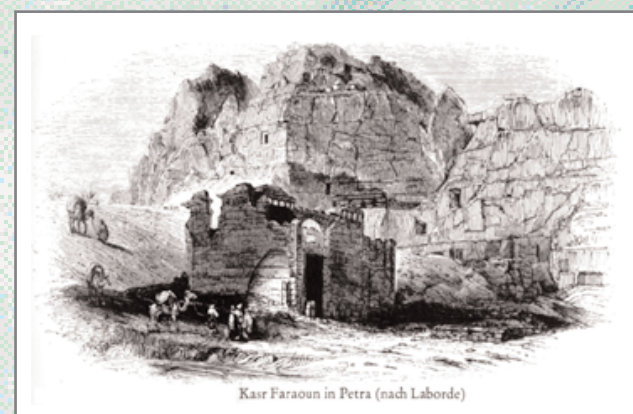
the actual original type of Arabian was to be found. The most beautiful species of Arabian horsebreeding (perhaps in the whole world) Palgrave (1868) thought to have found among the Fejsals horses. He estimated their number on 5000 animals (Kirsch 1987)

“...so that no Arabian Horse can be considered a real pure-bred except that descendant from the choice lines of the Nejd or the few studs outside Arabia based on their progeny, if they always or lately set great store by breeding within the same strain. Only the decendants of those choice strains show the individual prepotency peculiar to the pure bred arabian, e.g. the famous stallions Bairactar, Ofir, Shagya, Jasir, Darley's Arabian and others, whereas those Arabians which were not without any doubt of pure blood, as well as the so-called Orientals, always were a source of disillusion.” (Flade, 1962)

Also the Arabian scholar Burckhardt (1829), states that the best specimen horses were of the Nejd breeding Kheyl Nejdade or Nejd horses. They were to be found only in the Nejd and as a rule not for sale. One could only obtain such a horse through war, inheritance or as a gift. Only the higher classes of the Bedouins were entitled to do so. As a present, even to Egypt, only stallions were presented.

Lady Ann Blunt wrote in 1881 in her journals that the horses of Fejsal's stud in Riyadh and of his son Mohamed Ibn Rashid in Hayil were of very high quality and were purchased with great difficulties from the Bedouins of the Nefud desert. Especially the Muteyr Bedouins sold very good horses, only occasionally were horses purchased from the Shammar and Anazeh in the North.

Dr. Nagel (1998) is writing about the different types of the Arabian horse in the North and in the South. He quotes Lady Blunt who reflects on the horses in the southern and



Kasr Faraoun in Petra (nach Laborde)

Ammon is supported by other scholars, previous trying to find out when the horse came to Arabia and there formed by the Bedouins to what we today consider a desert Arabian.

“Already before Christ the horse migrated through Syria and North-Arabia to the Arabian peninsula and there, isolated from the Eurasian and African continent in the „dead end street“ by 3 oceans surrounded, formed the actual type of Arabian horse.“ (Wenzler, 1980)

In 7th century after Christ the prophet Mohamed and the by him founded Islam had an important impact on the ASIL breeding of the Bedouin tribes from the Arabian peninsula (see also Savier, 2002). One can assume that at least since 2000 years a horse was formed and bred on the



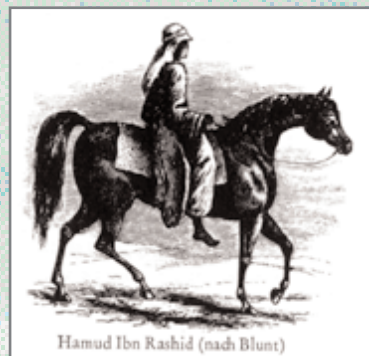
northern areas of Arabia and comes to the conclusion; "The more Nejd horses we find here, the clearer it becomes that the Anazeh horses of the north are faster than the Nejds. The Nejd horses have short necks, short bodies, good shoulders and a very good tail carriage. Their heads are better than the Anazeh's in every respect. The heads are not too large but neither too small, great width between ears and eyes and between the eyes, but not between the ears, the profile concave below the eyes. The tails of the Nejd horses are thrown out in movement like their heads, in a perfect arch. (Blunt 1887)"

Also Palgrave (1867), another contemporary witness, manages to see in Riyadh, in the centre of the Nejd the horses of Sheikh Faisal. Full of enthusiasm he writes: "Never have I seen a more beautiful collection of Arabian horses, 14 hands tall at the average with fine sloping shoulder, just a little dipped in the back, a head broad at the top, a fine muzzle, intelligent with a big eye, small ears and clear round hoofs, perfectly arched tails, long manes that are neither too long nor too thick. Predominantly greys and chestnuts. Above the Shammar mountains there are more common Arabian horses to be found, which the Europeans buy. They are not as elegant and measure between 14 and 16 hands."

But he „who penetrates into the Nejd does not get away alive“ was a well known proverb, and indeed many travellers coming to buy the fabulous horses did not survive their adventures. This made the horsebreed known as rare and not only did this drive up the prizes, also the breed could remain undisturbed in the untakable Nejd to refine

and perfect itself. The intense isolation of the central highland helped the asil breeding of the Arabs and therefore it was easily explained why the warrior like nomads of the Nejd, depend on their good horses had developed a unity in breeding in the broadest sense. Not only were they asil fanatics but with regard to themselves and their tribe, over generations and part of nature, they formed the classic desert Arabian, without romanticism, for their own need. For the horses this life was a constant performance test, which not all survived..

“It seems that the dry air and soil of Arabia have a hardening effect on the muscles of both, man and animal. The Bedouin have a lean and meagre look but like their horses, they can endure the most extraordinary deprivations and hardships. Among other things they can tolerate many days of intense thirst while travelling in the dry hot climate of Arabia.” (Th. Brown, 1929)



Up to the last century the Arab horse was generally admitted to be the best for all purposes, and without rival in any part of the world.

But after the Nejd had been a great secluded breeding-area for hundreds of years, large Bedouin tribes (such as ANAZEH, AMARAT, SBAA, FEDAN, RUALLA, IJLAS, and WOULD ALI) starting looking for better grounds and leaving the central

highlands with their horses and camels heading direction north of the Arabian peninsula, they went to Syria (Aleppo, Harms, Hauran valley) as well as Mesopotamia and the Euphrat . (Tweedie 1894) The SHAMMAR Bedouins however went direction Irak where they were chased away by the WAHABITS and in



the end settled north of the Euphrat in Kurd territory (v.Wrangel, 1908)

The BENI SAKER Bedouins wandered with their horses from the northern Hedschas as far as Dschebel Druz. (Schiele 1972)

European pilgrims on the search for the original desert-bred Arabian horse.

As for the prophet Mohammed, the desert horse played an important key role during the holly war - Jihad - and the expansion of the Islam. Soon after the first followers accompanied the prophet he commanded well over 5000 asil Arabians for his needs. Indeed he conquered first Nejd in order to get hold of more of these valuable horses. Later his successor Abu Bekr gained control over the entire Arabian peninsula and went on to control Jordan, Persia and Syria grace to the small fast horses.

642 AC, Alexandria, then the principal city of Egypt was taken over. Thereafter the warriors continued their way into Tunisia, Algeria and Morocco and last but not least Spain and France. For centuries Islam dominated in these countries and it must be mentioned, that during these times, the quality of the horses and riders was the key to defeat or victory.

During the period of the crusades the Arabian horse was much respected in Europe and it was considered, because of his advantages in comparison with the heavy and big European breeds, as horse of Kings and Princes. Valuable horses presented to the Kings and Princes of Europe by the Arabian and Oriental Kings helped create and improve new breeds that went on to gain importance like the English Thoroughbred. A great number of the mares and most likely all stallions that were used to establish the English thoroughbred were of Arabian descendants. The root-mares "the royal mares" were already crossed with Orientals or with import horses from Arabia.

The three famous root stallions imported between 1690 and 1730 were the Oriental "Beyerley Turk" and the asils "Darley Arabian" and the "Godolphin Arabian".

Due to the expansion of the Ottoman empire Arabian horses also become the possession of the then Kingdoms of middle and East Europe. Austria, Hungary, Poland, Russia and in fact all royal stables were in search of the "wonder-weapon" Asil Arabian.

They were mainly used to cross with their own heavier breeds in order to create an ideal cavalry horse. The first



one however who understood the value of the Arabian breed within the context of pure asil breeding and who was able to realise his visions, was King Wilhelm I from Wuerttemberg. In 1817 he founded the royal Weil-Marbach stud with the idea of breeding asil Arabian horses as a genetic source for European pure-bred Arabian horses.

Also the Austrian and Hungarian royals sent their first missions to the Arabian peninsula to purchase the real desert horse. But it was not easy for the foreigners to exactly identify a desert horse and develop an eye for good quality.

The ignorance of many inexperienced buyers made it difficult for them to recognise an asil desert horse in the country and again these horses were not offered for sale on the horse markets of Aleppo, Beirut or Damascus.

Except if they were infertile or had other defects so that the tribes gladly sold them to the Europeans. Also to trust and understand the pedigree meant that the potential buyers had to travel to the Bedouins in the desert and deal with the owners directly.

That's how they found out, that the Arabians divide their horses in two groups (Lady Blunt, Lady Wentworth, v. Wrangel also):

- The Nejd's, the real Arabians who themselves or their parents came from the Nejd directly and
- The Shimali, the Arabians of the North of the peninsula, from Syria, Mesopotamia and today's Iraq. (after Schiele 1985)

When talking about the purity of the blood how could the buyers have known that no reference was made to the



Arabian horses of the North but only to the Nejd horses. "Real in the true sense of the word are only horses that were bred in the Nejd and their immediate descendants (v. Wrangel 1908)."

Babolna, the royal stud of the Kings of Hungary in 1856 sent the 4th mission under the supervision of Col. Rudolf v. Brudermann to the Arabian peninsula. The three expeditions prior to this were more of an informative character and were not very successful. This expedition brought back to Hungary some



Lehm-turm des Schlosses von Hayil (nach Blunt)

mals...."

Col. v. Brudermann, the leader of this expedition wrote in his journal in 1856: "I have met Bedouins that asked for up to 6'000 FL for a 3-year old filly and when offered 6'000 to 8'000 FL did not answer and sped away. Such a Bedouin would often not own anything else but his mare, some camels and sheep, a shirt, a coat and one God..... Once I met some Bedouins of whom one rode a beautiful strong grey mare. I asked him if he would sell her. He asked me what I offer for her? The mare seemed old to me and I dis-

mounted, looked into her mouth and guessed that she was between 16 - 18 years of age but she was well in foal and especially beautiful. I offered him 1000 FL. "That was the tip I gave when I bought her" he answered and sped away." Anyway the Hungarian expedition was very successful and even years later many of the European buyers remarked: Col. v. Brudermann has bought the best from the desert and imported to Babolna. (Hecker, 1994)

Even Egypt imported the asil Arabian horses from Arabia. Egypt can look back on a centuries old tradition of Arabian horse breeding, their breeding more than once was dissolved over these centuries but through the influence of horses from the Nejd given a new start. The Egyptian breed came to a strong revival through Mohammed Ali The Great, born in 1769 in Macedonia. For years to come him and his sons influenced the breeding scene in the near East. After initial purchases by the Egyptian Pashas from the Bedouin tribes of the Nejd, the political climate changed in the next century.

"Nejd, the north-western part of modern Saudi-Arabia, the most important centre of these closed societies formed



only be bought in the desert, but prices there are so high, that if your used to the prices for horses from the North, you find yourself in a difficult position as it is seldom that a Bedouin may be persuaded to sell any of these ani-

[Ben Zuhair]	IX or +
el-Fejr)
Wlad Aly	⤵ 2 J I I X T
Raschid	⤵
Moukh	⤵
Bihar	⤵
Buh	⤵

Stammeszeichen der Beduinen (nach Doughty)

Zekryna	⤵
Hureydt	⤵ ⤵
Beny Sekhe	⤵
Beny Atch	⤵
Sherarit	⤵ ⤵ ⤵ ⤵ ⤵
Fahjt (Hureyn)	⤵

M'ulaka Lakawey



by the nomadic tribes, interrelated families and a flourishing breed of unique, tough and beautiful horses was invaded and conquered by the army's of the viceroy Mohammed Ali The Great from Egypt.

The vast Ottoman empire broke through its southern borders and began to influence the region. The legendary horses of the Bedouin tribes became a price of war and were taken to Cairo to fill the conquerors stables. Many died on the strenuous way west. The few that remained in Arabia continued to breed on. Some of them were later purchased by expeditions from all over the world and only very few of these typey, exquisite horses reached Europe on their way through Syria and Turkey.

(Nagel, 1998)

So the question remains, what happened in Egypt to the asil horses of the Nejd and with what breeding-criteria are they bred on? Nagel states in his book that the surviving desert Arabian horse from the Nejd forms the most valuable gen-source of Arabian horses in Egypt to date. Despite of all the changes in the environmental and living conditions has this horsebreed been able to preserve all the valuable qualities that were genetically embedded over 2000 years of selection by the Bedouins ?

More about this and the breeding program of the Egyptian Pashas in the 19th century will follow in the next issue of Desert Heritage.



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