



## The 2014 WAHO Conference in DOHA, Qatar

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Under the patronage of H.H. Sheikh Abdullah Bin Khalifa Al Thani, special advisor to H.H. Sheikh Tamim Bin Hamad Bin Khalifa Al Thani, Emir of Qatar, a team of internationally renowned experts with specialist knowledge in a wide range of subjects including equine welfare and behavioural studies, genetics, and cultural heritage, met in Qatar for the 2014 World Arabian Horse Organisation (WAHO) Conference. Owing to the WAHO Conferences which take place biennially in one of the member countries, time and again there have been significant speeches – held by international experts – which turned out to be milestones when entering the debates and discussions on the history, breeding, genetics, and sports centred around Arabian Horses. In this issue of Desert Heritage, the first of these contributions which we are proud to present to you is Cynthia Culbertson's insightful speech on Bedouin traditions relevant today.



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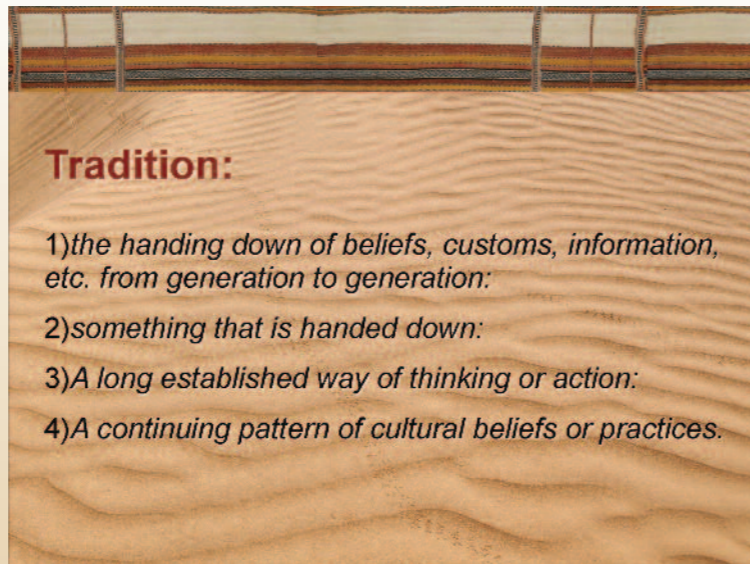




# Bedouin Tradition and its Relevance Today

Cynthia Culbertson is a lifelong devotee of the Arabian horse with a particular passion for the breed's history. She holds a degree in Near Eastern Languages and Literature and has lived and travelled extensively in the homelands of the Arabian horse. Cynthia has authored several books about the breed, as well as contributing to various film and museum projects. I'd like to call special attention to her "A Gift From the Desert" project featuring Art, History, and Culture of the Arabian Horse. This exhibition in the *International Museum of the Horse* in Kentucky Horse Park in Lexington, USA, was organized by her as a co-curator. Let me highly recommend the accompanying book to everybody who is interested in the topics. Cynthia Culbertson is a well-known breeder of Arabians herself. She knows what she is talking about when she compares the ideals the Bedouins had in their minds when they talked of their horses, to the ideals that get ever more predominant in the Arabian scene.

"All of us who are involved with Arabian horses today know that we stand on the shoulders of generations and generations of breeders", is one of the opening thoughts of Culbertson's presentation. "Thousands of years ago, the nomadic Bedouin tribes of the Arabian peninsula kept horses of recognizable Arabian type. And their breeding was an unprecedented success: the breed has been in demand for all of that unbelievably long time. Even before the first European ever caught a glimpse of an Arabian horse, the desert nomadshad been breeding horses for countless generations." And recorded history tells us of the use of



Arabian horses for spreading Islam to two-thirds of the known world about 1400 years ago, of Arabians in the Crusades 900 years ago, of Purebred Arabian breeding in Europe starting about 250 years ago. History also tells us that Humans have "admired and valued Arabian horses so much that despite cultural differences, wars, modernization, and centuries of dynamic human change, they have kept the purebred Arabian horse in a recognizable form for those thousands of years."





## Smooth Gallop

*"Mounted on a steed that takes long strides in his gallop."*

*"And on a long-striding horse, like an eagle on a cloud-filled day."*



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Purity / bloodlines  
Concave profile / dish  
Flat topline  
Long, arched neck  
High tail carriage  
Floating trot  
Large eyes  
Thin skin  
Large nostrils  
Good disposition  
Stamina

Purity / bloodlines  
Hooves  
Smooth gallop  
Agility / speed  
Courage / gentleness  
Stamina  
Neck  
Topline  
Tail carriage  
Thin skin / hair coat  
Large eyes  
Large nostrils

"Despite of all this, it is legitimate to ask ourselves why we should care about past practices when we are no longer desert nomads. Do we still care about the "classic" Arabian?", Culbertson asks. "What exactly is "Bedouin tradition", and is it the same as "classic", particularly if we consider the dictionary definition of "classic" as "belonging to the highest rank or class; having lasting significance or worth; enduring"?" Put like that, "classic" is obviously just one aspect of "traditional" - or is it the other way round? So Culbertson started to look, in detail, at the aspects of an Arabian horse that were traditionally important to the Bedouin breeders. The following is a summary of her findings and thoughts.

References to the characteristics that made an Arabian particularly important to his owner, are mainly found in poetry. Poets served as both historians and genealogists for the tribe, so for our purposes poems give us an ideal overview of the breed.

As for camels, the picture that the poets paint is that it was the camel that largely enabled the desert nomads to survive – providing transportation, milk, meat and leather. But if the camel equaled survival, then the horse meant quality of life – meat for the tribe from hunting, and wealth through livestock from raiding. Camels were a necessity, while horses were a luxury in many respects - a luxury that greatly improved one's life.

## Agility / Speed

*"Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock swept down by the torrent."*

*"He rides down the pair of wild asses in their dust: he is quick and nimble when he makes his charge, unswerving."*

*"...he surpasses the thunderbolt..."*

*"Swift was she....galloped she how wrathfully..."*

## Courage / Gentleness

*"Full of spirit is he – then, when thou has quieted him down, tractable, gentle of temper, easy to control."*



## Bloodlines / Purity

*"Among the sires and dams from whom he counts his race were the strain of Al-A'waj."*

*"...her sires have lifted her line to the best of strains..."*



## Hooves

*"The frogs of the feet resemble, by reason of their hardness, the pits of dates which evade, without breaking, even the blow of the hammer."*



*"They walk on hooves as hard as the moss-covered stones in stagnant water"*

## Stamina

*"He continues at full gallop when other horses are dragging their feet in the dust for weariness."*



Cynthia Culbertson analyzed available pre-Islamic and some early Islamic poetry regarding an ideal Arabian horse. Her finds serve as an excellent testimony as to what was important in Bedouin tradition. If we wish to continue the legacy of the Arabian horse, there is a grave danger in emphasizing only certain characteristics of the breed while overlooking others. To do so is to risk losing the essence of the Arabian breed and the very reasons for its success and longevity.

## Bodily Characteristics

In their order of importance, here are the characteristics and attributes of Arabian horses that Culbertson found mentioned most often in ancient Arabic poetry.

### Purity

"This point", so Culbertson states, "will please every breeder who is dedicated to ensuring the integrity of Arabian bloodlines: purity and heritage are right at the top of the list. Almost all of the poetry has at least one reference to bloodlines, ... establishing that purity and heritage were of paramount importance." So one poem states: "Among the sires and dams from whom he counts his race were the strain of Al-A'waj,..." and another: "... her sires have lifted her line to the best of strains..."

### Hooves


Interestingly, the frog and a strong hard hoof are mentioned in almost every single poem, says Culbertson, which makes her state that "The old saying of "No hoof, no horse" most certainly applies to Bedouin tradition. The Bedouins have a saying that the ideal hoof is round (...) "like a small child's cup". The key word is round – not pointed, not narrow, but wide and round, tough and flinty, to withstand the rocky ground the horses were expected to negotiate without shoes." To quote



**Neck**

*"The grey mare the renowned, in the world there is none like her... her neck curved like a palm branch..."*

*"And I came down riding, my mare's neck held loftily as a palm fruit-laden."*




**Topline**

*"She has a croup like the top of a leather tent, inside which the builders have assembled the frame."*

*"His croup, resembling a sand dune which humidity has made compact."*

*"He has the... straight back of the wild ass."*



some poems again: *"The frogs of the feet resemble, by reason of their hardness, the pits of dates which evade, without breaking, even the blow of the hammer."* *"They walk on hooves as hard as the moss-covered stones in stagnant water."* These strong hooves are a primary reason for the breed's longevity and value over the centuries.

**Long-strided Gallop**  
Culbertson found that "The trot is not even on the list of characteristics mentioned by the poets. What they talk about is a smooth effortless gallop. No Arabian horse was ever selected for trotting ability by a Bedouin, since they never rode at the trot. (...) In the words of one European traveller *"this distinguished breed of horse is restricted to two paces, a stately walk, and a gallop with a long stroke."* He goes on to say they considered the trot a vulgar and ignoble gait."

For Culbertson, the conclusion is that "the trot we value so highly today exists because the Bedouins bred their horses for centuries for a fast, ground-covering walk, a cadenced easy canter and an efficient gallop."

**Agility**  
Some reference to agility is present in almost every example analyzed. "Quite understandable for a desert warhorse used in surprise raids against the enemy", as Culbertson remarks quite aptly. The poets say: *"Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock*



**Skin, hair nostrils, eye, muzzle**

*"With a horse whose cheekbone is free of hair."*

*"A mare... short of hair."*



*swept down by the torrent"* or *"... he is quick and nimble when he makes his charge ..."*. This agility made sure that Arabian blood was invaluable to cavalries both in the Islamic and Western world.

**Character**  
In many of these poems, Culbertson found, we see both courage and gentleness praised, like in this example: *"Full of spirit is he – then, when thou has quieted him down, tractable, gentle of temper, easy to control."* So the Bedouins appreciated the two sides of the coin, knowing that strength of character calls for both.

**Stamina**  
Stamina is mentioned often and was obviously highly prized. Even today, Arabians are the preeminent endurance breed and are physically different from other breeds, as they have a higher proportion of the slow-twitch muscle fibers that are important for stamina. *"He continues at full gallop when other horses are dragging their feet in the dust for weariness"* says the poet Imru al Qais.

**An Arched Neck**  
The poets will often compare the shape of an Arabian horse's neck to that of a fruit-laden palm branch: *"The grey mare the renowned, ...*







*Type*

In poetry, “short of hair” is one of the most frequently used phrases, and nostrils, eyes, small muzzles – all hallmarks of type - are also given some attention. But perhaps most interestingly, a concave profile, the infamous “dished face”, is conspicuously absent in direct descriptions, Culbertson notes. This single characteristic that is so much emphasized today seems not to be a point to praise in the Bedouin tradition.

Even the oldest specimens of rock art in Arabia that we can find, however, tell us that the early artists emphasized the distinctive silhouette of Arabian horses just as much as contemporary artists do today: they concentrate on the aspects that are the easiest to see, such as the small, dished head, arched neck, level topline, and high-carried tail.

Summing up the statements found in ancient poetry, much of it described the horse in the context of being ridden. Culbertson says: “Bedouin tradition gave us an ideal riding horse – a willing and cheerful generalist who can perform in multiple disciplines and is unrivaled in one: endurance racing. The Arabian is a responsive horse and a loyal



her neck curved like a palm branch...” Shape rather than length seems to have been the primary consideration.

*The Topline*

For the topline, Culbertson notes, the descriptions are somewhat contradictory. A good topline is most often compared to the shape of a firm sand dune or even a tent. One of the very few descriptions that praises what we might consider a flat topline compares the stallion’s back to the “... straight back of the wild ass.”

*High Tail Carriage*

Cynthia Culbertson found that “High tail carriage is mentioned, but perhaps not as often as we might expect. Perhaps it was taken for granted, since it is such a strong characteristic. One pre-Islamic poem compares the high-carried tail to “...a scorpion poised to sting.”





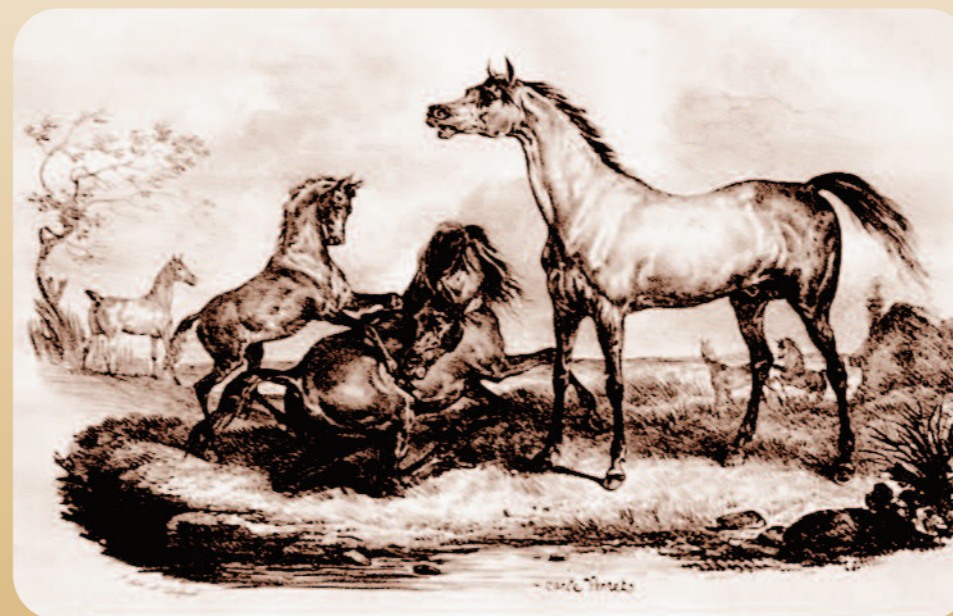
horse – remember that the Bedouins began their tradition of horsemanship without bits, stirrups or spurs. So no wonder the Arabian is a sensitive horse. Their poetry reveals a certain truth — that you can never really judge a horse until you have ridden him in various conditions.”

Horses that did not perform well were no doubt quickly eliminated from the breeding population. Yet we have many many breeders today who never ride their horses, and some who never even train them under saddle.

Quite obviously, Culbertson goes on to prove, the Bedouins of old strongly believed in the importance of respect and welfare towards horses. The famed poet and warrior Antar is quoted thus: *“Oh sons of Zabiba, what is the matter with your colt, so thin, while your bellies protrude?”*, and there are lots of examples in Arab writing of people giving their horse water when they had none themselves, or wrapping him in their own cloak in a freezing night, *“hoping he will pay us back for it from the enemy, raging and conquering.”*

So the Bedouins’ motivation for caring well for their horses might differ some from what motivates us today, but still, it was well understood that only proper care would ensure a horse’s well-being. The more so as desert areas are basically uninhabitable for horses, so in the desert, the horses definitely depended on their humans to take care of them, particularly to feed and water them well.

One result of this, as Culbertson sees it, is that “horses were socialized as part of the family – bonded to their “human herd”. Selection, in this respect, meant that horses who did not bond well with humans were not bred on.” She gives lots of evidence that even the modern process of imprinting, which aims at



making sure that horses accept people as part of their family, is part of the Bedouin tradition. So she quotes Burkhardt, a Swiss who travelled among the Bedouins in the 1800s: *“The Bedouins never let the foal drop to the ground at the moment of its birth, but they receive it in their arms and handle it with the utmost care for several hours; they wash it and stretch its delicate limbs and caress it all over like a child”*.

### Horse-Human Relationship

One reason why this process got Burkhardt’s attention was certainly that treating horses with kindness and respect and living in close proximity with them was largely unknown in the Western world at that time. There, most horses were simply viewed as beasts of burden. Busbecq, a French traveller to the Ottoman Empire, noted that *“... alas! Our Christian Grooms treat Horses at quite another rate; they never think them rightly curried, till they thunder at them with their Voice, and let their Club or Horse-whip, dwell, as it were, on their Sides. This makes some Horses even to tremble when their Keepers come into the Stable, so that they hate and fear them too.”*

The way the Bedouins treated their horses was in stark contrast to anything the Europeans were familiar with, Culbertson concludes. Which is probably why so many travellers described this different relationship at length: *“They never tied her up when she was not bridled or saddled. She went into all the tents with a little colt of hers and so visited everybody that used to kiss her, make much of her, and give her anything. She would often go over a heap of children that were lying at the bottom of the tents and would be a long time looking where to step, as she came in or out, not to hurt them. (...) The Arabs never beat them, they make much of them, talk and reason*



with them, and take the greatest imaginable care of them." (d'Arvieux, a French traveller to the desert in the seventeenth century)

Mares with foals, in particular, were obviously given loving care: "This making the mare a member of the family has a most delightfully humanising effect on Arab horseflesh generally. (...) mares enter the tent for shelter of a night when it is cold, or walk into the women's quarters in the midday heat (...) to escape the stinging rays of a fierce sun. No one says them nay. (...) they are welcomed, given some dates or a drink of water as a matter of course. This sort of treatment develops a strange gentleness towards those women who are always handling them, and especially towards the tent children." (H.R.P. Dickson, *The Arab of the Desert*). Lady Blunt observes that "This extreme gentleness and courage, though partly the effect of education, is also inherited, for a colt born and brought up in the stable is just as tame."

"The Arabian has long been considered an ideal family horse", Culbertson says, "and Bedouin tradition demonstrates that this breed was the "original" family horse. The philosophy of treating horses with gentleness extended as Islam spread to two-thirds of the known world." Today, most of us will, when occasion arises, be quick to point out that they don't believe in "breaking" a horse, or in using a whip. At the same time, some of us will never bat an eyelid at some of the details of show horse training. "Responsible horse training can certainly involve prompt punishment of a horse for wrongdoing, and, of course, reward for good behaviour. But what do you think a group of Bedouin would think if they saw a show horse standing in front of a handler, intimidated from past pain... How would they interpret looks of fear instead of pride and courage?"



*O Noble Stallion!  
How beautiful you are,  
with your eyes and muzzle darkened by makeup,  
Your hair shorn by clippers.  
How brave you are, what courage!  
To stand before me, frozen in place,  
with fear in your heart of my chain and my whip.  
You tremble in obedience to my commands.  
Yet, still, you reach for me, stretching your neck,  
your ears alert to the possibility of punishment.  
And when we are done,  
you accept my token pat upon your neck.  
I rejoice!  
Yes, you have suffered,  
but your owner has another prize.*

A fake old-style „show horse trainer’s ode“ written by Culbertson as a demonstration.

### Are we Selectively Breeding Arabian Horses for Their Ability to Tolerate Abuse?

Some horses, in fact, cannot withstand this kind of training, and therefore one might say, as Culbertson puts it, "that we are beginning a process of selecting Arabian horses for their ability to tolerate abuse. I believe there is a majority who would never condone the travesty of such behaviour towards an Arabian horse. But I also believe there are more and more breeders each year who do not show their horses as a result, and many who refuse to sell a horse that will be trained in this manner for the halter show ring.

I believe we are living in challenging times when it comes to breeding Arabians. I remember, as a teenager, when I said I had Arabian horses there was an almost universal response. "You have ARABIAN horses?" people would say. This was stated with awe – and followed by comments about their beauty, their rarity, their status as the finest horses in the world. Today, when people ask what kind of horses I have and I answer "Arabians", they

say "You have those CRAZY ARABS!"

Not one European traveller from the past centuries, not one writer of the horsemanship manuals of the Islamic empires referred to the Arabian breed as "crazy." Should we not carefully examine why this has become the case today? How has this happened? Why has it happened?

Maybe, just maybe, it is reminder that we are not paying quite enough attention to what made the Arabian such a prized horse for centuries." ■