

Daughters of the Desert

by Cynthia Culbertson ■ painting by Ali Almima, Shary B. Akers

The seventh century Arab poet Yazid, in a mere two lines, captured much of the unique sentiment between a nomad of the desert and his beloved mare:

"...And in truth she has ever been to me a precious possession, born and brought up in our tents: of all possessions, that which has been born and bred with one's people is the most precious."

This strong spiritual connection between man and horse is especially evident in the culture of the Arabs, where the horse was not merely a beast of burden, as was often the case in other parts of the world. Another notable difference is the respective value placed on mares versus stallions. The western world has traditionally emphasized stallions, while the winds of the eastern deserts blew in a distinctly distaff direction. This is not to imply that stallions were unappreciated in the Arab world. To the contrary, they were celebrated in the literature of the Arabs since pre-Islamic times and great poets, such as Imru al-Qais, were effusive in the praise of their male mounts:

*"Well-bred was he, long-bodied, outstripping the wild beasts in speed,
Swift to attack, to flee, to turn, yet firm as a rock swept down by the torrent,
Bay-colored, and so smooth the saddle slips from him, as the rain from a smooth stone"*

Western literature about the Arabian horses often implies that the Bedouins used only mares in battle, yet there are numerous literary references, par-



Treasures of Tomorrow

THE ARABIAN MARE IN ARABIC LITERATURE AND BEDOUIN FOLKLORE





ticularly in pre-Islamic times, of the stallion being utilized in warfare. One interesting poem tells of a warrior, as he learns of the enemy approaching the camp, asking his two daughters to saddle his stallion so he might ride out and meet the foe. This reference is one of many that disputes the concept that only mares were ridden in battle and also indicates another often over-looked aspect of Bedouin life - that the women and children had significant responsibilities regarding the horses. Yet any serious student of the history of the Arabian horse soon learns that the mare was prized over the stallion in the culture of the Bedouins.

When investigating the role of the Arabian horse in the desert it is paramount to understand their original purpose - they were clearly an instrument of war. Faster and more maneuverable than the camel, horses were a distinct advantage in the type of skirmishes that were common among the tribes. Livestock meant wealth to the Bedouin,

and a trusty war mare was an effective means of raiding others to gain this wealth. Horses, however, were relatively rare in the desert, and much more of a luxury than the trustworthy camel, which provided meat, milk, transportation and leather and was uniquely suited to the desert environment.

Aside from their speed and stamina, the evolution of the horse as a prey animal means they have an ability to detect motion far beyond the scope of human eyes, and the horses of the desert possessed especially keen vision. It is interesting to note that the horse has the largest eye of any land mammal, and, like most desert creatures, the eyes of the Arabian are larger than their fellows which evolved in a different environment. Whether or not there is a biological explanation, anecdotal evidence indicates it was the mare more often than the stallion that alerted the tribe to the presence of outsiders. Time and time again, even until the modern day, the Bedouins will tell of a special

mare whose behavior was a perfect "alarm" system for the tribe. It is often said that when the mare pricked her ears and expressed in interest in a particular direction, it could be 20 minutes or more before the subject of her interest was visible to humans. This gap in time was hugely important to the tribe, for by then the horses could be saddled and scouts sent out to investigate the threat.

Another disadvantage of the stallion is a tendency to be vocal in the presence of other horses. It is difficult to maintain the advantage of stealth when riding a stallion, as all too often when he senses the presence of other horses he will announce his arrival in an overt way. There is validity to the presumption that this is a significant reason for preferring mares in an environment where the element of surprise was often the difference between victory and defeat.

The scarce resources of the desert and the nomadic lifestyle of the Bedouin also led to the

horses being reared in close proximity to humans. While modern horse breeders often practice the process of "imprinting" newborn foals, the Bedouins understood this concept long before the advent of modern science. Burkhardt, a Swiss who traveled to Arabia in 1814 wrote, *"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..."* Foals and young horses were lovingly cared for by the woman and children of the tribe, who were responsible for much of their early training. A pre-Islamic reference states, *"With regard to the care of their horses, the Arabs trusted none save their sons or their women."* This socialization, which was much different than is found in the west, often resulted in the foals bonding with humans in the same way they would with members of their equine herd.

Because of the close connection with their horses,



the Bedouins also took advantage of the strong maternal instincts of the mare. Even though the nature of the equine is to flee danger, they also possess the capability for strong defense using their teeth and hooves. In the wild, mares will fiercely protect their foals, and a group of mares will sometimes unite against a predator or common threat. Amazingly, Arabian mares were often seen protecting their fallen riders against the enemy. With ears pinned back and teeth bared, they reacted much as they would if their own foal was in danger. Mares were also known to aid their riders during the battle itself, charging and biting as if they were also warriors. Such behavior could only occur when the socialization of the mares was such that they considered their human companions as part of the "herd." This behavior astonished the Europeans, including General Daumas, who wrote, *"Could it not be that the Arabs, because of their intimate association with the horse, have known how to develop in him faculties unknown to us, while we do not grant any more to the horse than the possession of the instinct of memory? To the Arabs, the horse is a family friend; where on the contrary to us he is only a luxury or tool for work."*

Whether the general use and success of the mare in warfare led to the development of recounting the ancestry of their horses through the use of the tail female line is not known. It is likely, however, that observation over time led to placing a greater emphasis on the mare when it came to breeding. While it is easy to dismiss certain traditions among the Bedouin as superstition, their supreme success as horse breeders is an indication their folklore should not be overlooked. An emphasis on purity is another example - over time they must have learned the value of pure blood in maintaining the characteristics they desired. The same must certainly be true of placing greater emphasis on the mare line.

The nomadic Bedouins possessed a superb oral tradition in both poetry and genealogy and thankfully a portion of this information made the transition to the written word. While the early western travelers to the desert made much of the "strains" of horses, even describing them as if they

were different breeds, they are a relatively recent development. The earliest references in written Arabic actually recount the ancestry of the horses by their individual names, and it is only about three hundred years ago that strain names are referenced, and they are only commonly found in the last two centuries. The original strains generally described a mare with defining physical characteristics or exceptional behavior which founded a line of equally distinguished offspring. Naturally those mares which produced superior offspring would have greater value than other lines, so the first strains were undoubtedly an indication of the finest families. Modern breeding also acknowledges the strengths of particular mare lines and the importance of considering these lines when making breeding decisions. This is just one example of the validity of Bedouin folklore when it comes to horses, while modern science has not yet revealed the secret of why mares seem to contribute more than stallions.

The horse is also highly regarded in Islam. The Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) greatly loved horses and encouraged his followers to be good stewards of their animals. There are many sayings or hadiths of the Prophet (pbuh) which particularly emphasize the mare. Several of these are recounted in the 14th century manuscript of Ali ibn Abd al-Rahman ibn Hudhayl al Andalusi, which describes a wise man asking the Prophet (pbuh) which possessions are profitable. *"A mare, followed by a mare, and in its womb a mare,"* was the answer given. Aday Ibn Fadl said that a man asked the Prophet (pbuh), *"What possession is good?"* and the Prophet (pbuh) said, *"A row of pollinated date trees, or a mare which produces many foals."*

The same manuscript speaks of the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh) advising his followers, *"Take upon you the mares! Their backs are a sanctuary and their wombs are a treasure."* Upon hearing this advice it is said that one of his followers told the Prophet (pbuh), *"Oh Prophet! I do have mares,"* and the Prophet (pbuh) replied, *"Then keep them and breed them to stallions, and keep the mares that result from this, and you will rise to the highest levels of heaven."*



Another indication of the value placed upon the mare is that, traditionally, they were never sold. They were sometimes given as gifts, however, or owned in shares among several members of the tribe, and occasionally grave circumstances resulted in a sale, but this was certainly not the norm. Perhaps this inadvertently led to the development of several breeds in Europe, for once the Europeans learned the value of Arabian blood they made numerous forays to the desert, but were generally only allowed to purchase stallions. Outside of its ancestral homelands it was much more difficult to sustain pure breeding initially because of the unavailability of Arabian mares.

In conclusion, there can be no doubt that the Bedouin horse breeders emphasized the importance of the mare over the stallion in both warfare and breeding. The love and admiration they felt for their mares, however, is perhaps best expressed through centuries of Arabic literature. It is here that one can best appreciate not only the physical characteristics the Bedouins prized, but also the beauty and spiritual attributes that make the Arabian mare a treasure beyond price. ❧

"She is one of those steeds of race that stretch themselves fully in their gallop, springing and light of foot, pressing on in her eagerness: her longing is the far-extended desert, plain giving unto plain."

From the Muzariid by Yazid, translated by Sir Charles Lyall.

"She carried me and my brother, and my son and our shield and the fifth one, her heart, gave us strength and encouragement in the battle..."

From a poem of Shahwan.

The grey mare, the renowned, in the world there is none like her...

...her neck curved like a palm branch...

...her hooves fly forward faster ever than flies the whirlwind...

From the "Stealing of the Mare" by Salame Abu Zaid

"And if that which was withheld of the reins is restored to her, she lets herself go at full speed like the darting flight of a sand-grouse which brooks pursuit...."

And I will keep her as my own, so long as there is a presser for the olive, and so long as a man, barefoot or shod, wanders the face of the earth."

From the Muzariid of Yazid translated by Sir Charles Lyall