



brief History of the Egyptian Arabian horse

BY: Judith Forbes

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Egypt's Arabian horse heritage is an ancient one. Magnificent tomb paintings and various inscriptions indicate that the Egyptians employed the horse at least as early as 1580 B.C. when they drove out their hated Hyksos Oppressors. The Warrior kings of the XVIIIth Dynasty who followed held their spirited Arabian chargers in great veneration.

The large scale military use of horses in Egypt began under the reign of pharaoh Thotmose III (1504 - 1450 B.C.). Amenophis, son of Thotmose, "was given the very best horses of the stable" and it was known "he could not be over taken in the races." The noble coursers of Ramses II saved his life in a battle against the Hittites. Thereafter he lavishly rewarded their valor and proclaimed: "Henceforth their food shall be given them before me each day when I am in my palace...." When Pharaoh Piankhi (751 - 715 B.C.) learnt that Namlot, a rebellious Egyptian king, had left his stable in total disorder, he poignantly despaired: "I swear as Ra loves me... it is more grievous in my heart that my horses have suffered hunger, than any evil deed that thou hast done, in prosecution of thy desire."

Pharaonic splendor was dimmed by conquering foreign armies and by 525 B.C. the Egyptian Empire had crumbled. However, events began shaping in the Arabian Peninsula which in a few centuries resulted in another incursion of horse-loving "people of the east" into the valley of the Nile. Like a sandstorm, the Arabians swept out of the desert to spread the Word of the Prophet Mohammed. Indeed, the Prophet's teaching that "every man shall love his horse" bore fruit. By the year 632 A.D. the eruption of Islam shook the whole civilized world. Bedouin warriors, mounted upon noble Arab steeds and Armed primarily with the new Islamic creed, proved to be invincible. Egypt was included in the many states which were engulfed by the Arab tide.

The land of the Sphinxes and pyramids was ruled as a province by Moslem caliphate governors for two centuries. They were followed by that incredible breed of horsemen, the Mamlukes. Ahmed Ibn Tulun, who subjected Egypt to his will in 868 A.D., epitomized this mounted warrior ruling class. Palatial gardens and estates provided a magnificent setting for the great hippodrome he built to

house his choice collection of Arab horses.

Historians still speak with awe about the illustrious Salaheldin who founded the Ayyubid Dynasty (1193 - 1250). He built the Citadel and fought valiantly against the Crusaders, preventing Richard the Lion Hearted from taking Jerusalem and Egypt. Of Saladin's swift Saracen steeds, Sir Walter Scott penned in *The Talisman*: "They spurned the sand from behind them - they seemed to devour the desert before them- miles flew away with minutes, yet their strength seemed unabated..."

The most enterprising of all Mamluke sultans was Baybars (1250 - 1277). On ceremonious occasions his regal mounts trod on oriental silks and satins which had been laid in the road to provide a luxurious pathway for the sultan. No sum was too great to lavish on the coursers who bore Islam's warriors, and Baybars was known to have given away as many as "one hundred and eighty horses in one hour" to those who became converts for the Holy Cause.

The house of Kalaoun (1279 - 1382), when headed by sultan Nasser Mohamed Ibn Kalaoun, brought a new height to Arabian breeding within the realm. The fabulous Meydan (Hippodrome) el Naceri was constructed and El Nacer's passion for only the choicest Arabian steeds became known to all the Arabs. Price was no object. Over one million drachmas passed from his treasury for horses in one day alone. He paid from 10,000 to 30,000 drachmas per horse and as much as 80,000 to 90,000 drachmas for broodmares. One daughter of "Al-Karta," a celebrated mare, was purchased for 100,000 drachmas, plus some property of land in Syria as an added inducement to the seller. There was no Arab tribe which failed to send to this sultan min Keraim Khoyoul-hom (Ar. "of the most elect of their horses"). Horse races were abandoned after his demise but were resumed in 1382 A.D. under the reign of the Burjite Sultan Barquq. He too loved horses as evidenced by the keenness which he displayed towards equine sport. When he died, there were some 7,000 horses left in his stable and all said to be mares.

After the Ottoman conquest, Egypt sank into the position of a mere province of the Turkish Empire until the rise of Mohammed Ali the great, an Albanian who brought about the Renaissance of Egypt.

The government of Constantinople conferred upon him the Pashalik of Cairo in 1805 and him and his son, Ibrahim Pasha, dominated the Middle Eastern scene for the next Forty Years. Mohamed Ali became entranced with the beauty and nobility of Arabian horses and wasted no time in building elaborate stables and spending millions of gold pounds to gather the finest animals available. The rebellious Wahabi sect in Arabia provided him even greater opportunity to obtain horses when they despoiled the Prophet's tomb and incurred the wrath of the Sublime Porte for committing a sacrilege. Mohamed Ali was requested to suppress these fanatics so Tousson Pasha, his eldest son (and father of Abbas Pasha) was dispatched to punish the offenders. Fate was on Egypt's side when Saud, the Wahabi leader, died of fever and his son Abdullah saw the wisdom of signing a peace treaty. As



Ibrahim Pasha

part of the terms for peace, Mohamed Ali requested and received many of Saud's priceless desert steeds. The treaty was subsequently broken by Abdullah and Ibrahim Pasha defeated him in another battle. As a result of these campaigns in Arabia, many choice horses were sent back to the royal stables of Egypt. Eventually over 1100 spectacular animals were stabled at Mohamed Ali's luxuries country estate at Shoubra, providing European artists with the most ethereal equine subjects they had ever seen. James St. John, visiting the stud in 1832, spoke of the genuine Nejd horses and remarked about the high quality typified by "a small, dark chestnut horse, of the true blood, as his points would testify. He had a fine snake head, with an expanding and projecting nostril... a remarkable small pointed ear. His forehead was wide, with an eye expressive of boldness, generosity and alacrity. His shoulder was thick through, and finely laid back; his ribs and loins were round and deep; his legs short and very powerful... there is no doubt he would be elastic, speedy, and lasting," the Bedouins did believe in beauty as well as utility!

Abbas Pasha fell heir to many of these superb steeds for Mohamed Ali had early noted his grand son's passion for Arabian horses and given him charge over the breeding stations. Abbas had also been enthusiastically collecting on his own and having freed Feysul ibn Saud from the Citadel where he was being held as a political hostage, Abbas secured the everlasting gratitude of the Bedouins and their assistance in the quest for horses.

Lady Anne Blunt was to write of Abbas that he: "ransacked the desert of Arabia and broke down, by the enormous prices he offered, the traditional refusal of the Bedouin breeders to part with their best mares. In order to achieve his object Abbas employed native agents, Arabs from Nejd of high birth and position whom he retained in his service in Cairo and treated with all possible considerations and who in return served him Faithfully in a business he considered the most important of his reign. He thus got together some 290 mares with stallions to match, the absolute pick of the desert which still are spoken of there with wonder and regret as the most authentic collection of pure blood ever made outside the peninsula. These he established as a breeding stud in a fantastic desert home." His horses became legendary in their own time and dignitaries the world over paid them tribute, saying "these horses rival those of King Solomon."

Abbas Pasha was most concerned about the absolute authenticity of his stud, and his envoys trekked many a weary mile ferreting out every detail of history about the strains and families of all the horses he acquired. This information was compiled into a book and presented to Abbas by his devoted Mamluke, Ali Gamal el Din el Shamashirgi Bey.

Lady Anne continues in her letter: "Nevertheless at Abbas's death

in 1854 the whole of his desert establishment was broken up. The palace which had cost a million to build was abandoned to the bats and owls, and the priceless stud was sent by his heirs to the hammer. At the public auction in that year great prices were realized, and King Victor Emmanuel transferred a moiety of the stud to Italy where it flourished till his death in 1879.... The other moiety, however, and as the Arab affirm, the most valuable, remained at Cairo, the best mares and stallions having been bid for and bought on the advice of Hashe, Abbas's chief Bedouin groom, and who best knew the ins and outs of the pedigrees, by Ali Pasha Cherif, then a young man of high family, the largest land owner after the Viceregal family in Egypt, and as great an enthusiast as Abbas himself had been about horses. Under the new management and transferred to Cairo, the stud maintained itself for 20 years and more in full efficiency, and continued to be recognized still as beyond question the first and most authentic Arab stud out of Arabia. Ali Pasha made it his one hobby and delight. The broodmares were seldom seen abroad, being kept secluded in their 'Harem' like the Eastern princesses they were, but the horses were a feature in the Cairo streets. They were entered from time to time in the local races and generally won, the horse 'Wazir' being the most prominent of those that were put in training."

The Pasha instilled in his sons the love of horses. Among them, Ibrahim Bey became a fanatical collector of race horses, the obsession nearly causing his financial ruin. When the stud of Ali Pasha had to be dispersed, owing to difficult financial problems, Lady Anne poignantly wrote of the auction "Sunt Lachrymae return (there are tears for things), and especially at this hour of evil omen for all Eastern sublimities, we cannot but be saddened at the final disappearance of what was in its day a noble thing, a type of Oriental magnificence passed away forever."

A number of the horses came into possession of the Blunts who retained some at their Sheikh Obeyed Stud in Egypt and shipped others to Crabbet Stud in England. The majority of the sale horses remained in Egypt and shipped others to Crabbet Stud in England. The majority of the sale horses remained in Egypt among the royal and titled families. Such men as Prince Ahmed Kamal Pasha, Prince Youssef Kemal, Prince Kamal el Din Hussein, H.R.H Prince Mohamed Ali and the Khedive Abbas Hilmi II, among others, loved Arabians and continued to preserve the legacy of their forefathers. As a consequence of their zeal and devotion, the Egyptian government was made aware of the necessity to continue breeding Arabian horses for the overall good of the country, and the Horse Commission was established in 1892 with Prince Omar Toussoun at the helm. This led to the establishment of The Royal Agriculture Society in 1908, and the best descendants of the horses originally imported by Abbas Pasha and Ali Pasha Cherif were gathered together by its dedicated leaders.

The original stables of the Society at Bahtem became inadequate in 1928 to house the priceless collection then in hand due to the generosity of the contributors to the cause, so the society built an ideal breeding farm north of Heliopolis - the ancient City of the sun - about 20 Kilometers from the busy center of Cairo. Through the establishment of the new farm, the society realized its aim of preserving the athletic ability as well as the classic beauty of the Arab horses for which Egypt has been renowned more than 3500 years. Arabian horse breeders in America and throughout the world indeed owe a debt of gratitude to those farsighted men who founded The Royal Agricultural society. It is now named The Egyptian Agricultural Organization, but the change was in name only for the same policies continue and its present leaders are equally devoted to the horse. We wish it continued success and prosperity throughout the future. The Arabian horse could not exist today if it weren't for Egyptians, past and present, who preserved the horse through sacrifice and dedication ■