

THE ARABIAN MARE

Excerpts form an article by Cindy Reich, Arabian Horse World, September 2007

The Arabian Mare, priceless beyond measure. Warhorse. Beloved of the Bedouin. Treasure from which all bloodlines are traced and held. Stallions may be powerful and majestic, but the true strength of the Arabian breed resides in the mare.

Ya Bey,
We can't give her as a present or sell her.
Ya, Bey,
A mare like this
It is a shame to sell.
You cannot guide such a horse
And you can't praise about her in books.
Indeed her strain is known in all the desert.
She can't be followed while I am on her back,
And you can hear sounds from her like mad stallions,
In the stormy nights.
And I know when I am riding her
No man can catch me with their glinting swords,
And if I chase them with my mare,
They are afraid of me.

~ from the Abbas Pasha Manuscript

It is no wonder that the mare is held in the highest place of honor and is held closest to the heart of the Bedouin. Mares were prized above all, and were almost never sold. Mares were occasionally gifted, often to royalty, for example when the Sultan of Muscat gave two grey mares to King William IV of Great Britain.

It was, in fact, according to legend, that the five strains of the Arabian horse trace to the five favourite mares of the Prophet. ... many hundreds of mares had been traveling through the desert without water for three days and were very thirsty. As they came upon a water source, the mares rushed to drink. The Prophet sounded his war call, and only five mares responded, turning away from the water to answer their call to duty. From these five major strains descended. The legendary strength of the Arabian horse - forged in an unforgiving climate and way of life – descended from the warhorse - the mare.

Tribes were constantly fighting wars against one another and it was in this harsh environment that the Arabian mare thrived – or died. Those that survived became a source of incredibly tough, courageous horses. Those that didn't were culled by the environment and circumstance. "Arabia is a hard school and no breeding ground for weaklings. The climate is one of sudden extremes, food scarce and work ruthless. Hungry, thirsty, wounded in battle and often shoeless and with frightful sore backs, the mares have little rest throughout the constant tribal wars. The waste of foals lost prematurely is beyond calculation. The wounded mare that cannot follow in the inexorable haste of marching to distant water holes, the horse that is ill. The foal that is weakly – all these are relentlessly left behind to die." (Lady Wentworth's *Authentic Arabian Horse*)

Oh, how dear are the tidings of wars
When their fire is stirred by the chief
Riding on a mare with her tail held upright
And with the nails of her shoes inward bend.

O uncle, buy for me a mare that clears all obstacles;
Oh, how truly such a one will attack!
Oh, truly on the day when she attacks,
Mares whose riders have been thrown will run to and fro.

Oh, how sweet it is to ride a purebred mare!
How sweet her prancing!
And with the troop not of the smallest
The enemy shall feel her rearing

~ from Abbas Pasha Manuscript

A Poem by Shahwan (of the mare al Dahma)

Oh, you hunters who shoot with arrows, I, Shahwan,
Am the best at shooting prey with arrows
And I am the most skilled marksman of all.

And some hunters may let their prey escape,
But I and my horse catch up with it and bring it back.

And the hunters who let their prey escape are weak.
And no one can catch up with it
Except one which has the strength
And swiftness of my horse.
And people have great admiration
For this swiftness.

The most beautiful type of horse
Is the one who stands on three legs
And raises the fourth,
And my horse is of this kind.
And she does more than what is expected of her
During battle.

During the attacks
She strikes with her forefeet and hind feet,
And the rider strikes with his sword and arrows.
And the higher the pitch of battle,
The more aroused the mare becomes.

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.

She defends her rider
Even unto putting herself in peril,
And does not give the enemy a chance
To wound her rider.

Those who taught this mare
Are very skilled in training horses, and this skill has enabled the horseman to live a free life
And make him a hunter
Whose arrows stray not from its mark.
And this is due to the horses.

I am blessed with al Dahma
Because she protects me from defeat
And enables me to hunt swift animals.
And during every battle and hunt
I can get milk and food.
I am blessed with al Dahma
Because she creates a void
Between her and the horses
Who are racing with her.
And the star has given her its light.

Indeed those who are skilled among riders
fear my mare because she is swift and strong.
If we fight, when evening comes
The victory is ours,
And the day will never come
When there will be sorrow and shame among us.

Horses are what the heart most cherishes,
And the Arabs use no other means
For fighting and riding except horses.
You must not allow any person
Who is not skilled in horsemanship or warfare
To ride horses until he should master the art,
Because he is young
And his body has not become strong
In the requirements for mastery.

Their heads are small and delicate
Having a dryness about them.
You must buy this kind of horse
and your hearts will not open.

~ from the Abbas Pasha Manuscript

Mares today have a life much easier than that of their ancestors. Box stalls, fenced paddocks of deep grass, water on demand. Yet mares still have many and varied jobs to do. Their main job is to produce foals. The mare's importance in that regard is considered by many to be superior to that of the stallion. Most horsemen believe, and scientific study supports, the mare has more influence on the foal than the stallion. A mare may be able to produce 10-15 foals in her lifetime, if she is lucky. More often than not, she will produce fewer than that, so her impact on the breed, while small, has to be mighty.

Carrying a foal for eleven months, giving birth and coming back into estrus (heat – ready be bred again) a week after foaling – mares are reproductive machines. While producing foals is the number one job of the mare, it is no surprise that she will occasionally “take a year off” and fail to get in foal no matter what.

Mares are luckier than stallions. In general, they are allowed to live like horses, in herd situations. Stallions tend to be segregated and isolated – a heavy burden for a herd animal. Mares do best in groups where they can act like horses - as opposed to life in a stall or isolation from other horses. There is nothing more peaceful and picturesque in the world than a herd of Arabian mares grazing in a pasture with foals scattered about asleep in the grass. The behaviour of mares in a herd is a study that could teach many in the human community.

A distinct hierarchy is established quite quickly in any group of mares. There will be one “lead” mare who is dominant over all others. She is not necessarily the oldest, but she can certainly be the meanest when she has to be. No one challenges her authority. In the wild, the lead mare finds the water and finds the food. She is the scoutmaster.

Arabian mares weren't warhorses for nothing. Their stamina and courage are legendary. Therefore it is no surprise that Arabian mares excel at the various jobs they are given. While war mounts are not in great demand, we have all seen the heart and guts that Arabian mares have displayed on the racetrack, in the show arena, and on the trail. Is it any wonder that Arabians and horses of Arabian blood dominate the endurance field.

The beauty of the Arabian mare is without peer. Delicate without fragility, strong without coarseness, beautiful without weakness. In *The Authentic Arabian Horse*, there is a description from an Arab of the mare Agheyli Jaber – “The grey mare the (most) renowned in the world, there is none like her” for whose possession all beholders were “covetous, sick with longing.”

“Spare her head and lean. Her ears pricked close together
...Her neck curved like a palm branch,
Her forehead a lamp lighted,
Her withers clean and sharp ... her forelegs are twin lances,
Her hooves fly forward ever faster than flies the whirlwind,
Her tailbone held aloft, yet the hairs sweep the gravel;
Her height twice eight, sixteen, taller than all the horses ...”

An excerpt from “The Poem of Ibn Mesoud al Qahtani” about his mare conveys not only his mare’s beauty but also her intrinsic value:

... Our horses were like brides
garbed in fine raiment,
and everyone admired them.

And they walked with the people in a very calm and sedate manner,
Surrounded by the old men
And followed by the children.

Ibn Saud says we must protect her
because every man would covet her.

She is shaqra,
And she has a long tail
And flies like the wild dove.

When she is standing, she appears calm,
But when she runs, it is as if she has wings.

And there is a string of prayer beads
Adorning her neck
To bring good fortune.

And the blessings of our Lord Mohamed
Are upon her because of those beads.

While the Arabian mare no longer has to carry her rider into battle, she still retains the beauty, charisma, elegance and strength that made her the jewel above price. She will always carry the heart of her owner.