

INTRODUCTION: WHAT DO WE TALK ABOUT WHEN WE TALK ABOUT HISTORICAL BREEDS?

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It is not uncommon to hear that a certain breed of horse dates to the Middle Ages or even to antiquity. Claims have been made about the breeding of Arabian horses going back to ancient Egypt, for instance,¹ or for the Friesian horse being the original medieval warhorse, the destrier. Other heritage and rare breeds have likewise claimed historical origins, dating back to the Middle Ages. The Fjord, the Icelandic horse, and the Murgese are all said to have originated in medieval Europe.

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¹ There is a massive corpus of scholarly and non-scholarly literature on the Arabian horse and its supposed ancient and medieval origins, which cannot be tackled here. For extensive and up-to-date discussion and bibliography, please see the discussion in Miriam Bibby, *Invisible Ancestor: The Galloway Nag and Its Legacy* (Budapest: Trivent, 2024), and Hylke Hettema, “Al-Khamsa: The Prophet’s Mares – Or Were They Stallions?” *Cheiron: The International Journal of Equine and Equestrian History* 1/1 (2021): 170-179. See also Iwona Głażewska, who, based on genetic evidence (mtDNA sequencing) argues that “that the Arabian horse breed was created from many different breeds and populations, and the concept of breed purity, might refer, at most, to the present population with a history that does not exceed two hundred years.” (Iwona Głażewska, “Speculations on the origin of the Arabian horse breed,” *Livestock Science* 129 (2010): 49–55). On the other hand, researchers estimate that some of the basic genetic characteristics of such modern breeds as the Arabian horse can be traced back to 600 AD (Ludovico Orlando, “Геномная история доместикации лошади: от истоков до современности” [Genomic history of Horse Domestication: From Its Origins to the Modern Day], guest lecture given at A. H. Margulan’s Institute of Archeology, Almaty, Kazakhstan, on March 26, 2025, and the ensuing discussion).

However, this is a very misleading claim, because, although horses were certainly bred in ancient Egypt, medieval Frisland and medieval Iceland, they cannot be equated with the modern breeds for several reasons. Jürg Gassmann succinctly defines the problem when he states that

The “breed” as we know it today, with a defined conformation (often also colour) and based on a stud book, is an artefact of modern times. Horses in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages were classified by type or function. Having said that, it is borne out by numerous references that breeding was done in a controlled manner.²

In discussing horses from the East, notably Arabian horses, Hylke Hettema highlights the fact that breed purity was not and even today is not as essential to the Bedouin breeders as western people tend to think. The desert horse is a working animal, and its ability to perform a certain function is more important than its bloodline. Examining early Arabian horse genealogies, Hettema concludes that they are similar to the genealogies of notable people and tribes: that is, they should be interpreted figuratively rather than literally, as indicators of blood purity in humans or animals.³

When considering the modern notion of the breed in horses, we can note the existence of three key factors that define the breed and that were not as prominent in medieval and early modern societies.

First of all, the modern concept of horse breed involves the existence of a studbook (or, sometimes, several studbooks): only horses registered in the said studbook or database are recognized officially as representative of the breed. No such global or regional studbooks existed in the Middle Ages, although breeders kept records of the mares covered and the foals born, often including the names of the sires and dams to avoid inbreeding. The most comprehensive of such studbooks was produced in Renaissance Italy, hence the claim by certain historians that

² Jürg Gassmann, “Combat Training for Horse and Rider in the Early Middle Ages,” *Acta Periodica Duellatorum* 6/1 (2018): 63–98 at 67 and references therein.

³ Hylke Hettema, “Al-Khamsa: The Prophet’s Mares – Or Were They Stallions?” *Cheiron: The International Journal of Equine and Equestrian History* 1/1 (2021): 170–179.

breeds (*razzias*) already existed in Italy in the fifteenth century. Nevertheless, they were still not breeds in the modern sense of the word, as will be explained later in this Introduction. It was only in the eighteenth century that the Weatherbys studbook of the English Thoroughbred horse was started, which is the earliest database of horses that is still continued to this date. At the same time, early records, even in the Weatherbys studbook, are not without gaps, which undermines the notion of breed purity and nuances the oft-made claim that any of today's Thoroughbreds can be traced back to the original founders of the breed (it can be traced, but not without gaps).

Second, the notion of breed purity, fundamental to modern breeding of horses and other domestic animals, was not followed in medieval society. The requirement of breed purity in horse breeding today means that either the studbook is closed (that is, breeding an individual horse with a representative of any other breed immediately disqualifies the offspring from inclusion in the studbook), or only certain breeds are allowed for intermixing with the breed. To take but one example of the former, the Polish konik has a closed studbook with six main lines; it means that breeding a konik mare with a pony stallion of any breed but the konik will disqualify the offspring from being registered as a konik.⁴ Still, because koniks are known to be good jumpers and have in general, very good temperament, many yard owners who breed their own horses cross them with sports pony stallions: as a result, the offspring have good characteristics for show-jumping in combination with a very level-headed, responsive and hard-working attitude, which makes them valued mounts for children and small riders.⁵

⁴ “The Studbook is closed i.e. only stallions and mares can enter the studbook which stem from parents which have been registered in the studbook.” “Stud book of Origin of Konik polski breed” Polski Związek Hodowców koni, available at: <https://www.pzhk.pl/en/breeding/stud-book-of-origin-of-konik-polski-breed/> (accessed April 4, 2025).

⁵ Information gained from communication with private sport yards in the area (Latvia). The author also has a feral bred konik and a half-konik, both of whom exhibit singularly good tempers. The author also owns a brother of the half-konik, who shares the same father but has a different, non-konik dam, and can testify to the difference in the two ponies' temperament.

A good example of the latter, a partially open studbook, is the Latvian Warmblood.⁶ The Latvian Warmblood exists in two types. The “old,” type, also known as the “heavy” or “harness” type, is the original working horse, which can go in harness and can also be ridden and jumped; it is a valuable school horse, but is not a prized athlete. The “new” or “light” type results from cross-breeding with imported stock: in the late twentieth century, Arabians, Thoroughbreds and Trakehners were used to lighten the breed, but today, German sport horses (Hanoverian, Holstein, Trakehner and other local breeds), as well as Belgians are more popular, resulting in higher and somewhat bulkier horses. A horse bred from a certified stallion and a mare in Latvia will be registered as Latvian Warmblood, provided that one of the parents is a registered Latvian Warmblood and the other parent is registered as a representative of a breed allowed into the studbooks.

The third factor that is important for the modern breed is that it should demonstrate certain features deemed characteristic of the breed. While a horse can have the right pedigree and be registered as a respective breed, it may be disqualified from further breeding if it does not fit. Thus, to use the example of Polski koniks, these ponies should display one of two colours allowed for the breed: dun (beige or greyish coat and a dorsal stripe) or bay (brown coat and black points – the mane, the tail, the muzzle and possibly the legs and hooves, although these can also be white). Likewise, the Latvian Warmblood, in order to be recommended for further studwork, should demonstrate certain physical and mental characteristics. It should be relatively tall (161 cm and taller), have large joints, good gaits and good temper. All these factors are assessed when mares and stallions are evaluated and a decision is made to issue a license to a stallion or to recommend a mare for breeding. Nevertheless, if the horse does not satisfy one criterion but exceeds expectations in other criteria, it can still be allowed for stud.⁷

⁶ The breeding programme for the Latvian Warmblood for 2019-2029 is available at the homepage of the Association of Breeders of the Latvian Horse, <https://lszaa.lv/ciltsdarbs/ciltsdarba-programma/> (accessed April 4, 2025).

⁷ The author's mare Esmeralde was assessed in 2023, and, albeit shorter than the breed's recommended standard (159 cm at withers as compared to the minimum of 161 cm at withers) and with smallish joints, she was recommended for breeding, satisfying on other criteria (good movements and

When compared to medieval breeding practices and typology, it becomes evident that breed purity did not exist in the medieval world. Rather, there were two ways of classifying horses: by type and origin. In terms of type, this is related to the function the horse was to perform. Unlike the modern breed, the type could be changed with a change in the horse's occupation. Today, a horse can retire from racing and become a show-jumper or a dressage horse, and many horses and ponies successfully combine several careers – combining harness driving, show-jumping and dressage is not an uncommon mix for ponies in Latvia – over the course of their lifetime or even at the same time. In much the same way, a medieval horse can start off as a rouncey and then become a pack-horse or a cart-horse, due to degenerating health or simply the owner deciding that the horse can be better at a different work.

As to the area of origin, this is easy to confuse with breed, especially given that many of today's breeds are known by the area in which they originate or in which they are bred primarily. At the same time, Arabian horses are bred all over the world today, from the US to Russia, and not only in the Arabian Peninsula. The same is true of the English Thoroughbred, which is bred and competed internationally. To compare, as late as the turn of the fifteenth century Pietro Monte in his wide-ranging treatise entitled *Collectanea*, which can be described as an encyclopedia of health, fitness and military training, turned to the influence of the place of birth on the living beings. In describing the factors influencing the offspring of humans and animals, he uses the example of horse breeding, stating that regions are crucial for producing certain qualities in horses.

We should also pay attention to the properties of the places where we conceive our children, since all living beings, both plants and animals, are greatly influenced by the circumstances of places in producing fruit, not only regarding where they are relocated over time. For example, if we bring a stallion and mare from Spain to France, and they generate offspring, the horse conceived and born in France, even though it comes from a Spanish stallion and

excellent temperament). She was recommended for breeding with taller and heavier stallions to increase the height and robusticity in the offspring.

mare, never comes out as good or able as if it were conceived in Spain, and the next generation of offspring are even weaker. This example can teach us about the places suited for generating offspring.⁸

Remarkably, Pietro Monte also includes an entire section on the influence of regions on humans, which is related to the theory of humours. Discussing Germany and Flanders, he states that: “In Germany and Flanders, almost everyone is phlegmatic, and choler usually follows. They are large of body, but few are strong and even fewer are agile, nor are they good at throwing except with large things like stones and such.”⁹ The characteristics of German and Flemish people resemble those of horses in Germany and Flanders, which Monte treats in another section, devoted to build or conformation in humans and animals. Thus, we get the impression that human and animal breeding are similar region-based. Moreover, in pursuing the subject of humans born in various countries, Monte expressly refers to breeding, e.g., in Chapter 99, devoted to Hungary, he argues that “Hungary breeds well-constituted men of good stature.”¹⁰

Monte’s statements make it clear that, in difference from today’s breeds, which can be produced anywhere successfully, the proto-breeds or landraces (*razzias*) bred in medieval and Renaissance Europe were firmly tied to a certain area. Origin and the work done by a horse were two ways of identifying and assessing individual animals, but, whereas origin was a set characteristic, the type or function of the horse could change. A horse’s type can be “upgraded” through training; alternatively, it can degenerate through maltreatment, injury or disease. It can also change due to a situation or a person’s subjective assessment. A study of horse types in English administrative records by Emma Herbert-Davies shows that horse types were fluid and could be changed subjectively by the people assessing individual horses in master rolls.¹¹ Moreover,

⁸ Pietro Monte, *Collectanea: The Arms, Armour and Fighting Techniques of a Fifteenth-Century Soldier*, trans. Jeffrey L. Forgeng (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2018), 67.

⁹ Monte, *Collectanea*, 93.

¹⁰ Monte, *Collectanea*, 92.

¹¹ Emma Herbert-Davies, “Appraising the Warhorse: *Restaurum Equorum* in the Reigns of Edward I and II,” in *Historical Practices in Horsemanship and Equestrian*

although names for horse types were often similar in European languages and could be associated with the same Latin terms, the understanding what a certain type was could evolve in different societies and even in the same society over time – a good case in point is the English hackney.¹²

The contributions to this volume investigate the diverse horse types and their functions, as well as the local traditions of horsemanship that are associated with certain breeds. The volume starts with a prefatory chapter by Clothilde Noé, which critically examines the notions of “breed” and “race” in application to medieval animals. The rest of the volume is divided into three parts, considering horses in different geographic regions (Iceland, Greece and Portugal), societies and literatures.

Part one begins with a study by Samantha Cone, focussing on the origin and role of the horse in medieval Iceland. The following chapter by Alexia Foteini Stamouli considers the uses of horses in medieval Byzantium, as testified by the *Histories* of John Kantakouzenos. The third contribution in the section, by Afonso Soares de Sousa, constitutes an overview of the types of horses in Portuguese administrative documents.

Part two highlights the fact that, depending on the society, horse types could have been defined and used differently. This is made particularly clear by the first chapter in the section, where John Clark investigates the meaning of the term “hackney” in medieval England, showing that the English use of the word differed from the French *haquenée*. The next chapter, by Miriam Bibby, looks at a different society still located in the British Isles: she takes the reader to the racecourse, in which the Galloway horse was the central actor. The third chapter in the section, by Kelly Gilbertson, charts the process through which the warhorse disappears from the world of the late medieval English gentry, as reflected in the hippiatric treatises they commissioned and read. The fourth chapter in the section, by Anastasija Ropa, is devoted to the less

Sports, ed. Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson (Budapest: Trivent, 2022) and Herbert-Davies, *The Warhorse in England. 1272-1327* (Budapest: Trivent, 2025).

¹² For a comparison of different horse terms in the Spanish, French and English, see the study by Cristina Oliveros Calvo, “Straight from the Horse’s Mouth: A Study of Horse Type Terms in English, French and Spanish,” in *The Liminal Horse: Equitation and Boundaries*, ed. Rena Maguire and Anastasija Ropa (Budapest: Trivent, 2021).

documented “wild horses” and the different ways in which they surfaced in the materials from various Eurasian societies.

The third section centres on the analysis of literary sources. Jürg Gassmann’s study of Middle High German literature, particularly romances, reveals the existence of a previously unremarked term, “*râvîl*,” which as the author argues, is likely to refer to a horse from the East. Another chapter, by Kristen L. Olson, considers an equid that was undoubtedly essential in the world before the advent of motorized transportation but was undeservedly forgotten, the mule. Olson examines Spenser’s works and literary emblems to reveal traces of this elusive and unremarkable, but irreplaceable hybrid.

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