*Cheiron: The International Journal of Equine and Equestrian History*
Vol. 5, Special Issue/2025
© The Authors 2025
Available online at
http://trivent-publishing.eu/

# Horsing Around: Complexities of Approaching Horses in Historical Material

Hylke Hettema

**DOI: 10.22618/TP.Cheiron.20255.SI.196010**

CHEIRON is published by Trivent Publishing

*This is an Open Access article distributed in accordance with the Creative Commons Attribution Non Commercial (CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0) license, which permits others to copy or share the article, provided original work is properly cited and that this is not done for commercial purposes. Users may not remix, transform, or build upon the material and may not distribute the modified material (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)*

# Horsing Around: Complexities of Approaching Horses in Historical Material

Hylke Hettema*

Navigating the world of horses as both a horse owner, rider, and academic, it is almost impossible for me to fathom the fact that the horse is disappearing from our society. It took reading Ulrich Raulff's *Farewell to the Horse* to realise that we are indeed, as he calls it, in the final century of our relationship. Horses, I believe, will not disappear altogether, as there are plenty of preservation efforts across the globe. Yet in comparison to the historic presence of horses, there are not that many left. Trying to grasp the effect of this century of decline, I googled the numbers for my country of origin, the Netherlands. Albeit being a small nation in size, the year 1850 counted three million human inhabitants and approximately half a million horses. Today, just 175 years later, we have grown to eighteen million citizens. Out of an estimated half million Dutch horse riders, only 250.000 of us keep horses. Together, we have 450.000 horses, a total only slightly less than in 1850.

Crunching the numbers reveals that not even two centuries ago one in every six people had regular contact with horses, and possibly that one horse affected all six humans because society was largely horse-powered, as so aptly described by Susanna Forrest in her *The Age of the Horse*. Today, only one in forty Dutch people has regular contact with a horse, and the horse in question is unlikely to affect the other thirty-nine people, as it does not venture far outside its stable located in rural areas as it has done in the past when it penetrated deep into the cities to power all aspects of human life. This lack of interaction with horses is significant when discussing the meaning of horses.

While it may be obvious that horses can be of practical and material value when we (ab)use their bodies as our workforce as well as a precious

* Leiden Institute for Area studies, Leiden University, the Netherlands.

commodity, much of the meaning ascribed to horses is rather symbolical as well as emotional. Observing equines as a collective, we see freedom, strength and spiritual power in horses. Divided into breeds we assert our ability to influence nature and through individual horses within the said breeds, we express our ideals and extended identity. Many of these aspects of meaning for horses are unknown to the abovementioned thirty-nine individuals not interacting with horses on a daily basis. But most of them will know something about one other facet of horses; their history, for nothing gives a concept more meaning than a history to explain it. And even the non-horsey people, as we horsey people like to call them, know of the centrality of the horse to human history.

To people who like horses however, horse-history is important on a more personal level. It serves to explain why that particular horse we interact with is different and special compared to other horses. Comparison and division of horses is exercised through various ideologies, depending on the focal point of the cultural and knowledge circles the horse enthusiast in question occupies. Those participating in equestrian sports will discuss horse history in terms of development of physical abilities of horse bodies in different time periods and cultures. Breeders and leisure riders approach horse history mostly through the lens of breeds; a racialist division of groups of horses with particular phenotypes, stemming from early modern thinking on race and eugenics. It is precisely this explanation of the horse world based on breeds that causes a problem for both the horse lover and the academic in me.

Being a big fan and eventually also a breeder of the Arab horse, reading histories for the breed led me to believe that Bucephalus, the famous horse of Alexander the Great, was an Arab. One can imagine how this claim affected a young researcher who had just moved to the Middle East and was convinced that she was riding Bucephalus' distant offspring in the Egyptian desert. It all made sense, after all, every publication in the breed history for the Arab horse claims that the horses of the Pharaohs were Arabs, too. In this manner, horse bodies are vehicles for time-travel to historical legacy. While horses are no longer part of our current society in numbers like those of our not-so-distant pasts, their abundant presence throughout history allows us to remember, imagine and reconstruct past times through historical information featuring human-horse encounters and interactions. But this time-transcending explanation of the world of horses and their history is problematic.

One can imagine the shock when I discovered that Bucephalus has been ascribed to almost every breed by their respective breed histories. While the nostalgia of claiming ancient history for the ancestors of our current equine partners is very appealing, among horse-historians, there is general consensus

that breeds are an invention of modernity. The corpus of literature contextualising the emergence of horse breeds and the construction of history for the said breeds is growing rapidly, yet outside of the academic world this knowledge is slow to spread.

Examples of discussions (and disputes) between academics studying horse history and horse enthusiasts familiar with popular breed histories can be found in various social media groups that are devoted to breed histories. Recently, I took part in such a discussion on a Facebook group dedicated to the preservation of rare breeds, in this instance, the Caspian horse. This little breed stemming from Iran is claimed to have its origins in antiquity and is therefore often seen as ancestral to various other breeds, among which the Arab horse. These claims surprised me, as the members of this discussion are all very passionate about studying the history of the breed; yet recent DNA research has proven that Caspian horses are part of the so-called crown group which formed sometime after the seventh century CE. Although this knowledge is available through open access publications, breed enthusiasts in this social media discussion appear not to engage with this genetic evidence. While this underlines the knowledge gap between academics and practical experts, it also confirms the continuing potency of the near mythical narratives that are at the heart of breed and horse histories.

Ignoring the genetic evidence that refutes the possibility of an ancient Caspian horse, enthusiasts of this breed insist on origins in antiquity by sharing depictions of ancient Assyrian reliefs featuring horses. Pointing out that the depicted horses are small just like the modern Caspian today is another problematic argument. I undertook my first attempt to revise part of the history for the Arab horse together with Egyptologist and Art historian Lonneke Delpeut. She helped me understand that we cannot simply conclude that we are seeing Arab horses in ancient Egyptian imagery of equines. The typical recognisable shape of a breed like the Arab or Caspian is the result of generations of selective breeding, culminating in the morphology we know today. Potential similarity to the shapes in historical depictions of horses cannot confirm the existence of the said breed in past times, without specific evidence that the people producing the images knew a concept like breed and used a particular name for that breed. Furthermore, scholars of Assyrian reliefs featuring horses are of the opinion that no conclusions about morphology or breed can be drawn from these reliefs, as they are representing horses that conform to the artistic conventions of that particular time and culture.

Visual material is not the only type of historical source that often suffers misrepresentation in public debates on horse history. As stated above, the

often static (and constructed) breed histories override horse enthusiasts' ability or willingness to engage with and accept academic findings, causing a misrepresentation of information about horses in historical texts. An example is found on the social media of the Arabian Galleries at the Kentucky Horse Park Museum, organised by the Purebred Arabian Trust, on March 30, 2025. In promotion of their exhibition on the Arab horse, they pose to their readers;

> "*What is Furusiyya?- Furusiyya is the Bedouin art of equitation. It was detailed in Furusiyya Manuscripts created by the Mamluks that beautifully illustrate training techniques, archery, weapons, battle tactics, hunting, sports and horse management, and care. #ArabianHorseGalleries at the Kentucky Horse Park*"

While it is true that Arabic manuscripts in the Furusiyya genre contain information about horses and their roles in Mamluk military efforts, it is important to point out a problem with the language used here. The fragment is an all-too-common example of projection of modern concepts as well as modern constructions of history for a breed onto historical linguistic sources. Over twenty years ago Shihab al-Sarraf made the case that the birth of the Furusiyya genre predates the rise of the Mamluks, but in the field of Arabic literary studies with a focus on Mamluk cultural production, there is little doubt that Furusiyya lacks Bedouin knowledge. In fact, the Bedouin were always a marginalised group within the Mamluk empire.

Because popular history for the Arab horse highlights the Bedouin as its creator and protagonist in accounts of the breed's legacy, discussion of any historical material from the Middle East tends to project the Arab horse and its Bedouin master onto the material, even when it is not about or produced by Bedouin. This is done once more through the lens of modern breeds, stating that the Bedouin bred purebred Arab horses. The arguments brought forward are based on complex Arabic jargon, collected by European travellers from Bedouin in the Arabian deserts in the nineteenth century. Armed with concepts and terminology like purebred and pureblood they concluded that Bedouin engaged in similar breeding practises based on the existence of the words *asīl, atīq, hajīn* and *kadīsh*. The first two terms are now translated to mean purebred, and the latter two are used to denote partbreds and horses not deemed worthy of the label Arab.

History for the breed is then created in retrospect, by pointing out that these specific concepts can be found in pre-modern Arabic material, without presenting the said material in its own contemporary context. Besides the anachronistic presentation of Arabic "evidence," voices of Arabs stressing the

difference of the Bedouin breeding system to that of the western interpretation of breed are often ignored. Possible arguments for public discussion navigating carefully around the explanation of the Bedouin concept of *asīl* by Arab voices such as Edouard al-Dahdah, sit within the intrinsic right of Bedouin to define and determine an *asīl* horse. Non-Arab enthusiasts of the breed are faced with the uncomfortable fact that colonialism and orientalism "westernised" the Arab horse, as explained by Margaret Derry. The modern and western public interpretation of the Arab purebred will never fully conceptualise Bedouin thinking on the production of horses, even if their terminology is now transferred to western narratives and definitions of Arab horse populations.

Thus, approaching horses in historical material requires collaboration. Obviously, this is partly because only a few of us still interact with horses on a daily basis and are also capable of interpreting descriptions of human-equine encounters in historical material. But there are also interdisciplinary collaborations, such as in the project *Arab-Armenian encounters in the body of the Horse*, where knowledge transfer in medieval hippology between the Christian and Muslim east was studied. To really grasp the contents of such works, one needs historians in the respective fields, with language skills on the respective manuscripts. But one also needs a veterinarian and an equestrian to understand the contents of such works as well as to aid the historians and linguists in deciphering what specific equine/equestrian jargon might mean.

Participating at the workshop organised to discuss the progress, results and future of this research collaboration reminded me why it is vital to collaborate across academic fields as well as work together with practical equine experts. When horses show up in historical material, the research immediately turns into an interdisciplinary one, as one has to address the complexities of approaching horses in history. Without considering the developments in abovementioned genetic studies, art history research, anthropology, and studies of human-equine ecologies and so much more, a historian studying equines would be just horsing around. And the need for properly contextualised horse-history is growing.

While writing on the origins of horses is present in pre-modern times, it has occurred to me that there might be a direct correlation between the decline of the number of horses in our society and the exponential growth of cultural production on the history of the horse. The fewer horses there are, the greater the need to tell their story. After all, from the early modern period onwards, we see the development of a true genre for breed specific histories. The response to this development is a new genre, equine and equestrian history,

written by a new "breed" of researcher, one that combines field specific training and knowledge, disciplined research, as well as equestrian practise; the Horsestorian.