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Caroline Baldock *traces the journey of...*

THE HORSE FROM ANTIQUITY TO THE DERBY

The horse has been with us for millions of years. Tracking the course of its breeding history becomes one of the great jigsaw puzzles of history. Tracing the origin of speed and endurance in the horse is also a mystery. To say that the Thoroughbred racehorse is descended from three Arab stallions shows a lack in comprehending the complexities of breeding of which we know very little.

Some exceptional racehorses have been shown to have 'elite' or large hearts. The XX chromosome of the mare carries this phenomenon, passing it from her sire back to her male offspring. The dam is an essential part of this process; it does not pass down the sire line. Princiquillo and Secretariat, Pochontas and St Simon and, further back, Eclipse all had the elite hearts. This gene carrying the elite heart may well have come from the Old Bald Peg, who was the grand dam of all thoroughbreds; and I don't see anyone trying to find out what breed of horse she was! She appears in 9 family trees of Thoroughbreds. To look for a stallion line to find speed and stamina is therefore incorrect. One must trace it through a female.

The British Museum have a current exhibition called, "From Arabia to Royal Ascot." The exhibition has a collection of interesting and previously unexhibited items. It also includes paintings, sculptures and a superb protective horse amour from the Ottoman Empire. The message follows through that the horse developed from the deserts of Arabia and that the Arab is the predominant breed. It is certainly worth a visit despite the dubious message of Arabian supremacy.

Any of you who have spent time with Louise Firouz would not applaud this blinkered view. Deserts cannot support grass-eating animals. Horses do not thrive unless the environment is perfect for them. We have all seen the effects of the civil unrest on the horses in Cairo. Cairo is not a natural environment for horses so, without food, they died. This pattern of use and abuse would be repeated over and over again during thousands of years of transporting horses to less agreeable climates where they then do not thrive and have to be replaced.

There exists near Tashkent an area, vast by all accounts, where the environment is perfect for the breeding of horses. It is known today by the people who live there as the cradle of superb fast horses: it is Ferghana.

The grasses out in Central Asia are for the most part annual. They grow up, flower and die down. These grasses were also common in California and on the Great Plains. There are many reasons why this annual grass is good for horses. It does not have the sweetness of the perennial grasses, but does have the nutritional values required for good bone growth.

We cannot date the domestication of horses accurately; perhaps 10,000 years ago or maybe 9,000. We do know that horses were gradually recruited into the arsenal of animals exploited for man's development and domination. The horse, once ridden, provided the greatest service of all: mobility. Mobility is only as good as your horse, so improving that horse must have been paramount. Once the use of the chariot began to fade and the invention of the stirrup allowed for the Parthian shot to confuse the enemy, as the departing horsemen let fly with their arrows, then the sheer endurance and speed of the horse became paramount.

The importance of the horse, its speed and endurance should not be overlooked. This legacy belongs to Central Asia.

These horses would probably have been carefully bred and retained by tribes across the constantly churning, warring steppe country. Battles were fought over land and water, salt and precious metals. Controlling the world's resources still causes wars, but in those days controlling the resources necessary for life depended on the horse.

The origins of these horses may be established by looking at many factors. The gold and silver duns and the racking are recessive, and the training methods of the Thoroughbred in the 17th and 18th century is a paper in itself. We know that these astonishing colours of gold and silver were imported into England and have been superseded by the more dominant colours of chestnut, brown and bay.

Racking is a four pace walk, swift, and common amongst the Turkoman horses. Racehorses a couple of hundred years or more often racked and the early training manuals included, "rack your horse home to the stable door." Racking is on a recessive gene and few thoroughbreds can achieve this fifth pace today, but I have ridden some who did. Ursa Major for one, whose dam, Double Entendre, I use to ride in Epsom.