



ASB-SAVĀRĪ

ASB-SAVĀRĪ (Horse-riding). The Iranian lands, in the course of their long history, have been the source of major advances in the techniques of equitation. The Parthian cataphractaries (horsemen clad in coats of mail) with their arched saddle-bows prefigured the heavy cavalry of later times (R. Ghirshman, "La selle en Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* 10, 1973, pp. 94-107). Moreover Iran was always an important channel of cultural contact between East and West. Thus the stirrup, invented in Central Asia, became known to the Arabs after they had invaded Iran in the seventh century (A. D. H. Bivar, "The Stirrup and Its Origins," *Oriental Arts* I, 2, 1955, pp. 61-65; L. White Jr., *Medieval Technology and Social Change*, Oxford, 1962, chap. 1). In the Saljuq period, three great Near Eastern equestrian traditions flourished side by side in Iran: That of the Iranians who rode stallions, that of the Arabs who rode mares, and that of the Turks who rode geldings (M. Kretschmar, *Pferd und Reiter im Orient. Untersuchungen zur Reiterkultur Vorderasiens in der Seldschukenzeit*, Hildesheim and New York, 1980).

Mainly from the thirteenth century onward, we have evidence that the principal suppliers of saddle-horses and cavalrymen were tribes who practiced "vertical" nomadism on horseback, in contrast with the Bedouin Arabs who migrated "horizontally" on camelback (X. de Planhol, *Les fondements géographiques de l'histoire de l'Islam*, Paris, 1968). Under the Qajars, each tribe was required to place at the government's, or more often the provincial governor's, disposal a contingent of armed horsemen proportionate to its strength (A. K. S. Lambton, *Landlord and Peasant in Persia*, Oxford, 1953);



thus Ḥosayn-‘Alī Farmānfarmā, when governor of Fārs, maintained a permanent force of 1000 cavalymen and could call up 20,000 in case of need. The tribes likewise supplied horses for the royal stable (*peygāh*) and stud farm (*qoroq* or *qūrūq*), either as obligatory tax-payments or as no less obligatory gifts. No khan could obtain an audience with the shah unless he first sent a troop of horses which might amount to several hundred (G. R. Garthwaite, *Khans and Shahs. A Documentary Analysis of the Bakhtiyari in Iran*, Cambridge, 1983). The royal stables and stud farms met not only the needs of the shah and his court but also those of the permanent cavalry (*rekābī*) force, the postal relay services, etc. To maintain the thousands of state-owned horses and the necessary installations such as stables (*ṭawīla*) and riding-schools (*meydān*), large staffs with many different skills were required; the *amīr-e ākor*, under whose authority they came, was a very important person. It is noteworthy that Iranian breeders developed a flourishing export of riding-horses to India, mainly by sea (P. K. Gode, “Some References to Persian Horses in Indian Literature from A.D. 1500 to A.D. 1800,” *Poona Orientalist* 11, 1-2, 1946, pp. 1-17).

A modern count gave the total number of horses in Afghanistan as approximately 400,000, of which 35,000 belonged to nomads; almost 300,000 were in the northern region from Badaḵṣān to Jūzjān inclusive (Kabul, Ministry of Agriculture and Irrigation, 1967). For Iran, the total number is considerably less; 320,000 according to an estimate by the F.A.O. (Rome, 1961). Conditions today are very different from those in the first decade of the twentieth century when the Baḳtīārī tribe alone could mobilize 25,000 horsemen (Ḥājj ‘Alī-qolī Khan Sardār As‘ad Baḳtīārī, *Tārīk-eBaḳtīārī*, Tehran, 1333/1914, repr. 1361 Š./1982). Even so, most of Iran’s stock of horses still belongs to tribes, principally those of Khorasan (Torkman) and Baluchistan in the east and those of the Zagros in the west. Iranian riding-horses are mainly of two types: Torkman horses (the commonest breed being named Āqqāl Teka) suitable for riding in relatively flat country, and Iranian horses (particularly the Lori breed) which have broader backs and are sure-footed in mountainous country; the Lori breed is often crossed with the Arab breed of Kūzestān (A. M. Barafroukhteh, *Le cheval en Perse*, Paris, 1931; W. O. Douglas, “The World’s Most Amazing Horses,” *Science Digest* 32, October 1952, pp. 17-21; Commandant Duhousset, “Notices et documents sur les chevaux orientaux,” *Journal de médecine vétérinaire* 7, 1862).

The equitation practiced in Iran and Afghanistan today is, on the whole,



strictly utilitarian, despite the skill of some riders in spectacular feats; compared with what is known of classical Moslem equitation, it seems rather rudimentary. The horses are broken in at a young age and receive too short a training. Today most Iranian horses are capable of only two gaits, gallop and walking pace, though a few are still trained to do the amble (*yorġa*) which was once highly rated for its comfort on long rides. The saddle (*zīn*) of the Turkish type made from a block of wood is still to be found in Afghanistan (B. Dupaigne, “Aperçu sur quelques techniques afghanes,” *Objets et Mondes* 8, 1, 1968, pp. 41-84), but has been replaced in almost all parts of Iran by a light cavalry pallet saddle which was used by the British army and imported into Iran at the end of the nineteenth century (J. -P. Digard, *Techniques des nomades Baxtyāri d’Iran*, Cambridge and Paris, 1981, chap. VII). As regards the bit (*āvīza*), straight or jointed types are used in the east of Iran, while the Arab type with a ring is used in the west. Stirrups (*rekāb*) with short straps are used in the east, but triangular Arab stirrups with long straps are sometimes seen in the west. The whip (*šallāq*) has one lash in the east, three in the west. Such items are among the few surviving relics of the two main traditions which influenced Iranian equitation. Spurs are everywhere unknown. Almost everywhere the stallion (commonly called *asb-e savārī*) is the preferred riding-horse; the mare (*mādīān*) is left to her reproductive function; while the gelding (commonly called *yābū* or *‘alafī*, i.e., hack) is held in contempt and used as a pack-animal or, among the nomads, for carriage of goods in saddle-bags (*korjīn*).

Since the ending of the military role of cavalry, the horse has gradually been dethroned by the more versatile mule (*qāṭer*). Among the Zagros tribes, the numbers—and prices—of mules are two or three times higher than those of horses. This primacy of mules at least ensures that mares and asses are kept to breed them (J.-P. Digard, *Techniques*, pp. 33, 42). At the same time, in all areas where access is not too difficult, mules, horses, and asses alike are threatened by the motorization of transport, which also gives rise to far-reaching social consequences (M.-H. Pâpoli-Yazdi, “La motorisation des moyens de transport et ses conséquences chez les nomades kurdes de Khorāssān (Iran),” *Revue Géographique de l’Est* 22, 1-2, 1982, pp. 99-115).

Nevertheless, possession of a fine horse and performance of equestrian feats, as in the *bozkašī* of the Afghans and the *qeyqāč* (shooting at the gallop) of the Iranian tribes, or for the Torkmen, participation in races and competitions at the Tehran racecourse (before its closure by the Islamic republican regime),



continue to be widely admired and to confer social prestige (G. W. Azoy, *Buzkashi: Game and Power in Afghanistan*, Philadelphia, 1982; A. Balikci, "Village Buzkashi," *Afghanistan Journal* 5, 1, 1978, pp. 11-21; L. Dupree, "Aq Kupruk: A town in North Afghanistan," in L. Sweet, ed., *Peoples and Cultures of the Middle East*, New York, 1970, II, pp. 344-87; A. Stucki, "Horses and Women. Some Thoughts on the Life Cycle of Ersari Türkmen Women," *Afghanistan Journal* 5, 4, 1978, pp. 140-49).

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