



DONKEY I. IN PERSIAN TRADITION AND FOLK BELIEF

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The donkey (*Equus hydruntinus*, *Equus asinus asinus*, etc.; Pers. *kar*, *darāz-gāš*), domesticated species descended from the wild ass (*Equus africanus*; Uerpmann), probably first bred in captivity in Egypt and western Asia, where by 2500 B.C.E. the domesticated donkey was in use as a beast of burden (Clutton-Brock, p. 65). Because of its jolting gait, it was almost never used in hunting or battle (Clutton-Brock, p. 66; for a rare exception, see Aelian, 10.40, 12.34). In southern Persia remains of the domestic donkey have been identified from the 3rd millennium B.C.E. at Tall-e Malīān (Zeder).

In Persian tradition. According to the *Bundahišn*, donkeys were created from the purified seed of the primordial ox and belonged to the family of horses and mules (TD2, pp. 95-96; tr. Bahār, p. 78). The “cat-footed” (*gorba-pāy*) donkey was the chief of all asses (TD2, p. 120; tr. Bahār, p. 89). Nevertheless, the donkey’s braying was considered unpleasant, resembling the voice of the evil spirit (TD2, p. 187; tr. Bahār, p. 122; cf. Qur’ān 31:19-20: “the harshest of sounds”; Hedāyat, pp. 178-79).

In the *Šāh-nāma* (ed. Khaleghi, I, p. 31) domestication of the donkey is credited to Hūšang, though in the 13th century Moḥammad b. Maṣūm Mobārakšāh (p.



405) attributed it to Tahmūrāṭ. Either Jamšīd ([Pseudo] Kayyām, p. 17) or Tahmūrāṭ was supposed to have been the first to mate horses and donkeys to breed mules (Baʿamī, ed. Bahār, I, p. 129). There is a Muslim tradition that such breeding is undesirable, though not unlawful (Abū Dāwūd, III, p. 27).

In biblical times donkeys, especially white ones, were among the preferred mounts for persons of rank (Judges 5:10, 10:3-4; II Samuel 16:2). In Muslim tradition, too, they were the mounts favored by prophets (Baʿamī, ed. Bahār, I, p. 509; Ṭūsī, p. 562; cf. Zamaḡšarī, IV, p. 401). Nevertheless, Moses was ordered to remove shoes made of donkey skin before approaching holy ground (Ṭabarī, IV, p. 1017; cf. II, p. 477).

Sunni theologians consider the flesh of donkeys forbidden, though Abū Dāwūd Sejestānī cited a tradition implying that it is permissible in dire need (cf. Termedī, IV, p. 82, V, p. 184; Ebn Ḥajar, XVI, pp. 44, 46-67, 62-63, 65; Abū Dāwūd, III, pp. 356-57). The prohibition was extended to the flesh of mules and similar animals resulting from the copulation of donkeys with other breeds (Zohaylī, III, p. 508). On the basis of one koranic verse (16:5) Shiʿite authorities do not consider donkey flesh forbidden but merely disapprove of it (Ḥorr ʿĀmelī, XVI, pp. 315, 322-29; Kolaynī, VI, pp. 244, 246, 313 n. 9; Ṭabarsī, XVI, pp. 174-76; Maḡniya, IV, p. 370; Šahīd Ṭānī, VII, pp. 268-69).

There are references to the prices of donkeys in some early texts (Moḡammad Ġaznavī, p. 284; Kolaynī, VI, p. 535), but the dependability of such reports cannot be ascertained. Some people have taken great pride in their donkeys and have gone to great lengths to adorn their beasts (for Tehran in the 19th century, see Šahrī, VI, pp. 377-81). Donkey dealers, on the other hand, were often unscrupulous and lowly people; some painted their larger animals brown and sold them as mules. Apparently the Persian expression *kòar rang kon* (lit., “donkey dyer”), referring to a tricky person who takes advantage of the simplicity of his fellow man, is rooted in this questionable commercial practice (Šahrī, I, p. 345, V, p. 27 n. 1). Donkeys, like other domesticated animals in the Middle East, are often abused or overworked (see, e.g., Šahrī, II, p. 291). From as early as the time of Aristotle (d. 322 B.C.E.; p. 107) donkeys have been thought to be insensitive to pain, which may account for their especially harsh treatment.

In Persian folk belief. Perhaps the most famous donkey in Muslim tradition is the white one that will carry the *Dajjāl*, the Antichrist (Hedāyat, pp. 178-79; Yāḡhaqqī, s.v. *dajjāl*).



The speaking donkey is a common motif in folklore (Thompson, V237) and is well attested in Persian literature (e.g., Bal'amī, ed. Bahār, I, p. 509; Ṭabarī, III, p. 569; Meybodī, III, p. 788). The Prophet Moḥammad had such a donkey, 'Ofayr or Ya'fūr (Mobārakšāh, p. 268), which supposedly threw itself down a well after his death (Ebn Ḥajar, XII, p. 9; Ebn al-Jawzī, I, pp. 293-94). The Prophet used to dispatch him to summon people (Mojāhed, p. 369). According to one tradition, donkeys bray because they see demons (Nesā'ī, p. 63) or other supernatural beings (Zamaḵṣarī, II, p. 578-79; cf. Numbers 22:23-72; Leach, p. 276). Measures recommended to stop braying ranged from the ancient practice of tying a stone to the animal's tail (cf. Aelian, 9.55) or a string to its ears to oiling its anus, the latter measure probably on the assumption that the animal would avoid braying for fear of soiling itself (Ḥāseb Ṭabarī, pp. 24, 30; Ḥobayš, p. 381; Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 36-37).

Divinations were made from the behavior or presence of donkeys. One Sasanian warlord supposedly interpreted an enemy leader's change of mount from an elephant to a donkey as evidence of his waning fortunes (Bal'amī, ed. Bahār, II, p. 1032). In the Middle Ages tales of witches' turning their victims into donkeys were publicly narrated (Bayhaqī, pp. 904-05). In modern Khorasan the braying of a seated donkey is taken as an omen of death (Šakūrzāda, pp. 309); it may also simply foretell rainy weather (A'zamī Sangesarī, p. 55; cf. Šakūrzāda, p. 341).

In the Middle Ages donkeys could not be included in a woman's dowry (*mahr*; Tawḥidī, 1408/1988, III, p. 140). In 19th-century Tehran brides rode white horses in their nuptial processions if they were virgins but donkeys if they were widows (Šahrī, II, p. 60). Midwives were transported about their business by female donkeys that had already borne colts; these donkeys could not be black, and drivers were not allowed to beat them (Šahrī, V, pp. 655-66).

A number of magical properties have been attributed to various parts of the donkey's anatomy. The head, for example, has been supposed to have apotropaic properties against the evil eye (Aṭṭār, 1361 Š./1982, p. 134; Sa'dī, p. 139; Balāgī, p. 234). To gain control of her mate or ensure his unfailing love, a woman could serve him donkey brains (Katīrā'ī, p. 419 n. 3; Balāgī, p. 217). Generally however, consuming donkey's brains was thought to cause stupidity (Tonokābonī, p. 94; Aṭṭār, 1341 Š./1962, p. 142; idem, 1361 Š./1982, p. 134), reflecting the ancient belief that donkeys are stupid (Aristotle, p. 121; Qur'an 61:6; Jāheẓ, II, pp. 99, 255; Boḳārī, pp. 209-11; cf. Aarne and Thompson, no. 52). The *Šāh-nāma* includes the story of a donkey that went to the cows to obtain a



pair of horns but instead lost its ears (Moscow, IX, p. 37); another story, in which the devil uses a donkey to gain admission to Noah's ark, is also well represented in the Persian literary tradition (Aarne and Thompson, type 825; *Mojmal*, ed. Bahār, p. 185; Ṭabarī, III, p. 732; Zamaḳṣarī, IV, p. 401; cf. Utley, for greater detail on the type). The Persian expression *yāsīn be gūš-e ḳar ḳvāndan* "to recite (the koranic sura) Yāsīn in an ass's ear" means to waste advice on a fool (Dehkodā, s.v. *yāsīn*). On the other hand, Jāḩeḩ, departing from the accepted wisdom of his time, suggested that donkeys are capable not only of distinguishing among certain voice commands (VII, p. 87) but also of engaging in a variety of primitive reasoning (II, p. 75). It was believed that the donkey, like the mule, would never forget a path it had trodden once (Jamālī Yazdī, p. 36; Tawḩīdī, 1973, I, p. 186).

Cutting the penis off a live donkey in order to cook it in hot spices, to be eaten as an aphrodisiac, has also been reported (Tonokābonī, p. 94). Abū Bakr Moṭahhar Jamālī Yazdī noted that keeping a hair pulled from the tail of a male donkey that has mounted a female increases a man's sexual prowess to the point that he can produce erections at will. Applying a concoction of powdered donkey's penis and olive oil has the more modest effect of making one's hair grow long (Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 36, 39). Donkey urine was used to remove certain types of stubborn spots from laundry (ḩobayš, p. 438). Treating blades with concoctions of donkey urine, blood, milk, or hoof by-products would ensure that their blows were fatal (ḩāseb Ṭabarī, pp. 209-10; ḩobayš, pp. 337, 339-40; Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 38-39). Donkeys or various parts of their anatomy were further used in rain-making magic (Hedāyat, p. 196; Šakūrẓāda, pp. 311, 346-47; for other charms and magical practices involving parts of donkeys, see Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 37, 39; ḩāseb Ṭabarī, p. 100).

Among the most important set of Persian beliefs about the magical properties of the donkey is that connected with folk medicine, which may reflect an association with Christ. This association is implied in the name *ambar(-e) našārā* "amber of the Christians" for donkey **dung**, a commonly used remedy (Bolūkbāšī, p. 137; Partovī, 1356 Š./1977, p. 70; Hedāyat, p. 114; Ṭūsī, p. 561). Applying three drops of liquid extracted from the dung, either alone or mixed with other ingredients, is thought to stop most nosebleeds and heal most wounds. Fumigation with smoke from burning ass's dung is considered medicinally effective in general (e.g., Jorjānī, pp. 557, 560; Hedāyat, p. 114; Massé, *Croyances*, p. 338; cf. Thorndike, I, pp. 733-34, 739-40). Burning donkey's hooves to fumigate the genitals of women in labor was once thought to help in



difficult childbirths (Ḥobayš, p. 436).

From medieval times women used a “stone” (*mohra-ye kar*, *kòar-mohra*), possibly a petrified gland (*ḡodda*) from the donkey’s neck, to prevent pregnancy (Ebn Boḳtīšū’, p. 61; Ṭūsī, p. 140; Donaldson, p. 160; cf. Thorndike, I, pp. 739-40). It has also been described as a small stone found under the tongue of the newborn donkey, which is swallowed if not taken immediately after birth (Katīrā’ī, pp. 416-17). The *kòar-mohra* hardens into a yellow-white stone if placed in water and is thought efficacious against most poisons (Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 36-39; Ḥāseb Ṭabarī, p. 53).

The flesh and milk of the donkey have also been considered effective antidotes to poisons. The milk must be taken chilled, however, as drinking it warm is fatal unless the patient ingests dried human feces. Donkey’s milk is also considered effective in treatment of many diseases (Kolaynī, VI, pp. 338-89; Jorjānī, p. 648; Ebn Boḳtīšū’, p. 59; Ṣadīq, p. 71; Massé, *Croyances*, p. 338), which may have some basis in fact (Iacono et al.). The pain of a scorpion’s sting may be transferred to a donkey if the victim whispers in the animal’s ear (Pliny, *Historia Naturalis* 28.42; Ḥāseb Ṭabarī, p. 36; Jamālī Yazdī, p. 37; Thorndike, I, p. 88) or rides the animal seven paces while facing the tail (Ebn Boḳtīšū’, p. 58).

Although the ass is a symbol of stupidity (see above), in some folktales it functions as a trickster (e.g., Marzolph, types 103C*, 122J) or entertainer. For example, ‘Amr b. Baḥr Jāḥeẓ mentioned “donkey fights” (II, p. 163). Sprinkling a fistful of dirt from a place where a donkey has rolled under the cloth upon which people are eating supposedly results in the entire party’s collapsing in guffaws (Jamālī Yazdī, pp. 36-39; cf. Ḥāseb Ṭabarī, p. 90; Ḥobayš, pp. 405-06, 410).

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