



HORSE RACING

HORSE RACING. The history of horse racing in Iran can be traced back to the Achaemenid period. Xenophon—after describing the riders of different tribes, their saddles, reins, chariots, and the ritual sacrifice of horses to the sun god (Cyr. II, pp. 355-57)—refers to a race set up by Cyrus (Cyr. II, pp. 361, 365). Cyrus also devised a race between Persian and Greek horses in Greece. It is surprising then that, aside from Xenophon's account, and the passing reference to "the length of a race course" (*carātu.drājah-*; *AirWb.*, col. 582) in *Vd.* 2.25 of the Avesta, there appears to be no mention of horse racing in any of the surviving texts by or about Iranians, including those from the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods, up until the Qajar era. There are, however, references to other sports involving riding, especially polo (Āḍarnuš, "Čowgān"). Despite this scarcity, modern Persian has inherited a word from Pahlavi, *asprēs*, which denotes a racetrack (Bahār, *Vāža-nāma-ye Bondahišn*, p. 31; Farahvaši, *Kār-nāma-ye Ardašir Bāba-kān*, p. 129). This track had a length of about 2,000 paces (Dehḵodā, IV, p. 2070, s.v. *asprēs*) and was not restricted to horse racing. More often, it was dedicated to the game of polo (q.v.; *Kār-nāma*, p. 129).

We know much more about horse racing among the Arabs, including the pre-Islamic Arabs. In the early years of Islam, owing to the prohibition of gambling, many hesitated to engage in horse racing; but from the traditions (Hadith) collected during the 2nd/8th century it is apparent that the Prophet Moḥammad participated in horse racing and betting (in the manner approved by Islam). It is said that he set a prize for a race and that his companions



placed wagers (Ebn Kalbi, p. 8; Abu 'Obay-da, pp. 6-9). These traditions found their way into the major compilations of Hadith and then into the Arabic horse manuals, which were numerous in the 8th/14th century. Finally, such matters were brought within the domain of Islamic jurisprudence (*feqh*).

In the first Islamic horse race, held in the year 6/628-29, Abu Bakr's horse was the winner (Ebn Jozay, p. 146; Ebn 'Abd-al-Qāder, p. 222; Nowayri, p. 370). It is reported that in one race the Prophet's horse, Sebḥa, took the lead, which pleased the Prophet (Abu 'Obayda, pp. 6-9; Ebn Jozay, p. 3; Ebn Hoḍayl, p. 161; Nowayri, p. 369). In reports that appear to have been added later, we find mention of other horses of the Prophet—Adham, Ḍareb, and Lezāz—that won races (Ebn Jozay, p. 3; Ebn Hoḍayl, p. 161; Nowayri, p. 369; Ebn 'Abd-al-Qāder, p. 219).

From these reports we learn that the training of racehorses is an old and respected tradition in Islam. Terms used for such preparation are *eẓmār* and *taẓmīr*. A horse that is ready is called *moẓmar*, and the track is called *meẓmār* (Malek Mojāhed, pp. 205-6). These terms occur in the horse manuals, including those in Persian, and are still in circulation in the Arabic language. They apparently go back to a Hadith according to which the Prophet set up a five- to six-mile race between *moẓmar* horses from Ḥafyā' to al-Moṣallā (Abu 'Obayda, p. 5) or from Ḥafyā' to Ṭaniyat al-Wedā'. He set up a different race, one mile long, for untrained (*ḡayrmoẓmar*) horses from Ṭaniyat al-Wedā' to the mosque of the Banu Zorayq. This Hadith shows the significance of *eẓmār* as well as considerations of a horse's sex and age. For example, Nowayri (p. 373) maintains that a race should not be held between a thoroughbred Arab horse and a horse of mixed breed.

All horse manuals and books of manners (*adab*) describe the training of the horse. Malek Mojāhed, who is impatient with all these considerations, maintains that training can be summarized in a few basic rules: reduce the feed, cover the horse so it sweats and loses fat, water regularly, ride the horse, and increase the distance daily. Rudbāri finds Malek Mojāhed's account incomplete; and, in translating his work into Persian, he devotes more than ten pages to breeding, taking into consideration Persian traditions as well (pp. 184 ff.). Training should take no more than thirty to forty days. There are requirements for the horse, the rider, and the race, which are consistent with many of today's regulations. The distance must be determined in advance and is ordinarily between one to three miles, so that the horses do not overexert themselves. The horses must be at the same level of competence, and their



ages and the weight of the rider are taken into account (Ebn Bayṭār, pp. 173-74). Placement criteria are also debated. If the horses' necks are the same length, the one whose ears cross the line first wins; otherwise, the shoulder of the horse is the deciding factor (Nowayri, p. 373).

Racehorses, from the pre-Islamic period on, were designated according to their position in the race. The winning horse is called *al-sābeq*, *al-mobarrez*, *al-motabarrez*, or *al-mojalli*. These terms go all the way down to the tenth horse (Malek Mojāhed, pp. 207-308; Mas'udi, *Moruj*, p. 13). The ideal racehorse is sometimes characterized in ways that are unscientific, such as by thinness of muzzle, length and sharpness of ears, breadth of forehead, blackness of lips, of hoofs, and of the region around the eyes, height, shortness of back (Ebn Bayṭār, p. 147; Tāj-al-Din, p. 142). The rider must also satisfy certain criteria: he must be intelligent, knowledgeable about horses, and light of weight (Malek Mojāhed, p. 207; Ebn Bayṭār, p. 167).

Making wagers (*al-rahān*) can be considered a form of gambling and so causes Muslims some anxiety. From the very beginning, there was available a Hadith from Abu Horayra, according to which they would enter a horse termed the *moḥallel* (lit., one that makes permissible) in order to neutralize the connection with gambling (Abu 'Obayda, p. 6; Ebn Hoḍayl, pp. 163-66; Nowayri, pp. 371-73; Malek Mojāhed, p. 212; Ebn 'Abd-al-Qāder, pp. 322-23). Ebn Jozay (p. 145) tries to summarize the many Hadiths relating to this issue. He claims that there are three types of races: (1) absolutely permitted (involves no wagers); (2) absolutely impermissible (involves wagering by the owners of the horses); and (3) conditionally permissible. There are several conditions to be met for this third category of race, and the jurists have discussed them extensively. Someone may offer a prize; and, providing he does not participate in the wagering, the race is permissible. Otherwise, its legitimacy is doubtful. The most common form of this sort of conditionally permissible race involves a *moḥallel*. In this case, the *moḥallel* is not a horse, but a racehorse owner, who mediates among two or more bettors but does not bet anything himself. If he wins the race, he gets the prize. The important consideration here is that the *moḥallel's* horse should be at the same level as the other horses; otherwise wagering becomes akin to gambling (Māleki jurisprudence disallows this kind too; see further, Ebn Hoḍayl, p. 163; Ebn 'Abd-al-Qāder, pp. 222-23).

In the Persian language—aside from books of manners (*adab*), such as the *Nowruz-nāma*, *Qābus-nāma*, and *Ādāb al-ḥarb*—the first *faras-nāma* (horse manual) is that of Moḥammad b. Moḥammad in the 8th/14th century (on the



evolution of the *faras-nāma* genre, see Āḍarnuš, “Asb”; see also FARAS-NĀMA). In this book, as in other horse manuals until the 13th/18th century, the discussion of horse racing is exclusively a translation of Arabic rules and regulations (Ebn Moḥammad, p. 77; Gilāni, 11th/17th cent., pp. 50 ff.; Rudbāri, 12th/18th century, pp. 182 ff.; K̄vānsāri, 13th/19th century, pp. 92 ff.). Furthermore, in other Persian works—even in accounts from more recent centuries such as the *ʿĀlamārā-ye ʿAbbāsi* (q.v.), ethnographic studies of Iranian tribes, and travel books by foreign visitors to Persia—there appear to be no references to horse racing, even though there is no doubting the existence of this sport among neighboring tribes, notably the Turkmen. This argues that Iranians, throughout their history, preferred to use horses in sports such as polo, tournaments (*jarid-bāzi*), and trick riding, of which there are many accounts.

Probably it was in the early part of the Qajar era that horse races as such were introduced in the capital, Tehran, perhaps with the encouragement of the Europeans, since there are reports of European-style horse races being watched by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah (r. 1848–96) with royal pomp and ceremony. In 1301-02/1884-85, Samuel G. W. Benjamin, the first American ambassador to Iran, attended a horse race hosted by Nāṣer-al-Din Shah and praised its pomp and splendor (Šafaq, p. 228). However, it was only in 1308/1890 that the shah ordered the formation of a body charged with the task of building a fully-equipped race track near a place called Kandaq (*Waḥid* 13/7, Mehr 1354 Š./September–October 1975, p. 69). As reported by Mostawfi (*Šarh-e zendagāni* I, p. 366), they started training horses (*sawḡun godāstan*, equivalent to Arabic *eẓmār*) in early Esfand/late February. Races were held after the end of the New Year’s holiday (13 Farvardin/1 April) on a track in the northwest corner of Tehran. Later the track (*asprēs*) was transferred to the Bāḡ-e Shah and, after a while, because the tall trees in the garden obstructed the view, they set up a track in Dušan Tappa (Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek, p. 11). Mostawfi and Moʿayyer-al-Mamālek describe in some detail the track itself, the Iranian and foreign spectators, the shah’s coach and his household retinue, the military parade, the soldiers, the cannons and drums, the elephants and their keepers, the number of horses and races, the length of the field, and the prizes, which ranged from ten to 150 tumans.

During the reign of Aḥmad Shah (1909-25), horse racing was accompanied by much pomp and ceremony; the British supplied the music, and the track was the Drill Square (Maydān-e mašq, the later Bāḡ-e melli). Then it was



transferred to Dušan Tappa in about 1921, and ultimately, in 1930, to Jalāliya stadium, where a polo field was set up in the middle of the track (Šaki, pp. 16-17). In 1934, the Jalāliya Equestrian Club (*Bāšgāh-e savārkārān*) was merged with the Department of Horse Breeding and Training (*Edāra-ye ešlāḥ-e nežād o parvareš-e asb*; Koy-lu, p. 21). In the following year, the stadium of Jalāliya was built (Barafrukta, p. 106; Amirāni, p. 12); in 1965 it was converted into a park (*Pār-k-e žāla*), and the track and polo field were moved to the *Bāšgāh-e Šahan-šāhi* and then to Karguš Darra. In about 1978, a joint Iranian-Australian company began building the Faraḥābād stadium; and just before the Revolution Tehran's Spring and Fall races were held there. In 1979 the Revolutionary government, emphasizing the observance of the strictures of Islamic law, invited the public to Faraḥābād to watch a race; and the announcement appeared on the cover of *Asb o savārkāri* (38, 1979). In the early 1980s, the races were transferred to Nowruzābād, where Tehran's Spring and Fall races, featuring Turcomans, Arabians, and thoroughbreds, currently take place.

In addition to Tehran, there has occasionally been horse racing in the provinces. More than a hundred years ago, Charles Wills reported the existence of tracks in Shiraz (tr., p. 262) and Isfahan (p. 395), although there is no record of races being held there. Attention is thus focused on the Turkman Steppe. There are tracks in Gonbad-e Kāvus, Āq Qal'a, and Bandar-e Torkamān. In the past, the track in Gonbad-e Kāvus was considered one of the best in the Middle East (Kuylu, p. 130), and to this day it hosts elaborate horse races and has a reputation as one of the most important centers of horse breeding (see Imāniān).

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