

EXCEPT FROM GOOGLE BOOKS

Customs and Traditions  
of

Palestine

Illustrating the manners of the Ancient Hebrews

by

Ermete Pierotti

Doctor of Mathematics and former architect engineer, civil and military to his excellency Surraya Pasha of Jerusalem

Translated by TG Bonne, MA, FGSD

Cambridge

Deighton, Bell, and Co.

London: Bell and Daldy

1864

## THE HORSE

This animal occupies the highest place in the Arab's esteem and care; as he rightly considers it a faithful friend in prosperity and adversity. He pays great attention to breeding horses, but it must be confessed that he does not obtain any very important results, owing to his personal indolence, and the extreme jealousy with which each tribe secludes its own mares and stallions. Their horses, and especially the mares are regarded by the nomad Arabs with an extraordinary affection. They are welcome both in the tent and in the cottage; they live with the family, and are never beaten; their master talks and reasons with them, as they eat from his hand or the fold of his mantle; accustoms them to stand without being tethered teaches them to come at a beck or a call, and to unhorse at a signal any one who is incautious enough to mount them without his leave. When a mare or a stallion is ill, sorrow pervades every member of the family; the natural fierceness of the Bedawy is tamed, and he seems to sympathize with every pang of the sufferer.

I was once present when a mare was bringing forth, and as the labour was more protracted than usual, I saw that the chief of the tribe was most painfully affected; he shed tears, and invoked the aid of Heaven, more than he would have done for his mother; the mare moaned with pain, partly, as I really believe, on account of her companion's sorrow. Presently a foal was born, and the mare began to "do as well as could be expected." This happy result caused songs of joy, and all the signs of delight which a true child of the desert evidences. The Arab rarely swears by his mare but if ever he does so, he is sure to keep his promise, even at the utmost risk of his life. Whenever I had to avail myself of an escort of Bedawin, I never asked for a contract, but only for an oath by the mare; and I am bound to say that I not only never had cause of complaint, but also cannot rightly express my gratitude for the frank hospitality which was always accorded me.

The blood-horses are divided into two distinct classes, the common, and the noble; the latter are becoming very rare. A horse is not considered noble unless both the sire and the dam are so; and as this quality adds greatly to its value, care is taken that the purity of the descent is attested by persons who are either chiefs of tribes or of considerable distinction. This certificate is always sold with the horse, and is kept in a bag suspended from its neck, which also contains its pedigree, together with a written charm, protecting the animal and its rider from every misfortune.

The horses of the Arabs are always entire, and their ears and tails are never docked. When not on a journey their forelegs are hobbled [sic] with a cord, while they are young, to prevent them from straying; but this is often taken away and they are left at liberty to range at will and acquire the habit at coming at the call of their owner. At the age of eighteen months the Arabs begin to accustom the colts to the saddle, and at two years they are ridden by the boys. In breaking them they teach them two paces, the walk and the gallop; an Arab horse rarely trots. When they are feeding in the open pasture, the corresponding fore and hind legs are fastened with a band, which is attached by a cord to an iron pin fastened into the ground, and they are thus prevented from chafing and hurting one another. The horses are fed during the day with fine straw, and with five or six pounds of barley in the evening. They only drink once, about mid-day, much less frequently than European horses; and they become weak in the forelegs at a far earlier period, owing to various causes; the chief of which is that the shoulders are pressed by the forward position of the saddle; another is the habit which the Arabs have of checking their steeds, when at full speed, by violently pulling the bridle; when the animal stiffens its forelegs and slides upon its hind; and stopping abruptly awaits like a statue the signal of its rider. This custom necessitates the use of so hard a bit that, when the horse gallops, the rein must be held quite loose. A third cause is that the country over which they travel is either mountainous or very sandy, so that in the one case they are worn out by the labour of picking their way among rocks and stones, and in the other by the effort it requires to raise the hoof out of the soft sand into which it sinks. Some of the Arabs ride their horses bare-backed, others upon a mere cloth, but the greater number sit upon a saddle, with a raised ridge behind and a pommel four or five inches high in front. The stirrups, when used, are formed of an iron or brass plate, bent up on each side as to offer an oblong surface to the foot. They are slightly convex, and pointed at the corners to serve instead of spurs. These convenient saddles, and stirrups worn very short, give a great advantage to an Arab when fighting; but a European, being unaccustomed to them, gets a pain in the back and cramp in the lower legs when he attempts to use them. This however is avoided by lengthening the leathers, and employing a cushion. Large and small horses are equally uncommon among the Arabs. The ordinary height is from four feet and a half to five feet. Even when dying they retain their fire and vivacity up to the last moment. They are rarely vicious, even when entire. An Arab can keep a stallion perfectly quiet on all occasions, with a slight touch of the bridle. He however prefers a mare to a horse, not so much for the profits of the foals as from its never neighing; an important quality on a night expedition or a foray, that is, when a

victim is to be plundered or an enemy surprised.

The most admirable property in an Arab horse, is the flexibility of his movements. There are other breeds which are handsomer and swifter, but none so graceful, so light, so picturesque. It will leap over a wall, if started at the gallop ten or twelve paces distant. It can wheel about in every direction seeming to comprehend and obey with pleasure the wishes of its rider, and acts as though it were anxious for the praise of the spectators. Nothing can be more animated or intelligent than the Arab horse when it curvets in a species of joust, in which the Arabs take great delight. One would think that it entered into the spirit of the sham fight, and among the cries that are raised and the sticks that are hurled, among the halts and wheels that it makes, knew exactly what it ought to do. This extraordinary nimbleness and agility renders it most valuable in war, especially in a hand-to-hand fight, where the movements of the horse avoid more blows than the skill of the rider parries. I have myself seen the horses of Bedawin, when under fire, lightly raising with the forelegs, or sinking on their hind and raising their necks and heads to each motion, as though they wished to shield their riders from the shots of the enemy. Not infrequently, I have seen a man fall from his horse with his foot entangled in the stirrup, but the noble animal remained still, as though it understood that any movement would be fatal. It has happened that the rider has fallen from the effect of a sun-stroke, yet the horse has not left him, but stood sadly near his prostrate body. I have myself found the value of a good steed in finding the way in the darkest nights, and escaping from dangerous places; and I have no hesitation in saying, that fiery though it be, it is as suited to carry children, women, and peaceful citizens, as warriors. My words may seem exaggerated, but any one who lives for some time with the Bedawin, will find that I have spoken nothing but the truth. The book of Job contains a just encomium of this friend of the Arabs.

It is not without pain that the Arab parts from his constant companion, and more than once he has preferred his mare to the tempting gold; for she divines a danger better than he, and by signs, imperceptible to others, finds the way over shifting sands to the friendly tents, listens to the confused sounds of the plain if an enemy appears on the horizon, and gallops for a whole day without rest or food or drink, to save her master from danger, or bring him to his journey's end.

After this enumeration of the merits of the horse, I will describe the manner in which a sale is conducted, choosing the case of the mare, as that is the more valuable animal. The price varies with the purity of the steed, and the fortunes of its owner. When he is requested to fix a value, his first reply is, "It is yours, and belongs to you, I am your servant;" because perhaps he does not think that the question is asked with any real design of purchasing; when the demand is repeated, he either makes no answer or puts the question by; at the third demand, he generally responds rudely with a sardonic smile, which is not a pleasant thing to see, as it is a sign of anger; and then says that he will sooner sell his family than his mare. This remark is not meant as a mere jest; for it is no uncommon thing for a Bedawy to give his parents as hostages, rather than separate himself from this friend. If, however, owing to some misfortune, he determines on selling his mare, it is very doubtful whether he or his parents will allow her to leave their country without taking the precaution to render her unfit for breeding. There are many methods of arranging the sale, all of which I should like to describe particularly; however, I will confine myself to a general statement. Before the purchaser enters upon the question of the price to be paid, he must ascertain that the parents, friends, and allies of the owners give their consent to the sale, without which some difficulty or other may arise, or perhaps the mare may be stolen from her new master. He must also obtain an unquestionable warranty that she is fit for breeding purposes, and that no one has a prior claim to an part of her body. This last precaution may seem rather strange, but it arises from the following custom. It sometimes happens that when a Bedawy is greatly in want of money, he raises it most easily by selling a member of his horse; so that very frequently a horse belongs to a number of owners; one of whom has purchase the right foreleg, another the left, another a hindleg, or the tail, or an ear, or the like; and the proprietors have each a proportionate interest in the profits of its labour of sale. So also the offspring are sold in a similar manner; sometimes only the firstborn, sometimes the first three: and then it occasionally happens that two or three members of the foal are, as it were, mortgaged. Consequently, any one who is ignorant of this custom, may find that after he has paid the price of the mare to her supposed owner, a third person arises, who demands to be paid the value of his part; and if the purchaser refuse to comply; he may find himself in a very unpleasant situation, without any possibility of obtaining help from the local government. Whoever sells his mare entirely, without reserving to himself one or two parts, must be one good terms with the confederate chief in the neighbourhood and must have obtained their formal sanction; otherwise they would universally despise him, and perhaps lie in wait to kill him, so that his only hope of escape would be a disgraceful flight, just as if he had committed some great crime. It is an easier matter to purchase a stallion, but even in this case the above formalities must be observed. These remarks only apply to buying horses of the purest blood; those of inferior race are obtained without difficulty, and at fair prices.<sup>1</sup>

I may mention while on this topic, that Signor Carlo Guarmani is about to publish a most interesting work on the Arab horses. He has thoroughly studied the subject, having lived fourteen years in Jerusalem and passed much of his time in the deserts in order to obtain information.