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The Disappearance of the Turk: The Cultural Politics of Thoroughbred Horses in the Ottoman and British Empires

Abstract

Between 1650 and 1750, the English Thoroughbred horse was created from Ottoman imports grafted upon native racing stock in an asymmetrical Anglo-Ottoman exchange, with appropriation leading to naturalisation and radical assimilation. The Ottoman Empire was a rich source of equine genetic material of the superior bloodhorse type. The Ottomans were equine multiculturalists. For Evliya Çelebi, the *kübeylân* (Arab thoroughbred) was as Ottoman a breed as any other. Evliya never speaks of “Turk” or “Turkoman” horses as Western visitors did; instead he particularizes the breeds of the steppe, employing the Tatar term *ağırmaq* (thoroughbred), and identifying the Nogay and Karaçubuk as ‘thoroughbred’ breeds. Yet it was this “Turkoman” lineage of early imports such as the ‘Byerley Turk’ that was most originally formative for the English Thoroughbred, evidenced by studbook records, contemporary observers, phenotypical resemblances, and recent genome research. From the evidence of Evliya Çelebi, Jean-Baptiste Tavernier, Sir John Malcolm, Lady Anne Blunt, and others, this essay argues for the formative influence of the Ottoman “Turkoman” genotype that, as a consequence of imperial rivalries, British prejudices, and equine bloodstock politics, has been erased from history. The impact made by Ottoman imported horses constitutes an instance of collective, rather than individual, equine agency.

Keywords: Ottoman empire; politics of horse breeding; equine agency; English Thoroughbred; Turkoman horse; Evliya Çelebi as horseman

1. Introduction

Between 1650 and 1750 the critical mass of genetic material that produced the English Thoroughbred horse was imported from the Ottoman Empire in the form of over 200 stallions and mares belonging to breeds known to the English as “Arabians”, “Turks”, and “Barbs”. The Ottomans at that time administered a multi-ethnic empire spanning the Eastern Mediterranean and Arabian Levant, the Balkans, Caucasus, and Barbary states of North Africa. From these lands came horses for the Ottoman armies and all other imperial equestrian pursuits. For most of their history, the Ottomans were equine multiculturalists. They valued many different breeds and strains beyond those recognised by the British. Ottoman horses’ transformative effects on British culture included the production of the English Thoroughbred racehorse, but also equine portraits, much eighteenth-century sporting art, including that of George Stubbs, and literary works such as Jonathan Swift’s *Gulliver’s Travels*. With the horses and mares themselves – such as the Byerley Turk, Darley Arabian and Godolphin Barb or Arabian

but also many others – there came into the British Isles new ideas about horses’ intelligence and rationality.¹ New ideas about horse-human relationships therefore came into being as a consequence of material relations arising from the presence, character and, I argue, agency of Ottoman horses.² Like the camel as analysed by Onur Inal, the horse is an ‘important history-shaping actor’ in the Ottoman realm and beyond, one of the nonhuman animals who ‘lived through and witnessed the same history as humans’, and ‘[t]ogether with other imperial actors,’ ‘shaped the empire’s history in profound ways, and were in turn shaped by it’.³ The very definition of a ‘thoroughbred’, according to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, mentions the historical association between the concept ‘thoroughbred’ and the importation of Eastern bloodstock:

Thoroughbred, B. n[oun].

1. a. Originally, a horse of pure breed or stock. In later usage: a horse of a breed developed in England, noted for its speed and typically used for racing, having a well-formed head, lean body, long neck, and long legs. Also: the breed itself.

The thoroughbred breed was created from cross-breeding a small number of stallions imported into England with selected English mares in the late 17th and early 18th centuries.⁴

What I wish to emphasise in this essay is that out of this multicultural Ottoman matrix there emerged, on the British side, a national icon, an icon of Englishness, the English Thoroughbred racehorse. What was taken to be a characteristically English national product was developed primarily from Ottoman sources. Here we have an asymmetrical Anglo-Ottoman exchange – in fact an appropriation leading to naturalisation and radical assimilation. The result of this assimilation has been the disappearance of the Ottoman-ness, or in English parlance, the Turkishness, of the origins of what had been Englished and appropriated. This essay will demonstrate the continuing influence of Ottoman horses that, as a consequence of imperial rivalries and British prejudices, has been erased from history.

1 Landry 2008, 16, 117–25, 130–42, 148–61, 167–75.

2 Landry 2008, 13–14, 167–75; Landry 2019, 29–33. Shaw 2013, 152–67, argues for the historical agency of an individual horse (the Duke of Wellington’s Copenhagen) but without taking into account the horse’s Thoroughbred and Arabian breeding, determinative of his character and capabilities – in other words, the ingredients enabling the collective equine agency that Copenhagen embodied. See Mikhail 2014, 4–5, 11–15, regarding animals’ historical agency, conceived collectively. On the agency of Ottoman sheep, see White 2011, 2, 247–248. All animal histories are indebted to the pioneering work of Ritvo 1987; in Ottoman studies, Faroqhi (ed.) 2010.

3 Inal 2020, 1, 2.

4 Online *Oxford English Dictionary* (access restricted): <https://www.oed.com/view/Entry/201024?rskey=FgVmW3&result=2&isAdvanced=false#eid>

It should be noted that the OED here reproduces the fallacy that these early modern importations consisted solely of stallions, when over 200 stallions and mares were imported; ‘selected English mares’ would have included imports and their progeny.

The cultural politics of horse-breeding here reproduces a wider geopolitics. As the political positioning of the Ottoman Empire shifted from its global pre-eminence in the sixteen and seventeenth centuries to its comparative vulnerability in the nineteenth century, its glamour as a source of all things equine and equestrian diminished accordingly. I will also endeavour to clarify the relationship between “Ottoman” horses and “Turkish” ones. For, although it has been the so-called “Turks” that have been most completely erased from history, the former more capacious category of “Ottoman” horses remains more reliably descriptive of the empire’s equine agents in early modern British-Ottoman relations.

The very notion of a “breed” of horse is a construct, just as “race” is among humans – a fiction, fraught with contradictions and paradoxes, and inseparable from questions of national and imperial interests, identities, ambitions, and designs, as well as aristocratic genealogies and monarchist ideologies.⁵ A breed is usually imagined as ‘a fixed standard grounded in beliefs about superiority of pure lineage’ but this standard changes historically as ‘new iterations’ are produced ‘constantly and opportunistically in response to human concerns with utility, aesthetics, and status’.⁶ Yet, however ideologically loaded the notion of “pure” or “thoroughbred” breeding may be, horse-breeders find ample empirical evidence to support their views. The transmission of invisible but undesirable characteristics may jump ‘one or more, or even a number, of generations’; therefore the ‘value of thoroughbred stock’ lies in the knowledge ‘that in such stock leading characteristic qualities have become more and more certainly fixed by generations of carefully selected breeding’.⁷

The Ottomans not only distinguished among a variety of geographically distinct breeds but recognised the concept of “thoroughbred” horses wherever they were to be found. Although Arabian horses were prized by the Ottomans from the sixteenth century onwards, it was only late in the day, in the nineteenth century, that the single-minded obsession with Arabian bloodstock that had become fashionable among the European powers took hold in the Ottoman Empire.⁸

2. Ottoman Equine Multiculturalism

On the British side, it is difficult to determine from the archives with any certainty the degree of sophistication with which breeders at any given time distinguished amongst imported Eastern horses; the Ottomans, on the other hand, had a highly developed knowledge of Eastern breeds. For Britons, point of origin might be confused with point of embarkation from an Ottoman port, as Peter Edwards, following

5 Landry and Mansel 2019, 197–204.

6 Guest and Mattfeld 2020, 1; Landry, 2020, 27, 42.

7 Wynmalen 1950, 89.

8 When nineteenth-century Europeans upgraded their cavalry horses by means of Arab bloodstock, the Ottomans followed suit: ‘By the nineteenth century, Ottoman officers and pashas – indeed the flower of the Ottoman cavalry, were relying on Arabian horses to the exclusion of other, possibly hardier strains’ (Fatah 1997, 160).

the advice of Daphne Machin Goodall, has observed.⁹ Hence in British accounts, there will always be room for speculation about whether this or that imported horse was correctly named as to genetic heritage at a particular point in the seventeenth or eighteenth century. What we can be certain of, however, is that amongst the earliest English imports from Ottoman ports there *were* Arabs and Barbs, as well as Turkoman horses, and that many of these latter were known as “Turks”; we will return to these horses later.¹⁰

For the moment what is important is that the Ottomans seem not to have had any concept of a “Turkish” breed of horse, but instead names for a variety of different breeds and strains. We should remember that for educated Ottomans, “Turk” was a derogatory term applied to humans, denoting people from rural Anatolia who were lacking in sophistication or “culture”. During the formative period of importation of “thoroughbred” bloodhorses from the Ottoman empire into Britain, 1600–1750, Ottoman history was powered by horses, literally ‘sinews of power’ for the Ottoman state.¹¹ Horses therefore figure in Ottoman writing, including the genre of poetry devoted to praising individual horses, *rahşiye*, and treatises on hippiatry, hippology, horsemanship, and hunting, such as the *Tuhfet’ül-mülûk ve’s-selâtin*, the ‘Gift of Kings and Sultans’ dedicated to Ahmet I. It is not surprising that such texts as the *Tuhfet’ül-mülûk ve’s-selâtin* should feature the *kübeylân*, or Arab thoroughbred, as the very model of a thoroughbred horse, since the treatise was a translation of a Mamluk source, and, like much Ottoman writing, remains in dialogue with Arabic as well as Persian sources.¹²

The most encyclopaedic source for information about early modern Ottoman horses and breeding, as for all other seventeenth-century Ottoman matters, is Evliya Çelebi (1611–c.1687).¹³ His ten-volume *Seyahatnâme*, or ‘Book of Travels’, may well be ‘the longest and most ambitious travel account by any writer in any language’, and it is a ‘key text for all aspects of the Ottoman Empire at the time of its greatest extension in the seventeenth century’.¹⁴ Although Evliya is known for his idiosyncratic wordplay, so that his text is, for both ambition and linguistic distinctiveness, *sui generis* within Ottoman writing, he is also known for his omni-curiosity, empirical detail, and acute ear. As Robert Dankoff concludes: ‘On the one hand, Evliya often adopts a playful attitude toward spelling, as toward other matters. On the other hand, Evliya goes to great lengths to record sounds accurately’.¹⁵ Istanbul-born and palace-educated, Evliya confirms the importance of the Arab thoroughbred from the vantage point of the Istanbulu. In volume 1 alone of the *Seyahatnâme*, there are 25 indexed instances of the *kübeylân* (*at*), and numerous instances continue throughout the

9 Edwards 1988, 41, note 46.

10 Wallner, Palmieri, Vogl, Rigler, Bozlak, et al. 2017.

11 Landry 2021, 149; this phrase originates in Brewer 1989, describing England as a ‘fiscal-military state’.

12 Artan 2010, 254, 255.

13 See Dankoff 2004.

14 Dankoff and Kim 2010, xi.

15 Dankoff 1991a, 8.

ten volumes; volume 10 has 50+ indexed instances of *kübeylân*.¹⁶ In the vocabulary of this lifelong horseman, who was both a cavalryman and a *hafiz*, a Qur'anic reciter, the term *kübeylân* resonates with the Qur'anic description of Solomon's horses in Sura 38:31:

Behold, there were brought
Before him, at eventide,
Coursers of the highest breeding,
And swift of foot.¹⁷

In volume 8 Evliya cites these verses while telling us of his love for horses, and that he never went without owning between five and ten of them during his fifty-one years of travel.¹⁸ Throughout the *Seyabatnâme* he echoes or alludes to the phrase referring to the horses' 'highest breeding', which appears to be something of a scholarly crux. Evliya renders the phrase variously: '*kübeyl-i sâfinâtü'l-ciyâdi*' or '*kübeylân sâfinâtü'l-ciyâd*' or '*es-sâfinâtü'l-ciyâd*' or '*esb-i sâfinâtü'l-ciyâd*', the latter followed by '*nesl-i musâfaba-i kübeyli'l-Hanâd misilli, mu'teber at idi?*', confirming the association of Solomon's steeds with noble Arab thoroughbreds.¹⁹ 'Abdullah Yûsuf 'Alî glosses *Şâfinât* as follows: 'literally, horses that stand, when at ease, on three legs, firmly planted, with the hoof of the fourth leg resting lightly on the ground. This would imply breeding and a steady temper, to match with the quality of swiftness mentioned in the next clause'.²⁰ Robert Dankoff, however, following N. J. Dawood, translates the term as 'prancing steeds', a livelier interpretation of the three-legs-down-one-leg-up formula, and likely to be how Evliya envisaged Arab thoroughbreds as behaving.²¹ Etymologically speaking, *kübeylân* derives from the Arab thoroughbred's black skin, especially noticeable on the head, suggesting eyes rimmed with kohl (collyrium or antimony).²²

When the horses of the imperial stables are taken to Kağıthane for spring grazing, Evliya waxes lyrical about both the panoply of Arab strains and the rich mixture of grasses and other forage plants they enjoy. Kağıthane is a place of beautiful meadows where 'the prancing steeds, the Arabian horses called keheilân and jilfan and treyfi and maneghi and musafaha and mahmudi and seglawi'²³ are fed on the finest grass 'and

16 Evliya 1996–2007, 1: 406; 10: 54.

17 'Alî 1997, 1168.

18 Evliya 1996–2007, 8: 12.

19 Evliya 1996–2007, 1: 111; 1: 234; 1: 234; 6: 212; Evliya 2010b, 184.

20 'Alî 1997, 1168, note 4184.

21 See, for example, Evliya 2010b, 184; Dawood 1990, 38:31.

22 Wynmalen 1950, 64, explains that the term 'appears to be connected with the black colour of the skin, that is the hallmark of a pure-bred Arabian, whose skin shall be black no matter what the colour of his coat; gradually the meaning of the word has come to be synonymous with our expression "thoroughbred"'. Brown 1947, 99, in consultation with Professor Philip Hitti of Princeton University, offers: 'Literally, the black-eyed; the one having the eyes anointed with collyrium'.

23 *es-sâfinâtü'l-ciyâd misilli kübeylân ve cilfidân ve tureyfi ve ma'nek ve musâfaba ve mahmûdî ve sey-lâvî* (Evliya 1996–2007, 1: 234).

trefoil [trifolium, the genus that includes clover and alfalfa] and clover [most likely *Trifolium campestre*, field clover, or *Medicago sativa*, alfalfa], and couch grass and black clover [black medick] and yellow sweet clover'.²⁴ Evliya's grasp of strains here accords with Bedouin usage, in that '*kühbeylân*' both designates 'Arab thoroughbred' in general and also names a highly prized strain within that general category.²⁵ Other named strains suggest an expansive geography for the Ottoman Arab thoroughbred from Syria to Kurdistan, Central Arabia, Yemen and Egypt: Jilfans are associated with the Yemen and Ottoman North Africa; Keheilân, Seglawi and Maneghi are among the most celebrated Syrian and Central Arabian desert strains, also prized in Egypt, and the Treyfi is a valued Arab thoroughbred strain of what the Syrian Bedouin call an "outside" type, that is to say, less proximate to themselves.²⁶ The Mahmudi in Evliya's account is likely to have been a Kurdish Arab breed since it bears the name of a Kurdish tribe and principality located on the Ottoman-Safavid frontier east of Lake Van.²⁷ Mahmudi horses occur frequently in Evliya's text as gifts or booty from eastern Anatolia and other Kurdish regions. That leaves us with Musafaha, which could well refer to a particular man who owned a substrain.²⁸ The very concept of 'the Arab thoroughbred' is for Evliya, then, quite multiple and complex. Evliya also plays with the terminology, as he so often does; he cannot resist playing with Jilfan (Cilfidan). According to Dankoff, '[s]uch usages can be considered hallmarks of Evliya's style, reflecting a quirky or willful attitude, as though he had decided on these forms long ago and then stuck with them'.²⁹ The description of Kağıthane is clearly a horseman's pastoral, delighting in the new spring growth of nutritious keep after the leanness of winter. When accompanying the Ottoman army on campaign, Evliya had often risked his life to find forage for his horses.³⁰ So bountiful are these meadows, Evliya claims, that, if the leanest horse feed in them for ten days, he will resemble an elephant in size and fatness.³¹

Should the time for action arise unexpectedly, therefore, these same sleek Arab thoroughbreds may still be too fat to be battle-ready; then horses of no particular breed, including geldings, rather than breeding stock, will rise to the occasion. This we learn from Evliya in the context of the revolt by Dasnik Mirza and Hanefi Khalifa in August 1651, just after his kinsman Melek Ahmed Pasha was appointed grand vizier. The forces recruited for the campaign against the rebels, Evliya reports, included '200 of Bektaş Agha's men clad in armor and mail and mounted on Arab thoroughbreds' and '300 armed men from the janissary agha Kara Çavuş, mounted on Cilfidan

24 *ve tirfil ve yonca ve ayırık ve karafirik ve sarıfirik* (Evliya 1996–2007, 1: 234).

25 Alwair 2007.

26 Alwair 2007; Alwair's version of strains accords with Lady Anne Blunt's 'Pedigree of the Arabian Thoroughbred Stock' (Blunt 1879, 1: facing page 276).

27 Dankoff 1991b, 150.

28 Murray 2011; Executive Secretary of the World Arabian Horse Organization (WAHO), Katrina Murray further proposes that Mahmudi might refer to a Seglawi substrain belonging to Ibn Mahmoud or Ibn Amoud, both of the Shammar.

29 Dankoff 1991a, 7.

30 See, for example, Evliya 1996–2007, 6: 211–5; Evliya 2010b, 181–9.

31 Evliya 1834–1850 [1846], I. ii. 85.

(Arab thoroughbred) steeds'.³² Ironically, these crack troops are delayed because their fine horses are unfit: 'But several hundred of the sleek Arab horses belonging to Bektaş Agha and the janissary agha's troops were overcome by the heat and the forced march: so quite a few men had to stay in Iznik or in the mountains looking after their mounts'.³³ The finest horses they may be, and some of them janissary mounts, but they have been called up unready for hard service, especially in the August heat. Evliya again singles out the Jilfan as a specific strain, on this occasion as belonging to the janissary troops.

Fortunately, for Evliya and the expedition, he and others are mounted on fit horses of no particular breed. These horses and horsemen can spearhead the campaign: 'I joined the forward skirmishers and our party reached the appointed spot well before the appointed hour ... But, because it was still too dark to see clearly, we stopped a little ways off to rest our horses and wait for the remainder of the troops and the appointed hour'.³⁴ These horses must have been in hard training because the advance party make excellent time, better than expected. They gain the advantage and an opportunity to rest. If horses are really fit, they will recover from exertion very quickly, as do today's endurance competition champions.

At this point, Evliya offers two further precious details, in this case regarding how the Ottomans dealt with questions of equine sexuality. The Ottomans were known to prefer to ride stallions as warhorses. This was the reverse of Arab practice; Bedouin tribesmen rode mares for preference. The use of stallions, the most magnificent and showy of horse-kind, had a tactical downside. Evliya reports: 'A few of us who had geldings went a bit closer, as your gelding will not neigh and whinny like a stallion and warn the enemy'.³⁵ The communicativeness of stallions, announcing their presence to others, could undermine covert action. One wonders how often Ottoman operations were derailed by equine braggadocio, neighing and whinnying. Given this tactical difficulty, it was necessary to have a supply of geldings, castrated male horses (a Tatar word, *alaşa*),³⁶ as Tatar troops did, to seize the moment. Evliya does not say how common geldings were, but they seem to have been in a minority – only 'a few of us' had them. Castrating a stud horse maximised a male horse's usefulness for all purposes other than reproduction; the practice was very common in early modern England. Since pedigreed sires were essential to preserve strains and upgrade or improve the rest of the horse population, it would have been horses of unspecified breeding that were most likely to be gelded. Because Evliya says nothing about the breed of his gelding or other horses in the forward party, we are left with the impression that the group consisted of horses of mixed or unspecified breeding that would have been familiar to his audience and are still to be found in Anatolia, where they are known as 'local' (*yerli*, of this place).

32 Dankoff 1991b, 65.

33 Dankoff 1991b, 66.

34 Ibid.

35 Ibid.

36 Dankoff 1991a, 11.

But what of the more properly “Turk” – Turkoman – horse that was prized as a pedigreed steed alongside the Arab thoroughbred and the North African Barb? In Evliya’s text, we will not find mention of any breed so-called. Instead, Evliya reports on the magnificence of the Asian steppe breeds of Nogay and Karaçubuk (Black Rod). Evliya also uses the Tatar and Nogay word for a “thoroughbred” from the Eurasian or Central Asian steppe, *ağırmaq*, the same term as the Russian for a bloodhorse, *argamak*.³⁷ The *argamak* was memorably described by Leo Tolstoy: ‘The expert would even have said that there was only one breed in Russia that could furnish such breadth of bone, such immense knees, such hoofs, such slender cannons, such a well-shaped neck, and above all such a skull, such eyes – large, black, and clear – and such a thoroughbred network of veins on head and neck, and such delicate skin and hair’.³⁸ The instance of Evliya’s usage featured by Dankoff – ‘*bir kübeylân ağırmaq aru*’ (literally, one thoroughbred pureblood) – shows Evliya riffing on the thoroughbred status of this particular *ağırmaq* by compounding and playing with Ottoman-Arabic, Tatar, and Turkish terminology (*aru* from *arkan*, meaning a pureblood or bloodhorse).³⁹ Unlike the *kübeylân*, these bloodhorses could be piebald.

Such horses graced official ceremonies and diplomatic gift-giving. Here Evliya describes a Nogay, ridden by Sultan Murad IV entering Istanbul in triumph in 1635 after success in a Persian campaign:

The Sultan was dressed in steel armour, and had a threefold aigrette in his turban, stuck obliquely on one side in the Persian manner: he was mounted on a Noghâi steed, followed by seven led horses of the Arab breed, decked out in embroidered trappings set with jewels ... The emperor looked with dignity on both sides of him, like a lion who has seized his prey, and saluted the people as he went on, followed by three thousand pages clad in armour.⁴⁰

In this, Joseph von Hammer’s 1846 translation, there are two horse-related discrepancies with Evliya’s text. Evliya describes Murad riding a ‘*Nogay alaçası*’, a Nogay piebald horse.⁴¹ Von Hammer leaves out this mention of a black and white, i.e., ‘coloured’ or ‘paint’ horse. Such a horse is portrayed in the *Tuhfet’ül-mülûk ve’s-selâtin*.⁴² Seven led horses, gorgeously caparisoned as von Hammer states, accompany the Sultan; they are described as ‘*kübeyl-i sâfinâtü’l-ciyâdi*’ – that is, prancing steeds reminiscent of Solomon’s horses, and horses of high breeding – but not necessarily therefore of “Arab breed”. As we shall see, by the time of von Hammer’s translation in the nineteenth century, the dominance of the Arabian in the European imagination had

37 Ibid., 10. For the *argamak*, see Kleimola 2005, 45–62.

38 Tolstoy 1974, 397.

39 Dankoff 1991a, 10, 16, 19.

40 Evliya 1834–1850 [1846], I. i. 153.

41 Evliya 1996–2007, 1: 111.

42 Artan 2008, 319, Fig. 21; Artan 2010, 257.

eclipsed the previous significance of other breeds of bloodhorse hailing from the Eurasian and Central Asian steppe.⁴³

The horses of the Nogay, the ‘lesser *Tartars*’ (*les petits Tartares*), according to Jean Baptiste Tavernier, who travelled in Persia during Evliya’s day, between 1630 and 1675, were bred for speed, endurance, and the ability to endure extreme deprivation of water and food over long distances at speed: ideal qualities for a marauding people. Tavernier noted that ‘*Les petits Tartares ont d’ancienmeté une race de chevaux qu’ils cherissent jus’qua la superstition, & ce seroit parmi eux un sacrilege d’en vendre aux étrangers*’.⁴⁴ Curiously, the French verb to “love”, or “cherish”, is rendered in the contemporary English translation as “breed”, suggesting an English preoccupation with “breeding”, combining heredity and upbringing: ‘The lesser *Tartars* have a very ancient race of Horses, which they breed up, even to Superstition; so that it would be among *them* an act of Sacrilege [*sic*] to sell them to strangers’.⁴⁵ Tavernier commented on how desirable these horses were as ‘Booty’ but added that ‘they are very hard to be tak’n for when one of these Horses perceives that his Rider is slain, he follows those that fly with all the swiftness imaginable’.⁴⁶ To ride such a horse requires great finesse as a horseman. Broadcasting his victory over the Safavids, Murad sports a turban in the Persian fashion while riding a steed of the steppe especially bred for speed over long distances for use in marauding raids. Seven led ‘coursers of the highest breeding’, ‘prancing steeds’, gloriously equipped, accompanied him. All are signifiers of Ottoman power and the geographical range of that power.

From the campaigns to Tabriz and the Kurdish and Iranian lands come Karaçubuk or Black Rod horses. These too seem likely candidates to be included in the category that Europeans called Turkoman. A Black Rod horse is given as a gift by the Safavid governor of Tabriz, Kelp Ali Khan, in 1648 in exchange for four horses, two Ottoman Arab thoroughbreds and two horses reminiscent of Solomon’s steeds, who run gently as the wind blowing at sunrise (*iki kübeylân ve busân-ı sâfinâtü’l-ciyâd misillü iki re’s esb-i sabâsür’at*),⁴⁷ all horses which astonish and delight the Persians. The Black Rod gift horse joins the procession of Evliya’s party to the mayor’s ‘world-adorning garden’: ‘At our heels came *tumans* of *bisti* coins as bath-money, one Karaçubuk thoroughbred with saddle and bridle, one piebald sorrel ambler, and seven camel-loads of food and drink and fruit. Our house overflowed with these gifts’.⁴⁸ This ‘thoroughbred Karaçubuk’ Evliya describes as ‘*kübeylân-ı karaçubuk att*’, recognising the thoroughbred status of this

43 Joseph von Hammer was well aware of the vogue for Arabian bloodstock. He knew Count Waclaw Rzewuski, who would travel to Syria to purchase horses and write *Sur les Chevaux Orientaux, et provenants des Races Orientales* (1821). Rzewuski ‘immersed himself in the study of the language’, having become acquainted in Vienna with von Hammer as a ‘scholar ... who was an expert on all matters involving the Orient’ (Steen [n.d.], 24).

44 Tavernier 1676, 341.

45 Tavernier 1677, 132.

46 Ibid., 132–3.

47 Evliya 1996–2007, 2: 121.

48 Evliya 2010b, 58.

horse of a different breed from Arab thoroughbreds. The thoroughbred is accompanied by an ambling piebald, a “gaited” horse who moves laterally, two legs on the same side, instead of moving the legs diagonally, and who is therefore exceptionally comfortable to ride. In 1655, the Khan of Urmia arranges for Evliya to have the gift of ‘eight full-blood Qarachuboq horses, eight postal horses, two panther skins, five pieces of Kashan *qatifeh* [velvet or satin], ten Gujarat cottons and twenty pieces of coloured Livorno fabrics.’⁴⁹ As should be clear by now, for the Ottomans and their near neighbours, there are distinctions to be drawn amongst the kinds of “thoroughbred” horses that Westerners classified simply as “Turkomans”.

Evliya’s seventeenth-century conception of horse-kind, as of humanity, was a sophisticated multicultural one. In the Ottoman context, where equestrian displays of imperial power were expected and the sultan controlled the territories of the Hijaz, a *küh Eylân*, an Arab thoroughbred, was *as Ottoman a horse* as one of a Turkic breed. Once obtained, the *agırmaq*, Nogay or Black Rod, coming as they did from mountain and steppe, from the North and East, similarly helped broadcast Ottoman power and geopolitical reach.

3. The Disappearance of the Turk

Today, while the Arabian and the Barb remain internationally recognised breeds, the Turkoman has largely disappeared, having been officially classified as “extinct”, represented only by the modern Akhal-Teke.⁵⁰ Yet these horses were readily to be found during the seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. As Levant Company merchant Nathaniel Harley reported in a letter of 29 December 1705: ‘The Aga’s who are Gentry of this Country Breed few or no Horses themselves, or if they doe tis of ye Large Turkman Breed wch. serve 'em for presents and are most Esteemed at Court’.⁵¹ Harley was quite clear about the difference between the “Turkman” and the Arabian: the Turkman’s greater size and strength, including longer legs, a longer back and neck, and elongated powerful hindquarters for long striding galloping, as well as a larger, longer, straight-faced head. Another difference was the coat colour of cream or golden dun, often with a pronounced dorsal stripe, not found amongst purebred Arabians.⁵²

Evliya’s Nogay, Karaçubuk and *agırmaq* were Ottoman terms for those “Turkman” contributors to the gene pool out of which the English Thoroughbred racehorse was

49 Evliya 2010a, 146.

50 URL: <http://www.theequinest.com/breeds/akhal-teke/>. Breed encyclopaedias declare that today’s Akhal-Tekes share the most characteristics with extinct forebears; only through the Akhal-Teke can we grasp what these early modern horses were like; the Turkoman horse becomes a proto-Akhal-Teke. Despite, therefore, the various forms of upgrading and out-crossing through which this breed was developed in the former Soviet Union, the Akhal-Teke, according to horse-industry professionals, retains the characteristic features of its Turkoman predecessors.

51 Harley 1705, 180.

52 Tempest 2001, 20; Landry 2008, 101–2, and source in note 50 above.

produced. Recent genome research confirms the genotypical source of the phenotypical resemblance between the Turkoman and the English Thoroughbred.⁵³ The resemblance, even today, between the English Thoroughbred and the Turkoman – in the form of the modern Akhal-Teke – is so striking, and so in contrast to the relative lack of resemblance between the English horse and the purebred Arabian or the Barb, that it appears the Turkic contribution has been hidden in plain sight.

Early English records of the Thoroughbred racehorse were replete with “Turks”. In addition to the Byerley Turk, there are the Byerley Turk Mares (at least four of them) which he sired, and the very influential sire Place’s White Turk and his daughter the White Turk Mare, Darcy’s Yellow Turk, the Stradling or Lister Turk, the Helmsley Turk, the Belgrade Turk and Belgrade Turk Mare, Lord Harley’s Dun, Selaby or the Marshall Turk, the Strickland Turk or Carlisle White Turk or Acaster Turk, the Holderness Turk, the Shaftesbury Turk, the Newcastle Turk and the Newcastle Turk Mare. Yet who speaks of ‘Turks’ now in Thoroughbred racing circles, apart from the connection between middle-distance racing speed and the Turkoman that was proposed by Alexander Mackay-Smith two decades ago?⁵⁴

The most notable recent exception has been Jeremy James, whose *The Byerley Turk: The True Story of the First Thoroughbred* (2005) made an important intervention. ‘I searched,’ James poignantly wrote, ‘for glimpses of the horses of the Turks. They are almost impossible to find. It’s as though history has tried to eradicate them utterly. But they were there: they were there.’⁵⁵ James’s book was written as fiction, though it was extensively researched and there were, apparently, many further footnotes than appeared in the published volume, but these were excised by the publisher, to the author’s consternation.⁵⁶ James made the best case he could for “Turks” amongst Ottoman cavalry mounts, comparing horse armour, especially chanfrons (protective face plates), and finding them measuring 58 cm to 71 cm, to fit horses between 15.3 hands and 17.1 hands (four inches to the hand) with ‘straight’ or ‘slightly convex faces’: like the Turkoman or Akhal-Teke, and unlike Arabians.⁵⁷

How can we account for this prejudice against recognising a “Turk” when one sees one? As early as the 1720s, the designation “Turk” began to disappear from English studbooks. An obsession with the Arabian supplanted earlier interest in the three major bloodhorse gene pools; both Turks and Barbs faded into insignificance. One form of assimilation to Englishness took was the rapid forgetting of any pedigree not “Arabian”. By 1750, radical assimilation was complete: the English Thoroughbred was born, or “invented”, in Richard Nash’s phrase.⁵⁸ Thereafter, there seemed little reason to import horses from the East at all because there appeared to be a sufficiency of English-

53 Wallner et al. 2017.

54 Mackay-Smith 2000, 122–30; Landry 2008, 101–2, 172–4; URL: <http://www.tbheritage.com>

55 James 2005, 17.

56 James 2015.

57 James 2005, 344.

58 Nash 2005, 261.

bred racehorses that were superior to any imports *as racers*, over sprinting and middle-distance courses, where speed rather than endurance was paramount.⁵⁹ Alexander Mackay-Smith has suggested that it was the crossing of ‘Turcoman-Arabian’ stallions with Irish hobbies and English running-mares that was most influential for the middle distance speed of the Thoroughbred, classifying the Godolphin as a Turcoman-Arab cross while denying imported status to the Byerley Turk, claiming that he was sired by Place’s White Turk.⁶⁰ Nash, based on archival evidence that is not entirely convincing, has also proposed a Yorkshire origin for the Byerley Turk.⁶¹ Even exceptions to the rule of ignoring the Turkoman’s importance for the English Thoroughbred, therefore, tend to downplay its imported Ottoman associations.

In Thoroughbred racing parlance, the three foundation sires, the Byerley, the Darley, and the Godolphin, translate into three lines of descent on the stallion’s side of the pedigree:

Byerley Turk Darley Arabian Godolphin Barb or Arabian
Herod (foaled 1758) Eclipse (foaled 1764) Matchem (foaled 1748)

By the twenty-first century, the Matchem line scarcely figures in race-winning sires’ pedigrees although it was once formative,⁶² while the Darley Arabian has proved exceptionally prepotent, as the breeders say. The Darley Arabian’s Syrian origins – of the Maneghi strain, from the Anazeh Bedouin – are the best documented of the three foundation sires.⁶³ This origin story, coupled with the Darley’s hegemony in Thoroughbred DNA (today calculated at 95%, largely through the line of Eclipse), has led Thoroughbred people to look to the Darley as *the* progenitor and prototype.⁶⁴ Yet recent DNA research has identified the English Thoroughbred haplotype with the ‘signature of the Turkoman horse’, not the Arabian, throwing the breeding of the Darley Arabian into doubt.⁶⁵ The Byerley Turk-Herod sire line matches with the highly influential Tb-oB1 clade, further revealing that Galopin and his son St Simon descended from this line, and not from Eclipse, as previously thought.⁶⁶ The Byerley Turk-Herod sire line has also produced winning sires such as Ahonoora and Dr. Devious who came to the fore during the 1990s and early 2000s, alongside the continuing influence of The Tetrarch.⁶⁷

59 Landry 2008, 103.

60 Mackay-Smith 2000, 1–6; 5.

61 Nash 2012.

62 Mackay-Smith 2000, 6.

63 Landry 2008, 99–100; Darley 1703: Thomas Darley described the horse he had purchased and was about to ship to his brother as ‘of the most esteemed race amongst the arabs both by syre and dam, & the name of said race is call’d Mannicka’; I am indebted to Richard Nash and the late Nicholas Mills for transcriptions of this letter.

64 Pickrell 2005, citing Patrick Cunningham and Emmeline Hill.

65 Wallner, et al. 2017; Cosgrove, Sadeghi, Schlamp et al. 2020 claim that the Darley’s breed ‘was likely of unknown genetic origin’ (p. 8).

66 Felkel, Vogl, Rigler et al. 2019; Wallner et al. 2017.

67 Landry 2013, 340–1.

The celebrated racehorse Frankel, once pronounced the greatest racehorse in the world, although of Darley and Eclipse descent in the sire line, owes a great deal to the Byerley Turk-Herod line throughout his pedigree. Most importantly, Frankel, like many another successful racehorse, traces back to the Byerley Turk line of descent on the ‘bottom’ or dam’s side of his pedigree, through what is called ‘in tail female’. Mitochondrial DNA passes through the dam’s side, where the DNA is considerably more varied than amongst stallion lines. Here we find evidence of Irish hobbies, Galloways, and Yorkshire racing mares – the so-called native ‘English’, including Scottish and Irish stock – but also mares of Eastern blood, some imported, but some the progeny of imports such as the Byerley Turk.⁶⁸ ‘Byerley Turk mares became jewels of great price’.⁶⁹ The Byerley Turk can be associated with several of the foundation mare families proposed by Bruce Lowe (numbered 1, 3, 8, 17, 35, 41), though Lowe himself makes little of this association.⁷⁰ In tail female, Frankel traces back to Lowe’s foundation mare Family 1 (the family with the most classic race-winners). He also exhibits a high concentration of Byerley Turk ancestry throughout the dam’s side of the pedigree.⁷¹ If the dam’s side is scrutinised as carefully as the sire’s side, the formative influence of the “Turkoman” genetic legacy becomes even harder to ignore.

4. ‘But they were there: they were there’, at least in 1884, according to Lady Anne Blunt

The dominance of the Arabian and the disappearance of the “Turk” from English Thoroughbred breeders’ consciousness was so extreme that by the mid-nineteenth century there was a rumour circulating, in order to account for the resemblance between English Thoroughbreds and “Oriental” horses who were not purebred Arabs, that English Thoroughbred stallions had been imported into the desert and were being crossed with Arab mares by the Bedouin.⁷² To a keen-eyed horsewoman such as Lady Anne Blunt (1837–1917), however, it was the “Turkoman” horse that accounted for this resemblance. Lady Anne Blunt, like Evliya Çelebi, wrote voluminous accounts of her travels and daily life; like him, she was curious, attentive to social nu-

68 Hill, Bradley, Al-Barody et al. 2002.

69 Peters 2005.

70 Peters 2005; Lowe 1895, ix-x and passim.

71 In Frankel’s tail female ancestor Ellen Horne (1844) from page three of his pedigree, for example, we find a high concentration of Byerley Turk blood, with three crosses to Highflyer, one to a Highflyer mare, one to Woodpecker, one to Herod, one to Fenwick’s Herod Mare, and two to Selim (whose grandsire was Woodpecker). Selim is Ellen Horne’s great grandsire on the sire’s side and also her great great great grandsire on the dam’s side. Fenwick’s Herod Mare was by Herod out of Pyrrha, who four generations back has Jigg by the Byerley Turk and the Byerley Turk Mare (foaled 1695) of Family 3 in her pedigree. See URL: www.pedigreequery.com/frankel3

72 Blunt 1986, 168.

ances and cultural differences, and good at learning languages.⁷³ She was also a devoted horsewoman. She became a promoter of the purebred Arabian, making a lifelong study of Arabic and of Bedouin ideas and lineages.

During the 1870s and 1880s, beginning with an Anatolian tour in 1873 and followed by Algerian, Syrian and Central Arabian expeditions and visits to Egypt and India, Lady Anne and her husband Wilfrid Scawen Blunt (1840–1922) committed themselves to preserving the original Bedouin Arabian strains, and they founded the Crabbet Arabian Stud in Sussex to this effect, initiating a global market in pedigreed Arabian horses that continues to this day, and continues to be vexed by questions of genetic purity as an index of breeding prepotency and quality, cross-hatched by geopolitical considerations.⁷⁴ After repeated enquiries amongst the Bedouin breeders over many years, and having observed no evidence whatsoever of this English Thoroughbred incursion, Lady Anne accepted that the rumour was unfounded. To an experienced horsewoman such as herself, it had become clear that the Turkoman lay at the back of English racing pedigrees. In an 1884 diary entry, she reported:

Last day in India. He (W.) [her husband, Wilfrid Scawen Blunt] rode with the Governor at 7.15 this morning, was given the Turkoman horse; a long bodied bay with black points and head like an English horse (which we looked at the day before). The horse is a good goer. Said to have belonged to Yakub Khan brought by Colonel ... from Cabul and bought from him by Sir James Fergusson. On seeing this horse I at once felt that this style of horse would be the one with which there are crosses in the Irak region producing results that make people believe there are English strains hidden away somewhere in the desert.⁷⁵

It was not the “impure breed” of “English Thoroughbred” whose influence was to be seen in the Syrian and Central Arabian desert or in Iraq.⁷⁶ There were indigenous bloodhorses of greater size and bone, with larger and longer straight-faced heads, and longer legs and backs than purebred Arabs, horses more like the English Thoroughbred, with a distinctive greyhound-like racing shape. John Macdonald Kinneir reported in 1813 that in Persia there were to be found “Turkoman” horses with ‘long legs and little bone under the knee, spare carcasses and large heads’, that were ‘larger, more

73 Lacy 2018, 5–8; Winstone 2003.

74 Derry 2003, 103–55; Landry 2008, 78–86, 169–74; Lange 2020, 234–50.

75 Blunt 1986, 168.

76 Blunt 1879, ‘Pedigree of the Arabian Thoroughbred Stock’, 1: facing page 276; the incorrect assigning of the Darley Arabian to the Keheilân Ajuz strain here will later be corrected to Maneghi. The Blunts never questioned the Darley Arabian’s Arab thoroughbred status, but Wilfrid criticised the Maneghi strain in 1879 as ‘plain and without distinction,’ having ‘coarse heads, long ewe necks, powerful shoulders, much length and strong but coarse hindquarters’; Blunt 1879, 2: 273. He added: ‘They have also much bone, and are held in high repute for the qualities of endurance and staying power’, which echoes descriptions of the Turkoman (2: 273). In 1881, Wilfrid complained to Lady Anne that the Maneghis ‘were ruining the breed’ among the Arabs (Blunt 1986, 129).

powerful, and all things considered, better calculated for cavalry' than the Arabian.⁷⁷ Standing from 14.2 to 16 hands (four inches to the hand), these horses were valued for their 'size' and 'extraordinary powers of supporting fatigue', such as travelling 'nine hundred miles in eleven successive days'.⁷⁸ In 1827, Captain, the Hon. George Keppel noted that in Kermanshah the 'Turcoman', which was 'preferred to the Arabian', was 'much taller, standing generally from fifteen to sixteen hands', had 'little bone, long legs, a spare carcass, and a large head out of all proportion with its body', but that '[n]otwithstanding this unpromising appearance, the Turcoman is said to be capable of enduring very great fatigue, and the facility with which it ascends the most rugged eminences is astonishing'.⁷⁹ Height, long legs, a lean racing shape, endurance, and ability to gallop up steep terrain: we might deduce from this evidence that it was the Turkoman that had been "most formative for the English horse in the first place", the source of so many English Thoroughbred characteristics.

Lady Anne appears at first to recognise this matter of ancestry in the English Thoroughbred. However, as she goes on to speculate about what this Thoroughbred/Turkoman resemblance might mean, she falls back on a reflex which is far from unusual even today:

The Turcoman horse would naturally resemble the English horse being the product of the same kind of mixture of blood. Some hundred or hundred and fifty years ago a number of Arabs, both mares and horses, having been taken up into that country and crossed with the country horse were the ancestors of the present so called 'thoroughbred' Turkoman horse.⁸⁰

Here Lady Anne alludes to the well-known importation of Arab horses by Nadir Shah (r. 1736–1747) into Persia, to the rich grasslands of Khorasan, which had resulted in the 'progeny, from being crossed with the stronger breeds of the country, and nourished with rich pasture' attaining 'considerable size and strength, as well as beauty', as Sir John Malcolm put it.⁸¹ Viewing through a *küibeylân*-prizing lens has led her to conclude that like the English Thoroughbred, the Turkoman bloodhorse was "impure" by Bedouin standards. Its high-bred racing quality is, for her, fundamentally the product of crossing with pure Arabian bloodlines. About the Other Genetic Material, that which makes this horse *not* an Arabian, Lady Anne does not speculate, calling them simply 'country horses'.

By 1884, both Anne and her husband Wilfrid had become supporters of Egyptian nationalism, outspoken protesters against the British occupation of 1882, and they were becoming involved in the Indian and Irish nationalist and anti-imperialist causes.⁸² That is to say, they had become increasingly vocal critics of empire. What

77 Kinneir 1813, 1: 40.

78 Ibid., 40–1.

79 Keppel 1827, 2: 49.

80 Blunt 1986, 168.

81 Malcolm 1815, 2: 231–2.

82 Lacy 2018, 74–172; Gopal 2020, 127–165.

emerges from their apprenticing themselves, as it were, to Bedouin horse-breeders and other local informants in Ottoman territory, is the subject of another study, and I shall say only a little about it here.⁸³ Especially as the Ottomans sought to ‘modernise’ in line with other European nations, while accruing greater and greater indebtedness to those nations financially but also culturally and socially, the Blunts become impatient of not only British but also Ottoman imperial rule. I would suggest that the Blunts’ understanding of the failures of imperial vision they witnessed on both the British and Ottoman sides limited their interest in the Ottoman past. They despaired at the current Ottoman bureaucracy’s all-too-apparent corruption, ineffectiveness, and lack of care for the welfare of even the (newly) Muslim majority of its subjects. The increasing alienation of the Empire’s subject populations, whether Turkish villagers, Egyptian fellahin, Kurdish highlanders, or Bedouin, cast doubt upon there being any remaining traces of past Ottoman greatness. Such a view undoubtedly limited the interest shown by the Blunts and other Europeans in what the Ottomans themselves had traditionally esteemed so highly: Evliya’s *ağırmaq* and *Karaçubuk* thoroughbreds and Nogay steeds, alongside the *kübeylân*.

3. Conclusion

I have made a number of related arguments in order to bring Ottoman and “Turk” horses out of obscurity into the light. First, the Ottomans were equine multiculturalists. By the mid-seventeenth century, the imperial stables in Istanbul featured horses of various breeds, and multiple strains of *kübeylân*s, Arab thoroughbreds. The *kübeylân* could be said to be as Ottoman a horse as any other breed. By the nineteenth century, Arab thoroughbreds had come to be desired by European governments and armies, and by the Ottoman cavalry, to the exclusion of other breeds.⁸⁴ Yet it was the genome of the Byerley Turk and other Turkoman bloodstock that was the most fundamentally formative for the English Thoroughbred. Here lie traces of what Evliya called the *ağırmaq*, *Karaçubuk* (Black Rod), and Nogay thoroughbred steeds. The striking phenotypical resemblance between today’s English Thoroughbreds and Akhal-Tekes stands in stark contrast to the fainter one between English Thoroughbreds and Arabians, and has been substantiated by genome research. Given the preponderance of the Darley sire line in Thoroughbred pedigrees, this research casts doubt upon the horse’s Maneghi lineage, or at least upon previous understandings of the Maneghi as an Arab thoroughbred strain. However one looks at it, the Ottomans provided the formative gene pool out of which the “English Thoroughbred” was produced. The imported horses transformed British equine and equestrian culture, which would in turn be globally re-exported. This one-sided affair, a clear case of collective equine historical agency, looks even more asymmetrical once one notices that not on-

83 Landry, research in progress, *What the Horses Said: Lady Anne and Wilfrid Scarwen Blunt, Critics of Empire*.

84 Derry 2006, 105–20; Landry 2020, 36; Fatah 1997, 160–1.

ly the Ottoman but also more specifically the “Turkoman” contribution to the Thoroughbred has historically been not only downplayed or neglected, but hidden in plain sight.

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