

## CELESTIAL HORSES

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For most horse lovers in the West, the exotic Akhal-Teke horse has long been a mystery: an occasional glimpsed photograph, a figment almost of imagination drifting from the deserts of Central Asia. Now, that mystery is gaining reality, as the growing popularity of the breed in the UK marks the latest step in its long history.

Nearly three thousand years ago, mounted Scythian nomads ruled the Central Asian steppes from the Black Sea to China, their horses recognised as the best in the world, the nuclear missile of their day. Recent archaeology has verified long-standing Turkoman tradition that the Scythian horses live on, essentially unchanged, in today's Akhal-Teke horses from Turkmenistan.

The Akhal-Teke is still reckoned the best in the world by its champions. In fact, it's hard to refer to this horse without superlatives. It's arguably the world's oldest breed. An Akhal-Teke stallion, Absent, was the world's most successful Olympic Dressage horse. It set jumping records in the USSR, where arduous trials also established it as the best endurance breed.

Many claim it's the world's most beautiful horse. Certainly it's emerging from relative obscurity as Central Asia's best-kept secret.

Long ago, other nations envied the Scythian horses. They were held sacred by the Medes and the Persians, and carried off in tribute by Alexander the Great. To the Chinese Emperors, they were Celestial Horses, and it was to acquire them first by warfare, and then trade, that the Silk Road was born. Chinese art from the Han period depicts tall horses with refined profile, high head carriage and long backs, quite different from the steppe ponies formerly used by Chinese cavalry. In medieval times the Central Asian horses became known as Argamaks, and were much sought after by Russian breeders wishing to improve their stock. By the seventeenth century they had become the preferred cavalry horse of the Ottoman Turks, and it was during the Turkish wars in central Europe that many of these warhorses were captured and imported to England, where the newly-fashionable sport of horse-racing created a thirst for fast bloodstock. It's only now, with DNA-typing revealing many secrets, that the extensive role of the "Turk", or Turkoman horse, in the development of the English Thoroughbred is beginning to be recognised.

Ownership of the Argamaks had by now passed to the Turkomans of Western Turkestan, and they became a symbol of Turkoman culture. Although the Turkomans made a basic living as semi-nomadic farmers and herdsmen, it was the slave trade that made them rich. They needed horses that could gallop all day from their villages on the edge of the Kara Kum desert to the fringes of the settled world - and gallop home again with a double burden, with produce for the slave markets of the desert Khanates. With the fragmentation of the Turkomans into separate tribes, the horses took on the identity of their parent tribe: Iomud, Gatmen, Gökkan... The best Turkoman horses of all were those bred by the *Teke* Turkomans of the *Akhal* Oasis in what is now Turkmenistan, and it was in this hard school of slave-raiding that the Akhal-Teke became the world's toughest and most versatile horse.

So it was their horses, not their women, which became the repository of the Turkoman's wealth. They wore bridles decorated with silver and cornelian. And they were looked after with loving care, hand-fed with lucerne, barley and mutton-fat, and rugged with felt against the vicious desert winds. "When you rise in the morning, greet your horse and then your father," runs a Turkoman saying.

After the the Russians conquered the Turkomans and put an end to slave-raiding, the Turkoman horse reverted to cavalry horse. Its prodigious capacities attracted wide attention. Accounts describe how it could travel 100 miles a day carrying 19 stone. A British Ambassador to Persia was quoted a saying that "no other horse in the world can cover such a distance so fast as the Turkoman horse... a fit Turkoman, in good training, can do 250 km in twenty-four hours."

The 20th century nearly brought the end of the Turkoman horse. Communism and collectivisation saw the removal of all horses to State studs, limited to the Akhal-Teke and Iomud strains, so that many Turkoman breeders voted with their feet and crossed into Iran.

Russian generals experimented with cross-breeding, to make a heavier cavalry horse. And so in 1935 the Turkomans staged an epic long-distance ride from their capital Ashkhabad to Moscow. Pure-bred Akhal-Tekes were matched against part-breds, Arabs and Iomuds, the Tekes out-performing the other breeds over the 4,300 km, 84 day trek. Pure breeding recommenced; but worse was to come.

After the second World War, Stalin became obsessed with mechanisation, and declared the horse obsolete. The produce of all horse farms across the USSR began to be sent for slaughter. Some Akhal-Teke horses were secretly turned out into the desert to take their chance of survival, until a more enlightened attitude saw recapture and re-establishment of state studs around the end of the 50's. Meanwhile, however, the breed was finding another rôle.

For most of the century, racing had been its only sporting use. But horizons began to widen, and in 1960 a dressage horse put Akhal-Tekes firmly on the world map. Absent won gold in the Rome Olympics, and his tally of medals there and in two further Olympics has never been beaten. Absent's sire Arab had taken part in the 1935 marathon, competed in the All-Union Show Jumping and Eventing, and set a Soviet puissance record of 2.12m. This was beaten by Poligon, another Akhal-Teke, who raised the bar to 2.25m. Meanwhile yet another Teke, Perepel, set a long-jump record of 8.78m. The breed began to excite serious attention, vindicating its long-standing advocate Vladimir Shamborant, who had brought some of the best surviving breeding stock from Turkmenistan to establish the Dagestansky Stud in Southern Russia, the first of many across the USSR.

Nowadays Akhal-Teke horses are widely used for racing, showjumping, eventing and endurance riding throughout the CIS, where they have proved themselves to be outstanding performance horses. And, although import from Central Asia poses enormous geographical and bureaucratic problems, Russian-bred Tekes have begun to make their presence felt in the West since the fall of the Soviet Union.

So what exactly is this horse, whose charismatic presence has excited the enthusiasm of so many horsemen throughout three millennia?

"Their unique conformation," says MAAK, the International Association of Akhal-Teke Breeding, "runs counter to generally accepted principles... long back, high withers, deep rib cage, long fine and dry legs with clearly defined tendons, powerful croup and splendidly developed hip and thigh muscles, tall, narrow-chested... the head is light and dry with a long refined face, long fine ears and the unique "Teke" setting of the eye... the fine breeding shows in the sensitive skin and fine silky mane and tail. With many Akhal-Tekes the mane is not just fine and sparse, but almost entirely absent. The hair of the Akhal-Teke... gives a special metallic sheen to any colour.... the commonest colours are: bay (39.9%), dun (22.4%), black (12.3%), chestnut (11.2%); grey, light bay and cream are less frequently encountered."

Shamborant elaborates: "Akhal-Teke horses have a very taut constitution, are unpretentious in their food habits, are rarely ill; the mares become pregnant with a high probability, are hardy, rapidly restore after working; the breed is ideal for long trips, they jump like cats. The Akhal-Teke horses are not hot like Thoroughbreds; they are very smart and intelligent animals."

Height is usually from 15 - 16 hands, with stallions/geldings generally bigger than mares. The conformation has its unusual features, but is highly efficient. It is a puzzle how the Teke, with its lean frame and absence of heavy fast-twitch muscle, is so fast. That is, until you watch or, better, ride it at the gallop. Then you feel how the high-set neck frees the shoulder into huge movement, how the long back curls and uncurls like a greyhound's, how the lengths and angles in the quarters and hind legs give maximum leverage to a raking stride. Geometry, not biology, gives speed to the Akhal-Teke.

That, and their high strength-weight ratio, that attribute beloved of runners and dancers. Combine these features with a cat-like agility, and a big jump becomes part of the job-description. But perhaps their most attractive feature is temperament. Their uniquely close affinity with people is more like that of a dog than a horse. Highly intelligent, Akhal-Tekes learn voraciously, are often natural show-offs and love to perform, from the dressage to the circus arena. Trainers who take the time and trouble to work with them patiently and sensitively will find themselves rewarded by a horse who develops a deep bond with those he knows.

Time and trouble, though, are imperatives; these horses, who are willing to give so much, demand much also. Generous and trusting, they do not tolerate forceful treatment or lack of respect; a near-equal partnership is their ideal. Although they are thrifty feeders and do well almost anywhere, they must be scrupulously rugged against the winters of the north Atlantic seaboard; for Nature has designed them over tens of thousands of years for arid steppe climate, and their winter coat lacks the dense waterproof layer found in the northern horse. Once in work they are best kept busy, and the weekend rider may find their Teke becoming bored and cheeky. And they can never form a proper relationship with their humans if they change hands every year or two.

For many horsemen, though, moving into Akhal-Tekes is a one-way trip. Judging by their slowly but steadily rising numbers in the UK, it's one which increasingly many people are willing to make. So this once rare and exotic breed is set to become familiar, both in sporting disciplines and among those who value the loyalty and companionship of a truly exceptional horse.

"He who keeps a horse," goes another Turkoman saying, "keeps a Khan."

