

## The Horse in the Archaeological remains of Qaryat al-Fau

A.R. Al-Ansary

**Abstract:** *There is near consensus among historians that the earliest appearance of the horse in the Arabian Peninsula would not, at best, go beyond the fourth century B.C. This opinion is based on dating inscriptions and drawings found on the slopes of the mountains. However, this evidence is not reliable for several considerations. To have moved from Central Asia to Persia and Mesopotamia and then to Egypt and North Africa, the horse must have passed through the northern deserts of the Arabian Peninsula or through its eastern and southern coasts thereby penetrating central and southern Arabia while heading to the western ports or Sinai on the way to Africa and the Mediterranean basin. There is no doubt that the people of Arabia had seen the horse and dealt with it just as they had with products of the East such as gemstones, fabrics, birds and scientific experience. Archeological excavations have shown traces of the cultural interaction in different areas of the Arabian Peninsula, the Syrian Steppes, Arabian Gulf Metropolis, and the southern and western Arabia. Again, the specific genetic features of the Arabian horse could only have been attained over several centuries, during which time the horse must have undergone genetic modifications to which many factors contributed such as environmental conditions, the wide span of the desert, and the light weight of Arab riders.*

There is near consensus among historians that the earliest appearance of the horse in the Arabian Peninsula would not, at best, go beyond the fourth century B.C. This opinion derives from their estimations of dating inscriptions and drawings found on the slopes of the mountains. However, this evidence is not reliable for several considerations. To have moved from Central Asia and China to Persia and Mesopotamia and then to the Nile Valley and North Africa, the horse must have passed through the northern deserts of the Arabian Peninsula or through its eastern and southern coasts thereby penetrating central and southern Arabian while heading to the western ports or Sinai on the way to Africa and the Mediterranean basin.

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of the cultural interaction in different areas of the Arabian Peninsula, the Syrian Steppes, Arabian Gulf Metropolis, Oman, Hadhramout, Yemen and the prehistoric sites in the west of the Arabian Peninsula.

An important point to bring up is the specific genetic features that distinguish the special breed of the Arabian Horse. These features could only have been attained over several centuries, during which time the horse must have undergone genetic modifications to which many factors contributed such as environmental conditions, the wide span of the desert, and the light weight of Arab riders.

Although researchers highlighted the connection between Arabs and the Camel, they hardly ever mention the connection with the donkey, the domestication of which is proven to precede the second millennium B.C. One can wonder if the Arabs had used the donkey for

transporting humans and materials, why cannot we imagine Arabs putting the horse to the same use; viz., as a means of transportation and hauling as it had been the case in other places! In this regard I may say: the Arab had cherished and dignified this animal and elevated its status above the function of transportation and carriage towing. Instead the Arab kept it for very especial missions of higher values, for adornment and pride, made the horse his companion, gave it his name, portrayed it in his poetry and illustrated it in his arts. Furthermore, it had even been the subject of Quranic heavenly verses that will be recited till eternity. Also the prophet (peace be upon him) associated between «goodness» and horses, implying that the horse will be the means for Muslim riders to reach places and consequently spread Islam and the «word of truth» everywhere.

Another issue deserves emphasis. Researchers who studied the inscriptions of the Arabian Peninsula in which the horse images appeared were unable to determine their definite dates. This failure resulted from the absence of scientific and professional surveys; and the studies and dating did not utilize modern technologies and means. Scholars contented themselves with only relating these inscriptions to writings attributed to nomadic tribes and caravan owners along the trade routes. This practice, I believe, explains the inaccuracy of date determination, and is similar to the practice one finds in the studies of Musnad inscriptions in southern Arabia. One can say that most scholars who studied the inscriptions of southern Arabia did so in isolation of the stratigraphic layers upon which archeologists build their methods in determining the relative or absolute date they assign to a historic period in a given site according to the results of laboratory analysis

or comparison to other known sites that bear relations to the site in question. The interests of early epigraphers, however, had primarily been the linguistic aspects of the ancient inscriptions; only secondarily had they been interested in whatever possible historical information derived from those texts. Yet without other supporting evidence, linguistic studies cannot reach definite conclusions; it is therefore not surprising that we have different chronological lines of the kings of Saba, Minaean, Hadramawt, Qataban and Hemyar.

Despite the linguistic, historical, and ethical influences that befell the people of southern Arabia and were present in their cultural remains, archeologists did not pay attention to the importance of relating the archeological excavations to the inscriptions and writings found in those same excavated sites. Thus, I believe, the study of the inscription in isolation of its environment, location and other archeological clues deforms its identity and detaches it from its time frame and social milieu. Therefore, disconnected readings of these texts lead to errors and misinterpretations. Of these, the most important is the issue of determining the time period of the texts that relate to the horse. These concerns, therefore, must be taken into consideration when determining the time of the passage of the horse into the Arabian Peninsula, so as to set things in perspective and to place the horse history in the Arabian Peninsula within the historical frame of the Ancient Near East Civilizations.

When we approach the issue through the archaeology of Qaryat al-Fau, the horse becomes one of the essential topics in the drawings of Qaryat's artist, who with quality and accuracy expressed in his art the conditions and interactions he lived and through which he

became the able artist to express his experiences and personal sense of the concept of beauty. The drawings of this artist show that he had passed through different phases. One can summarize these stages as follows:

**First Stage:** This early stage can be dubbed «The Simple Impressionism Stage.» Here, the artist illustrated on mountain slopes the natural images of his surroundings; of these his fellow human was the clearest image in his mind. Yet, he also drew the camel, the horse, the antelope and the dog. This style of drawings is spread over the slopes of Mount Tuwaiq. On “Khashm Qaryat” (Nose of Qaryat) in particular we find a large amount of inscriptions alongside drawings of camels (some with howdah on their back), horses, people, and battle scenes. Of these, the most beautiful is perhaps the portrait we have seen on the slopes of Mount Muraybikh, 30 km. west of “Qaryat” which highlighted dance festivities, lofty palm trees, crop harvesting, cows and sceneries of domesticated or wild animals.

**Second stage:** In this stage the artist seems to have moved his artistic talent into the town, and started to draw inside houses what he had seen outside and drawn on slopes. His art setting, tools and backgrounds seem to have changed; yet his inspiration and subjects remained the same. Instead of chiseling his engravings on rocks, we find him at this stage «incising» on wall mortars the same images; many rooms at Qaryat al-Fau testify to this prevalent practice. In the process he moved a step forward where he applied and exploited colors especially in writing. furthermore, he mixed colors in his paintings, a procedural development deserving recognition and consideration.

**Third Stage:** This stage is marked by the

transformation of the artist's role in the society. As the artist acquired a professional status, he was perhaps commissioned by the residents of “Qaryat” to paint for them scenes they suggested to him, or he himself provided them with samples from which to choose. This is what we have witnessed in the Qaryat's Artist shop where we found on its walls three paintings portraying composed scenes of huntsmen on horses in what seems to be camel hunting missions. In one of these scenes the word “king” is written above one of the men's head and the name “Salim bin Ka'b” in another. The artist also portrayed dogs accompanying the procession, some planets and some abstract shapes representing people, in addition to the symbol of “Kahl,” the main deity of Kinda which the artist scattered throughout these paintings. All of these images were illustrated in black and red colors. These paintings are the most important art works that reflect the ability of the artist to express detailed scenes of the daily life of that period. In that same shop we also discovered a small basin that still even today bears traces of the red pigment which the artist used for coloring.

Some points call for reiteration: one should know that this artist shop is the sixth of its kind in the southern part of the market; the market is known to belong to the second period which historically began during the first century AD; the scene depicts the use of the horse in camel-hunting (the very camel which was said to be the close companion of the Arab man). Taken together, these facts should give us pause to think through the significance of the horse in this particular scene and to conclude that the horse had been used to gather and increase wealth in the Arabian Peninsula. Again, the use of the horse in this area at the very edge of the Empty Quarter should lead us to believe that the

Empty Quarter was the first habitat to host the horse. Such a reading proves the importance of studying formal arts and drawings in terms of their significances rather than merely isolated issues detached from their historical implications and urban and cultural dimensions.

Fourth stage: In this stage the Artist of Qaryat matured and became more confident in setting his colors; moreover, at this stage the artist seemed to have familiarized himself with the art schools of his time. Consequently, he integrated all those factors and produced highly advanced creative paintings. We first found on the ground these artistic portraits (technically called “frescos”) in fragments of thin plastering gypsum not exceeding 2 mm in thickness. The mission of their rescue and restoration was the hardest; they demanded very special care and enormous effort. With the discovery of these paintings we noticed the following:

1. They are relatively larger in size, and some are elongated
2. The structural support on which the paintings’ background (the wall plaster) is set was prepared of lime clay and differs in cohesion and hardness from one painting to another.
3. The painting background (the plaster) is about 2 mm thick and made of white gypsum; it frequently betrays the effects time in the forms of cracks, breaks, disintegration, and puffiness.
4. It is believed that the colors of these paintings were made of non-organic materials which, along with the general dry climate of the area, help them maintain a high level of stabilization and resist factors of deterioration for some 2500 years, and ultimately survive in a relatively good condition.
5. Noticeable is the strong relation between the materials used in the background of the mural or in the background of the drawings and the coloring materials, on the one hand, and the nature of the surrounding environment, on the other. Hematite (the iron ore which occurs in red earthy form) is present in abundance in neighboring Mount Tuwaiq.
6. The most frequently used colors in these paintings are the yellow, red, brown, black and white, all in various and graded shades and components.
7. A dry calcified paste for the red color was recovered; it is assumed that it was prepared either by fine grinding or by water elutriation to obtain the finest granules known practically as dye, which is combined before coloring with sticking material known as mediator which might be either gum, glue, egg yolk or wax. It is supposed that «glue» was especially used because we found small chunks that were recognized as animal glue.
8. In this stage, the artist used the same technique we described in the paintings inside the grand temple and in the city’s residential palaces. The paintings of this stage had been composed in a form that combined the Eastern and Classical styles. Here, the drawings followed, as much as possible, the frontal view rule, and came in two dimensions with few but highly accented lines, emphasizing the personal characteristics of the individual person without any exaggerated details. The classical effect is evident in the artistic depiction of the cloths, their fashions, and

their folds.

9. In what follows we will present descriptions of some of the portraits we found in “Qaryat” in which the horse figures prominently or forms an important component:
10. The first painting: found during the second season of excavation in the market area in 1394 H / 1974 G, this painting is rectangular and composed on a thin layer of gypsum tile and clay, not exceeding 2 mm in thickness, forming what archaeologists call “Fresco.” It has been affirmed that the coloring materials for this wall painting are non-organic; the drawings were painted in two colors: reddish and solid black on bright grey background. In all, the portrait represents expressive drawings of different hunting scenes. In it, Qaryat’s Artist seemed influenced by his environment: he presents images of people in a side profile, shown in a clear expressive and outlined schemes, and were hunting wild camels. Two men also appear in the painting; one of them is holding a bow and an arrow. In the lower part of the painting appeared an expressive image of the Sun Disk in addition to a number of texts written in the ancient Arabic calligraphy (Musnad). The significance of this mural underlines the presence of the horse, as stated above, for more than two thousand and five hundred years as the piece indicates its use in hunting.
11. The second painting: Also discovered in the second season, this mural (Fresco) contains relatively similar drawings with the same type of fine paint of the tile and the bright clay. Here, however, the drawings are better and the colors are more stable, even though the drawing suffered the onslaughts

of various factors that led to the erosion of many parts. Still, this painting shows expressive drawings of some hunting scenes; here some human figures are drawn in a side profile, in a plain expressive and outlined style, riding on horse-backs, holding in their hands long spears, and are hunting wild camels. This painting clearly represents the artist’s ability to depict the horse in hunting missions in factual and expressive ways two thousand and five hundred years ago. It also affirms the fact that the horse was part of the Arabian city since ancient times.

12. The third portrait was found in the grand temple during the season of 1400H/1980G; it is part of mural (Fresco) involving colored drawings representing a river with fish and hoofs representing four horses perhaps pulling a wagon. Alternatively, those could have represented horsemen crossing the river, but only the hoofs remained visible. This scene reminds us of a text written on a bronze plate hung on the outer wall of the temple of “Wodd” in the center of the city, dating back to the period ranging from the third century to the end of the second century B.C. The writer of the text reported that he came from “Salouqiyah” (Seleucusa), crossed the river (the Tigris river), then on to <Jaba’a> (Jubah) and from there to “Qaryat,” and finally reaching “Qarnaow” the capital of Ma’in Kingdom, bringing with him the offerings of the Arab tribes of “Salouqiyah” to the temple of “Wodd in Qaryat.” This is clear evidence that the Arabs knew the horse and crossed with it the Valley of the Two Rivers (i.e., Mesopotamia) traveling all the way to the south of the Arabian Peninsula since ancient times. Evidently Arabs must have known the horse long before it was

documented in drawings and writing.

13. The fourth Painting was found during the twelfth season of 1407H/1987G, in Square B.17 of the residential area of Qaryat. At first, the excavators recovered a large number of fragmented gypsum which, when eventually gathered and restored, showed colored scenes. These involve a lady reclining on a sofa or bed, holding a cup in her hand; behind her appears a horse head and another woman stands wearing what looks like a “Abaia” (covering gown) and holding a cup as well; she seems to be the attending maid of the reclining princess. In

the left side of the painting appears a figure, perhaps of a man wearing what looks like a necklace around his neck and a crown on his head; below him a pomegranate fruit is drawn. Here, the horse seems to have acquired a higher status since we find it in the company of nobility.

#### Archeological objects of the horse

Galloping Horse: This item was found during 1411H/1990G season, in the eastern side of the descending entrance of a tomb at the depth of 315 cm. It is a very graceful galloping horse of a copper caste statute; its delicately detailed execution depicts clearly the horse's body



Fig. 1: Knights hunting camels, about the 2nd – 3rd century, Length 186.6 cm, Height 146 cm, Museum of the Dept. of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh.

parts.

The horse statue renders a very light movement, with a very beautiful small upright head slightly turning with an expressive look; the right ear is fine and erect, but the left ear is missing. The mouth is characterized by long muzzles, the nostrils are wide, and the neck is thin, long, and arched. The remaining traces of the tail indicate that it was raised and richly haired. It is noticeable that there is no congruity between the horse head and the horse body; the artist also seems to have deliberately exaggerated the length of the neck to suggest speed. On the back, right next to the end of the neck there is a small knot, perhaps of lead, most likely set to hold the rider in place. There is also another bulge under the abdomen which might have been used to mount the statue on a pedestal.

The main features of this horse, like all the characteristics of horses we find in the archaeology of Qaryat al-Fau, are those that distinguish the Arabian Horse: small upright head, long beautiful neck, uplifted tail, wavy

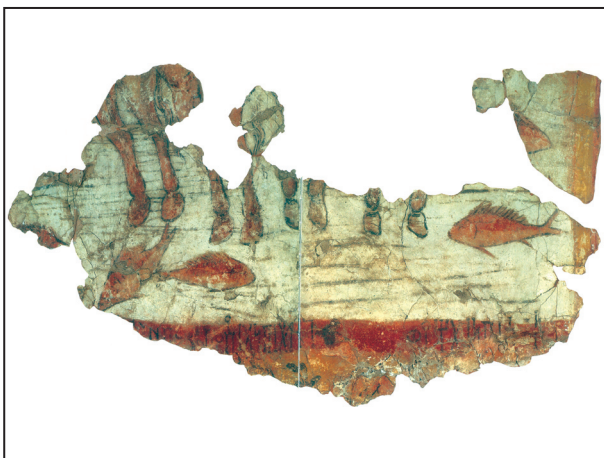


Fig. 3: Horses crossing a river, Length 101cm, Height 44 cm, Museum of the Dept. of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh.



Fig. 2: Another scene of Camel hunting, Length 186.6 cm, Height 146 cm, Museum of the Dept. of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh.

mane, and strong legs able to travel long distances in high speed.

Along with this article some pictures of other archeological objects and drawings are attached; these point to the role of the horse in Qaryat al-Fau in particular and in the Arabian Peninsula in general. I hope this will help researchers reconsider the old relation between the horse and the Arabian Peninsula and its peoples who, with love and pride, offered their name to the horse.



Fig. 4: Scene of daily life in a house of one of the nobles, Length 52.5 cm, Height 26.6 cm, Museum of the Dept. of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh.



Fig. 5: Statuette of a horse from Qaryat al-Fau, dated to about 200 A.D., Length 8.7 cm, Museum of the Dept. of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh.



Fig. 6: A 24 cm long couch ornament, 1st century AD, found in the burial of Sodd bin Malik, a noble from Qaryat al-Fau. Museum of the Department of Archaeology, King Saud University, Riyadh

**Prof. Abdul Rahman T. Al-Ansary: Prof. of Pre-Islamic History and Archaeology, Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.**

ملخص: هناك شبه إجماع لدى المؤرخين على أن الحصان لم يظهر في جزيرة العرب إلا في وقت متأخر لا يتجاوز القرن الرابع قبل الميلاد على أقصى تقدير، وقد أقام هؤلاء حججهم على تقدير زمن النقوش والرسوم التي وجدت على سفوح الجبال. إلا أن هذا الدليل لا يمكن الاعتماد عليه لاعتبارات عديدة منها أن الحصان عند انتقاله من أواسط آسيا إلى فارس، ووادي الرافدين، ومن ثم إلى مصر وشمال إفريقيا لا بد أنه مر عبر صحارى شمالي الجزيرة العربية أو من خلال سواحلها الشرقية والجنوبية عابراً وسط الجزيرة وجنوبها حتى موانئها الغربية أو سيناء إلى إفريقيا وحوض البحر المتوسط. ولا شك أن سكان الجزيرة العربية قد شاهدوا الحصان وتعاملوا معه شأنه في ذلك شأن كل المنتجات الشرقية من أحجار كريمة ومنسوجات وطيور وخبرات علمية شاهدنا أثرها في مناطق مختلفة من جزيرة العرب عبر التنقيبات التي أجريت في بادية الشام، وحواضر الخليج العربي، وجنوبي الجزيرة العربية وغربيها، كما أن الصفات الوراثية للحصان العربي التي اكتسبها خلال قرون عديدة تداخلت فيها التأثيرات البيئية ورحابة الصحراء وخفة جسم الإنسان العربي لكي تنتج الحصان العربي بشكله المميز.