

Asil Arabians: Diamonds without Inclusions – Are Pure-bred Arabians Asil?

By Dr. Georg Olms

Arabian horses are like diamonds (Greek: *adamantes* – the invincible). The cut diamond is valued in carats, and ultimately in terms of its purity. A diamond is considered to be pure when, under a tenfold magnification, no inclusions or imperfections can be seen. It is considered to be flawless when, under the same magnification, it does not have external defects and is correctly cut.

We do not claim that our Asil Arabians are perfect. We are, however, sure that they are pure-bred – that they are asil. Like diamonds, Asil Arabians should be scrutinized, as well. We have already done this for a long time and concluded that a circle must be laid round the existing population.

Yet, there are always breeders of Arabian horses who do not accept the existence of these “inclusions” in their “diamonds”, or who play down their significance. For decades, this attitude has been reflected in many discussions over the central theme of Asil bloodlines, which, at times, were not without controversy. Since then, the individual arguments have been exchanged on a good level. Now, however, we are facing danger: We must categorically refute the suggestion by the WAHO (World Arabian Horse Organization) that the long Bedouin tradition of Asil breeding, and therefore the real basis of the whole of Arabian breeding, is a misunderstanding and therefore belongs in the realms of mythology.

However, we cannot compromise with the following position: in certain articles and lectures attempt to cunningly cast doubt on the Asil Arabian horses and the Bedouin tradition in order to relieve the doubt over the majority of pure-bred Arabians. That is the essence of the matter.

Quintilian, the great orator and first stylist of his epoch, is quoted by *Lion Feuchtwanger* as follows:

“As an orator, I have never had any reservations about bringing dubious assertions before a court, if I saw no other way of winning the judge for the good cause.”

The authors of the WAHO pamphlet “Is purity the issue?” and Kees Mol consider themselves as advocates for the multitude of pure-bred Arabians and, like Quintilian, have no reservations about winning the reader for the “good cause”.

Yet, what is the good cause? In the end, self interest, only. They believe that they can play down the problems of pure-bred Arabians with obviously foreign blood elements by casting doubt on the Asil breeding of the Bedouin.

Such an attitude could really be attributed to lack of knowledge, only. Clarity has, however, been established years ago through the publications of experts such as *Guttman*, *Klynstra* and *Bakels* and through the Asil Arabian Documentations. Nobody could claim today he has not had the opportunity to obtain the information. The facts are there, one only has to go to the trouble of reading them, but *“the truth is a book one does not like to read”* (*Parömiakon*, 1606).

The newcomer to the scene has at first blind trust in the pedigree of an Arabian pure-bred horse which is recognized by the respective national breeder's association and the WAHO as a pure-bred Arabian. The following factors may be of most importance to the budding enthusiast who would like to join them:

- to sparkle at shows with a beautiful horse,
- to win races or distance rides with a fast horse,
- or, to enjoy a gentle, attractive family horse.

These factors, in general, are decisive for a purchase. Once the foreign-blood-carrying Arabian is in the owner's stable, once the owner mistakenly believes he has an immaculate pure-bred Arabian he can become entranced by his horse and any shining successes. It is no wonder that the owner is then disappointed, or almost driven to despair, when he finds out that his horse is not pure-bred, i.e. it is not Asil.

Additionally, the cause of the problem often is a linguistic dilemma that can produce particular confusion for the inexperienced. Our Arab friends translate the word *pure* as *asil* and therefore pure-bred Arab (or Arabian) with *al-hail al-'arabīa al-asīla*. The term 'asil' has, however, a much higher, almost sacred importance in Arab countries. An imported pure-bred Arabian is thus entered in the relevant national stud book as 'asil,' but is, as subsequently discovered, only in the minority of cases free from foreign blood. Thus it is not 'asil'!

The basic problem for the users of national studbooks is therefore that it is not possible to tell whether a pure-bred Arabian is really asil in the sense of being pure-bred and without any foreign blood.

One of the first tasks of the WAHO should have been to clarify this situation by demanding that horses carrying foreign blood should be listed as such, or, in contrast, that the few horses that are 'asil' in the letter sense of the word should be distinctly listed as such. This way further mixing of blood could have been avoided.

George Bernard Shaw once said:

"People generally regard me as a master of satire, but the idea of building a Statue of Liberty in New York Harbour would have never occurred to me."

Paraphrasing the above, *Foppe Bonno Klynstra* said: *"Machiavelli is said to have been one of the most skilful advocates thanks to his highly refined argumentation techniques, but the idea of accepting an Arabian with foreign blood as a pure-bred Arabian and as 'asil' would never have occurred to him."*

In the dispute between the WAHO and the AHRA (Arabian Horse Registry of America) (now Arabian Horse Association - AHA, *ed.*) many arguments have been presented which, 25 years ago, caused Asil breeders to found the Asil Club. By giving them a list of facts, WAHO intends to discipline AHA and to force them to recognize as pure-bred Arabians all those horses which had long been accepted by all the other national studbooks united under WAHO. It has been made public that, because of their predominant numbers, horses carrying foreign blood can be found in almost all national stud books. With reference to these facts, AHA is to be persuaded that it is absurd not to recognize some of these questionable horses and their offspring, when the studbook of the AHA itself lists predominantly horses with foreign blood. In order to show the unreasonable positions of AHA, WAHO gave a long list of facts, which, in the end, confirm our own objectives.

Here are extracts from WAHO publication of January 21, 1998 entitled, "Is Purity the Issue?":

"Most important, the AHRA's claim that the horses it has registered can all be traced, in every line, to the Arabian desert is not even remotely true. In fact, nothing could be further from the truth..."

Of the 8771 Arabians born in 1970 and registered by the AHRA, only 2% had pedigrees traceable in every line even to the 'Orient'.

By 1970, 98% of AHA horses could no longer be traced in every line to 'desert bred,' even with the most liberal possible interpretation of 'desert bred.'

Non-Arabian Blood in AHRA Pedigrees – The Evidence

At least 90% of AHRA registrations today trace to stock bred during the first half of the 19th century in the Slawuta/Chrestowka studs of the Sanguszko family in the Ukraine, in an area which had previously been part of Poland but was then under Russian rule. In 1900 Prince Roman V. Sanguszko (1837-1917), who had acquired the stud from his uncle in 1860, wrote that all his remaining stock had some amount of non-Arab blood. In a letter published in 1900 he wrote, 'At present I have no more pure-blood Arabians (i. e. born of imported parents); the last of these was the stallion 'Atyk', which was sold in 1899.' ... He stated categorically: 'This would apply to all my horses, since I have at present none from original desert sires and dams.' [Sherbatov & Stroganov, The Arabian Horse, A Survey, 1900].

The Polish exports, descended from these specific non-Arab lines of the Slawuta stud, which appear most frequently in AHRA pedigrees are:

** Kasztelanka, grand-dam of Fadjur (855 get), in 20% of AHRA pedigrees, traces to Prszyna*

** Bask, in 25% of AHRA pedigrees (1126 get), traces to Bakszysz and Granica * Czubuthan, in 25% of AHRA pedigrees (110 get, 585 grandget), traces to Mazepa I.*

** Witez II, in 33% of AHRA pedigrees, (219 get, 3880 grandget), traces to Pruszyzna*

** Skowronek, in 90% of AHRA pedigrees through *Raffles and *Raseyn, traces to all 8 great-grandparents of Pruszyzna.*

In fact, the AHRA approved the blood of Kurdo III by implication in June 1972, when they voted to approve the Veragua horses from Spain. The Veragua horses were animals of unknown pedigree from a stud which contained several mares descended from Kurdo III. This approval was a complete reversal of previous AHRA policy. [News from the Arabian Horse Registry of America, August 1973, page 1].

Kurdo III was born in 1902, the same decade as Skowronek. 30-Maria appears in the 6th generation of Kurdo III's pedigree. In that same generation, 9 of the 64 ancestors in Skowronek's pedigree have non-Arab blood ... In the next generation Kurdo III has 3 animals with non-Arab blood, while Skowronek has 16. Obviously the concentration of Arab blood in Kurdo III is higher than that in Skowronek...

So if we accept the AHRA's public position that only horses which trace in every line to the Arabian desert are purebred, we must admit that more than 90% of the AHRA registrations are NOT purebred. Since NONE of the more than 4000 important horses registered by the AHRA in the last 25 years trace entirely to horses marked 'desert bred' in the AHRA CD-ROM, it would appear that none of them are purebred under the AHRA definition...

According to Count Alexander Dzieduszycki, President of the Arab Horse Breeding Society of Poland from 1925 to 1945:

'The basis of the Polish breed of full-bloods was therefore an Oriental material, attained by the crossing of important Arab stallions with Polish mares, the breed of which had also been improved by centuries of intermixture of Arab blood.' [The Breeding of Arab Horses in Poland', The Arab Horse, An Annual Journal, Arab Horse Society, England, 1935]

In other words, the Polish concept of 'full-blood Arabs' admittedly applied to horses descended from native Polish mares, provided they had been repeatedly crossed with imported Arab stallions, and not just to the exclusive produce of imported Arab mares.'

(WAHO Publication, 21st January 1998)

Faced with facts such as these, the WAHO decided years ago to move away from the first and most important obligation of Arabian breeding, Asil breeding, because its definition was no longer tenable.

"WAHO has known for many years that all of the Stud Books around the world could possibly have questionable entries, many dating from over one hundred years ago. This fact was announced at each WAHO conference since the inception of the World Arabian Horse Organization." (WAHO Publication, 21 January 1998)

Despite this, one of the most important aims in the WAHO statute has, for many years, been: *"to preserve the purity of the blood of the Arabian horse world-wide"*, evidently following the formulation of the statutes of most of the national studbooks. However, current announcements of the WAHO state:

"The WAHO has decided to offer the studbooks of the world an understandable and useful definition of the Arabian horse".

This official definition of the pure-bred Arabian now is:

"A pure-bred Arabian horse is one which appears in any pure-bred Arabian studbook or register listed by WAHO as acceptable."

Solon once replied to the question *"Which is the best constitution?"*: *"For whom and at which moment?"* In other words: With reference to the essential problem of asil breeding, that is the question of pure blood lines, they try to save what is left to save. That means to find a school of thought they can live with. Yet, in the end, they fall back upon interpretations from which they had categorically distanced themselves years ago.

The WAHO publication *"Is Purity the Issue?"* continues:

"The travellers and explorers of the last century, many on horse buying trips, may have falsely interpreted the way in which the Bedouin tribes put the concept of blood purity (asil) into practice."

The travellers and explorers would have to have been complete idiots, then. One just has to take a look at the names of the individual personalities quoted in this book to see that this is not the case. It continues further: *"The countries that are known as areas of origination were never isolated from the outside world."*

It is a matter of fact that, in earlier times, the Bedouin of the Arabia Deserta were cut off from the outside world to a far greater extent than many other population groups. However, another fact is that there always was some contact. To suggest that this contact automatically lead to the mixing of the blood of horses means to forget or to deny the Bedouins' blood line fanaticism and to revile their code of honour. *"No other people on earth gives so much importance to its origins as the Arabs."* (*W. Thesiger, 1959*). That equally applies to their horse, camel and saluki breeding.

To remove the last doubts: *F. B. Klynstra*, by the experiences with crossbreeds of Shetland ponies on the Shetland Islands and of the Huzuls in the Carpathians, has made clear what happens when horses of crossbreeding have to live under the same gruelling conditions as the unmixed

original horses. The crossbreeds become extinct. This is only a discreet hint to those who still like to assume that there is mixed blood among the 'desert bred', the Arabians of the Arabia Deserta.

Ignoring this knowledge, the WAHO still states:

"The West sees a pedigree as a written document starting in the past and coming down to the present. The East sees it as an oral history starting in the present and receding into the past – it is firmly ego-centered around the current owner of the animal in question. What matters is the present and the future, so the past has to accommodate itself."

(WAHO Publication: Is purity the issue?) And now the pure breeding tradition is associated with the world of myths:

"It was always easy and convenient to give truth to myths and legends." (WAHO Publication: Is purity the issue?)

And *Kees Mol* says:

"For far too long the Arabian horse and its origins have been clouded in romantic myths, many of them embroidered in the West for commercial reasons. Lack of knowledge of the complex history of the Middle East, together with a lack of understanding of its people and their way of life, have made these myths, which still cloud modern thinking, being so lightly accepted in the west." (Araber Journal, The Purity of Blood, No 7/98)

So it is supposed to be a myth that the asil breeding was precisely checked by the nomadic breeders. It is true that every people has its sagas and fairytales, but what has the one got to do with the other? That the origin of the Arabian horse (see the legends "born from spray" and "created by Allah from the south wind") became mythologized, has its equivalent in many other cultures. The reference to such myths does not make a complete breeding tradition unbelievable.

In order to put down right away the daring interpretation, that the European travellers had been taken in by Arabic legends, let me quote *Professor Dr. Rudolph Sellheim*, Professor of Oriental Languages and Culture at Johann Wolfgang Goethe-University, Frankfurt/Main:

*"Anyone who delves into the culture of the orient sees that the Asil Arabian is loved and admired, sung of and described, in poetry and literature, in narrative and in natural history, and not least **in the dependable and vivid reports of European travellers from medieval until modern times.**"*

He who knows little about Arab cultural history knows about the many Arabic manuscripts, and consequently about manuscripts on the Arabian horse, only a small part of which have been translated. *H. H. Sheikha Lulua Al Sabah* names some of the Arab authors. Her position is:

"I wonder how somebody can degrade the Asil Arabian in this way. The first people in the world to classify horses and camels into purebred families were the Arabs. Archaeological digs in Syria, as well as carvings and plates dating back as far back as 3000 BC give evidence of Arabian horses... During the Jahaliya period, before Islam, the Asil horse was accurately and comprehensively described, presenting families and strains. The best of these early horse authorities, exact and precise in their accounts, were AL Ayadi and Al Jaa'di..."

*A long list of distinguished writers devoted themselves to the classification of horses and camels. Dr. Munthir Al Absi and Mr. Radwan Chabarek are currently editing 'Kitab Al Khail' written by Abu Obeida Al Teemi in 209 AII (831 AD).**

These Asil horses have always been few in number and always owned and bred by very few families in the original homeland. There were no strangers in the Bedouin World; everyone was known to everyone by reputation..."

In colloquial Arabic we say, ‘the root stretches forward and backward for seven generations’, meaning that all ancestors and all future progeny are important...

Many of the finest Asil horses today descend directly from Bedouin stock. Only masterful horse breeders, Bedouin Arabs with the knowledge of planned breedings between Asil horses, could have fixed type which has been seen for thousands of years. To any Bedouin, to any Arab I have ever met, purity means one thing only: no other admixture of unfamiliar blood to the horse. FULL STOP!” (Sheikha Lulua Al Sabah, 1998)

In this context one should also mention:

The Kadishis that existed with the Bedouin were, as a rule, by our terms asil horses, but had lost their asil status because the Bedouin would not accept a horse as asil had it fallen into other hands during a raid and the origins of which were not known. An asil mare and her later offspring from asil stallions was considered to be Kadish if she was once bred, with or without success, to a Kadishi stallion. (Kadish = ordinary, mediocre (not asil))

On the other issues W. G. Olms states in an article Araber Journal 4 and 5/88):

“The arguments of population genetics have been used to play down the importance of foreign blood. In 1972, the final position of the German ‘Gesellschaft der Züchter und Freunde des Arabischen Pferdes‘ (Society of breeders and enthusiasts of Arabian horses) was to allow a population geneticist to explain that everything was ultimately of no importance.

His lecture to the society culminated in the following statements:

- a. Complete homozygosity (genetic purity) is not achievable in any horse.*
- b. After five, ten, or more generations the influence of foreign blood is of no further interest. He quoted the ‘Clausen’ example of the Danish pig: A wild boar broke into a herd of pure-bred Danish pigs, resulting in offspring. Thanks to consistent displacement crossing with pure-bred boars it was possible, after five generations, to wipe out all outward characteristics showing evidence of the wild boar.*
- c. Every division into smaller groups weakens the breeding, quality comes from quantity. The exceptional stallion Ofir, of Polish breeding, was taken as a prime example of this theory. He gave another example: The first ten runners in a race with 100 entrants would certainly have a better average result than the first ten in a race with only 20 runners.*

I gave the following replies at that time:

To a - A careful and unbiased reading of the Klynstra statements immediately shows that the author would have never made such an absurd assertion.

To b - The ‘Clausen’ example (which was neither weak nor especially strong) actually shows that by consistent displacement crossing such outer characteristics can be reduced or eliminated after only a few generations. But the emphasis lays on consistent displacement crossing, and this was not the case with Polish Arabian breeding. Unwanted, recessive factors, that seem to be eliminated outwardly, are always passed on when pairing with stock of similar origins and can occur again even after many generations.

One example from the many to be found in animal breeding is the well-known phenomenon of the breeding of the merino sheep. After 15 to 20 generations, covering 100 to 120 years, unwanted black, or black flecked, sheep continually reappear, after a black headed sheep got into the population. Such negative genetic factors, which are recessive, often remain undetected over many generations. But when two identical negative, recessive genetic factors from the father’s and mother’s sides meet, the individual is phenotypically damaged.

I also included at that time Klynstra’s mouse example that he had used to clarify the

possible resistance to inbreeding:

Biologists who breed mice and rats for experimental use have pure, inbreeding resistant populations that have been inbred for up to 80 generations. Such families show no damage due to inbreeding. That does not mean, however, that mice are generally resistant to inbreeding. On the contrary, at the start of inbreeding, in the first generations, all possible types of unwanted, infertile and unhealthy individuals appear ... this phenomenon occurs throughout the animal kingdom. These products of degeneration must be eliminated so as to avoid the degeneration of the whole population. In the desert they are easily eliminated by the gruelling climate and the environmental conditions. Seydel, who studied the Arabian horse in his native country, established that thirty years ago fifty percent of all horses died before reaching their fourth year of life ... (Guttman/Klynstra, Die Abstammung der polnischen Araber/The Lineage of the Polish Arabian Horses, Marbach 1968)

In relation to this, critics pointed out to me: "You surely do not want to relate mice and rats to our noble Arabians." I could only answer this evident reproach of my mixing the levels by commenting that one can apparently compare our noble Arabians with pigs and wild boars, and that we should, for Allah's sake, not let any Bedouin hear about it. I continued that such an interpretation could be used to show that at any time one could use a warmblood mare to start pure-bred Arabian breeding, if one simply applied diligent displacement crossing. According to the population geneticists' interpretation, the warmblood mare would be genetically meaningless after five to ten generations. But those presenting their essays and the 'society' did not consider such arguments.

To c - Of course one can obtain more quality from correspondingly high quantity. The example of the runners, however, is based on wrong assumptions. If we take as an example a group of 100 horses which includes 20 English thoroughbreds, the ten fastest would definitely be English thoroughbreds. The high quality of the English thoroughbreds could not, however, be initially produced in the group of 100 horses simply through methods of population genetics. And as for the stallion Ofir, a prime example of the convincing quality of the Polish Arabian stallions, the fact is that he was one of the last asil stallions in Poland.

Science, including population genetics, can tell much. Scientists know how to work with statistics, they can quote historical examples, and they can erect impressive buildings for a particular cause. But there is one thing they cannot do: they cannot make a farce out of a truism."

The geneticist and breeding scientist Professor Dr. Dr. F. Bakels states:

"Pure-bred Arabians, which are exclusively descended from Bedouin breeding are particularly valuable ... There is evidence for the fact that when breeding for constitutional qualities one cannot bring in weaknesses without being penalized for it. One cannot think like the quantitative geneticists, who argue that if a particular horse has, perhaps, a few percent blood from another race, it is completely irrelevant, it makes no difference because it is statistically insignificant. Exactly this mode of thinking is false and leads to failure. The opposite must be the case." (Frederik Bakels, 'Der Asil Araber im Lichte neuer genetischer Erkenntnisse/The Asil Arabian in the Light of New Genetic Knowledge', Hildesheim 1981)