

Shaped by the Desert

How Bedouin culture and environment made the Arabian horse

The credo of this book is obvious: in order to understand the distinguishing features of Arabian horses, one must return to the source of these traits and features, to the desert and to the Bedouin way of life, in which the horse was treasured as a gift of god to man. Which is why for Dr. Matthias Oster, the first two of the seven pillars that make up the structure of his book are the desert and the Bedouins. Being a veterinary practitioner, Oster has the science of the horse as another pillar and verifies his statements with a comprehensive range of quotes and references. The environment and society that made the Arabian horse come vividly to life in his book, paying tribute to the great cultural heritage of the Arabian horse.



Courtesy Dr. G. Olms



The Bedouins - the Lords of the Desert

He shall be a wild ass of man, his hand against every man's hand and everyman's hand against him
Genesis 16:12

The word Bedouin (*badui/badawi/pl. badu/badw*) is derived from the Arabic term for the nomadic life (*badawa*). Its root is *b-d-w*. The *badiya/bediyah* is the land in which the *badu* lived, equated with the opposite of the settled land (Jabbur).

Oppenheim characterizes the Bedouins in his preface as the native master race of the desert: proud and independent, tough and hardy, hospitable and warlike. Bedouin means "inhabitant of the desert". The word desert in this context applies not only to the actual sand and stone deserts, but also to the desert steppes. And Müller states: "*The camel is the first characteristic of the Bedouin.*"

It is said that the Bedouin way of life did not change from archaic times to the 19th and even early 20th century. As Glubb claimed, a key moment for his learning process was the realization that the Old Testament contained an accurate description of Bedouin life in Genesis 18. According to Glubb, the story of Abraham offering hospitality to the strangers could have been repeated amongst the desert people with whom he lived between 1924 and 1925. Many of today's Bedouin names were already known in the age of ancient Greek and Byzantium. We have descriptions of their customs and mentality before the appearance of Islam in the 6th century. The striking resemblance between the Arab nomads of the pre-Islamic time and those described by various eye-witnesses of the 19th and 20th century emphasizes the remarkable isolation in which they have lived, at least for a millennium and a half.

"Bedouin ways were hard even for those brought up to them, and for strangers terrible: a death in life" (T.E. Lawrence). *"The first and most striking characteristic of desert life was its hardship. Its poverty and the desperate struggle needed to keep alive - particularly the battle with hunger, thirst and vast distances"* (Glubb). The actual Bedouins were true nomads, camel breeders, who wandered from one grazing and watering place to the next. They banded themselves into tribes. As Jabbur pointed out, *"the division of the Bedouins into tribes and clans and their devotion to a common line of descent became one of their most prominent distinguishing features, and this solidarity had an influence on Arab life in general. Since pre-Islamic times they have devoted their attention to genealogies, and anyone ignorant of them they view with suspicion and regard as deficient in ambition and culture."* The tribes traveled through the entire "de-

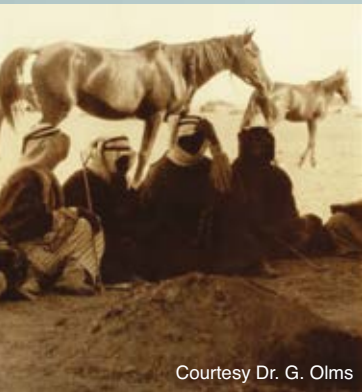


The book you hold in your hands, „**Bedouin Heritage, the World of the Arabian Horse**“, is somewhat reminding of times back, when Arabian horses met with lots of curiosity, people bearing in mind the manifold benefits they have to offer. Which is why it is pleasant and encouraging that this is, finally, a book that traces a wide arc from the beginnings of the breed in the Orient to recent findings in science that are capable of introducing fresh ideas and impetus to this topic.

The descriptions make it clear that the development of this breed, the Arabian horse, was, from its beginnings and for many hundreds of years after that, mainly shaped by its austere environment, and only in the second place by the sparse knowledge that its breeders, the Bedouins, possessed. Both topics are extensively discussed, with a substantial number of references from literature for factual presentation and support. It was only during the last 200 years, so we can read, that horse people mainly from Europe tried to interpret this development, intervening with further breeding, accompanied by a number of detours and flights of the fancy somebody would like to see. It is recommendable to read this book thoroughly, the unfamiliar and astonishing beginnings in the Arabian desert as well as the descriptions of the analytical methods applied even today, methods that have resulted in the fact that some of the thoughts that were so highly praised once have been found not to agree with reality. This development is going to continue, bringing new insights and aspects for breeding these horses. The book may encourage readers to think, pondering whether today's environment – lavish feeding, training stables, and artificial reproduction methods – is still agreeable with these horses. If the current logic is carried on, the horse world of the future will probably be populated by Arabians far different from „those from the desert“.

Hans J. Nagel

sert“, the vast planes of Inner Mesopotamia, Syria and Arabia. These migrations resulted in permanent rivalries, warlike skirmishes and raids among the tribes. *“The tribe was for the Bedouin not only his „country“, but his trade union, his club, his insurance policy and his old age pension. ... The tendency to violent and arrogant self-assertion was constantly checked by the dependence of the individual upon the tribe. Crimes of violence were restrained by the laws of revenge. ... If these qualities appear hard, ruthless and savage, there were compensating virtues. In a country in which a man lived in such constant insecurity, a true and loyal friend was indeed a pearl of great price. If the Arabs were merciless to their enemies, they were capable of extraordinary loyalty to their friends. The immense empty spaces of the desert and the toils and dangers to which travelers were exposed, made hospitality to the stranger and the wayfarer a sacred duty. Probably in the history of the world, no race has equaled the Arabs in hospitality - it is the Arab virtue par excellence.”* (Sir J.B.Glubb)



Courtesy Dr. G. Olms

Besides the true nomads, there were a number of tribes, called *arab as-shawaya*, at the edge of the desert who had originally been nomads, but had been driven from their former grazing areas by stronger tribes. They turned to breeding sheep and to agriculture at the edge of the arable lands. This applied to Syria and Mesopotamia as well as to the palm districts of Arabia proper. These semi-nomads were often driven entirely into the fertile lands and eventually settled down there. But they retained their tribal structure and continued to live in tents for a long time. The larger part of the population of the oases and the towns in Arabia, called *hadar*, also had tribal structures and were almost always descended from Bedouins. Therefore, according to Rasheed, "it is simplistic to translate the term *badu* as pastoral nomads because the word involved something more than animal-herding and nomadism. Although nomadism was an essential component of the notion of *badu*, it was not the determining factor which allowed a group to be so classified. Within the context of Arabia, all animal-herders were *badu*, but not all *badu* were pastoral nomads. Groups could still be classified as *badu* even if they were no longer animal-herders, like for example the Shammar tribal sections which took residence in Hail and other villages of Jabal Shammar while leaving their animal herds with their relatives in the desert, regarded themselves and were regarded by others as *badu*" (Rasheed). Out of this reason it is understandable, that Ibn Saud could claim "to be king of all nomads" (Glubb).

The History of the Bedouins in Arabia

For they would come up with their cattle and their tents, coming like locusts for number; both they and their camels could not be counted; so that they wasted the land as they came in.

Judges 6:6

The above description from the Bible applies well to the Bedouins during many centuries until the 19th century. The nomadic peoples of Arabia interacted with each other and also with sedentary societies and empires. Especially "at times when the central or fringe regions of Arabia became overpopulated or its lands were stricken by drought and its deserts turned into desolate wastes, some of its people were obliged to migrate. These people had no option open to them other than to move towards the Fertile Crescent. Historians agree that there had been numerous waves of this migration since remotest antiquity, and that such movements used to occur at widely spaced intervals" (Jabbur).

Prehistoric Times

Petroglyphs have been found in rather large number in the Arabian Peninsula that show a fascinating "rock art" with scenes of the hunting-pastoral life of Neolithic cultures du-

ring a more wet phase in Arabia. The Neolithic petroglyphs depict both wild and domestic animals. The Canaan or Bedouin dog is shown in hunting scenes of onager, aurochs, gazelle and others. Camels, domestic cattle, goats, and sheep of the fat-tail type make up the other domesticated animals. Wild animals are: aurochs, onager, bezoar (wild goat), ibex, gazelle, Arabian oryx, ostrich, lion, cheetah, Arabian leopard, Arabian wolf, and striped hyena. During the neolithic, hunting scenes were prevalent (Olsen). Neolithic cultures are documented in particular near the Persian Gulf and were succeeded by a sequence of Bronze Age cultures (covering the second millennium BC), which were all typical of transhumant farmers (Liverani).

We face many difficulties in exploring the history of nomadic peoples, because they do not leave traces that outlast a long time. We have to rely mostly on external sources from the adjacent urban civilizations of the Fertile Crescent, but also from settlements in the oases. The life of the nomads was never isolated from the sedentary population, but characterized by many interactions. The development of complex societies was a consequence of a range of phenomena that first appeared in the Near East: the origin of the state, the city, and writing (Liverani). The Bedouin society that developed in Arabia was strongly influenced by those inventions, although it was only touched by them from outside. The development of the Bedouin world happened during a decisive time of great changes, the Early Iron Age, and it was dependent on the domestication of the dromedary. Liverani's classical textbook on the history, society and economy of the ancient Near East will be cited at length in the following, as it gives us a deep understanding of the roots of the Arab societies. We will also deal with the controversial question of the Arab and Biblical genealogies and their patriarchs, or eponymous ancestors.

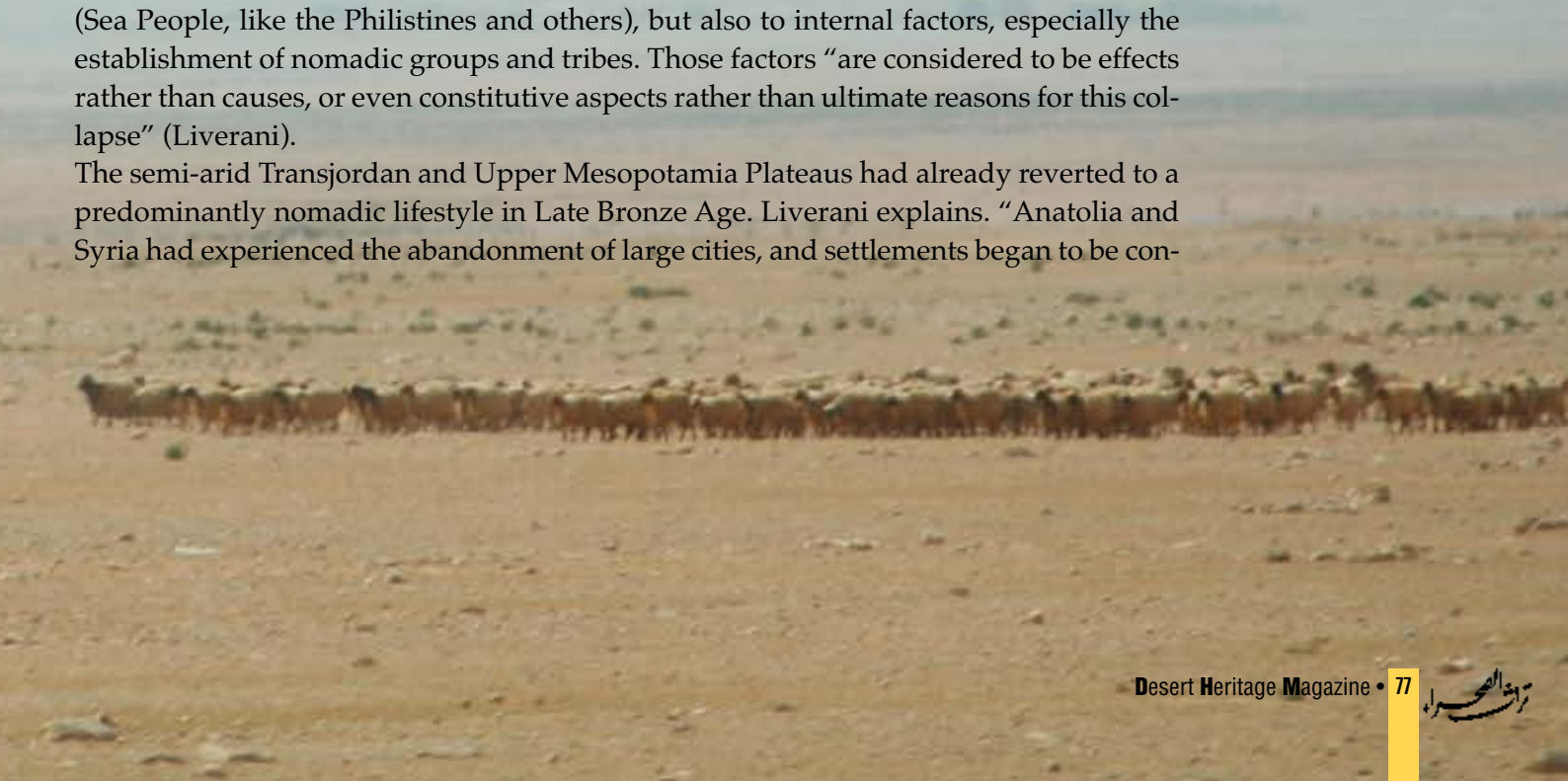
The Early Iron Age

The Iron Age, bringing again crisis and reorganization to the Ancient Orient, brought with it the development of a fully nomadic lifestyle and in the course the appearance of the Arabs and in the long run also the formation of nations. The political system of the Near East had been relatively stable for centuries, but collapsed rather abruptly shortly after 1,200 BC. This collapse was due to the arrival of foreign invaders from the west (Sea People, like the Philistines and others), but also to internal factors, especially the establishment of nomadic groups and tribes. Those factors "are considered to be effects rather than causes, or even constitutive aspects rather than ultimate reasons for this collapse" (Liverani).

The semi-arid Transjordan and Upper Mesopotamia Plateaus had already reverted to a predominantly nomadic lifestyle in Late Bronze Age. Liverani explains. "Anatolia and Syria had experienced the abandonment of large cities, and settlements began to be con-



Courtesy: Dr. G. Olsen





centrated in fertile valleys. Finally, in central and southern Mesopotamia the population was virtually halved.... Wars, deportations, depopulations and production crises led to famines and pestilences, which became an endemic problem in the Late Bronze Age." The result was an overall social crisis: "The decline of family and village solidarity led to the enrichment of the palace elite and the subsequent ruin of the rest of the community. This meant intensification of debt slavery, forcing people to flee. ... The rise in the number of fugitives was so dramatic that it forced states to seal a network of inter-state agreements aimed at searching, capturing and returning those who escaped. Consequently, people ceased to escape to other states, and preferred to hide in areas outside palace control, making the steppes and mountains their ideal refuge.

"These areas were mainly used by transhumant pastoral groups, who were seen by those in palaces as robbers, simply because they were able to live outside palace control, assaulting caravans and protecting fugitives. Consequently, tribal groups became an alternative to the unjust state administrations, a model of non-palatial social organization impossible to find in the now declining villages, ... for individual fugitives, or small groups of them. This new communal life required constant movement and a life in hiding. When entire villages moved from palace dependence to tribal solidarity, however, then entire communities virtually "became *habiru*" without having to leave their lands. They therefore avoided the excessive political and economic impositions simply by shifting their allegiance, changing their solidarity and obedience, and depriving their former states of material as well as human resources."

Together with the technological innovations of the Iron Age great changes happened. The introduction of iron metallurgy, the invention of the alphabet, the construction of terraces and subsequent deforestation of large mountainous areas, and a revival and improvement of irrigation techniques, were important improvements. The possibility of digging deeper wells and the plastering of them led to the increased spread of pastures in semi-arid areas. Also, "the Iron Age, saw the large scale domestication of the camel and the dromedary, both animals had been known for a long time and were occasionally used in Bronze Age. This opened up new modalities for transport of men and goods in the desert. By this it was possible to create a network of caravans reaching distant oases, previously cut off from commercial interactions because the caravans (of donkeys) had to cross fertile areas.

"These oases now became important stops for travelers, providing them with water. Oases also became important centers for the intensive cultivation of various plants, especially the date palm. Moreover, a camel was able to carry a far heavier load than a donkey (which had been the only means of transport in the Bronze Age). Apart from the Arabian caravans, which traveled along a main route linking Central Syria to the Hejaz and Yemen, there were the caravans crossing the Iranian desert, thus reviving commercial activities in the area. It has to be borne in mind that the end of the Bronze Age marked the introduction of riding horses (instead of draught horses), a significant innovation in the fast transport of messengers. This development became increasingly widespread in the Iron Age, generating a new speciality and military technique, and bringing to an end the use of war chariots. In addition to that, the camel also became an important animal for fighters, not to break down infantry lines, but as an effective means for the first incursions (and equally fast escapes) of raiders.

"The effects of these innovations on the Near Eastern landscape were dramatic. ... Occupation became much more widespread across the entire region, though with varying degree of intensity according to each individual case. ... The percentage of urban popu-

lation dramatically dropped, while villages acquired a new role, strengthening their defenses and structures. ... As far as exploitation of the land is concerned, *the main innovation of the time was the appearance of the fully nomadic lifestyle of camel farmers*. The latter developed alongside the closed nomadic lifestyle (semi-nomads) of the transhumant farmers of sheep and goats. The two lifestyles were drastically different in the terms of economy, geography and their relations with cities. ... Transhumant farming of sheep and goats was alternated in time and space with agriculture, originating that double morphology characteristic of these social groups. Semi-nomadic groups, however, were not major players in commercial activities, which they rather hindered through raids. They were more involved in military expeditions, for which they were recruited by city-states as auxiliaries. As a result they continued to have a largely conflictual relation with the cities, while at the same time depending on them.

“Fully nomadic groups were mainly specialized in the farming of camels and dromedaries, the intensive agriculture of oases, and independent commercial and military activities. The use of camels and the control of caravans allowed these nomadic tribes to become the preferred mediators for inter-regional trade, which they facilitated rather than opposed. The availability of fast animals with long autonomy also facilitated the pursuit of successful military expeditions and of fast raids of sedentary settlements which thus provided a more balanced opposition to powerful city-states. These two types of nomadic lifestyle developed in different areas. Transhumant groups lived in close contact with agricultural settlements, developing strong linguistic, ethnic and political similarities between shepherds and farmers. On the contrary, the fully nomadic lifestyle developed outside the Near East, in areas constituted an Iron Age addition to the areas interacting with the Near East. Moreover, these nomadic groups constituted the agents linking areas that had been previously cut off from the Near East.” (Liverani) In other words, the whole Arabian peninsula came into contact with the Fertile Crescent.



Courtesy Dr. G. Olms



Courtesy Dr. G. Olms

The Establishment of Long-Distance Trading Routes

Not only in northern Arabia, but also in the south, centers of agriculture, villages and towns developed, especially in Yemen. "Its climate significantly facilitated its agricultural and urban development, but its location had initially left it outside the great network of contacts of the Near East" (Liverani). "At the end of the second millennium BC - following both the establishment of centralized authorities in southern Arabia, which made it possible to cultivate, process and distribute spices on a large scale, and the domestication of the camel, which could then carry Arabian produce over great distances - there was a striking change in the nature of the contact between the nomads and the sedentary population of the western parts of the Fertile Crescent. Previous contact had been confined to attempted nomad encroachment with their flocks upon the settled parts of the country and the efforts made to repulse them, and the conflict over grazing areas of the cultivated land. It now developed that the nomads became important for the maintenance of Arabian trade because of their location along the trade routes. Profit from this key branch of the economy and interest in its uninterrupted operation generated new, commercially based, relations. Especially affected by this change were their relations with the political bodies (the local-national ones and later also empires) which ruled the region. These economic considerations had demographic and administrative implications as well." (Epha) The caravan routes were "charted by means of the large oases, which were hubs of economic activity and often also of administration and worship" (Epha). From south-west Arabia, the home of myrrh and frankincense and other goods, the caravan route led to Yathrib (Medina), from which it branched into three routes, all avoiding the great sand desert of Nafud:

Route 1: Yathrib - Há il - Najaf (1,060 km) and thence into Mesopotamia (including Ur)

Route 2: Yathrib - Khaybar - Fadak - Tema - and thence into three alternatives:

1. Dumah (al-Jauf) - Babylon (in all 1,530 km)
2. Tabuk - Má an (in all 860 km)



Monika Sawyer

3. Wadi Sirhan (western part) - Amman (and to Damascus or Tyre)

Route 3: Yathrib - Dedan (al-Ula) - Tabuk - Mā'an (760 km)

There was also a route from Elath - Mā'an - Amman - Damascus, that absorbed all the goods arriving by sea or land and destined for the countries of the western part of the fertile Crescent, Asia Minor and the countries of the Mediterranean. Three trade centers were fed this way: Gaza, Tyre, and Damascus. The many wars in Transjordan and Syria had their reason in the control of the trade routes. The importance of Dumah (Dumat al-Jandal, al-Jauf) lies in the fact that it is the largest oasis in the bottleneck of Wadi Sirhan, and Sennacherib's army reached there during the wars against the Arabs (Epha).




Courtesy Dr. G. Olms

Kinship, Genealogies and the Development of Nations

The Bedouin society was not only built on the fully nomadic life made possible by the use of the dromedary, but also on the kinship system of relations. The Early Iron Age (after 1,200 BC), according to Liverani, "saw a shift from the administrative system, at the heart of the Bronze Age palace states, to the kinship system. The latter was at the heart of a new type of state formation developing in that period, eventually leading to the birth of the 'nation' state. Admittedly, this reconstruction is largely based on Biblical evidence, which was compiled much later. However, the little evidence there is from this period seems to broadly confirm these developments. Members of a state identified themselves as such because they believed that they descended from one eponymous ancestor. Therefore the 'charter' of this kinship state was genealogy. The latter was able to link the mythical patriarch to the current members of the tribe, following kinship and



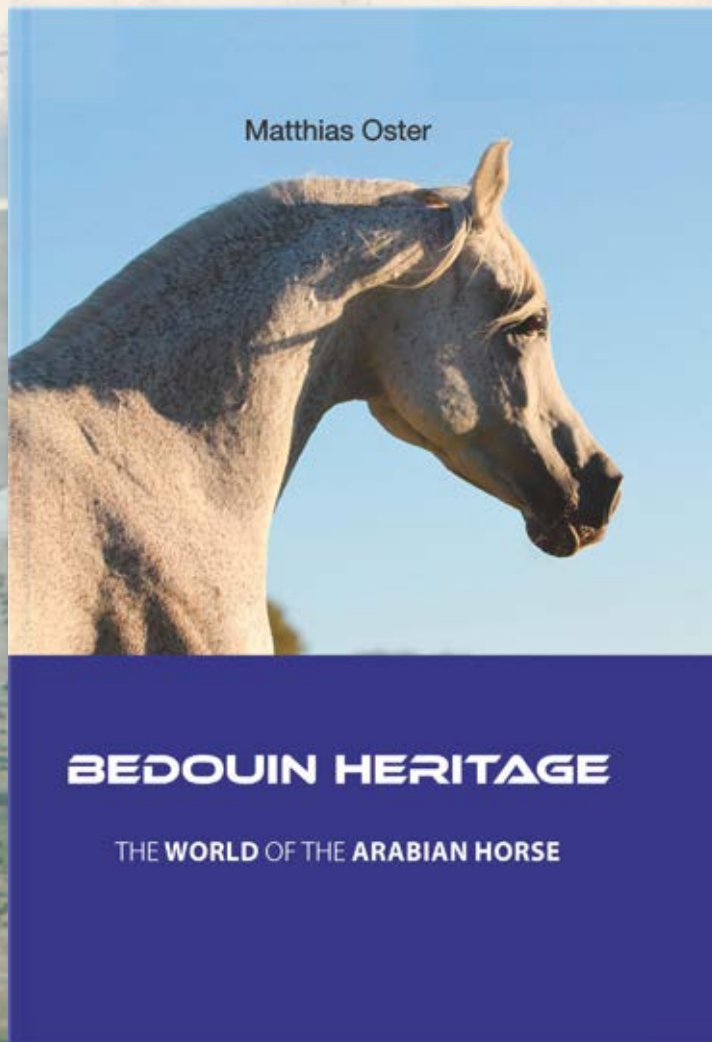


marital ties that had a precise meaning in this genealogical code. Primogeniture, adoptions, marriages and every other form of kinship then indicated various types and degrees of socio-political integration. ... This process led to the establishment of a network of descendancy and brotherhood with other groups" (Liverani). This transition from city-state to kin-based state was characteristic of the Syro-Levantine area. Tribal groups of Aramean origins, like the Sutians and Ahlamu, infiltrated and later settled down, first in the western parts of the Fertile Crescent, and later also in Lower Mesopotamia. Thus the formation of Aramean states, of new states of the Canaanites, and later of the Philistines and Israelites, Neo-Hittites, Babylonians and Chaldeans, was based on kinship structure, expressed by the term "house of" followed by the name of the eponymous ancestor. This kinship system had its roots in nomadic societies with their tribal structure. From there it had conquered the world of the villages and towns, and to a less degree the large cities, and became the base of the newly formed states and nations. Genealogies are not restricted to Biblical sources. Neo-Assyrian scribes, for example, composed a king list covering two millennia that was aimed at legitimizing the Amorite king Shamsi-Adad. According to this list the Assyrian state had tribal and nomadic origins, as the first seventeen kings "lived in tents". However, the actual early history of Assyria was that of a region characterized by early urbanization and intense agricultural activities (Liverani). The Amorite genealogies of tribal chiefs may be seen as a parallel to the Biblical genealogies, composed around the same time and under similar circumstances of origin: nomadic life. Their obvious intention and errors, the creation of a mirror picture of the present time into a previous time, is also attested by mainstream scientists to the Biblical stories of the Pentateuch, the five books of Moses in the Old Testament. Van der Veen and Zerbst, however, strongly oppose those theories and compile a wealth of data supporting an early origin of those Biblical reports and see a striking conformity between archaeological and historical data and Biblical text. Also, there can be found a striking similarity of the circumstances of the development of nomadic societies in the time of the patriarchs (end of Early Bronze Age in Palestine) and the Early Iron Age, about a thousand years later, when the fully nomadic societies came into being, not based on the theory of a mirror picture but on archaeological facts.

The New Book of Matthias Oster

„Bedouin Heritage, the World of the Arabian Horse“

Seven Pillars of Breeding Arabian Horses



Khuwey El Bediya and
Dr. Matthias Oster

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