



2015 HAWAII UNIVERSITY INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCES
ARTS, HUMANITIES, SOCIAL SCIENCES & EDUCATION
JANUARY 03 - 06, 2015
ALA MOANA HOTEL, HONOLULU, HAWAII

HORSES AS HEROES IN MEDIEVAL ISLAMICATE LITERATURE

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Synopsis:

Samples from Turkish, Persian and Arabic literature describe the place of horses in the societies of the time. Excerpts from the Turkic Kurogli-nama, the Persian Shahnameh, and the Arabic Sirat Antar will be used to show how horses function not only as support for their masters, but often as heroes in their own right.

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Horses as Heroes in Medieval Islamic Literature

“The horse is to the man as the wing is to the bird.”

With these words, taken from his 11th century Turkish-Arabic dictionary, Mahmud Kashgari tries to express the importance of the horse in human life.¹ Certainly the economic and political importance of horses in the history of most parts of the world is undeniable, and the Middle East is no exception. The ancient Persian empire of the Achaemenids used horses in a “pony express” system to facilitate communication across their vast territories. The rapid Arab conquests of neighboring lands in the 7th century following the advent of Islam, which were largely achieved on horseback, changed the area forever, and later waves of Turkic migration from Central Asia, also on horseback, followed by the Mongol invasions, had a lasting influence on the culture of the entire region.

But Kashgari’s analogy of a horse being like the wings of a man goes beyond the practical uses of horses. It hints at the exhilaration of riding, as well as the close relationship between man and horse. Especially in literature, not only does the horse speed up the man’s movement, as the wing does for the bird, but just as the wing is integral to the very nature of the bird, the horse is integral to the very nature of the hero, so much so that the hero and his horse are often virtually (and sometimes even literally) the very same being.² Françoise Aubin has put it this way: “In Turkic and Mongolian epic, the horse is the hero’s double, his *alter ego*, to the point that the horse is poised, reflective, and clear-sighted, while the hero is emotional and prone to impulsive, ill-considered behavior.”³

This paper will focus on the emotional and spiritual connection between horses and their masters as expressed in the literatures of the medieval Middle East. In celebration of this Chinese calendar Year of the Horse, which is now drawing to a close, examples will be presented from medieval Islamic literature that illustrate how precious the horse was to the societies of the time. One example will be included from each of the three main languages of Islamic culture: from Turkish, the story of the bandit Koroğlu and his horse Kırat; from Persian, the story of the royal champion Rostam and his horse Rakhsh; and from Arabic the story of the tribal leader^c Antar ibn Shaddad and his horse al-Abjar. Each of these stories includes some striking and unusual imagery of horses, and describes a somewhat different relationship between master and horse, but the love and appreciation for this magnificent creature are present in all of them.

Before beginning with the Turkish example, some background is in order. The importance of horses in the life of the Turks while they were still living on the steppes of Central Asia cannot be overstressed. Indeed, a Chinese ambassador once said of the Turks: “Their life is dependent on their horses.”⁴ It is indicative of the importance of horses that Kashgari’s dictionary, from which we have already quoted, includes many entries explaining horse colors, harness equipment, and other equine terminology, though it is not exclusively devoted to that topic.⁵ Kashgari himself was from East Turkestan, an area rich in fine horses and in legends about them. In fact, the idea quoted at the beginning of this paper is restated elsewhere in Kashgari’s work with special reference to the Turks: “The bird has its wing, the Turk has his horse.”⁶ Even after the Turks migrated westward and established empires of their own (the Seljuk and Ottoman empires being the most prominent ones), the importance of the horse did not diminish for many years.⁷

While still in Central Asia and before accepting Islam, most Turkic peoples were Buddhist and followed the Chinese calendar. Thus the horse was also, for them, one of the celestial signs marking the passage of time. But there is also much evidence that the horse had a spiritual significance beyond that. Horses were often interred along with their deceased owners to provide transportation to the next life for their dead

master.⁸ Horses were sometimes sacrificed as well, not only to honor the dead person, but also quite likely as an offering to the Sky God of ancient Turkic belief.⁹ So not only did the horse in the calendar mark the passage of time in general, but the horses in one's own earthly life helped in the transition to the Afterlife.

While still alive, of course, the master and his horse were very close. Even their names were intertwined. The color of the hero's horse is often used in Turkic epics and legends as an integral part of the hero's name.¹⁰ For example, in *The Book of Dede Korkut*, one of the most important of the Turkic epics, one hero is called "Bamsı Beyrek of the Gray Horse".¹¹ This was also customary among the Mongols; Genghiz Khan was widely known as Genghiz of the *Boz* Horse.¹² (*Boz* can mean gray, or a pale color with markings.) Again in *Dede Korkut*, we are given an idea of the strong emotional bond between the hero and his horse; Bamsı Beyrek of the Gray Horse says at one point that his horse is like a brother to him, even truer than a brother, in fact.¹³ Turkic epic heroes, and sometimes even sultans in real life, were known to take care of their horses personally, even when they could have had others do it for them.¹⁴ In fact, a young man was not considered a hero unless he proved himself worthy of his horse (*at aşar alp*); it is interesting that the horse was automatically assumed to be courageous, while the young man had to prove his courage.¹⁵

This intense closeness of master and horse is consistently present in the Turkic stories especially, and to a degree in the others as well, as we will see. And while this background information is mainly about the Turkic case, some of the features mentioned will also be seen in the Persian and Arab examples.

The Turkish example: Kōroğlu and his horse Kırat

This example is drawn from an Azerbaijani version of the legend of Kōroğlu. This legend is very widespread throughout the Turkic world and neighboring lands, that is, through all of Central Asia, the Caucasus, the Middle East, and even eastern Europe. I will limit my remarks to the Azeri version, only occasionally mentioning features that it shares with other versions. The most likely historical prototype for the character of Kōroğlu lived in the 16th century, and elements of the story go back much farther, but this particular Azeri version was put into writing at the behest of a Polish diplomat and scholar of the mid-eighteenth century, Alexander Chodźko, who spent some time in Tabriz, a city in the Turkic-speaking province of Azerbaijan in northwest Iran.¹⁶

In this version, as in most of the western versions of the legend, the hero's name means "son of the blind man". His father, a horse expert working for the local ruler, had been unjustly blinded by his employer for selecting two bad-looking horses for the royal herd. His reason for doing this was justified in his view, harking back to an ancient and very widespread motif in horse legends, that of the sea stallion.

The hero's father, Mirza, is tending the horse herds one day when he notices a magnificent stallion emerge from the waves of the sea nearby. This stallion mates with two of the mares of the herd, then returns to the sea.¹⁷ Mirza notes the date of this event and which mares were involved, and when they give birth he gives the newborn colts special treatment: he does not allow them to touch the ground as they exit their mothers' bodies, and he tends them with extra care, aware of their magical parentage. However, the two colts are not very appealing in their appearance. Their coats are shaggy and uneven, and their overall build does not seem very promising.¹⁸ Mirza, however, has full faith that these two colts will grow to be remarkable horses. His employer does not share his enthusiasm for these ugly colts, and he orders that Mirza be blinded and sent away. Mirza asks that he be given one of the colts in question, and the

employer agrees. The hero, Mirza's son Roushen, now to be known as K roĝlu (blind man's son), vows to take revenge for this injustice shown to his father. Mirza gives K roĝlu careful instructions about how the colt is to be raised. As a first step, the colt should be kept in an underground stable in total darkness for a period of 40 days. But K roĝlu, who is just a boy, cannot resist taking a peek inside the stable before the time period has elapsed. Inside the stable, he sees the horse luminous and winged. However, as soon as the light from outside falls upon the horse, it loses its luminosity. K roĝlu quickly patches up the hole he made to take a peek. But his blind father knows the boy has cheated, because when he examines the horse with his hands, he realizes that the horse has no wings. He scolds his son, but gives further instructions as to how the horse should be trained. K roĝlu follows most of the instructions. But one of the last orders is that he should bring back from the sea some foam at a certain propitious moment. The boy gathers the foam, but he cannot resist tasting the foam, and he drinks it all up. The father is distraught at this, because if he himself had drunk the foam, his blindness would have been cured.

So we can see even at this early stage that the hero himself is flawed. But K roĝlu nonetheless manages to defeat his father's employer's troops in battle and establish himself as a force to be dealt with. During this battle K roĝlu sings the praises of his horse to the employer, so the employer can realize what a mistake he has made in underestimating the worth of the homely colt. Here is a close translation of this famous song, detailing some of the features of an ideal horse: ¹⁹

Let me tell you, my Padishah,
 Certain features are necessary in a fine horse.
 Cavorting and snorting and jumping to his side,
 Like a doe; when he perspires, he must be like a sieve.

With a rump like an antelope's and the gait of a young camel,
 The grinding motion of a mill and the appetite of a hungry wolf

The waist of a rabbit and a mane of silk
 His withers must be high like a peacock's.

When he enters his fifth year following his fourth,
 The horse's head must be like a great dragon's.
 His eyes must be (round and large) like apples, his teeth like diamonds,
 His lips must be like a male camel's, and his nose like a chimney.

His origins are purebred, his neck as long as a strap,
 Upon entering the arena, he has one hundred thousand tricks,
 With the look of a hawk and the appetite of a hungry wolf,
 His middle must fill the girth strap nicely.

The hero is one who observes the words of his father,
 Who cares for his horse and protects it
 Who inspects its ancestry and relations;
 A good horseman must be experienced like Mirza.

We see here a mix of metaphors, some rather homespun (sieve, mill, chimney), some regal (peacock, dragon, silk, diamonds), many comparing the horse to other familiar animals (hawk, wolf, rabbit, doe, antelope, camel). This mix is typical of a poem or song of popular origin. There are several other songs in praise of Kırat in the Kōroğlu version of Chodźko.²⁰ Singing such songs of praise for horses is an ancient custom among the Mongols and Turks of central Asia; these songs constitute a unique poetic genre and they are still composed today in some areas. In fact, in some communities, horses are more often the subject of love poems than women are.²¹

So Koroğlu now has a marvelous horse, Kirat. He also acquires a band of followers, quite similar to Robin Hood and his merry men, and they rob caravans that pass through their territory, which is centered on the fortress of Çamlıbel.²² Kirat is an exceptionally good horse, powerful and exquisitely attuned to his master's needs and wishes. Incidentally, the name Kirat means "gray horse", and this coat color is of special interest regarding horse legends.²³ The Turks and Mongols in Central Asia thought very highly of pale-colored horses. Sovereigns and tribal leaders often preferred pale-colored horses as their mounts, and for sacrifice purposes as well light-colored horses were often chosen. This is sometimes seen as a function of the spiritual significance of the horse, light colors being associated with the Heavens and the Sky God. We will see further examples of this elsewhere in this paper. In the case of Kirat, his magical parentage and exceptional talents are in accordance with this special coloring.

Kirat serves his master in many ways in all the episodes of the story. Once as Koroğlu is riding through the woods, he is alerted to the presence of his enemy, a man called Reyhan Arab, by the twitching of Kirat's ears. This always happened when Reyhan Arab's mare was near, so Koroğlu is forewarned by his horse about his approaching enemy. An even more significant event occurs when Koroğlu is being pursued by a group of soldiers, and he is trapped on top of a cliff, from where there seems to be no escape. Kirat falls ill here, and Koroğlu is forced to wait several days until the illness has passed, as he would be totally helpless without Kirat. Kirat does recover, and he makes a remarkable leap from the cliff to the other side of the ravine, quite some distance away. (This leap was memorialized in an English poem, *The Leap of Roushan Beg*, by Longfellow, who may have known Chodźko, as they both spent some time in Paris; Longfellow repeats the translation error Chodźko made, calling the horse a bay instead of gray.) So here Kirat is responsible for his master's escape, even his survival. In another episode, Kirat destroys the enemy's tent and kills several of the enemy's men, behaving more like a warrior in his own right than merely a vehicle for his master.

At the very end of Koroğlu's story the importance of Kirat is again made clear. The Shah of Iran has voiced a wish that someone should rid him of this pesky bandit Koroğlu, and two scoundrels decide to fulfill the Shah's wish in hopes of a reward. They pretend to befriend Koroğlu, but while Koroğlu is sleeping one night they hamstring Kirat. Koroğlu wakes up to find Kirat bleeding to death, and he begs to be killed as well, as he is nothing without his horse. The scoundrels behead the distraught Koroğlu and bring his head to the Shah. The Shah, however, is not pleased. A drop of blood spurts from Koroğlu's head, indicating that he was unjustly killed. The Shah orders that the scoundrels also be killed. So ends the story.

So Kirat is not only a mount, but a friend, a weapon, a comrade in arms, and a savior without whom Koroğlu cannot live. This closeness and dependence is completely in conformity with the horse-master relationship seen elsewhere in Turkic legends.

The Persian example: Rostam and his horse Rakhsh

Here we see a somewhat different relationship between the hero and his horse. While the horse is still a trusted and beloved friend and a valuable comrade in battle, in this case we see the horse actually behaving more wisely than his master.

Our Persian example is taken from the *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings*. This is an epic poem describing the history of the kings of Persia, starting from the creation of the world and going to the end of the Sassanian dynasty following the conquest of Persia by the Arabs. This very long poem was composed in the late tenth to early eleventh centuries (completed in 1020 A.D.) by Ferdowsi, one of the most beloved poets in all of Persian literature. It achieved immediate and lasting popularity not only in Persia, but in all the

cultures influenced by Persian culture, such as the Mughals of India and the Ottoman Turks. Thus there exist many manuscripts of the *Shahnameh*, and illustrating the famous stories became a major artistic outlet for painters in these cultures.

The *Shahnameh* has many tales of kings and knights and their horses, but for our purposes here citing just one of the most important heroes will be sufficient. The main hero of the *Shahnameh* is Rostam, a marvelous fighter who serves as the champion of several of the kings of Persia. His horse is Rakhsh. Rostam himself is a person of gigantic size; he was so large as a baby that he almost killed his mother during the birth process, and she would have died if not for the magical intervention of the *simorgh* (a phoenix-like mythical bird with a special connection to Rostam's father). The *simorgh* instructs Rostam's father to perform a Caesarean section, drugging the mother with wine as an anesthetic first. Both the mother and her enormous child survive.

Rostam's size is also a major factor when it comes time for him to choose a horse, as most horses are not sufficiently strong to carry him. Rostam is taken to his father's herd to select a horse, and he tests each animal by pressing the animal's back with his hand; most of them bend from even that much of Rostam's weight. But then Rostam sees a young colt running with his mother, a very powerful gray mare. Rostam is told by the herd-keepers that the mare will allow no one to come near her colt, and that this colt is known as "Rostam's Rakhsh"; this hints at a magical predestined connection between this horse and Rostam. When Rostam tries to approach the colt, the mare begins to charge at him as is her wont. But then Rostam lets out a mighty roar, and the mare is subdued by this, seeming to realize that this at last is the master meant for her colt. She lets Rostam have the colt, and she goes to rejoin the other horses.

Rostam cares for Rakhsh carefully, even burning wild rue before him every night to ward off evil.

Rakhsh is easily strong enough to carry Rostam, and he is also a strikingly beautiful horse: "... from every side Rakhsh seemed to be a magical creature, swift in battle, with large haunches, alert and foaming at the mouth." He is described by Ferdowsi in regal metaphors suitable to the horse's role as the mount of the royal champion. His color is described as being "like saffron petals, mottled red and gold." Rakhsh is further described as being dragon-like, wide of chest and haunches, having iron hooves, a chest like a lion, short legs, a narrow waist, a plump rump, ears pricked like glittering daggers, and black testicles.²⁴

The adventures of Rostam occupy a major place in the *Shahnameh*, spanning the reigns of many of the kings. But here we will highlight just a few of the episodes that feature Rakhsh most prominently.

At one point, Rostam has to go to Mazanderan, a province bordering the Caspian Sea, to rescue the king, who has foolishly let himself be captured by the enemy (in this case a demon ruler) and has become blind. Rostam and Rakhsh set out to find and save the king, but they encounter many dangers along the way. This part of the *Shahnameh* is known as the Seven Trials of Rostam. (One could draw a parallel to the seven trials of Hercules in classical Hellenic mythology.)

In the first of the trials, Rostam is sleeping after a big meal, not knowing that he is near a lion's den. Rakhsh is nearby, awake. The lion comes home to find these intruders, and he decides to kill the horse first. Rakhsh fights the lion bravely, bringing his front hooves down on the lion's head, sinking his teeth into its shoulder, then throwing it on the ground and tearing it to pieces.²⁵ When Rostam wakes up, rather than being grateful to his horse for saving his life, he reproaches Rakhsh for taking on the lion all alone, saying that had Rakhsh been killed, he (Rostam) would not have been able to continue the journey, with all his heavy equipment.

In the second trial, Rostam and Rakhsh are traveling through an arid desert and are dying of thirst. Rostam follows a ram (magically sent as a guide) and eventually finds water. But the first thing he does is wash his horse, until Rakhsh's coat shines golden as the sun. Then they both drink their fill and give thanks to God, and they go to sleep. But first Rostam warns Rakhsh to wake him if any danger should appear, and not to attempt to cope with the situation on his own, as he did with the lion.²⁶

In the third trial, Rakhsh again has a major part. While Rostam is sleeping, a dragon appears. Rakhsh ("alert as a lion") tries to wake Rostam by pawing at the ground and neighing to alert him to the danger. But when Rostam does wake up, the dragon, who is after all a magical creature, disappears. Rostam is very annoyed with his horse for waking him up for nothing, and he scolds Rakhsh and goes back to sleep. Again the dragon appears, and again Rakhsh paws the ground to wake his master, but again the dragon disappears. Rostam is very angry with Rakhsh at this point, and threatens to cut off his feet if he awakens him again. But the dragon appears a third time, and now Rakhsh is afraid to wake Rostam, so he starts to run away; but his intense loyalty for his master compels him to return and protect him from the dragon. Rakhsh wakes Rostam, and God sends a light to prevent the dragon from disappearing again. Rostam draws his sword and fights the dragon. But during the fight, Rakhsh sees that Rostam is having trouble, so he helps out: he lays back his ears and sinks his teeth into the dragon's shoulder. Rostam is astonished at the ferocity of his horse, and Rakhsh's assistance allows him eventually to behead the dragon, causing its poisonous blood to flood the ground.²⁷

So here we see some instances where the horse is acting more rationally than the master. He is not only a mount, but a loyal friend and fellow fighter. When Rostam finally reaches Mazanderan to rescue the blinded king, it is Rakhsh's powerful neigh that announces to the king that his rescuer is near.

Perhaps the most vivid and poignant demonstration of the relationship of Rostam and Rakhsh is the one where they both meet their end. Rostam, undefeatable in most combat situations, is deceived by his envious half-brother Shaghad, who seeks to destroy his famous older brother. Shaghad arranges to have Rostam invited to a hunt on the grounds of the king of Kabul. But the king and Shaghad have conspired together to trap Rostam there: they have had deep pits dug into the hunting grounds, each pit lined inside with swords and lances, and the ground surface rearranged so that the deadly pits are not visible to a rider. When Rostam reaches the hunting ground, Rakhsh senses the instability of the recently-dug earth, and balks at going forward. As has happened before, Rostam is impatient with his faithful steed, and after urging Rakhsh on in vain, Rostam finally uses his whip lightly. Rakhsh goes forward cautiously, but his feet slip on the edge of one of the pits. He and Rostam fall into the pit and are instantly pierced by the many swords and lances protruding from the sides of the pit. Rostam realizes that he has been tricked by Shaghad, whose face he sees leering triumphantly at the edge of the pit. He asks one last favor of his half-brother: that he bring him his bow and arrow so that he can die like a warrior. Shaghad obliges him, but when Rostam strings his bow, Shaghad realizes he could be in danger, so he hides behind a thick old tree. Rostam shoots an arrow that pierces both the hollow old tree and his brother. Then he dies, commenting on the vicissitudes of fortune and the transience of all things. Both Rostam and Rakhsh are eventually buried in great honor, with Rakhsh's body being wrapped in fine brocades just as his master's body is.²⁸

So the closeness of the hero and his horse is somewhat different in this example. Although Rostam himself is certainly a good and noble person, we see that in some instances the horse is actually portrayed as a superior creature, whose wisdom exceeds that of his master, and whose instincts should not be ignored.

We have now seen two examples of the horses dying along with the heroes, Kōroğlu and Rostam, in two works of very different types - the one a widespread popular legend of a bandit, the other an elegant rendering of the history of the kings of Persia, featuring the champion of the king. It has been suggested that the horse dying with his master is a very ancient motif that probably relates to the custom of sacrificing and burying a person's horse when the person himself dies. This custom is still observed in parts of central Asia, and it was observed even by the highly refined Ottoman sultans up until the late 18th century.²⁹ As has already been mentioned, the most likely significance of this custom is that the horse is meant to convey his master (or mistress) to the realm beyond this earthly life.³⁰ While in both these stories the hero and horse actually die together and are not just buried together, the story line could reflect the same sort of thinking that inspired the custom: that the horse is or was essential to the person's life, an integral part of his existence.

The Arab example: ʿAntar ibn Shaddad and his horse al-Abjar

This brings us to the section on horses in Arab literature. Our example here will be drawn from the *Sirat ʿAntar*, or *Life of ʿAntar*, based on the adventures of the tribal leader ʿAntar ibn Shaddad. The extant versions of the story date from the early 15th century, but the story itself is much older, and the character of ʿAntar may have lived in the 6th century A.D.

Mounted on his horse, al-Abjar, ʿAntar leads his people through many adventures and many battles. Horses of course are an essential element in all of this, their strength, endurance and speed crucial for crossing vast expanses of desert, their courage critical during battles. In the text, note is taken of the exhaustion of the horses during battles and of their wounds. The importance of having a mount is certainly never forgotten. One passage says: “When the men had turned into horsemen, they

attacked.”³¹ And the horses’ own courage in battle is also noted: “The horses displayed their teeth with a frown...”³²

But passages are also devoted to celebrating the horses’ beauty in striking imagery. One challenger’s horse is described thus: “The slaves brought him a noble steed, the size of an elephant. It had turned the desert upside down with its bellow. It was one of the horses of the sea. It was of a pale color... After a boastful verse, he (the warrior) screeched in the ear of his horse, and it bolted like a water-jet or a flash of light in a cloud.”³³ Describing another enemy’s horse, the narrator says: “Then he rode forth on a horse. It was like a pearl and a gust of wind. It resembled water when it pours forth from a narrow pipe, pallid in its color, pleasing in its proportion.”³⁴ The comparison here to a pearl and a gust of wind is especially effective, evoking the image of the horse’s gleaming, rounded body moving swiftly and smoothly across the surface of the desert, as if it were a luminous pearl blown by the wind. The comparisons with water are, of course, especially suitable, considering the desert setting of these stories: horses, essential as water, are a most welcome sight, refreshing the eyes and inspiring hope in the harsh environment.

Horses play a significant role in the plot, as they are the steeds that carry the warriors into the many battles that take place among the warring tribes. But towards the end of ʿAntar’s life, his horse, al-Abjar, helps save his tribe from their enemies by means of a clever ruse. ʿAntar has been mortally wounded by an arrow that pierced his scrotum while he was outside urinating at night. He suffers for several days after the injury, but he knows he must move his tribe out of the danger in their present location. So he and his wife decide to disguise her in his clothes and seat her on ʿAntar’s horse, while he will travel in her palanquin on the back of a camel. Thus the enemy, thinking ʿAntar is still a force to be reckoned with, will still fear them as they travel towards a safer land. The ruse works for a while, but then the enemy notices that the rider on ʿAntar’s horse is shorter than ʿAntar, and relieves himself like a woman, not a man (hard to hide this in the open desert), so this ruse is ruined. ʿAntar frightens the enemy away temporarily by sticking his head out of his wife’s palanquin and roaring mightily, making the enemy

believe that the ruse was meant to trick them into attacking. So the enemy flees for the moment. But ʿAntar devises still another ruse to help his people get away safely: he himself, gravely wounded though he is, mounts al-Abjar, and stands motionless alone in the middle of the area, leaning on his spear for support. Al-Abjar has been trained to stay motionless, as ʿAntar used to sleep on horseback habitually. His tribe moves on to friendlier territory, but ʿAntar stays behind and dies there, mounted on his horse. The enemy does not know what to make of this scene; they know ʿAntar is not a coward and usually does not hesitate to engage the enemy. They suspect he may be dead, so after a while one of the men in the enemy army decides to release his mare, who is in heat at the moment, to see whether al-Abjar, known to all as ʿAntar's mount, will react. The mare does indeed attract the attention of al-Abjar, who is eager to mate with her. Al-Abjar pursues the mare, and ʿAntar's lifeless body falls to the ground. His enemies take all his possessions and are about to leave him there, dead and naked in the desert, but one of the enemy elders insists that they bury ʿAntar. As for al-Abjar, he runs away and becomes a wild horse, never to be mounted again. So the hero and his horse have saved his people, even as ʿAntar himself was dying. And when news of ʿAntar's death reaches his own tribe, there is mourning among the horses as well as the people.³⁵

Thus, In the *Sirat ʿAntar*, while horses are valued, we do not see the same close emotional bond that we saw between Kōroğlu and Kirat, or between Rostam and Rakhsh. The desert environment of the *Sirat ʿAntar* is more stark and harsh. But horses are integral to the plot nevertheless, their qualities are appreciated, and again the hero's horse plays an important role in his death. (One sees a similarity with the death of El Cid, where the hero's corpse is mounted on his steed so he can lead his troops into battle and strike fear into the heart of the enemy.) While al-Abjar does not die with ʿAntar, one could say his spirit was set free shortly after ʿAntar breathed his last breath, so the circumstances are somewhat similar.

Conclusion

In these examples we have seen how horses were regarded in the medieval Islamic world in ways that go beyond their practical roles in everyday life. In the story of Koroğlu and Kirat we witnessed the close bond between horse and hero against a background of mythical motifs. In the stories of Rostam and Rakhsh from the Persian *Shahnameh* we saw a profound recognition of the horse's intelligence and loyalty. And in the *Sirat ʿAntar*, we saw a deeply poetic appreciation of the horse's strength and grace and beauty. Horses have been a part of human life in many places and times, and these three literatures we have sampled are not by any means the only literatures that extol the horse's virtues. But these samples are indicative of the range of feelings inspired by the horse in these cultures, as seen in the choice of metaphors that reflect the setting in each case: with the rough bandit Koroğlu, simple, naturalistic imagery is used, comparing the horse to a hawk, a wolf, a doe; with the royal champion Rostam, more regal language is used, comparing Rakhsh to a lion or a dragon, and stressing his golden color; and in the desert setting of the ʿAntar stories, more elemental images of water and wind are involved in describing horses. The situation can be summed up well by returning to Kashgari one more time. In his writings, to express the idea of "riding a horse", Kashgari routinely uses the Turkish word *kanatlanmak*, which means literally "to acquire wings".³⁶ One could say that, in stressing this image of the horse as the wing of man, Kashgari was acknowledging not only the physical thrill of riding at great speed and elevation, but also a deeper exhilaration, the wings of imagination that the horse has inspired in people everywhere, resulting in so many wonderful songs and stories celebrating this beloved animal.

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Endnotes

¹ Mahmud Kashgari, *Divānu lughati-t Turk*, trans. B. Atalay (Istanbul: K. Rifat, Türk Dil Kurumu, 1939), vol. I, 48-49. As quoted in Turkish in Faruk Sümer, *Türkler'de Atçılık ve Binicilik* (Türk Dünyası Araştırmaları Vakfı: 1983), p. 1. Also cited by Emel Esin, "The Horse in Turkic Art," in *Central Asiatic Journal* X (1965), 195, citing Kashgari, vol. I, 34.

² Giampiero Bellingeri, "Sul Prototipo Iranico del 'Kırat'," *Studi Iranici* (Rome: Centro Culturale Italo-Iraniano, 1977), 224. Quoting Vladimir Propp, *Le Radici Storiche dei Racconti di Fate*, trans. C. Coisson (Torino: 1949), 265-289. Noting that the motif of a hero transforming himself into an animal to accomplish his mission is even more ancient, Propp observes: "Functionally the hero and his assistant are one single person. The hero-animal is transformed into hero + horse."

³ Françoise Aubin, "Critères d'Appréciation des Chevaux dans la Tradition des Nomades Mongols," *Le Cheval en Eurasie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 68.

⁴ Emel Esin, "The Horse in Turkic Art," *Central Asiatic Journal* X (1965), 167.

⁵ Esin, 177, 180. On these pages, and elsewhere, Esin lists some of Kashgari's equine-related entries.

⁶ As quoted in Sümer, *Türkler'de Atçılık*, 1-2.

⁷ Sümer, 37.

⁸ Isabelle Bianquis-Gasser, "Le Cheval dans la Société Mongole Contemporaine: Pratiques Quotidiennes et Rites Festifs," *Le Cheval en Eurasie* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), 100.

⁹ John Andrew Boyle, "A Form of Horse Sacrifice among the 13th- and 14th-century Mongols," *Central Asiatic Journal* X (1965), 150. Also see Esin, 171.

¹⁰ Isabelle Bianquis-Gasser on p. 95 quotes from Potapov's research on horse cults in epics: "The image of the hero is so inseparable from that of his mount that the name of the horse, based on coat color, is integrated into the personal name of the hero as an epithet."

¹¹ *The Book of Dede Korkut*, trans. Geoffrey Lewis (New York: Penguin, 1988). The story of Bamsı Beyrek of the Grey Horse begins on p. 59.

¹² Isabelle Bianquis-Gasser, 95. Sir Gerard Clauson observes that the terms for horse colors can vary from one group of steppe herders to another, and then still again in translation, making the definitions highly variable. See "Turkish and Mongolian Horses and Use of Horses, an Etymological Study," *Central Asiatic Journal* X (1965), 162. Françoise Aubin also observes on p. 69 of her article cited above that there are over 500 terms for horse coat colors among the Mongols.

¹³ *The Book of Dede Korkut*, tr. Lewis, 74.

¹⁴ Esin, 198.

¹⁵ Esin, 170.

¹⁶ Alexander Chodźko, *Specimens of the Popular Poetry of Persia as found in the Adventures and Improvisations of Kurroglou, the Bandit-Minstrel of Northern Persia* (New York: Burt Franklin, 1971). The summarized stories mentioned in this paper are drawn from the manuscript on which Chodźko's English adaptation was based, the *Kurogli-nama* of Sadik Beg, Bibliothèque Nationale MS # 994.

¹⁷ The sea stallion is a very ancient and extremely widespread motif in horse legends. Esin on p. 192, and also Bellingeri on p. 223, quote a version of the legend from the writings of the 9th century Persian geographer Ibn Khordadbeh; this version closely parallels that in the Azeri *Köroğlu* story of Chodźko. There are further parallels in Greek mythology, where the sea god Poseidon is associated with horses. Perhaps it is the similarity between the shape of a cresting wave and that of a rearing horse that inspires this legend. Kashgari himself believed the legend might originate in the misty high plateaus of eastern Turkestan, as a wild stallion joining the herd might appear to emerge from nowhere. The motif of a winged horse, which we see in some versions of the *Köroğlu* story, and which appears in a small way in Chodźko's version, is of course also present in Hellenic mythology as the Pegasus. Often the winged horse motif occurs alongside the sea stallion motif. See Esin, 195.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that the Mongols and Turks of Central Asia were well aware of the difference in horse aesthetics between their own short, stocky horses of the steppes, and the taller horses preferred by Europeans; they did not consider external beauty a prime criterion for a quality horse. See Aubin, 67. Other sources tell of contests wherein the short, stocky horses of Central Asia defeated the more graceful Arabian horses in various contests of speed and endurance, to the surprise of the onlookers. See Zangi's account as quoted in Esin, p. 193, and al-Jahiz's account described in Esin, p. 205. The 12th century account of Zangi and the 9th century account of Ibn Khordadbeh also describe differences in the ways Turks train their horses, as opposed to the ways of the Persians and Arabs. See Esin, p. 201. These are also mentioned in Bellingeri's article, p. 239.

¹⁹ Judith M. Wilks, unpublished doctoral dissertation, *Aspects of the Köroğlu Destanı: Chodźko and Beyond*. University of Chicago, 1995. The English translation of this song is on p. 201 of Vol. II, corresponding to MS p. 7, folio number missing, corresponding to Chodźko's English translation on pp. 23-4 of *Specimens*.

²⁰ There are several other songs in praise of Kirat in the *Kurogli-nama*. My translations are more reliable than those in Chodźko's English adaptation, which contain many inaccuracies and omissions. See Wilks, *Aspects of the Köroğlu Destanı: Chodźko and Beyond*, on the following pages of Vol. II: p. 233, Song # 13, MS f. 33a/34, Chodźko p. 79; p. 277, Song # 28, MS f. 72/72a, Chodźko pp. 165-6; p. 280, Song # 29, MS f. 74/74a, Chodźko pp. 169-172; p. 283, Song # 30, MS f. 75a/77/88, Chodźko pp. 173-5; pp. 286-7, Song # 31, MS f. 76/91, Chodźko pp. 176-7; p. 340, Song # 49, MS f. 112a/144, Chodźko pp. 253-4.

²¹ For further discussion on the preference for praising horses over women in poem and song, see Aubin, p. 69. In Esin's article, p. 223, he includes some lines of poetry by Namık Kemal acknowledging this same preference:

Our inclination is towards the horse-tail standard instead of the heart-robbing figure.
We have linked our fate to the horse's tail, not to the perfumed locks.

²² Since *Köroğlu* eventually became a national hero to several different Turkic peoples, there are many locations throughout the Turkic areas claiming to be the *Çamlıbel* fortress of *Köroğlu*. The historicity of the bandit *Köroğlu* cannot be known precisely enough to say which is the true *Çamlıbel*. See Wilks, *Aspects of the Köroğlu Destanı*, vol. I, p. 25-36.

²³ Several sources mention the importance of a pale color, especially in connection with mythical horses, but even in the real world. See especially Esin, pp. 175-7. Bellingeri has a special take on the issue of the pale color. He connects the color gray to the Persian word *samand* and thence to the word *samandar*, or "salamander", the self-regenerating mythical animal that dwells in fire, thus imparting a further spiritual significance to the light-colored

horse. See pp. 233-5. Bellingeri observes further spiritual connections of pale horses in the Zoroastrian scriptures, in the Apocalypse, and with the prophet Khizr Ilyas. See pp. 242-3. One important exception to the idea of pale coat color being highly valued would be the observations of Aubin, p. 70.

²⁴ Dick Davis, trans., *The Shahnameh* (New York: Penguin, 2007), 132-3.

²⁵ Davis, 152.

²⁶ Davis, 153.

²⁷ Davis, 154-5.

²⁸ Davis, 427-431.

²⁹ Bellingeri, 237, with reference to Esin, 175.

³⁰ Bellingeri, 233; also Bianquis-Gasser, 100.

³¹ Peter Heath, *The Thirsty Sword* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1996), 113.

³² Heath, 216.

³³ Heath, 181-2.

³⁴ Heath, 114.

³⁵ Heath, 207-219.

³⁶ Esin, 194.