

THE ORIGIN OF THE PERCHERON HORSE.

by

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To the reader of this article the writer will frankly state that his object is to present his subject in as condensed and concise a manner as possible. For this reason many details of minor importance have been omitted, there being an abundance of literature on equine history that treats the subject in a more exhaustive manner; hence, as stated before, the writer's aim is to give the principle and main facts in this historical sketch, as he knows them.

The Percheron horse of today descended in common from the same original stock as the other local draft breeds of France, the Boulonnias, Bretons, Picards, Argerons, etc.. They are all Norman horses, the Boulonnias or Bretons were from the same primitive stock. The reason that they were known by their respective local names was due to the political divisions of France at this period, (about 800 to 1600 A.D.). No one can tell the difference between any particular named strain of Norman blood when placed on the market in a mixed herd. A Percheron can sell for a Boulonnias or vice versa. In fact then, as well as at the present time, these types were interbred. The colt is reared in one section and when six months of age is bought by the feeder, who moves him to a different locality. The young animal is broken to work when about two years old. Two years more finds these Percheron horses at the large horse fairs or markets, where they are sold for the various purposes to which heavy draft horses are adapted. With this kind of treatment it becomes self-evident why the local named draft breeds of France are so closely related.

In this historical sketch the names Norman and Percheron will be used as synonymous, for their ancestors, after their type became fixed, were known over all Europe as the Norman horses; and their early history was not marked by any names peculiar to a locality or province. They were the Norman horse from Southwestern Gaul (Southwestern

France) to England, and they had the same elastic temperament, mildness, patience, great size, and hardy constitutions which are their characteristics today.

The primary use of this great horse was for war. From 2080 B.C. to 1066 his only sphere of action was on the battle field. There are no records to show that the horse was used by man for any other purpose before the time of William the Conqueror. The conditions during his long career as a war horse developed good speed, together with a gigantic frame, a frame that could with ease carry a half-ton of steel armor, and at the same time cover an immense territory in a day. This kind of early training made the Norman horse the symbol of endurance, patience, and hardihood.

The first period of definite consequence in the history of the great draft horse of Europe is his condition at the fall of the Roman Empire. At this time we find the horse in all stages of development, from a conglomerate mixture of inferior stock, to a few excellent examples of equine breeding. The few high grade horses found in the Empire were not due to any particular efforts of the Romans. Even if they did represent the center of civilization, they did not raise their own war horses, depending upon foreign countries for their cavalry mounts. With this kind of neglect we can understand the cause of the inferiority of this horse. The barbaric countries, Germany, France, the Netherlands, etc., could not be depended upon for any intelligent breeding methods; those only survived as a type whose natural superiority outlived the neglect they received. These exceptions were the Blacks of Western Germany and Gaul, the Greys of Lombardy and Asia Minor, and the Bays which had been imported from Africa and Arabia. The quality possessed by the Percheron is credited to these Bay horses. They were smaller and finer boned animals than the other

large breeds. From these three types originated the great Norman horse.

The low condition of horse breeding in Western Europe remained in this state for three hundred years after the fall of the Roman Empire. The Catholic Monastery farms were the only places where intelligent breeding was practiced, and these particular places were few. Much credit is due to these monasteries for preserving the purity of the Lombardy greys, which were in demand later on in war. The importance of their position was never so keenly realized until Charles Martel (732 A.D.), of Western Gaul and Germany, fought his famous battle of seven days and seven nights before he could defeat the pagan Mohammedans. This great victorious event in history proved the value of this horse in time of war, and after this time horse breeding was placed upon a sounder basis.

To Charlemagne (between 800-814) belongs the honor of first starting the foundation for the Norman horse. The kind of horse required was one that had good speed and good size combined. These qualities were necessary for drawing the heavy war chariots and to carry the more cumbersome steel armor which protected them. This combination was at hand in the big greys of Lombardy, raised under the supervision of the Monasteries whose farms were the richest and most improved in Europe. It is commonly accepted by authorities that these Lombardy greys originated or had a strong strain of Arabian blood, the grey coat being the main feature that they retained, their conformation being modified, due to environment.

The next type was the European Black, which were very large and heavy animals, coarse in fibre and clumsy. They were found in the Netherlands, and the black color of the Percheron today comes from this strain.

Lastly comes the Bays of Morocco and Arabian stock. They were more nimble and fleet animals, receiving their size from several distant crosses of the Blacks of Gothic blood. The Bays were found in Southern Gaul (Southern France); to this type the Percherons owe their quality and action. Coped with these three excellent breeds for their foundation stock, the empire of Charlemagne had the rich soil and excellent climate which is of equal importance in maintaining a great breed of horses.

From this date on we find the great Norman horse wherever his masters invaded an enemies territory they were successful as warriors practically without exception, and conquered all central and north-western Europe before their power declined. They adopted the costume and religion of their hosts and in time were absorbed in the population of the nations they had conquered. These peculiar characteristics of the Norsemen established their horse over all Europe .

The Norman horse does not make any historical appearance in agriculture until about the close of the Eleventh Century. In 1066 William the Conqueror was presented by his wife with a wood engraved copy of a large horse drawing a harrow. There are no records to show that the horse was used for agricultural purposes before this time; previous to this oxen and asses were used in the fields and for all material work. From this period to the present time we find the horse of Norseman fame who played such an important part in the wars that made the history of nations, employed in the more sober pursuits of hard material labor in the commercial world. This life has brought his conformation a little closer to the ground, that is more on the bull dog type, the old Norman horse of tradition being a more rangy animal than his posterity, and his speed has lessened, although he is far from being a clumsy animal today.

We find him today with the strong and hardy constitution, even temper, large size, and with the noble fire and stamina that belonged to his ancestors of barbaric ages.