

*The Royal Seal of Darius (about 500 BC). This seal—now in the British Museum—may be a valuable link in the obscure history of the curious pony which Louise Firouz describes. If the pony can be proved similar to those pulling King Darius's chariot, it will provide living evidence of the existence in Persia of a separate race of horse hundreds of years before the introduction of the domestic horse by the Indo-Europeans.*



COURTESY: BRITISH MUSEUM

On the shores of the Caspian Sea in northern Iran there exists a breed of small pony which I have never seen described in books, and which is practically unknown outside its own particular territory. The discovery of any rare breed is important, but these ponies are even more fascinating for the unique light they shed on the possible origin of the hot-blooded Eastern horse.

The Caspian pony provides the first living evidence to support the usually rejected theory that a separate race of horses was grazing the foothills of the Zagros Mountains long before the domestic horse was introduced by the Indo-Europeans, early in the Second Millennium BC.

In April, 1965 five of these ponies were brought to my farm to be used as children's mounts. If the ponies that arrived were at first a little frightened and suspicious we soon won them over with gentle treatment and good feeding; before long they became affectionate and interested companions for the children, and delightful rides. In fact, the Caspian is ideally built to carry the weight of a child; all over the countryside around Teheran, children from the ages of four to ten easily ride them unaccompanied, and in races organised by the Racing Federation.

At its best what I will call the 'Caspian', for lack of any other name, is like an Arab horse in miniature, perfectly proportioned and with the same sticking qualities. Even more interesting, it has the same peculiar head-structure as those antique horses' heads found in bas-reliefs, seals, and drinking cups throughout Iran's early history.

The Caspian stands about 3 feet 6 inches at the withers and has a short head, massively developed forehead, small pointed ears, and large protruding eyes. There is also a marked development of the

## A RARE PONY ON THE SHORES OF THE CASPIAN

BY LOUISE FIROUZ

parietal bones and the frontal bones from the occiput to the beginning of the nasal bones which gives the appearance of the ears being set well back on the head. As well as this, some of the ponies exhibit a marked development of the superior maxillary bones which gives the nose an upraised and rather noble look.

If we compare the Caspian with the Celtic pony its unusually fine characteristics become even more obvious; unlike the sturdy-looking British pony the Caspian has an extraordinary neatness and quality as well as the same ratio of leg to body as a horse, allowing for a freedom of movement that is quite impossible in the British pony. Except for the gallop, the Caspian can keep up with normal-sized horses at all gaits and can leap over any obstacles with remarkable agility, as I have established on our farm near Teheran.

The Caspian's tail is set high and it has a short back; the hoofs are small, tough, and more oval than is usual for a horse; it has a fine short coat which thickens in winter, becoming slightly longer in summer. In short, the impression the pony gives is of a miniature horse, well proportioned and possessed of an intelligent and kindly disposition.

I was so fascinated by this curious breed that I decided to conduct a survey of the area as best I could. In July 1965 I began a three-year survey which was really disappointing in the poor figures it revealed. The area which I covered stretched from Asrara, on the north-western border of Iran and the Soviet Union, to Pahlavi-Dej, situated east of the Caspian Sea on the Turkoman Steppes and sixty kilometres south of the Soviet border. Of course, we could only make spot checks which were certainly haphazard and not completely accurate, but they did indicate the general distribution—and the fact that the numbers of these delightful creatures was distressingly low.

Because of the difficulties caused by both swampy and mountainous conditions few subsidiary roads have been built off the single paved road that runs along the sea coast, through the provinces of Mazandaran and Gilan where the pony is found. Consequently a horse economy

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*The author with a Caspian pony: she has undertaken a project to preserve this rare breed at her farm near Teheran*

has been preserved, making travel from the main road a slow and often arduous business – as we ourselves experienced in the course of the inspections we made at towns along the coast road, at different times of the year. These visits were later followed up with trips on horseback to likely villages and grazing grounds.

Finally we estimated that the ponies occurred sporadically along most of the Caspian coast with rather more in an area of 3,400 sq. kms. between the towns of Amol and Babol. Although most ponies occur in this region it would be misleading to say there was a concentration as there are no more than 20, and perhaps another 30 scattered along the coast.

My original fear that the race was indeed a rare one was in fact well-founded. My decision to undertake a pilot project to preserve the breed with six mares and five stallions selected from those brought to Norouzabad was after all, not too premature.

Of this original stock, one colt and three fillies have been born, and six mares are in foal while I write. Our first generation shows a decrease in mature height of approximately one inch, in spite of improved feeding of both parent stock and

foals; this certainly seems to refute my previous assumption that its smallness may be attributed to the stunting effects of the climate and perhaps mineral and nutritional deficiencies. In fact, large animals do exist and breed in the same area without becoming any smaller. The climate, too, is relatively temperate: in summer the ponies are pastured on rich mountain grass, but the winter cold forces the herders to move down to the coast where the temperature is warmer. There the horses must make do with scant forage; it is extraordinary, for instance, to see horses knee-deep in water, grazing the harvested rice fields!

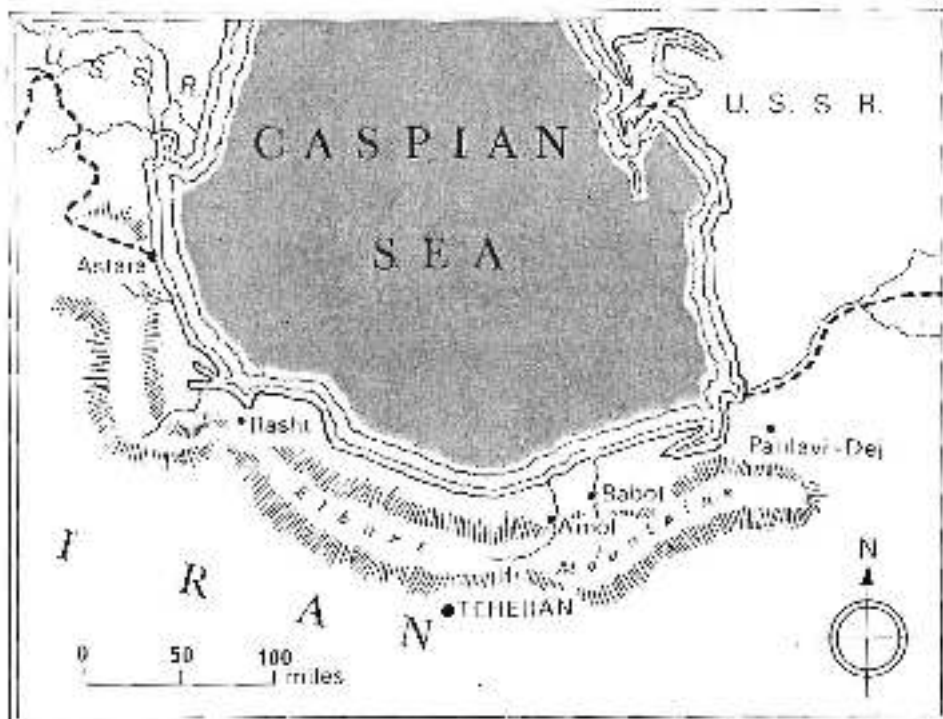
My attempts at breeding have been hampered somewhat by the irregularity of the oestral cycle, by which the ponies come into heat only once every two years. Fortunately we have had some success in overcoming this difficulty by injections of follicle-stimulating hormone. In the first six months growth is most rapid, after which it becomes negligible; at 18 months the females reach sexual maturity.

The peculiarly distinctive qualities of the Caspian are strong, for in spite of random mixing of colours in breeding most of our foals are bay, like the majority

we saw during our survey (though we did notice the occasional chestnut and grey). The strength of the little pony's characteristics became even more striking when a stallion was sent to the United States to stand at stud on a ranch in Virginia. Kathleen McCormick, who is part owner and manager of the stallion, reports that the foals born of Celtic and Caspian stock inevitably display the unusual head features of the Caspian despite its absence in the mares.

Yet in spite of the pony's unusual characteristics none of the remaining specimens could be described as pure. Local breeding is unscientific and haphazard, so they are left to run freely with other horses and of course the mares mate with any chance stallion. Besides this, they are often bred according to the particular requirements of the region; in Babol, for instance, the pony is crossed with a Mongolian or tarpau type to increase the size and make it more useful for traversing muddy winter roads. In Amol, however, the Caspian is bred intentionally to one of his own type because of the need for small cart-horses which can dash in and out of the hazaar more speedily than a donkey.

In 1966, however, a stud book was



established which I hope might preserve and encourage the purity of the Caspian pony. Dr Hosseini of Teheran Veterinary College regularly inspects foals and foundation stock for hereditary defects that would impair the health of any successive stock.

The exciting similarity between the Caspian and those ancient horses which we see pulling Darius's chariot on the trilingual seal now in the British Museum, or the ponies on the bas-relief in Persepolis, seems more than a coincidence. But some far more detailed study of equid bones from archaeological sites is needed before any positive identification can be made. Unfortunately this has not been accomplished so far.

If this were achieved succeeding generations of the Caspian pony born at Norouzbabad will illustrate the similarity more accurately, and should the proof of over 3,000 years of continuity of this curious breed be established, our Caspians will be available for study as living specimens. ●

*The Caspian pony may seem an unlikely cart-horse, but its speed makes it a more useful draught animal than a donkey*

