

# Camels, Goats and Horses - the most important livestock species in Oman

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## Introduction

The aim of this contribution is to introduce three livestock species of Oman – camels, goats and horses. Even though cattle and sheep are nowadays very numerous in Oman, too, the three mentioned species were identified as being part of the country's long tradition of nomadic and semi-nomadic livestock keeping and can thus be called the most important livestock species of Oman. FAO data from 2004 state that there are about 854 thousand goats and almost 99 thousand camels in Oman. There are no figures on horses available.

## The conditions for livestock keeping in Oman

Oman is characterised by dry and hot conditions in most of the country during most of the year. Only 0.2 % of the area of Oman is used for cropping. Despite this fact, 40% of the population is engaged in agriculture or fishing. It can be deduced that livestock keeping plays a major role as in most parts of the world that have harsh conditions – like water and food scarcity. In order to find enough resources for feeding the animals, large areas have to be used. That is how the nomadic lifestyle evolved.

## Nomadism

Nomadism exists since thousands of years. The herds follow the fodder and the herders follow the herds. It is a well-adapted lifestyle for marginal areas (arid and semiarid regions).

Nomads are interested in gaining wealth just as most humans, but since they do not have any permanent settlements, it needs to be "movable wealth". The animals are this movable wealth.

Under nomadic conditions, certain skills and adaptation mechanism are requested by the animals. Not every species is suitable for a life under such harsh conditions. Among these specific requirements are the adaptation to water scarcity: Whereas cattle and sheep need to drink water every two to three days, goats can cope without water for four to five days. Camels can do so even for up to two weeks. Due to that, the grazing radius of camels and goats around a water source is much larger than that of cattle or sheep.

## Goats

### General information

Goats are so-called intermediate feeders. They are rather selective and, in contrast to cattle and sheep, they do not only graze from the ground, but also browse bushes and trees by standing on the behind legs or by climbing, if possible.

As mentioned already, goats are very adaptable to harsh conditions. They have a high dry matter intake and high crude fibre exploitation. They are good climbers. Their ability to cope with water scarcity is second best after the camel – they can, for instance, stop water loss through the kidney. Goats are also quite heat tolerant.

There are many different goats breeds that differ in colour, size and length of hair according to their adaptation to certain climatic conditions. Goats from hot, humid climate often have a rather small frame and short hair. Goats from arid climate or climate with high temperature variations are often bigger and have long, thick hair.

“The goat is an ideal animal for keeping in harsh arid areas of the world. Its ability to survive under such conditions and produce high quality animal protein in the form of milk and meat is unparalleled except probably by the camel. The ability of goats to achieve this is attributed to their low body mass, low metabolic requirements, skilled behaviour and efficient digestive system” (O. Mahgoub et al., Sultan Quaboos University, 2004).

## Goats in Oman

Goats fulfil many different functions in Oman. They are an important provider of animal protein in the form of meat and milk. Especially selling the meat is an important source of income to small holders, as goat meat is the most preferred by the Omanis. On social and religious occasions it is a custom to slaughter a goat.

Goats in Oman feed on acacia shrubs and trees or seasonal range grass, Rhodesgrass hay, by products such as dates, fish, banana stems and household leftovers.

## Three different breeds

Three different breeds of goats are distinguished in Oman. They are named after the regions from which they originate: The Batina goats from the Al Batina plains, the Dhofari goat from the Dhofar region in the South of Oman and the Jebel Akhdar goat from the Jebel Akdar mountains in the North.

The Batina goat widely distributed in most of Oman with the majority in the Batina costal plains. It is generally kept in small flocks of about ten animals by nomadic, semi-nomadic and settled farmers. Batina goats have a rather large frame, are horned and have medium sized pendulous ears. Their hair is long and they are of a variety of mostly dark colours.

The Dhofari goats live in most of Southern Oman, with few numbers scattered in the North.

They are generally found in large flocks of about 50 to 300 heads, but smaller flocks are kept by settled farmers in Salalah plains. They are sabre-horned, have short erect ears, short hair and a variety of colours (with the white colour most dominant). They have a small frame which enables them to climb and graze on the mountain slopes easily.

The Jebel Akhdar goats are mostly located in the Jebel Akhdar montains and the interior. They are usually kept in medium to large herds of about 50 to 300. Sedentary farmers in the interior plains have smaller herds. Jebel Akhdar goats have back-twisted horns, long pendulous ears, long hair and predominantly golden to brown colours. They are the biggest breed in size in Oman and at the same time with about 20% of all goats the least numerous.

## Social and Spiritual Meaning of Goats

Traditionally, sacrificing a goat has a strong religious meaning in Islam because it symbolizes Abraham´s son being saved by God (and a goat being sacrificed instead of him). For instance, the end of Ramadan is celebrated by slaughtering a goat.

Goat management is a part of Omani heritage and tradition. Goats used to be an important factor in deciding dowries. Women played (and still play) a major role in controlling the goats as well as taking decisions with regard to this wealth.

## Camels

### The camelids

There are two chief kinds of camels: (1) the Dromedary Camel *Camelus Dromedarius* or Arabian camel, also called dromedary, which has one hump, and (2) Bactrian Camel *Camelus Bactrianus*, which has two humps. In the past, hybrids (crossbreeds) of the two species were used widely in Asia. These hybrid camels had one extra-long hump and were larger and stronger than either of their parents.

Before the oil discovery

## History

The Camels have been Domesticated thousands of years ago by frankincense traders, who trained the gangly cud-chewer to make the long journey from southern Arabia to the northern regions of the Middle East. Dromedaries were first associated with nomadic Semitic cultures and did not become important until the rise of the Arabian culture. They became important domestic animals only with the Moslem conquests of Egypt in the 7th to 11th centuries A.D. It even went on to become the most important of all the animals to the medieval Muslims. They were called "the Gift of God" and "the Ships of the Desert" thanks to their ability to withstand arid conditions. Camels were consequently used for transport, Camel caravans carried goods and people across the Arabic world to trade, nomadism or Pilgrimage. Some caravans were from 1,000 to 2,000 camels long.

The uses of camels

The important place of camels is also due to its different possible uses. First, camels were an important source of food in the desert. People eat the meat of young camels, though it can be very tough. They melt fat from the animal's hump and use it as butter. People drink camel's milk and also make cheese from it. Camels can also supply wool and leather for clothing and shelter. Camel droppings can provide fuel after being dried. They can practice agricultural work as pulling ploughs, turning water wheels, and carrying grain to market places. Deep in the deserts, camels are almost the only source of transportation, food, clothing, and shelter. But their strength and their resistance were also used for other purposes. For example, at the time of the Prophet Muhammad, the camel was the most important animal in war. The earliest wars were attacks with warriors mounted on camels' backs. The other activities using the camel's speed is Camel racing which has been a traditional desert sport of Bedouin tribes for many centuries. Camel is a really useful animal because of its complete adaptation to its environment and it played a fundamental role for the development of the Arabic world.

spiritual characterisation and society

A such beneficial animal became consequently highly valuable. The possession of camels was a sign of richness and power within the tribes and it could help to acquire respect. We understand easily when we know the status of camels, that they were called "gift of god".

The camel is also quoted in the holy qu'ran and that gives it even more importance.

After the oil discovery

A first difficult period for Camel

The oil has been discovered and exploited in the sultanate of Oman around 1950. Consequently the Omani economy knew an high growth and an important diversification but these changes were coupled with a decrease in animal breeding throughout the country and especially in camel breeding. The traditional nomad movement have been limited in terms of frequency and distance. A lengthier stay in one location, the construction of semi-permanent or permanent housing and the movement from one location to another by Landrover are common today.

Camps are established near surfaced and unsurfaced roads and where they are accessible by vehicle. The camels lost their monopoly as "transport of the desert". Moreover Traditionally, policymakers have seen camels as old, out-dated and destructive to vegetation. They are often considered responsible for overgrazing and desertification because they eat not only the upper part of the plant but also the roots. Consequently They have been linked with under-development. the few camels that are still raised are turned out to free pasture.

21st century: a new age

But this is no longer true. "Camels have an important place in the 21st century. In fact I'd say they are becoming more important," says Professor Babiker Elhag Musa, who oversees the breeding and management of more than 400 camels at the Camel Breeding Centre of the Royal Camel Corps of the Sultan of Oman.

racing camel

Camel racing is particularly important in Oman because Omani thoroughbreds are more in demand than other Arabian camels. With their medium size, their speed and their strength, they are appreciated sprinters. Camel racing are becoming more and more renowned all around the arabic world and consequently racing camels are more and more valuable. They can command fabulous prices ranging from RO60,000 (120 000 Euros) to RO100,000 (200 000 Euro) a head . To keep camels at the top, they receive special treatment, they are scrubbed and shampooed twice a week, any bruise daubed with expensive ointments, and at night, kept warm with blankets and sheets. Their diet is not the usual thorny shrubs of desert vegetation. Instead they are reared on rich fibre-based fare, which includes the finest honey and dates, fresh cow milk and ghee, wheat and freshly harvested alfalfa grass. In summer, they are fed the tender leaves of the sidr tree. This diet with weekly stomach purges keeps camels in fine fettle.

Scientific development and government policy

Camel breeding is a traditional activity in Oman and to preserve this heritage, a Directorate-General of Camel Affairs was established in the Diwan of Royal Court in 1989 to accord with the wish of His Majesty Sultan Qaboos. Located in the wilayat of Barka at Fulajj, it is equipped with the most modern race tracks and camel pens. High-technologies are now common used like artificial insemination, frozen embryos, sex semen etc... This development doesn't concern all camel breeders yet but for traditional camel-keepers, the renewed interest in camels and breed improvement can be highly beneficial. "If camel owners shift from quantity to quality, from subsistence to supplying the new markets, then they can get a lot of money," Professor Musa says.

The Arabian Horse

Spiritual meaning of the Arabian horse

The spiritual meaning of the Arabian horse has been very high to Bedouins for hundreds of years. The care for a horse is described by the Koran as a „holy duty“. For example, it is forbidden by the Koran to clip a horse's mane and tail (the horse's protection against insects). Horses are treated like a „family member“ by the Bedouins. Each horse is said to have its own personality. They are a sign of greatest wealth and a topic for many conversations and poems.

Many positive characteristics are accredited to the Arabian horses. Among these are courage, patience, loyalty, docility, a quiet temper and a very good memory.

They are also said to be gentle, affectionate, familiar, brave, very intelligent and eager to learn.

Arabian horses have the oldest tradition of pure breeding of the world. Certain laws for pure breeding ("Asil Arabians") were introduced by the prophet Mohamed in order to encourage the improvement of the race. For example, Moslems were forbidden by the religion to demand money for the mating of a mare with a stallion.

The „Bloodline“ of each animal is passed on by oral tradition - sometimes 500 years of knowledge about heritage.

The following quote from the Koran illustrates very well the outstanding value of the Arabian horse:

*„He who is not able to fulfil all his religious obligation may keep  
an asil horse for the honour of God and all his sins will be forgiven.*

*No tent that houses an asil horse is ever entered by demons.*

*He who rears an asil horse for the Holy War will be spared*

*purgatory on the Last Day“*

*(Köhler et al., 1980)*

#### Present situation and scientific development

Today, in the Sultanate of Oman there are currently about 2,000 horses, of which approximately 350 are pure-bred Arab horses, 150 are thoroughbreds, and 1,500 are pure-bred Omani horses. Horses are highly valuable and Oman is well-known for its pure-bred Arab horses. The situation was not always as good as the present one, during hard drought spells which became more common over the last few centuries, the number of horses decreased dramatically. In 1970, with His Majesty Sultan Qaboos bin Said's accession to the Omani throne, new directives were implemented pertaining to the breeding and care of Arab horses. A Directorate-General of the Royal Stables has been established under the Diwan of Royal Court which supervises the breeding and rearing of horses using scientific methods in conformity with international standards (artificial insemination, frozen semen.). A horse-breeding department was set up in Salalah which concentrates on the breeding of pure-bred Arab horses. In general, the Royal Stables breed a variety of pure bred and thoroughbred horses from the finest bloodlines available. The Oman Equestrian Federation arranges other race meetings and equestrian events, with the aim of preserving this valuable heritage. In addition the Royal Horse Racing Club was established to oversee the planning and development of equestrian activities, as well as organising the Royal Oman Horse Show which is held every 5 years.

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