



THE REFLECTION OF ANCIENT CENTRAL ASIAN HORSE BREEDS IN HISTORICAL SOURCES

Fayziyev Abdusamad Abduxoliq ugli,

Teacher of the Department of History of Uzbekistan and Source Studies of the Termez State University, PhD student.

Email: fayziyevabdusamad40@gmail.com

<https://orcid.org/0009-0002-9298-8492>

Article history:	Abstract:
<p>Received: 20th August 2025 Accepted: 14th September 2025</p>	<p>This article analyzes the formation of ancient horse breeds that existed in Central Asia, their classification based on biological and morphological characteristics, and their representation in historical sources. Drawing upon ancient written monuments, archaeological discoveries, and numismatic materials, the study highlights the culture of horse breeding in Central Asia and the role of horses in social and military life. Comparative analysis has been conducted using various historical sources, including Chinese chronicles, works of Greco-Roman authors, and writings of Arab and Persian historians. The results of the research demonstrate that ancient horse breeds of Central Asia were not only an integral part of the region's economic life but also played a significant role in the cultural and political development of its peoples.</p>

Keywords Central Asia, horse breeds, historical sources, morphological classification, limb morphology, body structure, folk beliefs, ancient zoology, behavioral types of horses, ritual symbols.

INTRODUCTION. Since ancient times, Central Asia has been one of the major centers of human civilization, where along with agriculture, handicrafts, and trade, animal husbandry—particularly horse breeding and its multifaceted applications—developed at a remarkably high level. From early antiquity, the horse held a crucial place not only in military and economic life but also in the social, religious, and ceremonial spheres. Especially among the ancient peoples who inhabited Central Asia—such as the Sogdians, Bactrians, Saka-Massagetae, and later the Kushans—the horse was widely represented in visual art, monumental heritage, and written sources. Historical and archaeological materials provide valuable evidence about the diversity of horse breeds, their external characteristics, coloration, functions, and classifications linked to social status.

The relevance of this study lies in the fact that, at present, the reexamination of ancient information on horse breeds based on historical sources and its comparison with representations found in archaeological discoveries and visual art allows for a deeper understanding of Central Asia's cultural heritage, economic life, and international relations. Therefore, this article aims to explore the ancient horse breeds of Central Asia, their depiction in historical sources, and the ways in which they reflect certain aspects of the region's cultural and political life.

MATERIALS AND METHODS. The formation of horse breeds in Central Asia and their historical and cultural significance have been partially addressed in the works

of several local and foreign scholars. From a scientific perspective, initial attention to this issue was given by local scholars such as Abu Nasr al-Farabi, Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Mahmud al-Kashgari. In their works, they classified the animal world into different types and analyzed their characteristics, habitats, and behavioral patterns [9; 16–18].

In addition, both local and foreign researchers—including U. Mavlonov, A. Tashbayev, S. N. Kenjayev, M. A. Rakhmatov, A. Azizov, John McLennan, B. Kh. Karmysheva, Deborah Cantrell, and K. Willekes—have provided valuable information in their studies concerning the horse breeds cultivated in Central Asia and their classification according to various criteria.

In this research, a combination of historical-analytical, comparative, archaeological-source, iconographic, and morphological-typological methods was employed. Using these approaches, the representation of ancient horse breeds of Central Asia in historical sources was examined through a comprehensive and interdisciplinary framework.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION. The horse is one of the oldest and most significant animals in human history, forming an inseparable part of social and economic life, military affairs, diplomatic relations, and cultural-spiritual values. Therefore, the representation of horse breeds in historical sources and their classification by form, breed, and function are of great importance not only for zoological studies but also for cultural-



anthropological, historical, and civilizational research. The references to horse types in historical records serve as a key indicator of societal development, as the presence of horses reflects a state's military power, level of economic advancement, diplomatic prestige, and cultural prosperity. For example, the horses of the Fergana Valley are referred to in Chinese chronicles as the "Heavenly Horses" [2; 30], which confirms both the political significance of the Central Asian states of that era and their economic influence through horse breeding. Written sources describing the value of horses, their role in exchange, and their use as diplomatic gifts [18; 184] are vital for understanding the structure of the ancient economic system. Chinese annals record that thousands of rolls of silk and gold items were offered in exchange for Fergana horses—demonstrating that horse trade played a central role in shaping the economy of the Silk Road.

The classification of horse breeds according to natural, morphological, and symbolic characteristics represents one of the earliest scientific and practical forms of human intellectual activity. The differentiation of animals, including horses, based on their physical traits, habitats, and social functions held an important place in Eastern philosophy, natural science, and ethnographic traditions. The earliest scientific insights in this regard can be found in the works of Abu Nasr al-Farabi. In his philosophical system, he analyzed living beings according to their natural attributes and divided the world into six categories of existence [17; 43]. According to al-Farabi, while humans possess reason and intellect, animals—including horses—act through natural instinct and sensory perception, lacking rational thought [9; 15]. This classification laid the theoretical foundation for subsequent scholars to divide the animal world into types based on intelligence, behavior, morphology, and social function.

Farabi's theoretical approach was further developed in the works of Abu Rayhan al-Biruni, Abu Ali Ibn Sina (Avicenna), and Mahmud al-Kashgari. Ibn Sina, in particular, provided scientific insights into the physiological structure and psychological sensitivity of animals, while al-Biruni distinguished their species according to geographical adaptability, habitat, and climate. Al-Kashgari, in his *Dīwān Lughāt al-Turk*, presented ethnolinguistic information about the types of horses among Turkic peoples, including their names, colors, and functional uses. These data serve as an important linguistic-typological source for understanding medieval horse classifications [9; 16–18].

In the nineteenth century, the emergence of the schools of evolutionism and ethnological typology introduced new scientific methodologies for studying the origins, behavioral characteristics, and ritual significance of horses. The Scottish scholar John McLennan's theory of totemism made it possible to analyze the symbolic role of animals—particularly horses—in ancient religious worldviews [4; 407–427]. According to this theory, in early societies certain animals, including horses, were revered as symbols of clans, tribes, or deities and became social emblems in the form of totems.

The views and classifications of Central Asian peoples regarding horses occupy a special place in the ethnographic studies of B. Kh. Karmysheva [14; 290]. According to her, among the Lakai and Uzbek populations, the horse was valued not merely as an economic asset but also as a symbol of courage, honor, loyalty, and sacred power. A traditional practice developed among the population of classifying horses according to their color, body structure, temperament, speed, and social symbolism. Karmysheva regarded these classifications as a typological system based on the people's empirical observations [13; 80–114; 12; 173].

Among Western researchers, Deborah Cantrell studied the religious and symbolic interpretations of the horse, explaining that in Judaic tradition, the image of the horse represents power, victory, and divine will [1; 131–149]. This perspective highlights the necessity of considering not only the morphological but also the metaphysical and spiritual dimensions in the typological classification of horses.

K. Willekes studied the depiction of horses in applied art, their ceremonial uses, and their historical role in breeding practices. By comparing the morphological characteristics of breeds such as the Pony, Przewalski, Akhal-Teke, Iberian, and Caspian horses, she classified them on a geographical-typological basis [7; 366]. According to Willekes, ancient peoples regarded the horse as an intermediary being between humans and the divine, which makes her work a significant source for understanding the spiritual-typological aspects of horses.

In the Zoroastrian religious system, the typological role of the horse also carries a profound symbolic meaning. In the *Avesta*, particularly in the *Yashts*, the white horse is interpreted as a symbol of power and purity. Varahran (Verethragna) is depicted in the form of a white horse [8; 96–100], while Tishtrya (Tishtr) appears as a white horse or bull [8; 74]. These



representations define the horse's place within cosmogonic and religious typology.

Thus, historical sources, religious texts, and ethnographic research demonstrate that the typology of horses must be studied not only through biological or morphological features but also through symbolic, social, and spiritual functions. This approach establishes a multilayered typological model in the modern scientific study of equine culture.

Among the peoples of Central Asia, the horse was valued not only for its economic and military significance but also as a moral, aesthetic, and social symbol. Views concerning horse breeds and their external features—particularly their colors—are reflected in many literary and didactic sources. One such source is the *Qabusnama* (*The Book of Qabus*), written by Kaykavus in the eleventh century [11; 173].

In this work, the author analyzes the nature, endurance, and virtues of horses according to their colors. He considered bay and chestnut horses to be among the most superior breeds. According to Kaykavus, horses of these colors adapt equally well to cold and hot climates and possess remarkable endurance over long distances. However, he also noted that some chestnut horses might be relatively weaker; nonetheless, if such horses had black hooves, muzzles, foreheads, and tails, they were regarded as "highly noble" animals [11; 81–82].

Furthermore, *saman* horses (those of a yellowish-golden hue) are also mentioned as among the finest breeds. Kaykovus considered the darkened coloration of such horses' flesh, the area between their thighs, and around their eyes to be signs of endurance and beauty. Conversely, gray horses were rarely included among the best breeds, while blue-coated horses were described by the author as *badfe'l*—that is, temperamental and rough-natured.

In the treatise, brown (*bura*) horses were also regarded as possessing undesirable qualities. Additionally, the author emphasized that when selecting a horse, one should consider the harmony between the horse's stature and the rider's social status. If a person of imposing build were to ride a small horse, it would, according to Kaykovus, diminish his public image and dignity [11; pp. 82–84].

Kaykovus's classification demonstrates that during that era, the horse was viewed not merely as a symbol of physical strength and endurance, but also as an emblem of personal dignity, social standing, and aesthetic value. These observations hold significant ethnographic and cultural importance as they reflect

medieval perceptions of horses, the symbolic meaning of colors, and the criteria used to evaluate horse breeds.

Historical sources indicate that the classification of horses was based not only on lineage or breed but also on external morphological characteristics such as coat color, eye structure, limb morphology, body proportions, and behavioral traits. In ancient works—particularly within the Eastern veterinary tradition—horses were evaluated according to favorable or "ill-omened" signs derived from their color, eye hue, leg structure, and bodily proportions.

According to historical sources, *gulgun*-colored horses (that is, uniformly coated horses without mottled or piebald markings) were regarded as noble breeds. *Adham* horses (deep black in color) were also praised; however, if their eyes appeared red, such traits were interpreted as signs of a "nervous" or "restless" temperament. Similarly, white markings around the eyes or on the hooves were considered unfavorable omens, believed to indicate that the horse possessed a "bad disposition" or was difficult to control [11; pp. 81–82].

Among blue-coated horses, those with both eyes of the same blue hue were admired, whereas horses with only one blue eye—especially the left—were considered ill-omened. Horses with *murg'ab* (crow-like) or dark black eyes were described as belonging to breeds "slow and inactive in running" [11; pp. 82–84]. Descriptions focusing on leg morphology indicate that if gray horses had white legs, this was viewed as a positive sign; however, having only the left leg white was regarded as a mark of misfortune. *Ahvar* horses—those with crooked legs—were called *kamon poy* ("bow-legged") and thought to be prone to stumbling. *Asdaf* or *Axnaf* horses, characterized by small hooves and weak bone structure, were negatively evaluated. Likewise, *Afraq*, *Afhaj*, and *Asbaq* horses were described as "lame and sluggish" breeds due to deformities or swelling in their joints.

The most perfect image of a horse was represented by the so-called *aston baytara*, an ideal morphological type: horses with white, smooth teeth, wide nostrils, an open forehead, a straight and thick neck, a broad chest, proportionate legs, a long and firm tail, and dark eyelashes were characterized as "graceful and swift." Their body structure was considered optimal for stability, endurance, and light running [11; p. 81].

Ancient veterinarians also noted that if a horse had more ribs on the left side than on the right, such animals demonstrated superior stability and balance in movement. This anthropozoological observation remains consistent with modern morphological analysis,



as horses possessing a symmetrical skeletal structure exhibit a more balanced gait rhythm.

In the belief-based classification, horses with a curved tail (*a'zal* horses), those with upright whiskers (*qoyig* horses), and those with stiff hair under the armpits (*maqxu* horses) were interpreted as possessing "ominous" traits. Such descriptions were not zoological in nature but rather reflected ancient folk beliefs and early naturalistic conceptions.

Moreover, behavioral classifications were also recorded: *shams* horses ("those that neigh excessively and bite frequently") and *zarrot* horses ("those prone to kicking") were evaluated based on observed temperament and conduct. The typological classification of horse breeds in Central Asia has been examined by numerous scholars, among whom the historian U. Mavlonov's views are particularly noteworthy. He categorized horses into three main types according to their physical capabilities, morphological structure, and functional use:

- Riding horses – such as the Akhal-Teke and Yomut breeds;
- Multipurpose gaited horses – including the Laqay, Qorabayir, Kyrgyz, and Don breeds;
- Heavy draft horses – breeds primarily used for carrying loads and pulling carts [16; p. 261].

A. Tashbayev [5; p. 186] supported this typological approach, proposing a classification system based on body structure, physiological adaptability, and specialization.

In his research, U. Mavlonov provided an in-depth analysis of each breed's geographical origin, climatic adaptation, speed, and endurance. In particular, he noted that the Akhal-Teke breed was developed by the Teke Turkmen living in the Akhal oasis of southern Turkmenistan. This breed, well adapted to desert climates, is characterized by exceptional speed and agility. Studies have recorded that an Akhal-Teke horse can cover a distance of 1 kilometer in 1 minute and 5 seconds.

The Yovmut horse is a native riding breed developed by the Yomut tribe of the Turkmen people. Genetically, it exhibits the influence of Arabian, Mongolian, Kazakh, and Akhal-Teke breeds. The main advantages of this breed are its exceptional adaptation to hot and arid climates and its notable swiftness.

The Laqay horse breed was developed approximately 300–400 years ago by the Laqay tribe of the Uzbeks through crossbreeding Mongolian-type native horses with Yomut, Akhal-Teke, Qorabayir, and Arabian breeds. The distinctive characteristics of this breed include its ability to move efficiently in

mountainous terrain, carry loads, and adapt well to warm climatic conditions.

The Arabian horse breed, originating in the Arabian Peninsula, is one of the oldest riding breeds and was crossbred in the medieval period with Turkmen, Persian, and Egyptian desert horses. This breed is renowned for its resistance to thirst and its endurance in desert environments, being able to cover long distances without fatigue. According to available data, Arabian horses could traverse 1 kilometer in 1 minute and 8 seconds [16; p. 260].

Historical sources note that during the reign of Amir Temur (Tamerlane), there existed Turkmen horses capable of covering distances of 120–160 kilometers without rest. In an effort to strengthen these breeds, Amir Temur initiated crossbreeding with Arabian horses, which led to the creation of new, highly resilient breeds able to withstand both drought and extreme heat. These horses provided significant strategic advantages during the military campaigns of the Timurid Empire.

In addition, a special administrative position known as the *miroxur* (chief equerry) was established within the royal court to oversee horse breeding and management. *Miroxurs* were responsible for determining the pedigree and quality of horses, supervising their feeding and care, and preparing them for military expeditions [3; pp. 21; 6; p. 105]. The establishment of this position underscores the socio-economic importance of horses and their role as a crucial factor in sustaining the military and political power of the state.

In the ancient worldview of Turkic peoples, the horse was revered not only as an economic and military asset but also as a central figure in the religious and mythological system. Ancient sources classify horses according to a fourfold typological principle — based on their physical, spiritual, ritual, and symbolic attributes. Through this classification, the horse was regarded as a mediator uniting the material and spiritual dimensions of human life. Accordingly, horses were categorized as follows:

1. Ritual and Sacrificial Horses (Ritual Type). Among Turkic peoples, one of the most widespread beliefs concerned horses consecrated for divine sacrifice. These horses were selected with particular care, and their color, age, and temperament carried ritual significance. Typically, white horses were dedicated to deities of the sky and light, whereas black horses were sacrificed to gods of the underworld and darkness. During sacrificial ceremonies, the horse's



meat was consumed, while its hide was hung upon a ritual tree or a sacred wooden post ("qurbonlik yog'ochi"). This practice symbolized the mediatory role of the horse between humans and the divine within the religious system.

2. Totemic and Symbolic Horses (Mythological Type). The second typological category consists of symbolic or totemic horses. Such horses were consecrated to particular deities and often marked with solar or swastika-shaped signs, representing the Sun's energy, vitality, and cosmic cycle. Traces of these symbols can be found on ritual stones from Tulxar Mausoleum, Khwarezmian coins, and ceramic artifacts of nomadic tribes. Horses belonging to this type were kept separately from ordinary herds, protected by taboos and ritual guardianship systems. This indicates that the horse totem had evolved into a socio-cultural institution of profound spiritual significance.

3. Spiritual-Psychological Horses (Cosmological Type). In ancient Turkic mythology, the horse was interpreted as a psychopompic being — a creature that transports the human soul to the afterlife. Within this cosmological framework, the horse was regarded as a sacred intermediary linking the earthly and celestial realms, as well as life and death. The burial of horses alongside the deceased, or the offering of the horse's mane or tail to the departed, serves as material evidence of this belief. Horses of this kind are thus classified as the "spiritual type," for they symbolically embody the connection between the soul and the heavens, existence and transcendence.

4. Dualistic-Symbolic Horses (Philosophical Type)

Among Turkic peoples, the reverence for the horse was closely connected with a dualistic worldview. The white horse was interpreted as a symbol of light, life, and the sun, whereas the black horse represented darkness, night, and death. These symbolic notions reflected philosophical ideas about the balance of nature and the universe. In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the depiction of the white and black horses endlessly chasing but never overtaking each other symbolizes the eternal alternation of day and night and the continuity of the life cycle.

This mythological typology, based on the color, gait, and behavior of the horse, later laid the foundation for the development of ethnographic and breeding classifications. Consequently, ancient totemic beliefs influenced the later classification system in Central Asia, in which horses were distinguished by color (white,

black, gray), temperament (ambling, swift, steady), and function (ceremonial, military, domestic).

In the socio-economic and cultural life of the peoples of Turkestan, horses held a significant place. Their breed composition, typological diversity, and roles in military and agricultural systems were widely reflected in historical sources, particularly in the materials of the "*Turkestan Collection*." The data presented in this collection serve as an important source for studying horse breeds developed by local breeders of that period, as well as their morphological and functional traits.

The records in the "*Turkestan Collection*" primarily highlight the typological characteristics of local horse breeds — their endurance, adaptability, speed, and resistance to climatic conditions. It is particularly emphasized that Central Asian horses differed morphologically from European breeds such as English, Don, and Hungarian horses. These differences were mainly related to the constitutional structure, muscle mass, leg length, type of gait, and energy efficiency, which together defined them as a type adapted to steppe environments.

In the article published under the signature E.U. in Volume 425 of the "*Turkestan Collection*," these typological aspects are clearly emphasized. According to the author, it was economically more efficient to supply the imperial army's cavalry units not with expensive English horses, but with Kyrgyz (Kazakh) type horses. These horses were distinguished by their energy efficiency, endurance over long distances, and ability to remain active with minimal feed. Statistical data presented in the article indicate that more than four million horses suitable for cavalry service were available in the Kyrgyz steppes of the Russian Empire, a figure that underscores the strategic military significance of the typological classification of Central Asian horse breeds [15; pp. 5–7].

The "*Turkestan Collection*" also includes information about horse races, which confirm that Central Asian horses belonged to the speed type. For instance, in races covering a distance of 20–23 versts, an English thoroughbred completed the course in 40 minutes and 95 seconds, whereas a Kyrgyz horse finished in 36 minutes and 30 seconds [10; pp. 8–13]. This demonstrates that Central Asian horses represent a mixed type, combining both speed and endurance.

Thus, the sources preserved in the "*Turkestan Collection*" serve as an invaluable scientific resource for reconstructing the ethnological, morphological, and functional typology of Central Asian horse breeds. Moreover, they provide a solid academic basis for



understanding the horses' crucial roles in the national economy, military affairs, and cultural life of the region.

CONCLUSION. In the historical and cultural development of Central Asian peoples, the horse occupied a role far beyond that of a mere means of transport or source of military power. It also served as a symbol of social status, ritual significance, and spiritual belief. Historical sources such as the "Qabusnama," "Avesta," "Shahnameh," and the "Turkestan Collection" provide extensive information on the varieties, colors, physical characteristics, and social functions of horses. Based on these records, the typology of horses in that era can be identified as riding breeds, ambling types, and pack or draught horses.

Furthermore, the totemistic perceptions associated with horses, the swastika-shaped tamgas, and the dualistic symbolism of white and black horses reflect the profound interconnection between the animal world and human thought in the region.

Thus, the study of ancient horse breeds in Central Asia holds exceptional importance not only from zoological or economic perspectives but also from cultural and philosophical standpoints. This underscores the necessity of a deeper investigation into the historical typology and civilizational significance of horses in the evolution of Central Asian society.

REFERENCES:

1. Cantrell D. "Some Trust in Horses": Horses as Symbols of Power in Rhetoric and Reality // Warfare, Ritual, and Symbol in Biblical and Modern Contexts. Society of Biblical Literature. – Atlanta: 2014. – P. 131-149.
2. Hasanboyev T.F., Burxonova E.F. Farg'onaning "samoviy otlari" // Yangi O'zbekiston taraqqiyotida tadqiqotlarni o'rni va rivojlanish omillari, 13(2). – B. 28-31.
3. Kenjayev S.N., Rahmatov M.A. Amir Temur va Temuriylar davri flora-faunasi. / [Matn]: Risola. – Buxoro: "Buxoro Determinanti" MCHJ ning Kamolot nashriyoti, 2023. – 60 b.
4. McLennan. The Worship of Animals and Plants // Fortnightly Review. 1869. № 4. – P. 407-427.
5. Tashbayev A. Ulov vositalaridan biri otlarning buyuk ipak yo'li rivojidadagi o'rni. // International Journal of Scientific and Applied Research, 1(2). 2024. – B. 180-189.
6. Uljaeva Sh. Amir Temur davlat boshqaruvi [Matn] / Sh. Uljaeva. – Toshkent: Akademnashr, 2017. – 248 b.
7. Willekes C. From the Steppe to the Stable: Horses and Horsemanship in the Ancient World: diss.... PhD. from anthropology University of Calgary. – Alberta: 2013. – 366 p.
8. Авесто: Яшт китоби / М. Исҳоқов таржимаси. – Т.: «Шарқ», 2001. – 128 б.
9. Азизов А. Ўзбек халқининг ҳайвонот оламига оид қарашлари. – Т.: «Фан» нашриёти, 2024. – 208 б.
10. Заметки о Киргизской лошади. Туркестанский сборник. Т. 425. – С. 8-13.
11. Кайковус. Қобуснома. / Форсчадан М. Ризо Огаҳий тарж / . – 2- тўлдирилган нашри. – Т.: Истиқлол, 1994. – 173 б.
12. Кармышева Б.Х. Очерки этнической истории Южных районов Таджикистана и Узбекистана. – Москва: Наука, 1976. – 324 с.
13. Кармышева Б.Х. Узбеки-локайцы Южного Таджикистана. Вып. 1. Историко-этнографический очерк животноводства в дореволюционный период [Текст]. – Сталинабад: Изд-во Акад. наук Тадж. ССР, 1954 [вып. дан. 1955]. – 169 с., 4 л. схем., карт. : ил., схем., карт.; 25 см.
14. Кармышева Б.Х. Этнографические очерки узбекского сельского население. – Москва: Наука, 1969. – 295 с.: ил.: 22 см.
15. Киргизская лошадь. Туркестанский сборник. Т. 425. – С. 5-7.
16. Мавлонов Ў.М. Марказий Осиёнинг қадимги йўллари: шаклланиши ва ривожланиш босқичлари. Монография. – Т.: Akademiya, 2008. – 431 б.
17. Ўзбекистонда ижтимоий-фалсафий фикрлар тарихидан лавҳалар. – Т.: "Ўзбекистон", 1995. – 240 б.
18. Ходжаев А., Кулдашев Ш., Джуманиязова Ф. Марказий Осиё давлатчилиги тарихига оид маълумотлар (хитой манбалари асосида). – Тошкент: Ўзбекистон Республикаси Фанлар Академияси "Фан" нашриёти, 2018. – 184 б.