

Classical horsemanship, the foundation of dressage, is the ultimate test of obedience, agility and training for both the horse and the rider. Dressage's distinguishing roots originated in Assyria (900-600 BC) and continued to develop throughout the Renaissance. For the duration of this period, classical horsemanship flourished in the more advanced civilizations and social cultures, but languished in backward societies. In poor or primitive societies a place did not exist for activities that required great patience, sensitivity and applied intelligence.

Classical horsemanship, the basis of dressage and of all other disciplines of riding, was first conceived for use in warfare. Throughout the ages, it has evolved into a form of art as well as an Olympic sport. When dressage is performed correctly, it should look as though the horse and rider have become one; working together in perfect unity. Dressage should look effortless and magical.

Dressage work should be free and light, with the horse willingly accepting the bit. Dressage takes much concentration, skill, and athleticism. However, it must always appear to be natural. Dressage is the French word for training. In "training" the goal is the development of harmony between the horse and the rider. This should be accomplished while keeping the mount calm and flexible, with an inside bend and acceptance to the bit. When dressage is executed correctly, the horse should submit himself to the will of the rider. The horse should do this without fuss, while maintaining a positive attitude. This should be accomplished without disturbing the mount's natural way of going. When working with a horse, the rider must remember to obey the laws of nature and physics. The rider should not ask the horse to attempt a movement that is not natural to him.

The majority of the movements seen in upper level dressage originated directly on the battlefield. The *levade*, when the horse stood balanced on its hind legs, as a result of a half halt applied when the horse was already highly collected, was a common method of attack for cavalry forces. Other maneuvers, such as the *capriole*, were designed to attack the enemy. While executing the *capriole*, the horse would leap into the air. During the highest point of this leap, the mount would vigorously extend its hind legs out in a kicking motion. Several dressage movements were invented in order to keep the horse and rider safe, such as the *piaffe*, the *courvet* and the use of flying changes. The *piaffe*, an animated trot in place, assisted the horse in avoiding being attacked. Flying changes were used to help the horse remain balanced while quickly changing direction during battle. The *courvet*, an advanced dressage movement, required the horse to have excellent balance. The horse moved forward by taking several jumps on his hind legs, without his front legs touching the ground. It was used as a defensive tactic to help free a soldier from an enemy attack. These are just a few of the many movements that made the horse a valuable asset from ancient Assyrian time all the way through the Renaissance period.

The early Assyrian society (900-600 BC) considered fine horsemanship to be an important personal and group goal. The Assyrians were the first nation to form a cavalry. They formed their cavalry around 900 BC. Employing his newly formed cavalry, King Assurnazirpal II fought history's first battle using horses against the King of Nairi.

Largely, as a result of their cavalry, the Assyrians became a true military power. During this time, their empire stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Persian Gulf. The Assyrian cavalry was victorious in warfare because it had more mobility than the enemy armies that fought using large groups of chariots.

The Assyrians' horses were similar to both the modern day Prezewlski horse and the wild horses of the Eastern Steppes. Many of their horses were crossbred with wild asses or mules in order to enhance their hardiness. This helped to increase the horse's stamina, which was necessary for long campaigns. These horses were usually under 14'2 hands (4 feet 10 inches). The trained mounts were usually worth about thirty slaves or five hundred sheep. The Assyrians' horses were quite hardy, but they lacked the athleticism of later day dressage horses.

Assyrian horsemanship was not very good. The rider sat in a chair seat on the horse's croup, with his pelvis collapsed and his legs in front of him. This prohibited the rider from using natural aids, such as shifting his weight position or using his legs in order to guide the horse. Originally, each Assyrian mounted archer had to have his horse led by another mounted horseman. This was necessary because the Assyrians lacked the seated position needed to control their horses. By the time of Tiglath-Pileser III's reign, the Assyrians had developed the correct deep seat, with the rider's legs placed straight underneath him. This allowed the rider to guide his mount by using his legs, especially his thighs. During this period, the Assyrians seldom rode with reins. Instead they relied on their natural aids: their seat and legs.

Some Assyrians rode their horses bareback. Horses ridden by the wealthier Assyrians wore decorated covers that were secured by ties placed around the horse's chest and tail. The adorned covers were a result of the Assyrian belief that the wearing of embellished clothing showed one's status in society. Thus, the Assyrian mounted infantry was highly adorned with tassels and ribbons. The Assyrians invented the first horseshoe. It was a piece of cloth that was cut to fit the horse's hoof. The horseshoe was attached by trying it above the horse's fetlock. This protected the hoof from ice and rocks, allowing the horse to remain sound, while being ridden for a long time. The Assyrians' military power began to weaken partly as a result of other societies forming their own cavalries.

The philosophy and culture of early Greece (700 BC- 393 AD) created a nurturing environment in which classical horsemanship further developed. The Greeks believed that "nothing could be attained correctly or harmoniously without strict adherence to the laws of the universe". The early Greeks sought perfection in every aspect of their lives. The Greek society encouraged the study of classical horsemanship since it incorporated balance, light, symmetry and knowledge. Because the Greeks relied heavily upon their highly developed phalanxes in war, their cavalry was of little military importance. However, Greek society was home to many great horse people such as Simon, Xenophon and Alexander the Great.

Simon was a professional trainer of both the horse and the rider. Not much is known about him except that he was very knowledgeable about equine anatomy. Simon wrote many books on the subject but only fragments of these books have been found.

Alexander the Great was a talented horseman. Once, as a young man, while looking at horses with his father, he encountered a horse that many people considered to be crazy. This was because of the animal's lack of trust in humans. This was a horse

of the Akhal-Teke breed. It is said that Alexander turned the horse, named Bucephalus, to face the sun and the horse settled down. Bucephalus was afraid of his own shadow. If this story is true, it is the first recorded case of natural horsemanship. Natural horsemanship is the process of observing a horse's body language and then communicating and forming a special bond with the horse.

Xenophon was considered to be the premier horseman of Greek society. Most experts agree that it was Xenophon who created the art of dressage. Xenophon was a cavalry officer who lived from 430 to 355 BC. He wrote a number of books about horse breeding, hunting, and the art of riding. He also developed a theory regarding the correct psychological approach to handling horses. Two of Xenophon's best-known works include *Hipparchikos*, "The Horsemen's Guide", and *Peri Hippikes*, "On Horse Riding". All of his works are based on one concept: the necessity of trying to understand a horse's natural aptitude and temperament, so that brute force is not needed to control the mount. This can be done by understanding the horse's inner nature. Xenophon was the first to regard the horse as a partner and not as a slave. All of his theories combined are what define modern day dressage.

The Greeks employed a kind, gentle method when controlling their horses. They rode using a simple snaffle bit. Because the Greeks rode with a superb seat, they were able to use a less severe bit than their predecessors had. The rider's seat was designed in such a way that if the horse was to theoretically vanish, the rider would remain in a balanced standing position. This is similar to the dressage seat of today. For their cavalry, the Greeks used horses that were obedient and easy to control with one hand. Usually, only stallions were used in battle because their center of balance was preferred over that of a mare.

The Greek civilization contributed much to the study of classical horsemanship. This is because Greek society was comprised of many upper class people. It was also a society in which the pursuit of knowledge was valued. The Greeks had a great appreciation for all of the arts. Therefore, the Greeks were encouraged to spend the time and energy necessary for developing this art form. They were able to incorporate the use of kinder and gentler methods in their training.

The Persians (539-330 BC) were the first civilization to breed heavier horses, similar to modern day Warmbloods. This allowed the Persians to fight battles while their horses wore chain armor. The breeding of superior horses, with the temperament to be ridden "on the bit" and with long lofty gaits, was considered to be a true science by the Persians. The Persians prided themselves on being able to choose horses to breed that were larger and stronger than those of the Egyptians or the Assyrians. Cyrus the Great of Persia owned approximately 8,000 stallions and 6,000 mares. The Persian cavalry was very strong, due to their plentiful supply of well-bred horses.

The Etruscans (800-300 BC) bred their horses for different attributes than did the Persians. They bred for a lighter horse. The horses of the Etruscans were light-boned and fine-limbed. They possessed short noble heads, slightly dished faces and elegant necks. Standing only 13'3 hands (4 feet, 7 inches), they were small in stature. There was much Arabian horse mixed in their breeding. The Etruscan riders had a good deep seat. The Etruscans invented the saddle. As a result of this important invention, they were able to maintain their good riding position, even during battle. Their new saddle

consisted of several layers of leather fastened with a girth strap. Leather loops served as stirrups.

The Celts (c.300 BC), like the Etruscans, also bred smaller horses. However they were slightly bigger-boned, with much Tarpan horse influence. Over time, the Celts' horses evolved and became larger. They became similar to a modern day Wales Pony, or even bigger, like an Irish Hunter. These horses were still smaller than the Persian's horses because they were not weighted down with heavy armor. This allowed the horses extra strength and speed. The Celts rode with decent seats and were able to satisfactorily control their mounts. However, they did not possess the advanced seat that some of the other civilizations did.

Ancient Rome (300 BC to AD 475) established the *Haute Ecol* of horsemanship. *Haute Ecol* applies to the practice of expert equestrianism. Archeologists have discovered pictures painted on Roman ruins depicting horses performing *piaffles* and *levades*. In early Ancient Rome, the cavalry was not of great importance to the army. Despite that, the cavalry was extremely well trained. Although well schooled, many of the riders never fought in battle but instead served as messengers for the military. The Romans used wooden horses to train their riders. They began by practicing mounting quickly. This was difficult because they did not use stirrups. Gradually, the rider would progress to learning more advanced movements. They were also taught to handle their weapons while mounted. The Romans, like the Greeks, rode with a classical seat and a light hand. This encouraged the engagement of the horse's hind end, a very important skill for dressage.

The horses ridden by the Romans were imported from Spain and Persia. These horses were usually Warmbloods, crossbred with some breed of lighter horse. The horses were strong enough to carry some armor but were light enough to be mobile. After being defeated in battles by the Carthaginians, who rode Iberian horses, the Roman military gave more importance to their cavalry.

The Mongolian army (1203-1249) was totally dependent upon horses. The Mongols did not have an infantry. Their army had slightly under 200,000 people, and each soldier had eighteen to twenty horses. There were about four to five million horses in the army. The Mongolian army relied upon Steppe Ponies that were about 13'2 hands (4 feet, 6 inches) high. These horses were very resilient, tough and strong. They had to be able to perform double duty, both as riding horses and to pull the Mongols' possessions. The Mongols did not ride with a classical seat or a deep seat but instead rode by pinching with their knees. This position, although not useful for many of the movements of dressage, was appropriate for the fast action warfare that the Mongols participated in. The Mongols rode with light hands, allowing the horse to find its own center of balance.

In Feudal Europe, the level of horsemanship went down drastically. This was because Feudal Europe was not as advanced a society or a social culture as the Roman Empire. During this period of history, the people had many worries, concerns, and problems such as illness and constant warfare. They did not have the necessary time to educate themselves on the subject of horsemanship. The horses used for warfare were big, strong, draft horses such as Percherons and Belgians. These horses were called "destriers". The military needed bigger horses because the average warhorse was expected to carry up to 400 hundred pounds of rider and armor. The

horses were ridden in a severe curb bit and the rider would wear sharp spurs in order to control the horse. The reins on the bridle of a destrier would be coated with metal plates to prevent the enemy from slicing through them. However, this inhibited the rider from being able to give soft rein aids. The size of the horse allowed the rider to have superior height and speed over the enemy. The horses were the medieval equivalent of planes and tanks, used to displace the enemies' foot soldiers. The heavy weight of the armor and the destrier made it nearly impossible to perform classical dressage movements. The riding style of the Middle Ages was the exact opposite of the Greek's philosophy of riding.

Other types of horses were also ridden during the period of Feudal Europe. Knights often rode a Palfrey, a smaller lighter horse, when not on a military campaign. These horses were chosen for their smooth and comfortable gait. The Courser was another type of horse often ridden during this time. Only the rich could afford to own a Courser. Many aristocrats enjoyed racing these faster horses.

During the Renaissance (1350-1600), when culture again began to flourish, so did the art of classical horsemanship. This was largely because of Federico Grisone. Grisone studied Xenophon's works. Grisone then established a riding academy in Naples. At the Academy, young nobles were taught to handle horses and to ride with a classical seat. Grisone wrote a book on horsemanship, *Gli Ordini Di Cavalcare*. The book stated that in order to achieve true obedience from a horse, the use of geometric figures (such as circles and figure eights) are necessary. Grisone also discussed the "airs above the ground" movements, including the *levade* and the *capriole*. Grisone and his Academy became so popular that many princes and kings from throughout Europe chose him as their teacher.

Grisone's teachings, when compared to Xenophon's, were often criticized. This is because Grisone's methods were not always as gentle as Xenophon's. Each of these men's theories contained weaknesses. In reality, Grisone achieved a higher level of training, requiring much more skill from both the horse and the rider. Grisone did not discourage riding in a harsher bit, such a double bridle or a gag. Some of the bits he used had long cheeks and high ports with balls, rollers and revolving cylinders on the mouthpiece. Even so, he also believed that a young horse should always be started in a simple jointed snaffle and progress from there. Grisone taught that a horse should not be ridden until it was three and a half years old. He believed that some roughness was already in the mentality of a horse and that sometimes being forceful was necessary. Grisone advocated that it was necessary for a strong horseperson to practice three principles. They were: knowing how and when to help your horse, knowing how to correct your mount, and knowing how and when to show praise for your horse.

Following the success of Grisone's Riding Academy many more academies were established in the courts of France, England, and Denmark. By the 15<sup>th</sup> Century, dressage training had greatly advanced and many riders were learning to ride with true collection. Equitation had become a fine and valuable skill.

In 1565, Rosstumbplatz created the Spanish Riding School of Vienna. It was based on Grisone's Academy. The school was located in the gardens of the Imperial Palace. The Spanish Riding School of Vienna acquired its name from the famous Spanish stallions that were trained there. During this time, many lighter horse breeds

were being developed, such as the Barb and the Lusitano.<sup>1</sup> The Lipizzaner was a lighter, more agile horse. The Lipizzaner, because of its unique confirmation, was able to maneuver more easily and gracefully than other horses. The Lipizzaners were very strong and intelligent but could often be quite temperamental. Both the horses and riders at the Spanish Riding School were trained extremely slowly and correctly. Perfection was demanded of both. The students spent many years learning the basics of riding and horsemanship on the older stallions before they were allowed to handle the younger horses, or were chosen to perform on them. Since each horse was started slowly and was well taken care of, many horses could continue working into their mid thirties. The School combined, encouraged, and employed many of the philosophies and practices developed by previous civilizations. This enabled the Spanish Riding School to create the sport of dressage, as we know it today.

Classical horsemanship, dressage, was greatly influenced by the individual societies and periods in which it was developed and practiced. Classical horsemanship thrived in societies that appreciated its value in everyday life, the military, as well as recognizing its importance as an art form. When civilizations had the liberty to embrace classical dressage, the society benefited both militarily and culturally. In Feudal times, the people could not devote time and resources to developing classical horsemanship, and the skill level of riding declined. It only returned to its original strength after the conflicts of illness, barbarians and inflation had been resolved.

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