

from
THE MERITS OF THE TURKS
A.D. 800s

al-Jahiz

The writer al-Jahiz lived in the cosmopolitan city of Baghdad, the capital of the Muslim empire of the Abbasids. Al-Jahiz wrote about many subjects, including the Turkish soldiers who were gaining a presence in Baghdad. The Turks were a nomadic people from the northeastern edge of the empire. Known for their amazing military skills, the Turks first came into the Abbasid empire as soldier-slaves.

THINK THROUGH HISTORY: Contrasting

According to al-Jahiz, what were some of the differences between the Turks and other warriors of the time?

The Turk as a Horseman

A Khârijite at close quarters relies entirely on his lance. But the Turks are as good as the Khârijites with the lance, and in addition, if a thousand of their horsemen are hard-pressed they will loose all their arrows in a single volley and bring down a thousand enemy horsemen. No body of men can stand up against such a test.

Neither the Khârijites nor the Bedouins are famous for their prowess as mounted bowmen. But the Turk will hit from his saddle an animal, a bird, a target, a man, a couching animal, a marker post or a bird of prey stooping on its quarry. His horse may be exhausted from being galloped and reined in, wheeled to right and left, and mounted and dismounted: but he himself goes on shooting, loosing ten arrows before the Khârijite has let fly one. He gallops his horse up a hillside or down a gully faster than the Khârijite can make his go on the flat.

The Turk has two pairs of eyes, one at the front and the other at the back of his head.

One of the criticisms of the Khârijite concerns his way of disengaging from combat, and of the Khurâsânî his method of engaging. The weakness of the Khurâsânîs is that as soon as they come up with the enemy they wheel round: if pursued they then take flight, and return again and again to the charge. These are reckless tactics, which may encourage the enemy to keep on their heels. When the Khârijites break off an engagement, it is broken off for good: once they withdraw they do not return to the charge, unless by chance. The Turk does not wheel round like the Khurâsânî, indeed if he turns his horse's head it is deadly poison and certain death, for he aims his arrow as accurately behind him as he does in front of him. Especially formidable is his trick of using his lasso to throw a horse

and unseat its rider, all at full gallop. . . . He also commonly resorts to another trick with his lasso: he aims it nowhere near his adversary, and the fool takes this for clumsiness on the Turk's part or adroitness on his own!

They train their horsemen to carry two or even three bows, and spare bow-strings in proportion. Thus in the hour of battle the Turk has on him everything needful for himself, his weapon and the care of his steed. As for their ability to stand trotting, sustained galloping, long night rides and cross-country journeys, it is truly extraordinary. In the first place the Khârijite's horse has not the staying-power of the Turk's pony; and the Khârijite has no more than a horseman's knowledge of how to look after his mount. The Turk, however, is more experienced than a professional farrier, and better than a trainer at getting what he wants from his pony. For it was he who brought it into the world and reared it from a foal; it comes when he calls it, and follows behind him when he runs. . . .

If the Turks' daily life were to be reckoned up in detail, he would be found to spend more time in the saddle than on the ground.

The Turk sometimes rides a stallion, sometimes a brood mare. Whether he is going to war, on a journey, out hunting or on any other errand, the brood mare follows behind with her foals. If he gets tired of hunting the enemy he hunts waterfowl. If he gets hungry, jogging up and down in the saddle, he has only to lay hands on one of his animals. If he gets thirsty, he milks one of his brood mares. If he needs to rest his mount, he vaults on to another without so much as putting his feet to the ground.

Of all living creatures he is the only one whose body can adapt itself to eating nothing but meat. As for his steed, leaves and shoots are all it needs; he gives it no shelter from the sun and no covering against the cold.

As regards ability to stand trotting, if the stamina of the border fighters, the posthorse outriders, the Khârijites and the eunuchs were all combined in one man, they would not equal a Turk.

The Turk demands so much of his mount that only the toughest of his horses is equal to the task; even one that he had ridden to exhaustion, so as to be useless for his expeditions, would outdo a Khârijite's horse in staying-power, and no Tikhâri pony could compare with it.

The Turk is at one and the same time herdsman, groom, trainer, horse-dealer, farrier and rider: in short, a one-man team.

When the Turk travels with horsemen of other races, he covers twenty miles to their ten, leaving them and circling around to right and left, up on to the high ground and down to the bottom of the gullies, and shooting all the while at anything that runs, crawls, flies or stands still. The Turk never travels like the rest of the band, and never rides straight ahead. On a long, hard ride, when it is noon and the halting-place is still afar off, all are silent, oppressed with fatigue and overwhelmed with weariness. Their misery leaves no room for conversation. Everything round them crackles in the intense heat, or perhaps is frozen hard. As the journey drags on, even the toughest and most resolute begin to wish that the ground would

open under their feet. At the sight of a mirage or a marker post on a ridge they are transported with joy, supposing it to be the halting-place. When at last they reach it, the horsemen all drop from the saddle and stagger about bandy-legged like children . . . groaning like sick men, yawning to refresh themselves and stretching luxuriously to overcome their stiffness. But your Turk, though he has covered twice the distance and dislocated his shoulders with shooting, has only to catch sight of a gazelle or an onager near the halting-place, or put up a fox or a hare, and he is off again at a gallop as though he had only just mounted. It might have been someone else who had done that long ride and endured all that weariness.

At a gully the band bunches together at the bridge or the best crossing-place; but the Turk, digging his heels into his pony, is already going up the other side like a shooting star. If there is a steep rise, he leaves the track and scrambles straight up the hillside, going where even the ibex cannot go. To see him scaling such slopes anyone would think he was recklessly risking his life: but if that were so he would not last long, for he is always doing it. . . .

The Khârijite's lance is long and heavy, the Turk's a hollow pike; and short hollow lances have greater penetrating power and are lighter to carry. This is why the Îrânîs keep long lances only for their foot-soldiers: these are the weapons used by the Persians of Iraq for fighting at the entries to trenches and from behind barricades. Not that they are to be compared with the Turks or the Khurâsânîs; in most cases they use them only at the entries to trenches or from behind barricades. The others are horsemen and riders, and horses and riders are the pivot of an army. They it is who withdraw and return to the charge, who fold the battalions around themselves as a letter is folded, and then scatter them like hair. No ambush, advance-guard or rear-guard duty but is always entrusted to the best of the mounted troops. Theirs are the glorious days, the famous battles, the vast conquests. Without them there could be no squadrons or battle formations. They it is who carry the standards and banners, the kettledrums, bells and trappings. Theirs are the neighing, the dust flying, the spurring on, the cloaks and weapons flapping in the wind, and the thunder of hooves; they are the unerring in pursuit, the unattainable when pursued.

Source: Excerpt from *The Life and Works of Jabiz*, by Charles Pellat, translated by D. M. Hawkes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969).