

THE EVOLUTION OF BITLESS EQUITATION

Robert Cook

“Perhaps the sentiments contained in the following pages, are not yet sufficiently fashionable to procure them general favor; a long habit of not thinking a thing wrong, gives it a superficial appearance of being right, and raises at first a formidable outcry in defence of custom. But the tumult soon subsides. Time makes more converts than reason.”

- Thomas Paine (Introduction to ‘Common Sense,’ Feb 14, 1776)

The first domestication of the horse, about 5000 years ago, coincided with the building of the pyramids. Horses were kept primarily for meat and milk, rather than for riding. When riding was first attempted, perhaps in the third millennium BC, riders probably had no more than a cord around the horse’s neck and steered with a stick. The next phase of development may have been for them to ride with a simple halter with reins attached. A loop of thong around the lower jaw may have been the precursor to the bit. Archeological evidence is scanty for, as M.S.F. Hood points out, “the equipment of primitive riding is rudimentary.” Native Americans, for example, rode with a loop of horsehair, rope or rawhide around the lower jaw, and one rein. They used the rein as a signal for stopping but steered with their legs. C.M. Russell’s description of Native Americans preparing to hunt buffalo provides a 19th century word picture of an earlier age. “Tain’t a minute till they’re all stripped to the clout an’ moccasins, forkin’ their ponies naked like themselves, barrin’ two half hitches of rawhide on the lower jaw”¹

The bit method of control was probably introduced fairly early in the history of domestication. The primitive ‘bits’ would have been made out of twisted vines or some other plant material, but bone, horn and finally metal followed, probably rather quickly. The first crude bits were probably devised and used by the Scythian horseman, ca. 5000 BC. In the Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, is an Egyptian bit from the fourteenth century BC. A jointed snaffle with four spikes lateral to the canons is designed to compress the horse’s lips and jaw from the outside of the mouth. With increasing severity of bits, there followed a long period of history in which the aids were used in the hope of enforcing commands rather than indicating wishes. The middle Bronze Age started after 1800 BC and bronze chariots are recorded in Palestine, ca. 1730 BC. Presumably, bronze bits were also in use at this period. On the tomb of Horenhab of Egypt (ca.1600 BC) a horseman is depicted on an obviously spirited horse ridden in a snaffle bridle of surprisingly modern design” (E. Hartley Edwards). Curb bits were in use in the third century BC and were first recorded in use by the Celts of Gaul during the fourth century BC.

¹ -‘Trails Plowed Under’, p143. See p 96 in the Sid Richardson Collection

Mounted warfare was known in 1700 BC ² but, as an instrument of war, the horse was used in chariots well before it became common, sometime in the eighth century BC, to fight on horseback. "Pictures of ridden horses are rare before 700 BC" (Anderson 1961). In his book, "*Origin and Influence of the Thoroughbred*" Ridgeway uses an illustration depicting chariot horses in Egypt (ca. 1321-1300 BC) being controlled with a bitless bridle. Two reins are attached to a severely dropped noseband. The upper rein appears to be a sort of bearing rein and the charioteer holds the lower rein. As with the bit, the early bitless bridles may have relied on force rather than finesse. Nosebands at a certain level would have the effect of pressing on the fleshy portion of the muzzle and would 'control' by obstructing the airway. When the nosebands are placed higher, and rest on the peak of the nasal bone, suffocation is no longer a factor in control and good horsemen learn to communicate rather than command.

A sixth century B.C illustration (Boetian) shows a cart in a bridal procession being drawn by a pair of mules. The carter controls simply by means of a whip and there is no evidence of a bit or bridle.

An early fifth century BC vessel (Attic) in the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston shows a carefully delineated Greek pack donkey carrying a load on a wooden-framed saddle (Fig 1). The donkey wears what Anderson describes as a halter. The lead rope is apparently attached to the packsaddle at one end and is described as being attached to the chinstrap of the halter at the other end. The donkey's head is strongly flexed and the front line of the nasal bone is vertical to the ground. But judging by the position of the noseband, it was resting on the nasal bone and would not have interfered with respiration. A particularly interesting feature of the bridle's design is the presence of two crossover straps. These run from a point high on the cheekpiece on one side, at a level just above the corner of the eye. They end at the metal ring on the noseband on the opposite side of the head.³

Halters were probably invented before bridles. Further evidence cited by Anderson on the design of early halters comes from a picture of a drinking vessel in the British Museum (Fig 2). The vessel is in the form of a mule's head with its ears laid back and its mouth wide open (Attic, mid-fifteenth century BC). The mule wears what is plainly a halter with a low set noseband but with the same crossover straps as in the pack donkey but her more clearly indicated. This item supports Anderson's later description of the design of halters at this period of history (see below)

A splendid Etrurian vase from about 530 BC in the Louvre shows an intrepid mounted hunter with javelin, riding bareback and chasing a fine pair of antlered

² The stirrup was invented by the Sarmatians, ca. 2000 BC and re-invented by the Chinese in 300 AD

³ This halter, with small changes, could easily be made identical to the present day Bitless Bridle.

stags. The horse has a bitless bridle with noseband (on the nasal bone), browband and throatlatch. Its mouth is shown wide open but this may have been an artistic convention to indicate liveliness, rather than because it had a foreign body in its oral cavity. These and previous illustrations are part of J.K. Anderson's 1961 book on "Ancient Greek Horsemanship." Anderson suggests that the open mouth "merely provides the artist with an opportunity to indulge his love of white paint."

Another bitless bridle variation is seen in an Attic, mid-fifth century BC vase in the British Museum (Fig 3). The horse wears a halter with a very broad noseband, probably with spikes or studs on the inside. The draughtsmanship is rather poor but if it is to be believed, the bottom edge of the noseband lies in touch with the top edge of the nostril and the corner of the mouth.

A continuation of the idea that horse's can be controlled by pressure across the nose led eventually to the system of control now regarded as the norm for Western horsemanship on the American continent. I refer to the hackamore, and bosal (both bitless bridles) that depend for their effect on nose and chin pressure. Historically, these trace their ancestry back to the horseman of the Iberian Peninsula and *la jaquima*. The tradition was introduced into America by the 16th century Spanish *conquistadors*. They, in turn, had inherited the tradition from the 700-year Moorish occupation of the Iberian Peninsula in the seventh and eighth centuries AD.⁴ In using this system, horses are trained to respond first to the hackamore before introducing a potentially severe curb bit. But used correctly, the curb bit is employed with only the very lightest of pressure on the reins. It has been described as the nose-to-bit system. A masterly, modern exponent of the system is Pat Parelli.

Returning again to the roots of bitless history, Anderson comments on the early distinction that was made between a halter for leading a horse and a bridle for managing a ridden or driven horse. The distinction is illustrated in a vase painted about 540 BC by the Athenian artist Nearchos, found at the Acropolis in Athens (Fig 4). "The four-horse chariot of Achilles is being harnessed; the two yoke horses are already in position, with their bits in their mouths; Achilles is adjusting that of the near-side yoke horse. The near-side trace horse is just being led up, and he wears a halter of a simple type, with a single lead rope fastened under the chin."

In relation to the development of the Bitless Bridle in the 21st century AD it is of interest to make note of the description given by Anderson of the design of the halters in the late centuries BC. Once again, it will be convenient to quote Anderson's description verbatim. "The simplest type of halter consists of a noseband divided into two halves, front and back, held in place by a third strap passing over the horse's head just behind the ears. The junctions between these

⁴ Legend has it that the conquistadors led the Native American natives to believe that their horses wore bits to prevent them from eating people.

straps, on either side of the horse's head, are normally formed by two large rings, presumably of metal. A single lead rope is fastened to the back part of the noseband [the chinstrap], under the chin. More elaborate examples have browbands and throat lashes, or [and I add emphasis here] *two straps crossing under the chin in place of a simple band.*" Anderson does not, at this point, make a cross reference back to the Greek pack donkey (Fig 1) or to the mule head drinking vessel (Fig 2), though it seems likely that this is what he is describing.

I have deliberately gone into some detail in the foregoing paragraphs to outline the development of bitless communication, whether by halter or bridle. As there can only be a limited number of ways in which a strap device can be designed for a horse's head, the differences – though minimal – are nevertheless important. The development of the Bitless Bridle in the 21st century AD makes use of all that has gone before but adds small but vital detail. The development over time can be described in two paragraphs.

First, a crossover feature was introduced in the design of a halter. This we have seen was already present in the fifth century BC (Figs 1 & 2). Fast forward from there to 1894, when McCleod patented a bitted bridle with a crossover feature (Fig 5). In this bridle, reins ran forward from the rider's hands, through the snaffle ring, and then crossed over behind the chin to finish by joining over the poll. In 1980, Woodruff modified this bridle to produce a halter with the same crossover feature (Fig 6). But it was a halter for ground control, not a bridle for riding or driving. This same halter is marketed in the USA as the Be Nice Halter. In 1988, Allan Buck, a horseman from California, added reins to the Be Nice halter to produce a bitless bridle and marketed it as the Spirit Bridle. But prior to this, Ink Grimsley, of Spinks, Colorado devised a bridle based on the crossover principle and used it for rodeo work. It was similar to the Spirit Bridle and differed only in having a strip of copper wire sewn on the underside of the crownpiece and browband. This development took place in the early 1950s though no attempt was made to market the design. Grimsley's bridle was used extensively by Leon Manchester of New Jersey and Maryland. Manchester was still using this bridle when I first came to know him in 2005, by which time he was 81.

In 1999, I made some further modifications to the Spirit Bridle to produce the Bitless Bridle, which can serve as both a bridle and a halter (Fig 7 & 8). At the same time, I published research to explain why the bit method of control contravened the principles of equine physiology and was, therefore, a hazard to the health and safety of both horse and rider. It was probably this explanation that was needed to persuade the current horse-owning public to abandon their conviction that a bit was necessary to control a horse. Such convictions, though widespread around the world, were not however without many instructive examples of bitless horsemanship. Jane Digby, that intrepid British explorer and first wife of Lord Enborough, who subsequently married a Syrian sheikh, describing her experiences c.1850, "noticed the skilful manner in which these

Arabs rode their small, strong and agile horses, holding them on a single rein attached to a bitless headstall.”

After five thousand years, a better paradigm in horse communication has been introduced that improves the safety of horse and rider and also improves performance. The crossover feature first recognized in the fifth century BC remains the critical feature of this bridle. Unlike the traditional bitless bridles (the hackamores, bosals, and sidepulls) this new design can be used on all horses, for all disciplines, and by all ages and skills of riders. It represents a long-overdue advance in the welfare of the horse and the evolution of equitation. Taking another leaf out Thomas Paine’s *‘Common Sense’* it could be said that the control of the horse is analogous to the government of men. Whereas the bit is a complex method of government, the bitless method is simple. And like a constitution, “the more simple it is ... the less likely it is to be disordered.” As horsemen we should join Paine in asking whether we wish to govern by “force or friendship.”

Reference

Anderson J.K.: *“Ancient Greek Horsemanship.”* University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles. 1961