

Ancient Origins of Karakul Sheep

By Carole George

To our knowledge, there is no book written entirely about the Karakul sheep. We are pleased to mention that *The Lambs*, which features a flock of pet Karakuls, is forthcoming from St. Martin's Press in spring 2018. While the book is a memoir, it contains historical background about this fascinating heritage breed from Central Asia. A sampling is offered here. In the next issue we'll include an additional excerpt from *The Lambs* describing the Karakul breed's journey to the United States.

Sheep are said to be one of the most ancient species of animal, having survived since the early Ice Age. What is interesting in considering the history of the Karakul breed is that according to Richard Lydekker in *The Sheep and Its Cousins*, the word *sheep* is of ancient Sanskrit derivation, which points to the possibility that sheep originated in the East. (*Sheep* comes from the Sanskrit *avi*, which is a modification of the root *av* that means to keep or to guard.)

Moreover, it has been asserted that the Karakul is one of the earliest breeds of sheep. In summarizing his travels through Arabia in the fifth century B.C., Herodotus, the Father of History, noted



Karakul sheep are an ancient breed from Central Asia, currently listed as Threatened on The Livestock Conservancy's priority list. Photo courtesy of Carole George.

the "remarkable sheep who had flat tails, eighteen inches broad." This fat tail, although not exclusive to the Karakul, is a distinguishing trait of Eastern sheep. The "two great cushions divided by a median cleft" (Lydekker) was considered the "but-ter of Central Asia." It covers the animal's entire rump and can weigh as much as 30 pounds.

The other notable physical characteristic of the Karakuls is their very lean, typically black, legs.

But what truly distinguishes the Kara-

kul sheep is its definition as a fur-bearing sheep. This is the breed from which the fur known as Persian lamb is derived, and this has contributed to their role in the colorful commercial history of the area of the world now known as Central Asia.

It is difficult to imagine a more exotic birthplace for a breed of farm animals. The very mention of ancient Persia immediately conjures up beautiful parks, everything to delight in, the perfect accuracy with which lovely trees have been planted in straight lines, the exquisite scents that mingle in the air, women as slim as cypresses, and poetry recited in voices that are barely audible.

Any exploration of ancient Persia will include the exploits of Alexander the Great, who crossed into Asia Minor in 334 B.C., burned King Darius's symbol of magnificent kingship – his sprawling palace at Persepolis – and plunged all the way across Persia into the far northeastern kingdom of Sogdiana, where the Karakul sheep would have been grazing.

The poor windswept village of Karakul – which provides the name for this breed – is located in the valley of the famous Amu Darya (once called the Oxus) River. Legend has it that the famous tight curls on the pelts of lambs born here were due to a diet of wild wheat. The mountainous deserts with elevations up to 8,000 feet, sparse food supplies, long distances to water, and a generally hard life, produced the extremely hardy Karakuls.



Young Karakul sheep, as depicted in the upcoming book *The Lambs*. Photo courtesy of Carole George.

It is not surprising that people in this area are now phenomenally enterprising, now that they are relieved of Soviet restrictions. The Sogdians whom Alexander the Great encountered were not warriors like their neighbors. They were famous as deal-makers and were the undisputed masters of the trade routes (later known as the Silk Road) for 700 years. From the age of five, Sogdian boys were prepared for a life of trading: they were taught Arabic, Greek, Chinese, Turkic, and Tibetan, and as soon as they were old enough to leave home, they went out to sell the lush fruits and flowers that grew in the river valleys, the expensive silk fabrics, and the treasured skins of newborn Karakul lambs.

Within this area was the former khanate of Bokhara, the richest emirate in Central Asia. It is now roughly the territory occupied by the Republic of Uzbekistan. Its capital was the great caravan city of Bokhara, which is situated on an oasis and was a natural stop on the long trade routes. Although silk, with its lustrous sheen and high tensile strength, symbolized the romance of the network, the pelts of the Karakul lambs were an extremely important component of the trading scheme.

In the old town of Bokhara was the famed Karakul bazaar. It had a premier location near the city's principal building, the

For More Reading

If you are interested in additional reading about the area of the world from which the Karakuls have come to us, we offer the following suggestions:

Glazebrook, Philip. *Journey to Khiva, A Writer's Search for Central Asia*. New York, Tokyo, London: Kodansha International Ltd., 1996.

Hopkirk, Peter. *The Great Game, The Struggle for Empire in Central Asia*. New York, Tokyo, London: Kodansha International Ltd., 1994.

Krist, Gustav. *Alone Through the Forbidden Land, Journey in Disguise through Soviet Central Asia*. Translated by E. O. Lorimer. London: Faber and Faber Limited, 1938.

Lane Fox, Robin. *The Search for Alexander*. Boston, Toronto: Little, Brown and Company, 1980.

Vambéry, Arminius. *History of Bokhara, Travels in Central Asia*. New York: Praeger, 1970. (Originally published London: H. S. King & Co., 1873.)

Citadel, which was the fortress of the final emirs. People from all corners of the world were attracted to this constellation of covered bazaars. There were separate bazaars for products ranging from books and gold to booths for butchers and teashops.

Even when the advent of shipping forced the old camel caravan routes into gentle decline, and many Persian lambskins were sent to the fur market at Nishni Novgorod on the east side of the Caspian Sea—or still later when Leipzig fur specialists improved the treatment for the hides and the principal market shifted to the other side of the Caspian—the pastoralist nomads maintained their valuable flocks and continued to deliver the

black lambskins to Bokhara. Despite its dilapidated state, the famous old Karakul bazaar continued to attract international fur buyers who wanted to purchase at the source. ❖



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