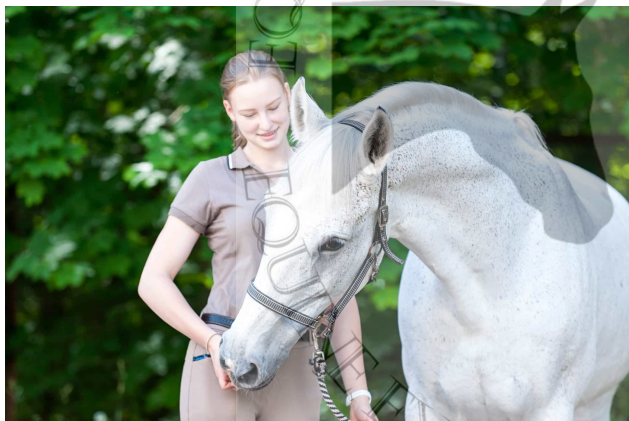


The Horse-Human Relationship: From Prehistory to Today

A zooarchaeologist presented a brief history of how horses and humans have coexisted and interacted over the the millennia at the International Society of Equitation Science convention.

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The future of the horse-human relationship likely lies in equine-assisted therapy and other ways of 'valuing horses for all the things they can do,' said Olsen. | Photo: iStock

In the beginning—nearly 4 million years ago—equids and humans coexisted and traveled along the same paths in ancient territories located in modern-day Tanzania. This coexistence was, said one expert, the starting point of a long and deep bispecies relationship that's had a critical role in shaping today's world.

"Horses have played a variety of vital roles in societies over the millennia, including ones related to diet, transportation, work, religion, property and commodities, military service, status, and sports," said Sandra Olsen, PhD, zooarchaeologist and professor at the University of Kansas.

Olsen spoke on the topic of how humans and horses began this relationship during her plenary lecture at the 15th Conference of the International Society for Equitation Science (ISES), held Aug. 19-21 in Guelph, Ontario, Canada.

"They've been valued across the history of time for various reasons, including their milk, their meat, and their power," she continued. "And in modern times, of course, they're often valued for their companionship. So the relationship has gradually improved, if we look at things from the horse's point of view."

That evolution hasn't followed a continuous and fluid slope, however, said Olsen. Depending on the region of the world, the culture, resources, and political situation, horses have experienced highs and lows in their relationship with humans, and even gaps where the evolution might have stopped entirely in certain regions while possibly progressing in others.

Proof of those gaps, she said, lies, for example, in DNA evidence revealing that our modern-day riding horses didn't descend from the horses of the Botai populations, believed to be the first domesticated equids. The Copper Age **Botai people** lived more than 5,000 years ago in north Kazakhstan. These populations used horses mainly for meat and milk, although some were probably ridden for herd management, based on signs of bit wear on ancient teeth samples from that region, Olsen said.

DNA investigations indicate that the Botai horses gave rise to the Przewalski's horse; hence, their husbandry knowledge—which appears to have been advanced compared to other world regions at the time—might not have continued into later generations.

Further, some ancient cultures appeared to have the capacity to "read" horses' emotions, as evidenced by the art they created. "We can detect a certain sensibility of Paleolithic artists to the facial expressions and body language of horses in their artistic creations, indicating that they were skilled observers and recognized the importance of understanding animal behavior," Olsen said. She referred specifically to a horse effigy that "has its mouth open as though caught in the middle of vocalizing," she explained. "Its eyes are bulging, and its ears are pricked. Its head is thrown back."

However, this sensibility likely served a different purpose in Paleolithic times than it does today: "Recognizing horses' expressions may have helped these humans better understand their prey and therefore made them better hunters," Olsen said.

In many periods of history, horses represented status and wealth, and they often received significant attention from their owners and handlers to make them appear elegant and attractive, said Olsen.

"They were adorned in many ways," she said. "They trimmed the mane and did special things with the tails; they wove beautiful feathers into the hair and generally decked them out to be spectacular."

While this might also infer excellent care and welfare, a lack of knowledge about horses' needs might have prevented even the most well-meaning owners from providing ideal conditions.

"Better welfare for horses has been long overdue, and it's dependent on the horses' value and the culture's economic and political conditions, but also on society's compassion for animals, which has grown tremendously over the past 100 years," Olsen said.

The future of the horse-human relationship likely lies in equine-assisted therapy and other ways of "valuing horses for all the things they can do," she said.

