

Britains figures - Arabs of the Desert

Introduction



Arabs of the Desert.
From Source 4.

Britains produced their first set of Bedouin Arabs, in 1911, and in various configurations continued to do so until 1966, when most of the firm's hollow cast production ceased.

The figures mirrored the public imagination of "Arabs", as also shown by other toy soldier firms.

Terminology

The terms used here to describe the figures may not be the proper words for Bedouin Arabic clothing and weapons, but reflects the style normally used by collectors of old Britains toy soldiers.

A *burnoose* is a long cloak of coarse woollen fabric, with a hood; see [Burnous](#) (Wikipedia).

A *scimitar* is a sword with a curved blade design; the name can be used to refer to almost any Middle Eastern sword with a curved blade; see [Scimitar](#) (Wikipedia).

A *jezail* is a simple, cost-efficient and often hand-made musket common to Central Asian and some parts of the Middle East; see [Jezail](#) (Wikipedia).

The basic sets

Set Title
No.

Pre-war Post-war

164	Arabs on Horses (<i>Original title: Bedouin Tribesmen, mounted</i>)	1911- 1941	1946- 1966
187	Arabs on Foot (<i>Original title: Bedouin Arabs, on foot</i>)	1914- 1941	1948- 1960
193	Arabs on Camels	1916- 1941	--
224	Arabs on Horses, on Camels and on Foot, with Coconut and Date Palms	1925- 1941	1946- 1965
2046	Arabs of the Desert. A Display Box of Assorted Arabs, mounted and on foot	--	1950- 1966

The figures reflect various styles of dress, some maybe inspired by the North African tradition, rather than the Arabic proper.

Arabs of the Desert (Illustrations from the 1960 Britains' catalogue)



Set 164 (*above*) had 5 mounted figures as its basic configuration (1 deleted in 1960):

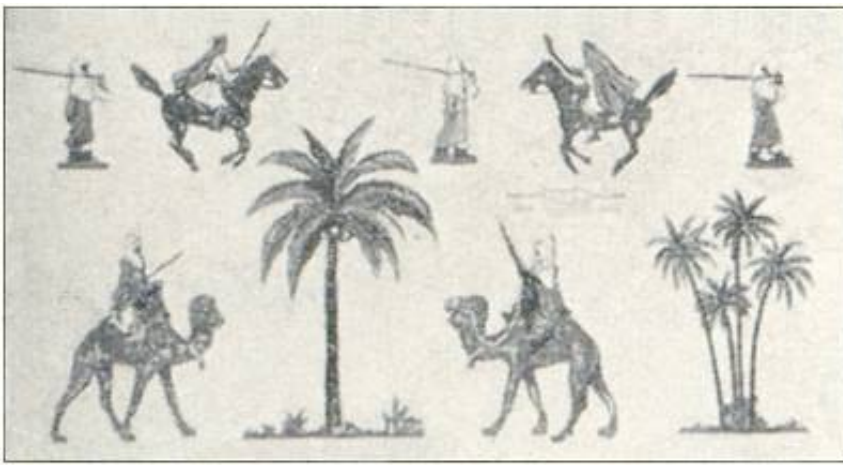
- 1 in blue burnoose, with scimitar, on brown horse
- 2 in red burnooses, with scimitars, on brown horses
- 2 in green burnooses, with jezails, on black horses.



Set 187 (*above*) had 8 marching figures as its basic configuration (1 deleted in 1960):

- 3 in blue burnooses, with jezails
- 3 in red burnooses, with jezails
- 2 in yellow burnooses, with jezails.

As a rule of thumb for pre-war figures, horsemen with jezails were mounted on black horses, whereas the rest were mounted on brown horses. However as for post-war figures, the above illustration of Set 164 seems to indicate that a white or grey horse was used for one of the men with jezail.



Set 224

Set 193 held 6 figures on camels:

- 2 in blue burnouses, with jezails
- 2 in red burnouses, with jezails
- 2 in green burnouses, with jezails

Set 224 combined figures from the previous three sets:

- 2 mounted on horses (1 with scimitar, 1 with jezail)
- 4 marching with jezails (1 deleted in 1960)
- 2 mounted on camels, with jezails
- 1 coconut palm and 2 date palms (1 deleted in 1960).



Set 2046

Set 2046, introducing a new running figure and a new weapon - the spear or lance, had the following configuration:

- 4 mounted on horses (1 with scimitar, 1 with jezail, 2 with spears) (1 spearman deleted 1960-1962)
- 4 marching with jezails
- 4 running (1 with sword, 1 with jezail, 2 running with spears).

The Picture Pack series (Illustrations from a reprint of the 1954 Britains' catalogue)



1232B
Mounted,
with Spear.



40B
Mounted,
with Scimitar.



829B
Mounted,
with Rifle.

In 1953 ventured into selling figures of their first grade series as single figures, introduced as the Picture Pack series.

This venture lasted until 1959. During this period, and/or later, it was also possible to buy similar figures unpainted.



53B
Marching.



1229B
Running
with Scimitar.



1231B
Running
with Rifle.

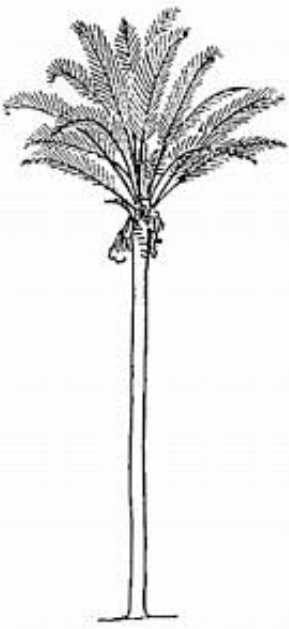
Anyway, the catalogues presented nice photos of the various figures, showing the various types under the header of *Arabs*.

Further, we are presented with the company's own designation of the figures and weapons.

Both the mounted and running figures armed with jezails/muskets, are mentioned as being armed "with rifles", the term musket was probably being considered to old fashioned/unfamiliar. The weapon however, was still as introduced in 1911.

As for the painting of these Picture Pack figures I have no specific knowledge, but I presume they followed the pattern of the multiple figure sets.

Accessories



The palm trees used in the Bedouin Arab sets were also found in the Zoo Series (*Nos. 919: Coconut Palm* and *920: Date Palm*).

Being of South Asian or South American origin, the coconut palm may be a bit out of style, or at least rare, in a North African or Middle Eastern setup. But as palm tree goes, it looks its part as just a "palm tree", as seen *left* in an illustration from Source 4.



A further set, *No. 301: Arabs (mounted and dismounted), with Bell Tent*, included a "... round brown cloth tent with a red tassel". (Source 1)

The tent was thus not a proper Bedouin Arab style tent, as seen *above* in an illustration from Source 4, but a just "a tent".

Weapons



A jezail, flintlock musket. From Jezail

(National Maritime Collection).

The weapons shown on the figures could be considered as generic indigenous weapons, the sword (scimitar) and the spear being traditional weapons used for thousands of years, supplemented by the musket (jezail) of newer origin.



A scimitar.

From Scimitar

(National Maritime Collection).

When production of the toy soldiers began, the jezail in real life may have substituted by rifles of European manufacture. However, the flintlock musket still had its advantages since bullets could be produced locally. The calibre of the jezail shown below is given as 0.75 (19mm)



Bedouin Arab, drawn by Ron Poulter.

From Wargames Illustrated,

No. 263, June 2007.

The article Resistance in the Desert - A Wargamers complete guide to the Armed Opposition to France's Expansion Across the Algerian-Moroccan Frontier at the Turn of the Century by Ian Croxall (The Red Shadow) gives a thorough description of various types of firearms used in "the desert".

Friend or foe ...

From a purely toy soldier perspective the figures are probably meant to represent some sort of generic opposing force, of almost any North African or Middle Eastern origin.

A Britains' advertisement from October 1916 mentions Set 193 as being "Enemy Arabs on Camels" - and the Senussi uprising in Egypt and their allies from various Bedouin tribes springs to mind as a possible inspiration at that time.

In the 1917 Catalogue however, and perhaps illustrating a change in public opinion due to the Arab Revolt against Turkey, a drawing of three figures was subtitled "A Group of Arab Desert dwellers who assumes alternately the role of friend and foe."

The figures



A camel rider from Britains Set 224, seen for sale on eBay.

The camel rider is probably one of the most impressive and elegant of all Britains figures, reflecting the archetype of Bedouin Arabs, mounted on a slow but steady moving "Ship of the Desert", as camels are often called.. Throughout its life span, the figure was always produced carrying a jezail, and with the rider in blue, red or green burnoose.





Two figures from Britains Set 164: Arabs on Horses.

The figures catches the vigour of a mounted attack, and perhaps one would rather be on the side of the mounted men, than with their opponents ...

The figures show the scimitar and the jezail arms, however the tip of the jezail is missing (i.e. not cast on this figure).

The distinctive tail-up horse [1](#)) used for the mounted figures was not altered during production.

Lacking the characteristic chiselled head of an Arabian horse, but at least showing the high tail carriage, the horses may not claim to be of proper Arabian breed. Since their riders with their coloured robes does look like being inspired by the North African clothing style, a Barb horse could be the one giving pedigree to the models.

Follow the below links for information on the significance of the horse to the Desert Bedouin, and the two breeds:

- [Arabian Horse](#) and [Barb Horse](#) (Wikipedia)
- [Horse of the Desert Bedouin](#) (Piner Plantation Arabs, South Carolina).





In true toy soldier style, the Bedouin Arabs were also made marching, carrying a jezail on the left shoulder.

Displayed as a marching unit, similar to e.g. European infantry, the figures may look a bit out of place, but spread out in a display - and perhaps mixed with other figures - they do not look that odd.

Britains Set 187: Marching Bedouin Arab, with jezail. Photo: Graham Merkert, eBay.

Set 187 consisted of 3 figures wearing red burnouses, 3 in blue and 2 in yellow burnouses.



The running figure was introduced in 1950, using the jezail and sword arm from the mounted figures.

Britains Set 2046: Running Bedouin Arab, with jezail. Photo: Graham Merkert, eBay.

A new type of arm, carrying a spear, was introduced at that time as well.

A rather smart figure, with much élan. I have seen examples wearing red, blue or yellow burnouses, but I am not aware of any green types.



The British Lieutenant Conder, leading a survey party near Gaza in 1875 [2](#)), was attacked by 20 mounted members of the Tiyaha tribe, and described his opponents as "*... all well mounted and armed with swords, guns, and pistols, and with great lances of cane with long iron heads and tufts of ostrich feathers.*"

Britains Set 2046: Running Bedouin Arab, with spear. Photo: Graham Merkert, eBay.

Although not displaying ostrich feathers, the spearman is an interesting figure too.

Sources

1. *Armies of the World, Britains Ltd. Lead Soldiers 1925 - 1941* by Joe Wallis, Privat udgivelse, 1993, ISBN 0-9605950-2-3.
2. *Regiments of all Nations, Britains Ltd. Lead Soldiers 1946-66* by Joe Wallis, Privat udgivelse, 1981, ISBN 0-9605950-0-7.
3. *The Great Book on Britains - 100 Years of Britains Toy Soldiers* by James Opie, New Cavendish Books, London 1993, ISBN 1-872727-32-8.
4. *Highroads of Geography - Introductory: Round the World with Father*, Thomas Nelson and Sons, London 1916 (Project Gutenberg).



These illustrations from Source 4 may be used as inspiration for displaying the figures.

Postscript - Eastern Peoples

Although not part of the *Native Warriors* section in the Britains catalogues but the *Historical* section, figures from the Eastern Peoples' sets will match almost any Middle-Eastern indigenous set-up.

Britains thought of these sets as their parallel to nativity scene sets produced by e.g. German toy companies, and the figures were introduced at Christmas 1937.

Set No. Title	Pre-war	Post-war
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1313 Eastern Peoples (12 figures) 1937-1941 1954-1959

1314 Eastern Peoples (20 figures) 1937-1941 --

From the outset, the sets consisted of the following figures:

1313 An Eastern man and woman, a boy, a shepherd; with a camel, sheep, cow, donkey and coconut palms

1314 Two Eastern men and a woman, a boy, a shepherd; with camels, donkeys and coconut and date palms



*Part of Britains Set 1313:
Eastern Peoples, from the 1950'ies; seen for sale on eBay.*

The animals included in the set may have changed over time, but the figures seen in the picture, are close to the 1950'ies configuration; however 1 date palm and 1 goat is missing in the photo.

According to Source 1 one of the Eastern men in Set 1314 were painted like the shepherd to the left, but having a "plain" moveable arm in stead of the "shepherd's crook" arm seen here.

The *Eastern man* and the *Shepherd* figures could particular useful together with the Bedouin Arab figures, or they could serve as guides/interpreters together with European soldier figures.

Per Finsted

Noter:

1) The type was only used in one other set, *No. 152 North American Indians on Horses*, where two braves with tomahawks were mounted on this type of horse.

2) From the article *On Bedouins Wars, Honour and Diplomacy* by Larry Winter (Portraits of Distinction).