

Riding High – horses, power and settler society, c.1654 – 1840.* *Kronos*, vol. 29, Environmental History, Special Issue, Nov. 2003.

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Although species of the genus *equus* – like the zebra and ass – have been present in Africa since earlier times, the horse (*Equus caballus*) is not indigenous, but was introduced into the continent. Although the horse was in regular use in North and West Africa from 600 AD, there were none in the southern tip prior to European colonisation.¹ African Horse Sickness and trypanosomiasis presented a pathogenic barrier to horses reaching the Cape overland.² *Equus* was an element of the ‘portmanteau biota’ that followed European settlement of southern Africa from the mid-seventeenth century.³ The early modern colonial state that had come into being by the nineteenth century – against resistance from the metropole – was based, at least in part, on the power of the horse in the realm of agriculture, the military and communications. This paper seeks to explore a particular facet of horse-human relationships, focusing on their introduction at the Cape and the consequent symbolic and practical ramifications.

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¹ For the horse, particularly for descriptions of how the horse played a role in major shifts in the balance of power in West Africa see Robin Law, *The Horse in West African History* (Oxford University Press, 1980).

² African horse sickness is a serious viral disease of horses, mules and donkeys. It is endemic to the African continent, and is characterised by respiratory and circulatory damage, accompanied by fever and loss of appetite. The main tsetse-transmitted trypanosomes of Equidae are *T. brucei*, *T. congolense* and *T. vivax*.

³ A.W. Crosby, *Ecological Imperialism: The Biological Expansion of Europe, 900 to 1900* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1986).

This paper may be read as part of what has been termed the ‘animal turn’ in the social sciences.⁴ Recent historiography is beginning to explore the importance of animals in human affairs and to find that they have their own histories independent and yet revealing of human history.⁵ This new turn has been inspired, or at least encouraged, by the encounter with new theoretical ideas derived from social theory, cultural studies, feminism, post-colonial studies, and psychology.⁶ The ‘animal turn’ explores the spaces which animals occupy in human society and the manner in which animal and human lives intersect, showing how diverse human factions construct a range of identities for themselves (and for others) in terms of animals.⁷ It is argued that attention should turn to the cultural meaning of non-humans in the histories, anthropologies, sociologies and geographies – the *stories* – of everyday life.⁸ Rather than conceptualising animals as simply elements of ecological, agricultural or biogeographical configurations, they can be understood through their role and agency in human cultures. What is emphasised here is the consideration of a widened cultural

⁴ There are currently at least four major journals that publish in the field of animal-related topics: *Anthrozoos*, *Animal Welfare*, *Journal of Animal Ecology* and *Society and Animals*. There is also a growing literature on animal histories like Harriet Ritvo (1987) as well as such ‘standards’, like K. Thomas’s *Man and the Natural World* (1983) and J. Serpell’s *In the Company of Animals* (1986). However, there is very little recent scholarship written on animals outside of Europe and North America. A recent edition of the *South African Historical Journal*, 48(2003) included a special feature on “*Canis Familiaris* – A Dog History of South Africa”, edited by L. Van Sittert and S. Swart, pp 138 - 251.

⁵ See, for example, conferences and panels on the ‘Animal Turn’, like the Annual Meeting of the American Anthropological Association, San Francisco, 15-20 November 2000; *Animals in History And Culture*, Bath Spa University College, 2000; *Representing Animals*, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2000; *Thresholds of Identity in Human-Animal Relationships: An Interdisciplinary Colloquium*, , University of California, 2000; *Millennial Animals: Theorising and Understanding the Importance of Animals*, University of Sheffield, 2000.

⁶ Philo, C. “Through the Geographical Looking Glass: Space, Place, and Society-Animal Relations”, *Society & Animals*, Vol. 6 No. 2, 1998.

⁷ Baker, S. *Picturing the Beast: Animals, Identity and Representation* Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993; Franklin, A. *Animals and Modern Cultures: A Sociology of Human-Animal Relations in Modernity* London: Sage, 1999; Henninger-Voss, M. *Animals in Human Histories: The Mirror of Nature and Culture* (Rochester: University of Rochester Press, 2002); Manning, A and Serpell, J. *Animals and Human Society: Changing Perspectives* London: Routledge, 1994; Ritvo, H *The Animal Estate: The English and Other creatures in the Victorian Age* Cambridge Mass: Harvard University Press, 1987; Thomas, K. *Man and the Natural World: Changing Attitudes in England 1500 – 1800* London: Allen Lane, 1983.

⁸ Anderson, K. (1997). A walk on the wild side: a critical geography of domestication. *Progress in Human Geography*, 21, 463-485; Bennett, C. F. (1960). Cultural animal geography: an inviting field of research. *Professional Geographer*, 12(5), 12-14; Wolch, J. & Emel, J. (Eds.) (1998). *Animal Geographies: place, politics and identity in the nature-culture borderlands*. London: Verso.

realm in which animals are more than either ‘resources’ or ‘units of production’. This has initiated the analysis of the use of animals by human society as something other than either ‘natural’ or unproblematic.⁹ Some studies point to how particular human societies wished to exclude particular kinds of animals from their homes (because they were regarded as ‘useless’, ‘wild’ or ‘unclean’). Other studies, like this one, focus not on exclusions, but inclusions – where some animals were incorporated (as ‘useful’, ‘tame’, ‘clean’ or ‘charismatic’). These studies, for example, trace the keeping of domestic animals, like the horse, within the domestic, military and commercial *milieux*. This departure heralds the symbolic dimensions of the encounter between humans and animals, together with the material societal changes. Such codings and transformations become closely entangled in the identity politics of human groups, with animal images and metaphors deployed to reflect human societal strata – and *vice versa*.

In this vein, this paper discusses the history of horses and white settlers at the Cape. Horses were the first domestic stock imported by the settlers after their arrival at the Cape of Good Hope in 1652 and became, horses were integral to their identity as Europeans, used both symbolically and in a material sense to affirm white difference from the indigenous population.¹⁰ The power relations played out through the horse are explored, and contextualised with references to other settler societies. The socio-historical role of the equid in settler society and the divergence in horse culture from c.1796 is discussed. The development of the English Thoroughbred in southern Africa is traced, demonstrating its very different trajectory to the ‘breed’ of horse, which became known as the ‘Cape horse’, which differed both phenotypically and functionally.

⁹ See discussion by Yarwood, R., Evans, N. and Higginbottom, J. (1997) ‘The contemporary geography of indigenous Irish livestock’. *Irish Geography* 30, 17-30, p. 17.

¹⁰ On more general horse history see Barclay, Harold *The Role of the Horse in Man’s Culture* (1980, J.A. Allen & Co.); Chevenix-Trench, Charles, *A History of Horsemanship* (1980, Doubleday) and Clutton-Brock, Juliet, *Horse Power* (1992, Harvard University Press). For the early South African period see Schreuder, H.A. Wyndham, *The Early History of the Thoroughbred Horse in South Africa* (London: Humphrey Milford/Oxford University Press, 1924); and J.J. Nel, *Perdeteelt in Suid-Afrika, 1652-1752.*, MA, Stellenbosch, 1930. For an analysis of the equine dimension of the period leading up to and during the South African war Harold Sessions, *Two Years with the Remount Commission* (London: Chapman and Hall, 1903) is a useful primary source. For popular reading see Jose Burman, *To Horse and Away* (Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1993) or Daphne Child, *Saga of the South African Horse* (Cape Town, Howard Timmins, 1967).

As necessary as bread?

In the early seventeenth century, the *Vereenigde Oost-Indisch Compagnie* (Dutch East India Company, VOC) sought, like other European maritime powers, to entrench their mercantile interest in India and the Far East. The Cape's strategic positioning, midway between Europe and the East Indies on contemporary maritime routes, and the region's agreeable climate, rendered it potentially useful as a site for European settlement. In 1652 the VOC commissioned Jan van Riebeeck to establish a re-provisioning station at the Cape, to develop a meat supply from the Khoikhoi, and to cultivate fresh produce. In 1657, one year before the first import of slaves to the colony, the VOC released nine of its employees from their contracts, creating the first land-holding, free burgher community at the Cape.¹¹ They were intended to establish independent commercial farms that would provide the settlement with a steady food supply. The indigenous Khoisan¹² proved reluctant to enter the settler-controlled wage labour economy, which both exasperated and mystified the colonists.¹³ This added to the perceived necessity for equine draught power.

There is evidence to suggest the existence of only one feral horse pre-Van Riebeeck, possibly the survivor of a shipwreck.¹⁴ He was observed to be wearing a decaying rope halter, and was so wild he could not be caught. Consequently, the settlement initially faced construction with no draught animals. It was not part of the Dutch social tradition to use oxen for draught. Moreover, while oxen were occasionally ridden by some indigenous groups, controlled by a stick thrust through their nostrils, they were untrained in drawing wheeled vehicles.¹⁵

¹¹ R. Ross, *Cape of Torments: Slavery and Resistance in South Africa* (London, 1983).

¹² For a discussion of the nomenclature, see Shula Marks, 'Khoisan Resistance to the Dutch in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Journal of African History*, 13 (1972), pp.55-80.

¹³ For discussion see Richard Elphick, *Kraal and Castle, Khoikhoi and the Founding of White South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1977) pp. 90-110.

¹⁴ Leibbrandt: *Letters Despatched* Vol. I. P.31.

¹⁵ Travelling by ox was a deeply unsatisfying mode of transport – as David Livingstone observed two centuries later. David Livingstone, *Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa*, (London, 1857) Chapter Eighteen. See also William Burchell, *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa*, vol. ii (London: 1824) p.188.

Van Riebeeck wished to reshape the landscape, to change the native ecosystem. The first white settlers attempted what is common to most settlers – to make themselves *at home* on the land by making it *like* ‘home’. One aspect of this was the introduction of horses, which were not only an alien species from the metropole, but had the potential to transform the physical environment with their draught power.¹⁶ Van Riebeeck wished to reshape the land itself with horses: he wanted to remove the bushes, plough the soil, and cut down shrubs and trees, with that arboreal animosity common to settler societies, and encircle his settlement with a hedge of wild almonds.¹⁷ He argued that horses would prove invaluable in transporting lumber, sand and clay and firewood to make bricks for construction, and for revolutionising agriculture at the settlement with ploughing and threshing.¹⁸

The Company, however, acceded to requests that delivered immediate material results, and his written requests were ignored by his superiors in Amsterdam.¹⁹ Moreover, the original plan was not to create a colony, but rather merely a refreshment station at which to refuel ships *en route* from Holland to the East. Horses and free burghers were inextricably entangled in Van Riebeeck’s changing vision for the development of the country; with enough horses he believed he could provide provisions for the Eastern settlements – and fashion a colony rather than merely a provisioning station.²⁰ He attempted to persuade the Company by arguing that only horses would allow for the exploration of the hinterland. In May 1653, he observed ‘I wish we had a dozen [horses], when we could ride armed to some distance in the interior, to see whether anything for the advantage of the Company is to be found there...’²¹ He argued that it would accelerate the settling

¹⁶ For a discussion see Thomas Dunlap, *Nature and the English Diaspora – environment and history in the United States, Canada, Australia and New Zealand* (Cambridge University Press, 1999).

¹⁷ *Uitgaande briewe* no.493, p.670.

¹⁸ It was a rudimentary system: horses turned the ground over with a massive plough requiring eight or ten horses, and the harvested grain was trodden out by horses on circular threshing floors in the open air.

¹⁹ A.J.H. van der Walt, *Die Ausdehnung der Kolonie am Kap der Guten Hoffnung (1700-1779) eine historisch-ökonomische Untersuchung über das Werden und Wesen des Pionierlebens im 18. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Ebering, 1928) p.2

²⁰ *Uitgaande briewe* no.493, p.143

²¹ *Uitgaande briewe* no.493, p.143

period, saving both time and human labour (particularly after he erected a horse mill in May 1657).²² He further contended that horses would make the settlers independent of the Khoikhoi, enabling them to acquire their own construction materials and wood, thus freeing them from an otherwise unavoidable policy of conciliation.²³

Accordingly, Van Riebeeck argued that his biggest problem was the continual shortage of horses. He wrote in his journal that horses were '*soo nodigh als broot in den mont zyn*' ('Horses are as necessary as bread in our mouths.')

²⁴ It was to become a perpetual refrain. He recorded in November 1654, 'it is to be wished that we had a few more horses than the 2 we have at present, both of which are being used for brick-making. We should then be able to get from the forest everything we need, both timber and firewood, as the roads are quite suitable for wagons'. In April 1655, he wrote, 'we are therefore still urgently in need of another 6 or 8 horses.'²⁵ He judged horses to be his 'greatest and principal need', demanding: 'Horses! Give me more horses!'²⁶ His requests became petitions, which became pleas, but remained ignored by Amsterdam.²⁷

Zebra Crossing?

Van Riebeeck was hampered by two factors: the strict economy of the VOC and the Company's desire to maintain the region as a refreshment station and not to develop it as a colony in its own right. He was thus refused, with the Company suggesting that he avail himself of the 'wilde paarden', 'indigenous horses', the

²² J. Van Riebeeck (ed. H.B. Thom), *Journal of Jan Van Riebeeck, vol II, 1656-1658* (A.A. Balkema, 1954), p.116. S.F. du Plessis, *Die verhaal van die dagverhaal van Jan van Riebeeck* (D. Litt., University of Pretoria, 1934); *Dagverhaal van Jan van Riebeeck, Commandeur aan de Kaap de Goede Hoop*. (Gravenhage: Nijhoff, 1892-1893) p.434. *Uitgaande briewe* no. 493, p.143.

²³ *Dagverhaal van Jan v. Riebeeck*, p.446.

²⁴ H.C.V. Leibbrandt: *Précis of the Cape Archives: Letters Despatched 1652 -62* , voli(Cape Town, 1900) p.407.

²⁵ J. Van Riebeeck (ed. H.B. Thom), *Journal of Jan Van Riebeeck, vol I, 1651-1655* (A.A.. Balkema, 1952), p.272, 307.

²⁶ *Uitgaande Briewe* No. 493, p.1041.

²⁷ H.C.V. Leibbrandt, *Précis of the Cape Archives Letters Received 1649 –1662* (I Cape Town, 1898, II Cape Town, 1900) p.253.

zebras and quaggas. Three wild members of the horse family were local to the area – later classified as the mountain zebra (*Equus zebra*), Burchell's zebra (*Equus burchelli*) and the quagga (*Equus quagga*) now extinct.²⁸ Van Riebeeck initially planned to tame them but found that he could not even catch them.²⁹ He recorded in 1660, that one of his explorers, Pieter Meerhoff shot a 'wild horse' [zebra], and while it was down straddled it in order to sever its sinews, but 'the horse rose with him still astride, and immediately jumped a stream ... and [Meerhoff] received a kick in the face.'³⁰ Van Riebeeck noted that the 'horse' was a 'beautiful dapple grey, except that across the crupper and buttocks and along the legs it was ... strangely streaked with white, sky-blue and a brownish-red. It had small ears just like a horse's, a fine head and slender legs like the best horse one could wish for.' He distinguished between quagga (which he observed the locals called *Douqua*), which he likened to mules, and zebra, which he likened to horses (and which the locals called *Haqua*). He tried to get living specimens of either but the Khoikhoi refused to assist, an indication of the dangerous nature of these equids, or, as Van Riebeeck argued, an indication that 'the [Khoikhoi] are beginning to realise more and more that we would thereby be the better able to keep them in submission.'³¹

Kolbe speculated, in 1727, that if domestic stock had not been introduced so rapidly, a more determined and sustained attempt at taming the indigenous 'horses' would have taken place.³² Certainly, even after the introduction of horses and the founding of a embryo-horse industry, indigenous equines with their apparent immunity to horse sickness, proved an inviting proposition.³³ Anecdotal evidence has

²⁸ Colin P. Groves, *Horses, Asses and Zebras in the Wild*, Ralph Curtis Books, 1974. The last quagga died in 1883 in an Amsterdam zoo.

²⁹ *Uitgaande Briewe No. 494 1662/69*. p.943.

³⁰ *Gerrit Van Spaan, *De Gelukzoeker* (Rotterdam: De Vries, 1752) p.28; J. Van Riebeeck (ed. H.B. Thom), *Journal of Jan Van Riebeeck, vol III, 1659-1662* (A.A.. Balkema, 1958), 14 December 1660, p.300.

³¹ Van Riebeeck, *Journal*, p.300.

³² Kolbe, *Beschrywing van die Kaap de G. Hoop*, p. 73.

³³ This does not appear to have been the case without exception. Thomas Baines, for example, recorded that "even the wild quaggas were dying of the horse-sickness", in March 1850, *Journal of Residence in Africa*, Vol II, (Cape Town, The Van Riebeeck Society, 1961) p.217.

it that quagga were more tameable than zebra and only their extinction prevented their use as a viable alternative to horses. The Swedish explorer, Anders Sparrman, noted in 1785, that it was possible to tame zebras, and as they showed little fear they could be turned out with the horse at night to protect them against predators, and further, 'Had the colonists tamed them and used them instead of horses, in all probability they would have been in no danger of losing them, either by the wolves or the epidemic disorder [African horse sickness] to which the horses here as subject.'³⁴ He argued that horses were weaker in the Cape than in Europe, and quaggas or zebras would make better use of the dry pasture available.³⁵ A Cape Town guidebook noted resignedly in 1819, however, that 'the zebra is said to be wholly beyond the government of man.'³⁶

Introducing the horse

Establishing an initial settler equine stock was difficult. The long journey between Holland and the Cape militated against sending Dutch horses, and the VOC resorted instead to sending stock from their base in Java, probably from Sumbawa. Javanese imports were small hardy creatures, thirteen and a half hands high.³⁷ They were also known as 'South East Asia Ponies', an amalgam of Arab and Mongolian breeds, their ancestors having been acquired purportedly from Arab traders in the East Indies.³⁸ Van Riebeeck criticised these first horses as too light, almost like English

³⁴ A. Sparrman, *A voyage to the Cape of Good Hope, towards the Antarctic polar circle, and around the world, but chiefly into the country of the Hottentots and Caffres, from the year 1772 to 1776* (1785, Cape Town: Van Riebeeck Society, 1975-1977.) pp.216-217.

³⁵ A span of zebras were even briefly utilised to run stagecoaches to Pietersburg at end of nineteenth century.

³⁶ Captain Horace Hayes broke a young Burchell's zebra in Pretoria in 1892. The Mazawattee Company also ran two four-in-hand teams of zebras for advertising purposes. See Clive Richardson, *The Horse Breakers* (London: J.A. Allen, 1998) p.121-122. A professor of natural History at Edinburgh from 1882-1927, Cossar Ewart crossed a zebra stallion with pony mares in order to disprove telegony, and a secondary aim of these experiments was to produce a draught animal for South Africa that was less subject to local diseases. W.J. Broderip, *Zoological Recreations* (London: H. Colburn, 1847); *Special Collections L.14.29*. University of Edinburgh.

³⁷ A 'hand' measures 4 inches or 10.16 cm.

³⁸ P.J. Schreuder, 'The Cape Horse – its origin, breeding and development in the Union of South Africa', PhD, Cornell University, 1915.

genets or insubstantial French horses (not sizeable, heavy-built and solid like the draught horses available in Holland).³⁹

Horse power

Horses and white settlers were sent to the Cape in the same year 1652; the horses however were driven onto the island of St. Helena by a storm.⁴⁰ In 1653 four of these Javanese (or more likely, Sumbawa) ponies were imported.⁴¹ In 1659, sixteen more horses were permitted by the Company to be imported from the East in order 'om alle roverye der Hottentotten tegen te staan'('to put an end to theft by the [Khoikhoi]').⁴²

The horse was imported at least in part to instil fear into the Khoikhoi and San, who were beginning to pose a threat to the settlement by raiding. Van Riebeeck argued that a watch of twenty riders would prove a sufficient deterrent.⁴³ In June 1660, the settler authorities used horses to demonstrate settler superiority.⁴⁴ The horses – together with a pack of hunting dogs – were imported, to a certain extent to inspire terror in the Khoikhoi, who were beginning to initiate raids upon the settlement.⁴⁵ On 7 June 1660, the settler authorities used horses to display settler ascendancy to the Khoikhoi who were cattle-raiding '...the Commander, galloping along the near bank towards the farms of the ... Free Burghers, soon disappeared from their view. His purpose was also to demonstrate the speed of the horses, which caused great awe among them.' Van Riebeeck noted with satisfaction that the local

³⁹ Leibbrandt, *Letters Despatched*, vol. iii, p.91.

⁴⁰ Later a handful of these were recaptured (1655 and 1656) and brought to the Cape.

⁴¹ The stallion was eaten by a lion a few days after arrival. Leibbrandt, *Letters Despatched*, vol I, p.90. Sumbawa entered into treaty relations with the Dutch East India Company in 1674, but supplied horses earlier and established itself as chief horse purveyor.

⁴² *Uitgaande Briewe* No. 493, p.1118.

⁴³ *Uitgaande Briewe* No. 494 1662/67 p.65.

⁴⁴ Similarly, In West Africa, for example, horses were often used as symbolic demonstrations of power, in contexts where they were of little military value. Law, *The Horse in West African History*, p.193.

⁴⁵ Leibbrandt: *letters despatched* vol. ii, p.311; *Uitgaande Briewe* no.493 pp. 1098-99.

population were astonished and impressed by horses, because of the ‘miracles’ of speed he performed with them.⁴⁶

Van Riebeeck was drawing on an entrenched tradition as horses were long associated in the western Europe with the society of the elite and with the culture of hegemony. The horse had long distinguished the ruler from the ruled, with the rider a symbol of dominance.⁴⁷ The cost included not only the purchase price, but food, the transport of food and water, protection, structural shelter and space⁴⁸, accoutrements (tack, training devices and tack cleaning materials), shoes or hoof trimming, labour (grooming, exercise and training), and medical attention.⁴⁹ In Europe, the nobility’s focus on a range of equine activities (mounted games, dressage, ladies riding, hunting, carriage or coach-driving, or racetrack), and – as the western/non-western interface grew – an interest in exotic breeds like Arabians and Barbs,⁵⁰ led to a marked and ever-increasing differentiation in varieties of horses, bred for particular social niches. The complex, almost balletic, movements of what we would now call dressage, the style identified as *haute école*, swept Europe. Practitioners were largely of the aristocracy, who had the leisure and financial resources to pursue the *art* – rather than the utilitarian dimension – of riding.

⁴⁶ *Uitgaande Briewe* No. 493, p1098. Later, in the early nineteenth century, when the San suffered massive suppression, the traveller Burchell recorded that ‘A troop of horsemen is the most alarming sight which can present itself to a kraal [homestead] of Bushmen [San] in an open plain, as they then give themselves up for lost, knowing that under such circumstances, there is no escaping from these animals.’ William Burchell, *Travels in the interior of Southern Africa*, vol. ii (London, 1824) p.187.

⁴⁷ B. Tuchman, *The Proud Tower* (MacMillan, New York, 1966). This is buttressed by psycho-social analysis by, for example, Freud, who described the horse as symbol of power. Psychologists suggest that literally ‘looking down on others’ from the back of a horse may increase feelings of pride and self-esteem. D. Toth, ‘The Psychology of Women and Horses’, in GaWaNí PonyBoy *Of Women and Horses* (BowTie, 2000) p.36.

⁴⁸ A horse at pasture requires an acre to sustain its nutritional needs, as a rule, although this varies according to the type of horse, energy output of horse, the nature of the grass, and seasonal climatic variation.

⁴⁹ As observed in a 1603 preface to the *Anatomia and Medicina Equorum*, “in order to sustain political societies, and in order to protect the people who make up these societies, you cannot do without the horse.” Quoted in Pia Cuneo, “Beauty and the Beast: Art and Science in Early Modern European Equine Imagery”, *Journal of Early Modern History* (2000): 269-321, p. 269. Seventeenth century European iconographic representations of the horse emphasized serenely regal control by (patrician) riders.

⁵⁰ Lisa Jardine and Jerry Brotton, *Global Interests: Renaissance Art between East and West* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2000) p.145.

A similar phenomenon was not observable in early settler society at the Cape and horses retained a utilitarian function until the beginning of the nineteenth century. Because most colonists came to South Africa in the service of the VOC, the majority of early settlers represented the lowest class of Holland and Germany's hierarchical societies.⁵¹ Company employment was both hazardous and low paid, thus attracting the poorest elements of European society to its service – men unfamiliar with *haute école* (dressage⁵²).⁵³ In a different way, however, horses did become a symbol of status within the evolving southern African communities. Horses gained a military use from 1670. There were – perhaps consequently – several attacks on horses; two horses were killed in July 1672, for example, by Khoikhoi. It is not certain whether these attacks were motivated with the intent of obliterating horse stock, a desire for food or whether a horse acted as a proxy of white settlement, being perhaps one of its most visible and vulnerable manifestations.⁵⁴ The body of the horse was thus both a symbol of power and perhaps because of it, a site of struggle. In the cultural context of animals and racism, Elder, Wolch, and Emel (1998) have argued that 'animals and their bodies appear to be one site of struggle over the protection of national identity and the production of cultural difference'.⁵⁵

The first armed militia controlled by whites in southern Africa was established by the VOC. At first the Company had no large garrison and therefore relied on a few soldiers supplemented with local farmers and the indigenous people – who volunteered or were compelled to join a *kommando*.⁵⁶ The first *kommando* was

⁵¹ L. Thompson, *A History of South Africa* (New Haven, Yale University Press, 1990) p.35.

⁵² Although, technically dressage stops at *piaffe* and *haute école* continues with the airs above ground, symbolising the ever increasing degrees of collection.

⁵³ In any event, the various differentiated breeds of horses were simply not available.

⁵⁴ Horse maiming was sometimes undoubtedly a form of social rebellion in Europe, for example. It was also a form of psychological terror, of symbolic murder, that resulted from personal feuds between members of the same social class. Roger Yates, Chris Powell, Piers Beirne 'Horse Maiming in the English Countryside: Moral Panic, Human Deviance, and the Social Construction of Victimhood', *Society & Animals*, vol.9, no.1, 2001. Elder, G., Wolch, J., and Emel, J. (1998). Race, place, and the bounds of humanity. *Society & Animals*, 6(2), pp. 183-202.

⁵⁵ Elder, Wolch, and Emel, 'Race, place, and the bounds of humanity', p.184.

⁵⁶ For discussion of Cape defences see O.F. Mentzel, *Life at the Cape in the Mid-eighteenth century, 1784* (Trans by M. Greenlees, Reprinted Cape Town, Darter Brothers, 1920) pp146-156.

established in 1670, which initiated the horse's military role – as opposed to simply draught and transport. By the early nineteenth century, the *kommando* system had become the dominant military mode.⁵⁷ The horse-based *kommando* system extended into politics, culture and social mythology.⁵⁸ Just as in the case of West Africa, the dominance of cavalry had more than solely military implications, it had an important influence on the character of political structure and social institutions.⁵⁹ Horse culture in South Africa reinforced the complex interconnection of military, economic and political power, coupled to social institutions. *Kommando* was part of the social machinery in the construction of settler, particularly Boer, masculine identity. Despite desperate efforts, horses were not contained by white society.⁶⁰ The equine industry did not remain in white hands, by eighteenth century the stud managers were often 'coloured boys' or 'Hottentot[s] or Cape boy[s]'.⁶¹

The growth of the horse trade

Several factors militated against the successful introduction of horses to the Cape. Transportation was difficult – in 1673 a cargo of horses drowned, only two were saved, and in 1690 all horses died on the arduous sea voyage. On land, conditions were equally dangerous. African horse sickness (often dubbed 'distemper')

⁵⁷ Members of the *kommando* were expected to provide their own mount and saddlery, rifle and 30 rounds of ammunition. The *kommando* was made up of mounted marksmen, without uniforms and formal training. Christiaan Grimbeek, 'Die Totstandkoming van die Unieverdegingsmag met Spesifieke verwysing na die Verdedigingswette van 1912 and 1922', D.Phil, University of Pretoria, 1985, p7.

⁵⁸ P.H. Frankel, *Pretoria's Praetorians, Civil-military relations in South Africa* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984).

⁵⁹ Law, *Horse in West African History*, p.184.

⁶⁰ The Spanish government had issued decrees forbidding Indians to own or ride horses.

⁶¹ Wyndam, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.97. Moreover, from the time the Sotho, for example, overcame socio-political and economic hurdles and acquired the first horse, the 'ox without horns' as they called it, in 1825, they re-invented themselves as an equine society. Just as in the Americas, horses endowed their owners with enhanced military capabilities, as well as hunting and transport capacity. Greater mobility in turn meant greater involvement in trade networks. This essay focuses on white society, however. Eric Wolf, *Europe and the People Without History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1982, 1997) p. 177. For a discussion of the equine revolution in Sotho society, for example, see Sandra Swart, 'The 'ox without horns' – the Basotho pony and the transformation of Sotho society, c.1825-2001', International conference on forest and environmental history of the British empire and commonwealth, 19th -21st March 2003 at the University of Sussex, Falmer, Brighton, Sussex.

was a perennial problem.⁶² An acute, febrile and infectious disease, it was the scourge of the wet season – a disease believed by the settlers to be carried by evening miasmas.⁶³ There was no natural fodder – hay or grain – and forage was often of low quality. Predation by lions and other wildlife played a minor role, killing some of the prime stock and necessitating unmitigated vigilance. In June 1656, when his best stallion was eaten by lions, Van Riebeeck anguished: ‘This has greatly inconvenienced us, when one considers all the work done by horses – one alone does more than ten men in pulling the plough, in carrying clay, stone, and timber from the forest...’ Horses occasionally died from settler misuse, and legislation was introduced to prohibit the premature use as colts and fillies, which underlines the importance of horses to the young settlement, and how seriously the administration took them.⁶⁴ As previously discussed, as the indigenous population realised the extent to which horses formed the white power base, there were attacks on horses. Stock theft became increasingly a factor as local communities realised the utilitarian value of the horse to them.

Despite these limiting factors, however, there was a steadily growing horse trade. Although overworked, the Javanese ponies bred successfully, until by 1662 there was a herd of 40. They were now integral in the defence of the settlement, with eighteen mounted men patrolling the border against cattle-raiding Khoisan. By 1667 there were 50 horsemen on watch duty. One of these guards and his mount drowned while drunkenly fording a river. It is significant that the mare was mourned more than the soldier.⁶⁵

Horses ceased to be under the sole control of the authorities in 1665, when a public auction was held and free burghers were granted the right to breed horses.

⁶² See the *Cape of Good Hope Government Gazette*, 17 September 1830 no.1288.

⁶³ It does not spread directly from one horse to another, but is transmitted by midges, which become infected when feeding on infected horses. It occurs mostly in the warm, rainy season when midges are plentiful, and disappears after the frost, when the midges die. Most animals become infected in the period from sunset to sunrise, when the midges are most active.

⁶⁴ *Origineel Plakkaat Boek*, 1735, 1753, p.82.

⁶⁵ Child, *The Saga of the South African Horse*, p.13.

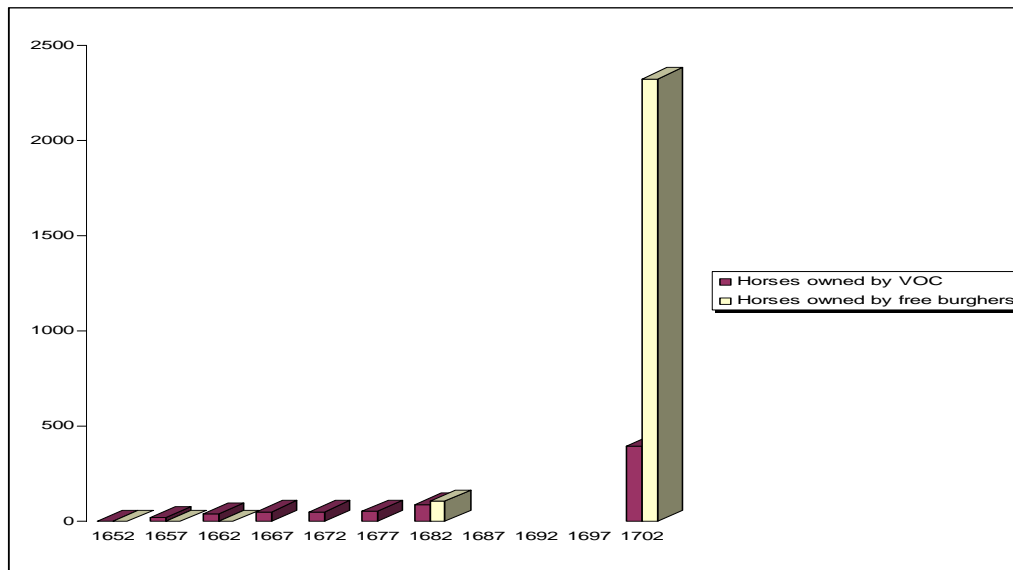
However, they continued to be a public asset, and considered vital to the functioning of the settlement. The polity exercised a controlling hand. In May 1674, for example, a man was prosecuted for shooting his own (rogue) horse.⁶⁶ The rising stock saw an increase in quantity and a decrease in quality. Inbreeding was affecting the herds, certain birth defects – like weak hindquarters – were becoming obvious. In a 1686 *plakkaat*, the governor, Simon van der Stel, tried to prevent the deterioration of stock, imposing a fine of 40 *rixdollars* if colts were used under the age of three years, and importing stud stallions in 1689 (allegedly from Persia).⁶⁷

The number of horses continued to increase. In 1673, two more Javanese ponies were introduced, and in 1676 two horses and four mules from Europe. During the first 125 years of settlement horses were imported from Europe to the Cape only once, all the rest were from the East. In 1683 four horses were imported from Persia via Mauritius, in 1689 eleven horses from Persia. By 1681 the Free Burghers possessed 106 horses, and the Company 91 horses. In 1700, there were 928 horses. By 1715 the Company had 396 horses and the white settlers 2 325. In 1719, when the first crippling epidemic of horse sickness hit, the industry survived despite the loss of 1, 700 horses. By 1744 the colonists had 5, 749 horses. Hackneys were evidently imported in 1792.⁶⁸ Horse breeding continued at a steady rate, resulting in a “breed” or, more accurately, a broad morphological type of horse that came to known as the “Cape Horse”.

⁶⁶ Child, *The Saga of the South African Horse*, p.22.

⁶⁷ George McCall Theal, *History and Ethnography of Africa South of the Zambesi vol. ii*. London: George Allen and Unwin, 1907, 1922) p.323 , *Inkomende Briewe*, no.417, 1689, p.618.

⁶⁸ These animals are believed to have been of the early English Roadster breed. There is evidence to show that the name Roadster, was synonymous with Hackney. M. H. Hayes, *Points of the Horse*.



Unlike the horse in the American west,⁶⁹ horses did not represent freedom or wildness to the white settlers, but rather civilization.⁷⁰ This was because there were no indigenous feral horses to be broken, resulting in extremely difficult exercises in importation and equine existence in the colony was precarious, threatened by disease and predators⁷¹, both human and animal. Horses were not wild creatures to be tamed, but extensions of western civilisation to be nurtured and protected in order that they serve the white expansionist projects. The frontier consequently did not develop rodeo or related equestrian games- there were no contests as to who could ride the wildest bronco. They were not wild creatures to be tamed but, as discussed, extensions of western civilization to be nurtured and protected in order that they serve the white expansionist project. Horses meant (white) civilization – both symbolically and physically.

⁶⁹ The tamed mounts transported by the Spanish to the Americas assumed a feral state in the New World and developed into the 'mustang'.

⁷⁰ See, for example, Elizabeth Lawrence, 'Rodeo Horses: the wild and the tame', in R. Willis, *Signifying Animals – human meaning in the natural world* (London: Routledge, 1990) p223 and more extensively E.A. Lawrence, *Rodeo: an anthropologist looks at the wild and the tame*. Knoxville: University of Tennessee Press. See also Richard Slata, *Cowboys of the Americas* (Yale University Press, 1990).

⁷¹ Particularly in the first decade of horse importation predators made equine existence precarious; for example, see Leibbrandt, *Letters Despatched*, vol I, p.90

The ‘Cape Horse’

It is a common trend that colonists create new breeds of horses to suit their needs. If a local horse existed [or if there were no indigenous horses but there were various breeds more readily available to import than those of the metropole], it could be utilized and often cross-bred with imported stock, and deliberately shaped, ultimately resulting in a new form of horse. These horses could differ markedly from those of the metropole, and after a while could come to be identified with the particular colonial culture, facilitating the differentiation from the metropolitan culture. After independence, horses were often one of the symbols utilized in the development of national pride and self-definition. This is illustrated vividly by the case of the gaited Peruvian Paso (a horse that walks and canters, but instead of trotting performs an amble, with legs moving in broken lateral pairs to create a four-beat smooth ride, like the *tripple*).⁷² The Peruvian Paso, based on Barb and Iberian stock (including ambling horses) from the sixteenth century, were brought to the Americas by the Spanish. They were selectively bred for long comfortable strides gaits, and was relied on for covering vast distance where wheeled vehicles could not go. From 1824, it became entangled in ideas surrounding national identity, and was therefore retained long after its functional utility had waned.

This general pattern was followed but with slight variation in the southern African context. There is little evidence to suggest an early identification of settler horse stock as different – and therefore superior – to metropolitan breeds. As discussed, Van Riebeeck criticised these first horses as too light, and not solid, like the draught horses available in Holland.⁷³ Correspondingly, there were ongoing efforts to alter the indigenising equine stock throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, with a view towards improving the various horse types in the

⁷² The trot, in contrast, is a two-beat jarring ride, with legs moving in diagonal pairs, which is very useful for pulling vehicles and horses that trot were better at racing and jumping than the gaited types. Gaited sorts had been prized prior to the seventeenth century for general purpose riding because their ability to cover a lot of ground in comfort. So it was the advent of wheeled travel and the rising popularity of jumping and racing that arguably marginalized the gaited horses in western Europe. See K.Raber and T.Tucker (eds.), ‘The Kingdom of the Horse’ (forthcoming).

⁷³ Leibbrandt, *Letters Despatched*, vol. iii, p.91.

Cape, but over time the phenotypical type or “breed” that was coming to be considered the “Cape horse”.

The “Cape Horse” was a globalised fusion of the Javanese pony (itself of Arab-Persian stock),⁷⁴ imported Persians (1689), South American stock (1778),⁷⁵ North American stock (1782), English thoroughbreds (1792) and Spanish barbs (1807)⁷⁶ with a particularly significant Arab genetic influence. In 1769, the first export of horses occurred; they were destined for Madras and initiated interest in breed-improvement (which encouraged the importation of the new breeding stock discussed).⁷⁷ Also in 1769 (and particularly after 1795, with the enthusiasm for horse racing proliferating after the replacement by VOC rule with the British administration), the Cape-based horses diverged – one “breed” to meet the needs for riding, transport and cavalry (which eventually became the Boerperd) and one to meet the needs of the racing fraternity, which used thoroughbreds, usually a thoroughbred sire and a colonial dam.

The former was variously known as the Cape pony,⁷⁸ Caper (the name adopted in India for race-horses exported from the Cape); by English-speaking settlers as the ‘Colonial’, the ‘South African’, the ‘Boer horse’, and by Dutch-speakers as the Hamtam (an area in which horse breeding occurred); Melck or Kotzehorse (surnames of famous breeders), even *Bossiekoppe* (bushyheads) if unimpressed at its points.

Horses, like other African livestock breeds, have developed in response to a wide range of climates, environmental stresses, and, perhaps particularly, anthropogenic demands. The Cape Horse was phenotypically very different from

⁷⁴ The first hundred years saw no major new breed importations, resulting in a foundation stock of hardy ponies.

⁷⁵ John Barrow, *Travels in the Interior of South Africa, in the years 1797 and 1798* (New York, N.Y. Johnson Reprint, 1968) p.36.

⁷⁶ The horses of Spanish origin were taken from two French ships boarded during the Napoleonic wars.

⁷⁷ From 1769, it gained escalating renown as an army remount and was exported to India for use by the British over the next century.

⁷⁸ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (Reprinted Cape Town : Struik, 1966) p.99.

English Thoroughbreds. They were small, hardy horses.⁷⁹ In 1845 the first “scientific” description was offered: 14.3 hands, “brown”, compact, short-legged, calm, well-mannered, strong constitution, and disease resistant. As previously discussed, for the first hundred years, the breeding stock were largely Arabian and Persian,⁸⁰ with the injection of English thoroughbred blood from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. This globalised “breed” was increasingly stamped an indigenous, horse, belonging to the Cape. George Thompson noted, for example, ‘I had travelled this day about 56 miles, the last 30 at full gallop on a hardy African pony, saddled for me fresh from the pasture. This would have killed almost any English horse, but the country breed of Cape horses is far more hardy than ours...’⁸¹ Lady Anne Barnard recorded her favourable impression of the Cape horse in 1798: ‘A little more size in the breed would render the Cape horse very good; they already have a cross of the Arabian fire and are hardy in the greatest degree...’ Daniel van Reenen was breeding Cape horses near the Breede River. Heinrich Lichtenstein noted that these horses were ‘so fine, that they [were] very much sought for at the Cape as riding-horses’ and ‘The Africans, besides, owing to their being accustomed from their youth to seek their nourishment upon dry mountains are easily satisfied, and grow so hard in the hoofs.’⁸²

Moreover, settler riding styles replaced those of the metropole.⁸³ This developed during the eighteenth century, which has been argued to be the period in which, with the decrease in settler immigration and increase in Dutch-speakers births, that the Cape truly ceased to be an extension of Europe and became instead a *colonial* society. The trot, for example, considered “unnatural”, was replaced by an ambling jog called a *triple (or trippel or tripple)*, or slow gallop, making it easy to ride while carrying a whip or gun.⁸⁴ Lichtenstein commented on the “short gallop” of the Cape

⁷⁹ F.J. Van der Merwe, *Ken Ons Perderasse*, Cape Town: Human and Rousseau, 1981.

⁸¹ G. Thompson, *Travels and Adventures in Southern Africa*.

⁸² H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa in the years 1803, 1804, 1805 and 1806* (reprinted, Cape Town, 1965). See also Anon, *Sketches of India, or, Observations descriptive of the scenery, etc. in Bengal...Together with notes on the Cape of Good-Hope, and St. Helena.* (London : Black, Parbury and Allen, 1816), 1847, p.74

⁸³ Ross, *Beyond the Pale*, Essays on the History of Colonial South Africa (Wesleyan University Press, 1993) p.1. L. Thompson, *A History of South Africa*, p.41.

horses, ‘very agreeable to the rider as well as to the horse ... This pace appears so natural to the race of horses in question that it is not without some difficulty the riders can ever get them into a trot or walk.’⁸⁵ In 1861, Lady Duff Gordon termed it an ‘shuffling easy canter.’⁸⁶ H. Rider Haggard makes mention that ‘he put the tired nag into a sort of “tripple”, or ambling canter much affected by South African horses,’⁸⁷ and that the horse ‘reduced its pace proportionately, to a slow tripple, [...] Anscombe kicked the horse with his sound heel and I thumped it with my fist, thereby persuading it to a hand gallop [canter/slow gallop].’⁸⁸

More has been written about the deterioration of the Cape Horse than any other aspect. As early as 1800, there was concern about improving the Cape horse. For example, the English official, William Duckitt, who arrived to establish an Agricultural Department and an experimental farm at Klapmuts, in September 1800, started a small stud of mares, and went “native”, becoming increasingly absorbed into the Dutch-speaking sector and concerning himself with improving the quality of Cape horse.⁸⁹ He wished to improve not the thoroughbred, but the draught horse. His argument was that the horses were so poor that farmers were reduced to utilising oxen for farm work. This meant that when oxen were sold for beef only when past labour.⁹⁰

From 1860, breeding with inferior stallions was widespread enough to feed the export trade. There was popular demand to breed from English thoroughbreds, and

⁸⁴ M.H. Hayes, *Among horses in South Africa* (London: Everett, 1900). Lichtenstein still makes mention of the trot as a gait used by *trekboers* in the late eighteenth century. H. Lichtenstein, *Travels in Southern Africa*.

⁸⁵ This “peculiar pace” was mentioned in 1806, but was labeled “the *bungher*” [this could be a corruption of ‘burgher’], and contended an English jockey soon “[got] rid of it”. Anon. *Gleanings in Africa, exhibiting a faithful and correct view of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope, and surrounding country*, (1806, New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969) p.23.

⁸⁶ L. Duff Gordon, *Letters from the Cape*, (Cape Town : Maskew Miller, 1925) p.84.

⁸⁷ H. Rider Haggard, *Jess*, 1887.chapter one.

⁸⁸ H. Rider Haggard, *Finished*, Chapter IV, “Doctor Rodd” (1917?) This later became something that was cherished as traditional Boer riding style, see George Green, “How to train a horse to triple”, *Farmers Weekly*, 74:55 24 December 1947.

⁸⁹ *Records*, vol. xiv. P.23

⁹⁰ See Letter to Huskisson, *Records*, vol. iii, p.390. See Barrow, vol. I, p.67.

pedigree became paramount to the exclusion of merit.⁹¹ Speculators imported broken down horses with good pedigrees.⁹² These “blood weeds”, as they became known, polluted the gene pool, precipitating a general decline in stamina, size, hardiness, and sound conformation.⁹³ Horses were not bred from because of the vagaries of fashion – white socks, a blaze on the face and chestnut coats were unpopular. Efforts towards breed improvement were further hindered by a focus solely on the sire to the exclusion of the dam. Interestingly (as a reflection on the gendered use of horses), particularly as good horsemanship was perceived to be a hallmark of masculinity, stallions received special treatment. Evidence is sketchy for the eighteenth century, but by the nineteenth century, it was considered ‘undignified to ride or drive [mares]. Only Hottentots did it.’⁹⁴ The traveller Charles Thunberg noted in the late eighteenth century that while mares and colts were expected to forage for themselves, stallions were fed specially cultivated barley. Moreover, mares were perceived as having little importance and, as it was considered undignified to ride one, fillies were seldom broken or handled.⁹⁵ Similarly, fillies were rarely deemed worth racing. Wyndham notes similarly, that in efforts towards breed improvement, the infusion of “good” blood was from the stallion, as ‘any female equine was considered good enough to serve as a brood mare, and comparatively few were imported during the first half of the nineteenth century.’⁹⁶

⁹¹ Schreuder, *The Cape Horse*, p.39. In England a horse’s pedigree had become perceived as vital far earlier; in 1791 a General Stud Book was introduced.

⁹² *The Agricultural News and Farmer’s Journal*, 7 February 1850.

⁹³ The state attempted breed improvement through the importation of Hackneys in 1888 and 1891. The Hackney (fairly short-legged, powerful little animal, which may stand anything above 14 to about 15,2 hands high) is a British horse breed.

⁹⁴ Anon, *Sketches of India, or, Observations descriptive of the scenery, etc. in Bengal...Together with notes on the Cape of Good-Hope, and St. Helena.* (London : Black, Parbury and Allen, 1816), 1847, p.75.

⁹⁵ Charles Thunberg, *Travels in Europe, Africa and Asia, performed in the years 1770 and 79 Vol. II* (London, 1793). Law notes a similar phenomenon in West Africa, where mares had to feed themselves by grazing and mares were unpopular for riding, *Horse in West African History*, p.45. The parallel was extended to human society, while Boer women were not expected to be equestrians, the South African war hero, General De Wet, famously maintained that a ‘Boer without a horse is only half a man.’

⁹⁶ Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.2.

There was apparently little anthropomorphism surrounding the horse as “personality”. In one particularly revealing incident in 1773, an official in the service of the VOC, Wolraad Woltemade (1700-1773), endeavoured to rescue sailors going down with a storm-damaged VOC ship. Woltemade made seven trips to the ship, riding his horse 300 metres into the sea, saving fourteen sailors. On his last attempt, the remaining sailors panicked, and too many clutched the horse, dragging them all down. Significantly, the horse was not accorded hero’s status (indeed initially neither was Woltemade)⁹⁷, and the horse’s name is lost to posterity. Correspondingly there appear to be few contemporaneous equine luminaries globally.⁹⁸ However, by the time of Dick King’s famous 1843 ride from Durban to Grahamstown, the name of his horse, Somerset, grew to be well-known to the public. And by the late nineteenth century, certainly, there were various Southern African horses accorded celebrity status.⁹⁹ It was arguably only with the advent of the racing industry from 1796 that horses began to acquire individual public *persona* in southern Africa, with race favourites becoming known and adored by the crowds.¹⁰⁰

Race (and Class) horses

By the late seventeenth century, the English had developed a keen interest in horseracing, a dramatic divergence from the *haute école* still embraced on the continent. This new pursuit required a new seat (position in the saddle) and ultimately a changed equine physiognomy. The Thoroughbred came into being, adapted both conformationally and in terms of disposition, for galloping. The characteristic for

⁹⁷ The initial judgment appears to have been that he was an interfering idiot who had lost his life unnecessarily. In the first report to Holland his name was not even mentioned, though considerable space was devoted to the 18 boxes of money that had been salvaged. When Woltemade’s body washed ashore on the 2 June 1773, he was buried without ceremony in an unmarked grave. Later, however, a VOC ship was named after him, widow received compensation, and in 1956 a statue was erected in his honour, after the idea was mooted in the Van Riebeeck festival in 1952, and a commemorative stamp was issued in 1973. See Sparrman, pp. 126-127.

⁹⁸ Those, like Dick Turpin’s “Black Bess” appear to be later inventions teleologically imposed on the early eighteenth century.

⁹⁹ Like General C. De Wet’s famous grey “Fleur” in the South African War (1899-1902).

¹⁰⁰ This was further stimulated by the rise of popular media – available more cheaply to an increasingly – albeit slowly – literate public; and further fostered by military campaigns (for example, 1881 and 1899-1902), which facilitated the popularizing of heroes – both human and equine. This was further encouraged by the global trend toward popularizing military heroes’ horses, particularly after Napoleon’s “Marengo”. A similar argument may be made for England, and, gradually, the global context.

which they have been selectively bred is simply speed. For this they need to be leaner, of lighter-build and longer-legged (almost a retention of neotenus traits) – and more vulnerable and less suitable for farm or draught work – than other horses. Thoroughbred breeders drew not on the horses of the *haute école* nor on those of draught stock, but on the blood of the Barb, the Turk and the Arabian.¹⁰¹

As Wyndham noted, ‘Horse-racing will start sooner or later in any country occupied by the British’.¹⁰² The first English thoroughbreds were imported in 1792, immediately prior to both the British Occupation, and the institution of racing.¹⁰³ Although the Cape was not yet part of the British imperial web in 1792, an increasing interest was being taken in the English thoroughbred, which was gaining international fame. In 1795, the year in which the British initiated their first occupation of the Cape, an Agent for the British East India Company imported more blood stock, which was followed by importation from the wealthy Dutch-speaking sector, particularly the horse breeders Jacobus, Sebastiaan and Dirk van Reenen.¹⁰⁴ A racing club, the African Turf Club, was organised and the first race meeting was held in Cape Town in 1797.¹⁰⁵

There were no bookmakers and each bet was an arrangement between two independent parties. Initially, with the dearth of thoroughbreds specifically for racing and races being held only once every six months, any horse could be utilised as a race horse: a hack, a hunter, a trap-horse. There were fewer horses, so the race-going crowd was able to identify the individual horses and, as mentioned above, had a

¹⁰¹ Raber contends that the exotic ‘orientalised’ Other, to use Said’s categorisation, was nationalized: the Arabian, Turk and Barb modified into the English Thoroughbred. Moreover, the continental *haute école* was replaced by specifically British styles. As Raber notes “[w]hile the new horse culture might still be socially restrictive, as a metaphor and interpretive device it became an inclusive definition of Englishness”. K. Raber (ed.), *Kingdom of the Horse* (Palgrave, forthcoming) p.36*

¹⁰² Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.16.

¹⁰³ This blood stock formed the foundation of the Melck stud, which from c.1808 to 1881 was an influential stud in southern Africa.

¹⁰⁴ W.H.C.Lichtenstein, *Foundation of the Cape, About the Bechuanas: being a history of the discovery and colonisation of Southern Africa, 1811, 1807 / trans O.H. Spohr.* (Cape Town: Balkema, 1973). *

¹⁰⁵ Anon. *Gleanings in Africa, exhibiting a faithful and correct view of the manners and customs of the inhabitants of the Cape of Good Hope, and surrounding country*, (1806, New York, Negro Universities Press, 1969), p.23.

greater personal knowledge of – and financial stake in – the horses. The races became a diverse space, mixed in terms of gender, class, ethnicity and race. The biannual race meetings were significant social events, incorporating assemblies and theatre for the elite, and drawing a varied crowd at the meeting itself. Initially, meetings were held on open commonage, with no fence and consequently no gate money. Burchell commented in 1810, it was ‘amazing’ to watch

the motley crowd on foot: Malays and negroes mingled with whites, all crowding and elbowing, eager to get a sight of the momentous contest. But the patient Hottentot ... seems to prefer a pipe of tobacco to that which affords such exquisite gratification to his superiors. Together with the art of making horses run fast, the science and mystery of betting has found its way to the farthest extremity of Africa; and on Green Point large sums are said to have been won and lost.¹⁰⁶

Lady Duff Gordon records:

[At the Greenpoint] races, ... a queer-looking little Cape farmer’s horse, ridden by a Hottentot, beat the English crack racer, ridden by a first-rate English jockey, in an unaccountable way, twice over. The Malays are passionately fond of horse-racing, and the crowd was fully half Malay: there were dozens of carts crowded with the bright-eyed women, in petticoats of every most brilliant colour, white muslin jackets, and gold daggers in their great coils of shining black hair.¹⁰⁷

There was a clash of horse cultures. Young subalterns, drawing on trends from the metropole, docked horse’s tails, which infuriated Dutch locals, who observed that the tails provided protection against flies.¹⁰⁸ There was no simple division between English- and Dutch-speakers over racing. More complicatedly, there was a seam of English-speaking colonial society that distanced itself from racing, principally because of its ties to gambling. Governor Lord Macartney, for example, despised racing. Lady Anne Barnard attended the first race meeting in 1797, while her husband absented himself on the spurious grounds of official business. She was aware of the ambiguities of her position – she personally disapproved as did the governor, but she

¹⁰⁶ W. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa vol II* (London, Batchworth, 1822, reprinted 1953) p.25.

¹⁰⁷ Lady Duff Gordon, *Letters from the Cape* (Cape Town: Maskew Miller, 1925) pp. 152-153. She also observed that the Malays maintained a grip on the horse-hiring industry, 46.

¹⁰⁸ Anon. *Gleanings in Africa* p.23. W. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa vol II* (London, Batchworth, 1822, reprinted 1953) p.163.

attended in the carriage of a Dutch-speaker to emphasise her connection to the broader population, and to show a lack of snobbery.¹⁰⁹ However, there is no evidence to suggest that Sir George Young, governor from December 1799, disapproved of racing. Indeed he joined the African Turf Club.

Racing initially depended heavily on the garrison (the Turf Club began with 29 members, 20 of whom were officers in the Army or Navy, with only a few wealthy Dutch-speaking horse breeders). There were efforts to encourage racing enthusiasm among the Dutch-sector, by organising a 'Farmers' Race'.¹¹⁰ During the period of Batavian Republic rule at the Cape, 1803-1806, there is little evidence of racing and the African Turf Club went into liquidation. After the second British Occupation in 1806, Dutch-speakers participated increasingly actively as spectators at meetings. After 1807, although racing depended heavily on officers, the farming sector (particularly Duckitt, Melck, and the Van Reenen brothers) was progressively more involved. The Turf Club provided the social space for the breeders to meet and trade. Racing became increasingly popular, with race clubs starting in Paarl (1815); Uitenhage and Stellenbosch (1816); Graaff-Reinet (1821); Grahamstown (1823); Somerset East and Swellendam (1825). The colonial governor, Lord Charles Somerset, was even able to counter imperial rumblings over banning racing – because of concerns over gambling – with the assertion that this would alienate the Dutch-sector of the population.¹¹¹ In 1822, for example, the Burgher Senate commented with approval on race meetings and granted money towards a Cup, valued at 400 *rixdollars*.¹¹²

Class division was materially evident in the display of carriages at the race meetings. Cowper Rose observed that one could see 'the regular gradation from the well-appointed English carriage to that curious piece of antiquity [Dutch cart] – the

¹⁰⁹ September 1798, *Letters of Lady Anne Barnard* (Cape Town, 1973).* *The Cape Diaries of Lady Anne Barnard, 1799-1800*, vol. I (Ed. M.Lenta and B. Le Cordeur (Cape Town, Van Riebeeck Society, no.29., 1999) p.311, pp.333-334 and p.359. Interestingly, she also mentions oxen or bullock racing among Khoikhoi, p.116, 123.

¹¹⁰ Wyndham, *History of Thoroughbred*, p.25.

¹¹¹ Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.34.

¹¹² Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.39.

gig, the light wagon cart, and the long heavy wagon ... hired for the day'.¹¹³ In 1820, William Bird noted that settlers who could not afford a horse in England, got a boost in status as they could afford one in the Cape.¹¹⁴ Burchell observed that social display formed an important part of the events, 'Horsemen, without number... exhibit their prancing steeds of half Arab or English blood; although some, indeed, of their noble animals refuse to prance without the incitement of the curb or spur.'¹¹⁵ Similarly, class differentiation was marked with the vehicles acting as nuanced social signifiers, as indicated by this comment in 1822: 'lawyers in barouches; next in rank in curricles, and notarys [following] in a solitary gig. Doctors turned out in chariots drawn by four greys, surgeons in barouches or tilburies [delicate two wheeled vehicles], and an apothecary on a hack'.¹¹⁶ Fashion vacillated, as Wyndham observed, with fewer carriages at meetings in the 1840s, but regaining popular appeal as a space for display by the 1880s.¹¹⁷

In 1810, the African Turf Club was revived, and renamed the South African Turf Club, with the arrival of Lord Charles Somerset, as Governor of the Cape Colony, in 1814. Somerset (1767-1831), grew up in Badminton, a centre of English equestrian sports, and was a well known figure at Newmarket. He re-organised the Turf Club, protected the race course,¹¹⁸ wrested control of the Groote Post Experimental Farm and re-directed its focus to horse-breeding, in part to foster the export trade to India, and used the racing industry as a means to improve the breed. He used the rationale that racing was simply a means to an end, a strategy towards improving local horses. This made little sense – draught and transport horses required no Thoroughbred pedigree, indeed draught horses would have benefited from warmblood (solid, weighty draught animal) infusions instead of Thoroughbred – and

¹¹³ Rose, Cowper *Four Years in Southern Africa*, (London, Colburn and Bentley, 1829) pp 9-10.

¹¹⁴ W. Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope in 1822* (Reprinted Cape Town: Struik, 1966). He mentions also the availability of mules, chiefly from Buenos Aires, Brazil, at 200 rixdollars, and Spanish jacks selling at 500-1 000 rixdollars, p.99.

¹¹⁵ W. Burchell, *Travels in the Interior of Southern Africa vol I* (London, Batchworth, 1822, reprinted 1953) p.25.

¹¹⁶ Bird, *State of the Cape of Good Hope*, 1822, p.163.

¹¹⁷ Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred*, p.22.

¹¹⁸ *Gazette*, August 1814.

was likely a mere validation for his personal interest in both racing and breeding Thoroughbreds. As contended by an acerbic observer in 1820:

[a] distinguished person at the Cape is thought to have conferred a singular benefit on the Colony by bringing over several thoroughbred English horses, and disseminating a taste for racing. But it is difficult to imagine how the interests of an infant Colony can be advanced by the introduction of an animal perfectly useless for any purpose of trade or [agriculture], or by rendering fashionable an expensive and ruinous amusement.¹¹⁹

Horses were, however, more than just signifiers of elite status, they could contribute towards *creating* elite status. There was money to be made as a Thoroughbred breeder, which involved an elite group of male breeders from both the Dutch- and English-speaking sectors, including the Governor.¹²⁰ Indeed, Somerset relinquished his position after a scandal, in which it appeared as though he had corruptly made a grant of land in consideration of 10 000 *rixdollars*, under the guise of horse trading, and although exonerated, resigned in 1827.¹²¹

Thoroughbred breeding remained entrenched, and expanded with the expanding racing industry, and the fashion grew during the early and middle nineteenth century for horses with a 'bloodhead', 'light neck' and a 'pedigree'.¹²² See, for example, the figure of Somerset below, with his horse's docked tail (in accordance with metropolitan fashion) and curved 'Arab' neck, and small 'blood' head considered desirable in an English thoroughbred.¹²³ Thus English thoroughbreds bred for racing and the utilitarian work or farm horse diverged, from 1797 onwards, although there were several points of contact, as explored below.

¹¹⁹ A.E. Blount, *Notes on the Cape of Good Hope made during an excursion in that colony in the year 1820* (London: Murray, 1821).

¹²⁰ The first advert for a stallion at stud appears to have been 25 September 1805, in the *Gazette*.

¹²¹ KAB,GH,NO.1/46,1825;KAB,GH,NO.1/58,1826.

¹²² Wyndham, *History of the Thoroughbred horse*, pp.88-89.

¹²³ Signed C:B: Esqr delt; pubd by Dighton, Spring Gardens, Decr. 1811.



“A View of Somerset” (Africana Museum 66/1909).

Conclusion – Closing the stable door

Horses played a significant role in social and political processes in the early settlement of the Cape. History was made with horse power and equally the horses were shaped by human history, incorporating the environmental and shifting anthropogenic needs into their genetic makeup. After their hard-fought introduction, resisted by the metropole, horses were first used as draught animals to effect changes in the new environment. Between 1652 and 1662, the utility of the ox was eclipsed in the Cape, particularly in settler perceptions, by the value of the horse, which was utilised first as symbol of power and as draught animal.

They were also utilised by the VOC authorities as a signifier of difference, a marker of social status. It was used to emphasise the difference between native and settler, in order to facilitate psycho-social subduing of the indigenous population. The

role of the horse was predicated on *power*, in both symbolic and material manifestations, and hence became a victim of attack. Horses remained vulnerable in their new environment, threatened by disease and environmental dangers. Unlike in the American settler communities, the horse not a symbol of wildness but rather of tameness, of civilization and white settlement. There was no basis to re-enact the subduing of the wilderness and the transformation from ‘nature’ to ‘culture’, that anthropologists and historians have uncovered, for example, in the western display of rodeo.

The rising number of horses advanced economic and territorial-political ambitions, through military means (on *kommando*) and through the socio-economic control of the horse trade and racing industry. From 1797, two distinct horse cultures emerged – one embraced the British-led racing industry, the other a more utilitarian use of horses. There followed a clash of horse cultures, between those who followed metropolitan fashions and those adopting ‘indigenous’ settler modes. Moreover, the divergence led to a morphological difference between the race horses, which were of English thoroughbred type, and the utilitarian horses, which came to be considered a definite “breed”, known as the Cape horse, initially not accorded special status, but later invested with the pride of settler society.