

Chapter 2



The Reins of Power

Equine Ecological Imperialism in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries

ONE OF THE first European settlers in southern Africa was a horse. This creature was the sole survivor of a mid-seventeenth century shipwreck on the Cape of Storms. Wearing the decaying remnants of a rope halter, he was occasionally glimpsed by the sailors who arrived with the first wave of white settlement, but had become so wild he could not be caught.¹ He was the only 'wild' horse to exist in the Cape. 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 in regular use in North and West Africa from 600 CE, there were no horses in the southern tip prior to European colonisation.² African horse sickness and trypanosomiasis presented a pathogenic barrier to horses reaching the Cape overland. Indeed, sub-Saharan Africa had the worst disease environment for equids in the world.³ The barrier presented to horses meant a barrier to certain groups of humans too.⁴ So, it was with difficulty that *Equus* became an element of the 'portmanteau biota' that followed European settlement of southern Africa from the mid-seventeenth century.⁵ Horses were the first domestic stock imported by the settlers; and the early modern colonial state that had emerged by the end of the eighteenth century – despite resistance from both indigenous groups and the metropole – was based, at least in part, on the power of the horse in the realm of agriculture, the military and communications.⁶

This chapter seeks to explore a particular facet of horse–human relationships, focusing on their introduction at the Cape and its consequent symbolic and practical ramifications. The growth of the colonial state and the rise of the Vereenigde Oost-Indische Compagnie (VOC, or Dutch East India

The Reins of Power

Company) from the seventeenth century had considerable consequences for the human and equine populations under its sway, linking far-flung South-east Asia and the southern tip of Africa. The 'invention' of new horse breeds meant the dissemination of equine genes and phenotypes from Europe, Asia and the Americas and their fusion through deliberate state intervention, idealistic individual efforts by groups of breeders and often by the everyday politics of economic pragmatism. The resultant breeds were thus partly a product of their adaptation to new environments and largely a corollary of their close connection to human society. Horses became integral to the settlers' identity as Europeans, used both symbolically and in a material sense to affirm white difference from the indigenous population. They were part of the twin technologies of conquest: the ability to dispossess people of their land and alienate water resources by means of horses and guns was at the very heart of South Africa's colonial history.⁷ Horses endowed their owners with enhanced military capabilities, hunting prowess and transport capacity. Greater mobility in turn meant greater involvement in trade networks. Equine technology played pivotal material roles and concomitant cultural roles. From military display to the racing arena, horses meant not only the grasping of power, but the 'performance' of that power in key rituals of colonial society.

As necessary as bread?

The VOC, founded in 1602 and liquidated in 1795, was the largest of the early modern European trading companies, eclipsing all its competitors. It appointed local rulers, kept its own private army and concluded treaties in its own name. To entrench the company's 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 the early seventeenth century the VOC, like several other European maritime powers, sought a provisioning station at the Cape to develop a meat supply from the Khoikhoi and to cultivate fresh produce.⁸ By 1652 the decision was taken and the VOC directors, the Heeren XVII, commissioned Jan van Riebeeck⁹ to establish a refreshment station to feed the scurvy-ridden and malnourished crews of the ships that passed the Cape en route to the East Indies. In 1657, one year before the first importation of slaves to the colony, the VOC released nine of

Riding High

its employees from their contracts, creating the first land-holding community at the Cape, the *vrijburgers* or free burghers.¹⁰ It was intended that they would establish independent commercial farms that would provide the settlement with a steady food supply. The indigenous Khoikhoi/Khoekhoe and Bushmen¹¹ proved reluctant to enter the VOC-controlled wage labour economy, which both exasperated and mystified the colonists.¹² This added to the perceived necessity for equine draught power. The settlement initially faced carrying out construction with no draught animals. It was not part of the Dutch tradition to use oxen for draught.¹³ Moreover, the cattle the VOC did manage to acquire from Khoikhoi were untrained to cart or plough. (As prey animals, horses and oxen have to be accustomed to the plough and cart. Otherwise, they sense that there is a large, close-following predator behind them who is unaccountably able to dog their every step. The results can be dramatic.)

Unhorsed?

Before the Dutch arrived, the pastoralist Khoikhoi herded cattle and sheep. Although they slaughtered cattle only on occasion, their livestock provided them with milk, meat and skins to make clothing and equipment. Prefiguring the horse's symbolic power, their cattle served, too, as transport and a means of warfare, and the source of status and power. Long before horses became the premier riding animals, oxen had filled this need.¹⁴ At least 150 years previously there were Khoikhoi riders on cattle on the south coast, and on the lower Orange River by 1661. From them, the Xhosa had acquired riding skills by 1686. Other Nguni-speaking groups appear not to have ridden.¹⁵ Trained oxen were ridden with saddles made of sheepskin fastened by a rope girth. They usually had a hole drilled through the cartilage of their noses and a wooden stick with a rope fastened to either end to enable the rider to direct the animal.¹⁶ Only under the first wave of Dutch settlers were donkeys and mules introduced and produced, respectively.¹⁷ Donkeys had been imported from the Cape Verde Islands by Van Riebeeck in 1656. Mules were produced after the 'mare with which the ass had been playing foaled a mule. Two or three more are in foal from the same ass, which is very welcome, as the female ass died [the previous] year whilst foaling'.¹⁸

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 Reins of Power

the introduction of horses, which were not only an alien species brought in from the metropole, but had the potential to transform the physical environment with their draught power.¹⁹ 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.²⁰ He argued that horses would prove invaluable in transporting lumber, firewood, sand and clay to make bricks for construction, and for revolutionising agriculture at the settlement with ploughing and threshing.²¹

The VOC, however, only acceded to requests that delivered immediate material results, and Van Riebeeck's written requests were ignored by his superiors in Amsterdam.²² Moreover, their original plan was not to create a colony, but rather a refreshment station at which to refuel and reprovision ships en route from Holland to the East. Horses and free burghers were entwined 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 a lowly provisioning station.²³ He attempted to persuade the VOC by insisting that only horses would allow for the exploration of the hinterland. In May 1653 he observed: 'I wish we had a dozen [horses], [then] 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.'²⁴ He argued that it would accelerate the settling period, saving both time and human labour (particularly after he erected a horse mill in May 1657).²⁵ He further contended that horses would make the settlers independent of the Khoikhoi, enabling them to acquire their own construction materials and wood.²⁶ Accordingly, Van Riebeeck argued that his most insurmountable problem was the ongoing shortage of horses.

Horses and white settlers were first sent to the Cape in the same year, 1652; the horses however, were driven onto the island of St. Helena by a storm.²⁷ In 1653 four of these 'Javanese' (or more likely, Sumbawan) ponies were imported.²⁸ Van Riebeeck wrote in his journal that horses were '*soo nodigh als broot in den mont zyn*' ('as necessary as bread in our mouths').²⁹ This 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 [only] 2 we have at present [sent by a reluctant VOC], both of which are being used for

Riding High

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.'³⁰ He judged horses to be his 'greatest and principal need', demanding: 'Horses! Give me more horses!'³¹ His requests became petitions, which then became pleas, but remained largely ignored by Amsterdam.³²

Equine settlement was more difficult than human settlement. Importation was perilous – in 1673, for example, most of a cargo of horses drowned and only two were saved, and in 1690 all the horses died on the arduous sea voyage. Simply getting the horses off the ship was hazardous. In 1664, as Van Riebeeck noted with exasperation, 'the old fool' of a skipper fired a salute while the horses were being disembarked, which startled them. One of them, a fawn-coloured male called Generael, was so distressed that he leapt overboard and (luckily) swam safely ashore.³³ Once on land, conditions were equally dangerous. African horse sickness (often dubbed 'distemper') was a perennial problem. An acute, febrile and infectious disease, it was the scourge of the wet season – a disease the settlers believed was carried by evening miasmas.

Disease

Animal afflictions contributed towards shaping human settlement patterns, land use, trade and military capacity (e.g. Bushmen soon learnt when the equines of settler forces were weakened by sickness and the settlers' defensive or offensive capacity was reduced).³⁴ Right from the beginning of the human movement from the coast to the interior travellers faced an invisible danger more formidable than human or animals and tried to ward it off with remedies that were little more than talismans.³⁵ This was because horses faced a barrage of dangerous afflictions. Southern Africa – even simply the area now known as South Africa – presents a range of topographies and environments, from temperate to tropical climates, and thus offers a diverse pathogenic and parasitic menu: glanders or '*droes*', farcy, strangles or '*nieuw ziekte*', *snotziekte*; *lampas*, *bota* or *papje*, biliary or gallsickness, roll-sickness or, simply, worms. More parasites were imported in successive waves by sheep-herding Khoikhoi and Bantu-speaking migrants with cattle, goats, dogs and chickens, and later by

The Reins of Power

Europeans with horses, donkeys and pigs. (No one knows exactly who brought the rat.)³⁶

But the real scourges were sleeping sickness and horse sickness: the former lay in wait to the north and the latter inflicted devastating losses on the horse population.³⁷ They were both vector-borne diseases. (Particularly in the Lowveld and on the east coast in Zululand, trypanosomiasis – colloquially, sleeping sickness or nagana – was spread by tsetse flies.)³⁸ The result was muscle wastage, loss of energy, fever, anaemia, oedematous swelling, neurological problems and possibly death (the species that infected horses did not infect humans, although humans were affected by their own strain).

Similarly, the other scourge, African horse sickness, did not affect humans: it is a seasonal midge-borne viral disease of horses, donkeys and mules, and zebras, in decreasing order of susceptibility.³⁹ Endemic to the African continent, horse sickness is characterised by respiratory and circulatory damage, accompanied by fever and loss of appetite. 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 first frost, when the midges die. Most animals become infected in the period from sunset to sunrise, when the midges are most active.⁴⁰ At dusk, a horse could seem perfectly healthy and by dawn it could be dead. With froth pouring from its nose and mouth, it basically drowned in its own bodily fluids.

In dealing with these terrifying diseases and others, horse owners came to use idiosyncratic mixtures of local knowledge of disease management over time. Obviously, equine-specific disease had no local tradition of healing (and the first European settlers were not horse experts). Indeed, local knowledge came to be an amalgam, derived from various cultural sources.⁴¹ From indigenous herdsmen who knew how to keep stock alive even in the tsetse belt, they learnt about using smoky fires to discourage the flies.⁴² Travellers noticed how pastoralist Khoikhoi would relocate their cattle if they manifested illness.⁴³ Later, the horse-owning Khoikhoi, for example, kept the horses they acquired bordering the Zandveld. During the 'season of the paardeziekte horses are sent to the Roggeveld in January to avoid the horsesickness of the hotter months'. The first frosts of May provided the signal for the return of the horses.⁴⁴ Indeed, the only two useful ways of preventing horse sickness (although a legion of others were attempted) were determined by observational practice: removal

Riding High

to high ground and stabling.⁴⁵ By local observation it became clear that horses grazing on higher lands stayed free of horse sickness, so horse owners moved their stock strategically to higher elevation, and mountain ranges were often crown lands reserved at the insistence of *heemraden* and *landdrost* as sanctuaries for horses when 'distemper was abroad', infuriating farmers who coveted them for other livestock.⁴⁶ Many farmers had too few horses to be able to arrange transhumance around them, but those with larger herds routinely sent their horses to higher elevation to avoid the seasonal epidemics. From the seventeenth century and gathering impetus from the eighteenth century, the new settlers established themselves in places where their horses could survive. The desire to reach horse sickness-free zones determined the range of settlement. The disease made depredations every year, but after the first crippling outbreak in 1719 (which killed 1,700 horses), roughly every 20 years the disease became epidemic.⁴⁷ The degree of immunity in the high Hantam lured potential horse breeders.⁴⁸ Some towns, like Colesberg, were established with the *raison d'être* of keeping horses alive. In the northward movement of people, legal boundaries were crossed in order to reach safe horse country.

Yet nowhere was really safe. 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 constant vigilance.⁴⁹ 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 (which underlines that these men were not horse owners in their home countries), and legislation was introduced to prohibit the premature use of colts and fillies, underscoring the importance of horses to the young settlement and how seriously the administration took them.⁵⁰

Zebra crossing?

Initially, horse importation was hampered by two factors: the strict economy of the VOC and its desire to maintain the region as a refreshment station rather than develop it as a colony in its own right.⁵¹ Instead, the company suggested that Van Riebeeck avail himself of the '*wilde paarden*', the 'indigenous horses' – zebras and quaggas. Three wild members of the horse family were local to

The Reins of Power

the area – later classified as the mountain zebra (*Equus zebra*); Burchell's zebra (*Equus burchelli*); and the now-extinct quagga (*Equus quagga*).⁵² Van Riebeeck initially planned to tame them, but found that he could not even catch them.⁵³ 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' for his trouble. Van Riebeeck went on to describe the 'horse' as 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.⁵⁴

He distinguished between quagga (an onomatopoeic word derived from *douqua*, the name the locals used because of its barking cough), which he likened to mules; and zebra, which he likened to horses (which the locals called *haqua*). He tried to capture living specimens of both – clearly hoping to tame them – but the Khoikhoi refused to assist, an indication of the dangerous, intractable nature of these equids, or, as Van Riebeeck argued, an indication that the Khoikhoi were 'beginning to realise more and more that we would thereby be the better able to keep them in submission'.⁵⁵ He felt that the 'Hottentoots [sic] [have] at present discovered too much already how these animals cause them injury, as by their means we can beautifully overtake them and be at their heels'.⁵⁶

A later traveller speculated that if domestic stock had not been introduced so rapidly, a more determined and sustained attempt at taming the indigenous 'horses' might have been made.⁵⁷ Certainly, even after the introduction of horses and the founding of an embryo horse industry, indigenous equines with their apparent immunity to horse sickness (the first reported outbreak in 1719 killed 1,700 horses) proved an inviting proposition.⁵⁸ Anecdotal evidence has it that quagga were more tameable than zebra and only their extinction prevented their use as a viable alternative to horses.⁵⁹ In 1785 the Swedish explorer Anders Sparrman noted that it was indeed possible to tame zebras because they showed little fear; they could be turned out with the horses at night to protect them against predators. Furthermore:

Riding High

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 are subject.⁶⁰

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.⁶¹ Such cross breedings continued to occur.⁶² In the Warm Bokkeveld, for example, in the early 1800s the traveller Lichtenstein encountered what he described in wonderment as ‘a remarkable thing’:

a tame quagga ... feeding in the meadows with the horses, [who] suffered himself readily to be stroked and caressed by the people about. His spirit of freedom was, however, not yet so far subdued as that he would suffer himself to be rode. He was only kept by his owner for the purpose of making experiments in improving his breed of horses.⁶³

But as a Cape Town chronicle noted with quiet resignation, ‘the zebra is said to be wholly beyond the government of man.’

Invasive species?

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 its base in Java, probably from Sumbawa. ‘Javanese’ imports were small, hardy creatures, 13.5 hands high.⁶⁴ They were also known as ‘South East Asia ponies’, an amalgam of Arab and Mongolian breeds, their ancestors having been purportedly acquired from Arab traders in the East Indies.⁶⁵ Van Riebeeck was unimpressed, criticising these first horses as too light, almost like English genets or insubstantial French horses. They were certainly not as sizeable, heavily built and solid as were the draught horses available in Holland.⁶⁶

In 1659, a year that saw attacks on outlying farms, 16 more horses were permitted by the VOC to be imported from the East in order ‘to put an end to theft by the [Khoikhoi].’⁶⁷ Van Riebeeck argued the very ‘preservation of the Cape establishment depends completely on our having horses.’⁶⁸

The Reins of Power

These horses were intended as the seventeenth-century equivalent of 'shock and awe'. Together with a pack of hunting dogs, they were imported (to a certain extent at least) to inspire fear in the Khoikhoi, who were beginning to initiate raids on the settlement.⁶⁹ Van Riebeeck argued that a watch of 20 riders would prove a sufficient deterrent.⁷⁰ On 7 June 1660 the settler authorities used horses to display settler ascendancy: '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.'⁷¹ Van Riebeeck noted with satisfaction that the local population were suitably astonished and impressed by horses because of the 'miracles' of speed he performed with them.

This laid the foundation for making horses key to a symbolic display of power that was to persist. Parallels can be drawn with the introduction of guns. Both introductions buttressed the perceived power of the owners and helped establish a social order in a time of flux.⁷² As Storey has observed of guns, a 'new order is made out of a demonstration.'⁷³ The symbolic display went hand in hand with the practical deployment of horses in the pursuit and maintenance of material power.

The first commando was established in 1670, which initiated the horse's formal structured military role in South Africa, as opposed to draught, transport, guard duty and ad hoc armed expeditions.⁷⁴ The horse-based commando was a new institution for frontier policing actions (rather than defence against coastal attack from foreign powers). Essentially it was a 'mounted infantry', travelling as cavalry and attacking as infantry: the men dismounted to shoot, fired, retreated, reloaded and then charged again.⁷⁵ By this time there were over 50 horses at the Cape, all still owned by the VOC itself, which made a small unit possible. Over time, when both horses and some men ceased to be under direct company control, all burghers between 16 and 60 were liable for commando duty and were expected to provide their own horse and saddle and, frequently, their servants.⁷⁶ The commando developed as part of the social machinery in the construction of settler identity; and, as time passed, particularly of Boer masculine identity (discussed in Chapters 5 and 6), although the commandos relied on other groups too. Similarly, as Storey points out, although the right to own a firearm was integral to citizenship, the ironies and complexities of paternalism allowed servants to assist by bearing arms on commando. Horse-based commandos allowed Van Riebeeck to round

Riding High

up deserting slaves, something that would otherwise have been impossible.⁷⁷ Furthermore, horses were always brought home from raiding or punitive missions because they were considered more useful than the Bushmen, most of whom were perceived to be unenslavable.

There were – perhaps consequently – several attacks on horses. Two were killed by Khoikhoi in July 1672, for example. It is not certain whether these attacks were motivated with the intent of obliterating horse stock; out of 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.⁷⁸ The body of the horse was thus both a symbol of power and, perhaps because of this, a site of struggle. This supports a broader argument that ‘animals and their bodies appear to be one site of struggle over the protection of (human) identity and the production of cultural difference.’⁷⁹

Van Riebeeck was drawing on an entrenched tradition, because horses had long been associated in western Europe with the society of the elite and with the culture of hegemony. The horse distinguished the ruler from the ruled, with the rider a symbol of dominance.⁸⁰ The cost included not only the purchase price, but food, the transport of food and water, protection, structural shelter and space,⁸¹ as well as accoutrements (tack, training devices and tack-cleaning materials), shoes or hoof trimming, labour (grooming, exercise and training), and medical attention.⁸² 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 Barbs⁸³ 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 at the same time as Van Riebeeck used his riding horses as blunter instruments of power.⁸⁴ Practitioners were largely of the aristocracy, who had the leisure and financial resources to pursue the *art* – rather than the utilitarian dimension – of riding.

This ‘art’ was entirely absent 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’s and Germany’s hierarchical societies.⁸⁵ Company employment was both hazardous and poorly paid, thus attracting the most indigent elements of European society

The Reins of Power

to its service – men unfamiliar with *haute école*.⁸⁶ In a different way, however, horses did become a symbol of status within the evolving southern African communities.

As the settlement developed, a hierarchical slave-owning landed gentry emerged in the Cape Colony predicated on a finely differentiated rank system signified to some extent by the social use of horses.⁸⁷ For example, in terms of the mid-eighteenth-century Tulbagh Code, slaves were not allowed passage through the streets of Cape Town on horseback or in a wagon.⁸⁸ There were also regulations on what rank of person could have horses with funeral furnishings. The sumptuary laws of 1755 dictated the number of horses permitted to draw a carriage; and coachmen and footmen could only wear livery if the owner was sufficiently well-to-do.⁸⁹ Differentials of wealth became more apparent over time.⁹⁰ The landed elite translated their wealth into local influence.⁹¹ One of the key visible hallmarks of authority was riding. Indeed, a fundamental indicator of male *vrijburger* identity was the right to own a horse and gun. Thus, some subtle class distinctions were signified through horses: Shell has pointed out that the real difference between *knechts* and slaves was that *knechts* were permitted to carry arms and ride horses.⁹² In a nuanced analysis, Worden has shown that as the eighteenth century came to an end, in an early nineteenth-century slave rebellion, for example, the rebel leaders dared to commandeer horses. In an almost saturnalian ‘turning the world upside down’, they performed their shift from slaves to free rebel leaders by their move from their hired wagon to horseback. It was highly symbolic when the rebels commanded the farmers to dismount and be carried in the wagons through the Zwartland. Even more tellingly, in their ensuing defence plea, one was actually more willing to admit his possession of a gun than a horse, while a number of slaves contended that they had ‘been put’ onto horses, as Worden observes, in ‘a passive syntax that tried to minimize their active guilt in such a symbolic transgression of the social order.’⁹³ In other words, they were protesting their innocence of having literally got on their high horses.

Holding one’s horses

Right from the beginning, despite the efforts of the authorities, horses were not contained by the ruling elite. Initially the VOC tried to monopolise both trade and ownership; neither attempts proved successful. There are parallels: the horse

Riding High

escaped settler control in other contexts, escaping from European settlements in the New World by 1680.⁹⁴ Horses were highly coveted by indigent whites, black communities, Khoikhoi and Bushmen. These groups frequently converted desire into possession. Technologies of power were adopted and adapted; but they could not be contained.

Just as with guns, the Khoikhoi were at first cautious, but quickly embraced the new technology insofar as they could gain access to it. Over time, asymmetric access to guns and horses drove the Khoikhoi into liminal areas or to join other groups like the Griqua or Tswana, discussed in Chapters 3 and 4. At first, this was done illegally. In the eighteenth century, when the Cape claimed jurisdiction over all Khoikhoi, they were forbidden to possess horses.⁹⁵ As previously discussed, because the indigenous population realised the extent to which horses formed the white power base, there were attacks on horses. Furthermore, as local communities realised the utilitarian value of the horse, stock theft became an increasing factor. But later such trade became more extensive and legitimate and the direction of acquisition was frequently reversed in the next century, as will be discussed in the following chapters.

Horse trading

The number of horses slowly grew. Although overworked, the horses initially imported bred successfully and by 1662 there was a herd of 40. They were now integral to the defence of the settlement, with 18 mounted men patrolling the border against cattle-raiding Khoisan. By 1667 50 horsemen were on watch duty. One of these guards and his mount drowned while drunkenly fording a river, and it is significant that the new settlement mourned the mare far more than the soldier.⁹⁶

The original intention to confine the settlement to a slice of coastline had to be abandoned when not enough food was produced and the *vrijburgers* were liberated from VOC control to farm as individuals.⁹⁷ The *vrijburgers* engaged in small-scale farming, using unallocated areas as grazing commonage. Like their human counterparts, horses ceased to be under the sole control of the authorities in 1665, when a public auction was held and *vrijburgers* were granted the right to buy and breed horses.⁹⁸ However, they continued to be a public asset and were considered vital to the functioning of the settlement, so the authorities still exercised a controlling hand. In May 1674, for example, a man

The Reins of Power

was prosecuted for shooting his own (rogue) horse.⁹⁹ The rising stock also saw an increase in quantity and a decrease in quality. Because the initial genetic pool was small, inbreeding affected the herds and certain birth defects such as weak hindquarters were becoming more 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 decreeing that cruelty could be punished by a special magistrate. The administration also began importing stud stallions, apparently from Persia.¹⁰⁰

The number of horses continued to increase. In 1673 two more Javanese ponies were introduced, and in 1676 two horses and four mules arrived from Europe. In 1683 four horses were imported from Persia via Mauritius; and 11 horses arrived from Persia in 1689. By 1681 the *vrijburgers* possessed 106 horses and the company 91. Along with the shifting of the settlement's borders, outposts were established at the front line of expansion. The frontier zone was uncontrollable and trade took place between *vrijburgers* and Khoikhoi who lived in the interior; the VOC was simply not equipped to control this illicit trade.¹⁰¹ *Trekboeren* – quasi-nomadic stock farmers – moved further away, shifting the settlement from the south-western Cape to almost as far north as the Orange River and to the Great Fish River in the east. In 1700, when the trekboer lifestyle took off, there were 928 horses in the settlement. By 1715 the VOC had 396 horses and the *vrijburgers* 2,325. In 1719, when the first crippling epidemic of horse sickness hit, the horse population survived despite the loss of 1,700 horses. By 1744 the colonists had 5,749 horses. Other breeds, like Hackneys, were imported in 1792.¹⁰² Horse breeding increased, albeit at an occasionally fluctuating rate. This resulted in a 'breed' or, more accurately, a broad morphological type of horse that came to be known as the 'Cape horse'.¹⁰³

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 various breeds were more readily available to import than those of the metropole), it could be utilised 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 in time could come to be identified

Riding High

with the particular colonial culture, facilitating differentiation from the metropolitan culture.

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 superior to metropolitan breeds. As discussed, Van Riebeeck criticised the first horses as too light; they were not solid, like the draught horses available in Holland.¹⁰⁴ Correspondingly, there were ongoing but limited efforts by the authorities to alter the indigenising equine stock throughout the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, chiefly by importing fresh breeding stock with a view to improving the various horse types in the Cape. 'Improvement' in this period meant simply making them hardier and larger (rather than faster, as in the nineteenth century, as the next chapter will discuss). Over time the distinguishing phenotypical type or 'breed' came to be spoken of as the 'Cape horse'.

Horses creolised as humans did. The Cape horse was the result of a globalised fusion of the original import (South-east Asian or 'Javanese' pony, itself arguably of Arab-Persian stock);¹⁰⁵ imported Persians (1689); South American stock (1778);¹⁰⁶ North American stock (1792); English Thoroughbreds (1792); and later Spanish Barbs (1807);¹⁰⁷ with a particularly significant Arabian genetic influence. In 1769 the first export of horses occurred ('small and ugly, but indubitably horses').¹⁰⁸ They were destined for Madras and initiated an interest in breed improvement, which in turn encouraged the importation of the new breeding stock. From 1769 it gained escalating renown as an army remount and was exported to India for use by the British over the next century. Increasingly after 1795, when VOC rule was temporarily replaced by imperial British administration (which became permanent in 1806), enthusiasm for horse racing proliferated and in 1769, the same year that the first horses were exported, the Cape-based horses diverged. One 'breed' was to meet the needs of the racing fraternity, which used Thoroughbreds (usually a Thoroughbred sire and a colonial dam), and the other 'breed' to be used for riding, transport and commandos (some descendants of which eventually became the 'Boerperd'). This Boerperd was variously known as the Cape pony;¹⁰⁹ the Caper (the name adopted in India for race horses exported from the Cape); and by English-speaking settlers as the 'Colonial', the 'South African' and the 'Boer horse'. Dutch speakers referred to these utilitarian horses as the Hantam (an area famous for horse breeding); Melck or Kotze horse (surnames of famous breeders); or even

The Reins of Power

the Bossiekoppe (bushyheads or 'thick headed'/unrefined) by those less than delighted by its attributes.

By the end of the eighteenth century a visitor labelled the Cape horse admittedly small, but with 'a cross of the Arabian fire and are hardy in the greatest degree'.¹¹⁰ The Cape horse was phenotypically very different from English Thoroughbreds. They were small, compact, short-legged horses of about 14.3 hands. They were distinctively hardy, with a famously strong constitution, and were disease resistant, due to natural selection of the most vulnerable to local ailments. As previously shown, for the first 100 years, the breeding stock was primarily South-east Asian, with admixture from Arabian and 'Persian' stock, and an injection of English Thoroughbred blood from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries. This creature, a product of many 'breeds' from different continents, was increasingly stamped an indigenous horse 'belonging' to the Cape.

Moreover, settler riding styles replaced those of the metropole. This process developed during the eighteenth century, which was the period that the Cape ceased to be an extension of Europe and became instead a *colonial* society (due largely to a decrease in settler immigration and an increase in the birth of Dutch speakers). The trot, for example, considered 'unnatural', was replaced by an ambling jog called a tripple (or *trippel*) or slow gallop, making it easy to ride while carrying a whip or gun.¹¹¹ Lichtenstein commented on the 'short gallop' of the Cape horses, which was

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.¹¹²

Thus, the horse, like its human owners, had come to stay and had become a new force in the area, both adapting and being adapted to local conditions.

Making tracks

The world of the road is little explored by southern Africanist historians – but following horses allows one a better view.¹¹³ Long before the horse's arrival, Khoikhoi transhumant pastoralists had created a network of hard-beaten paths through the Karoo. When the first Dutch expeditions ventured inland, they

Riding High

often traced the paths trodden by game. As time went by, the *vrijburgers* used pasture land beyond the settled areas, following the tracks of the Khoikhoi. In summer months they sent livestock inland (although initially they were supposed to keep them within a day's journey of the settlement). The roads became sand tracks, with maintenance of roads rudimentary.¹¹⁴ As settlement expanded, existing paths connected key centres like Stellenbosch, Swellendam and Mossel Bay. Near Cape Town the farmers travelled in light carts or chaises, or rode horseback, but longer journeys were usually by ox wagon. In the early years of the eighteenth century horses roamed freely and grazed along sidewalks in Cape Town, and the streets of Cape Town were hazardous as pigs burrowed holes that uncannily attracted the hooves of vulnerable horses. The stench from uncollected animal dung was considerable. Thus, in 1724 authorities designated the Boeren Plein (later Riebeeck Square) the place to outspan. Further amendments were made to make traffic less disruptive and wagon drivers were discouraged from cracking their whips, which scared passers-by and even broke windowpanes.

As frontier conditions developed, the road network adjusted to suit changing traffic flow. The orientation of the roads in the early days of settlement was determined primarily by the needs of local farmers to migrate seasonally. Major roads to the north were straightened as the frontier shifted.¹¹⁵

A journey of 400–500 miles took six weeks. A trip between Cape Town and Swellendam took at least 60 hours or almost two weeks. Even in the vicinity of Cape Town roads were in bad repair. It took six hours to travel from Cape Town over the sandy Cape Flats to Stellenbosch. Each day's *skof* (journey) ranged from five to 15 hours, often during the night, so that the cattle could graze in the day. Travellers depended on their own food and fodder, and on the intermittent generosity of the farmers along the routes.¹¹⁶ Riders on a long journey would ride one pony and lead two others, if they could afford to, riding for two hours and 'off-saddling' for half an hour near water and shade, if possible. At the end of a journey, the saddle and bridle would be removed and the horse knee haltered (by fastening its head to its leg just above the knee, with its leg lifted up and tied with a clove hitch); the horses then grazed until evening, before being driven into the kraal (or stable).¹¹⁷ The horses of wealthier owners were fed on oats, barley or Indian corn, when available, and fodder had to be carried along with the human supplies.¹¹⁸

If the going was level and firm, the speed was about three miles an hour; by

The Reins of Power

cart and horse, perhaps six miles an hour. But travellers often averaged only six hours a day because of the difficulties of crossing rivers, the crudeness of the tracks that passed for roads, and the frequent halts demanded by thirsty and tired oxen or horses.¹¹⁹ There were no bridges, so larger rivers like the Breede were crossed by pontoons. The mountain ranges posed the biggest challenge, like those over the Outeniqua ranges or the Hottentots Holland Mountains. As Sparrman noted of crossing this range in 1775:

The way up it was very steep, stony, winding ... Directly to the right of the road there was a perpendicular precipice, down which, it is said, that wagons and cattle together have sometimes the misfortune to fall headlong, and are dashed to pieces.

Horses left their imprint on the way the roads were negotiated. For example, the spacing of outspans (resting places) was dictated by how well horses or oxen would manage various topographical problems along the road. The average spacing was the distance the animals could travel in a day (the distance between water points was less, if possible).¹²⁰ On a more prosaic level, geography was further altered by horses when paths formed in the veld as vegetation was trampled, plant regeneration was hampered and root damage occurred. This damage was, however, minimal – particularly in comparison to comparative examples from the American West and Australian Outback, where equine impact on the environment was extensive.

The weeds of war

Horses were thus part of the rapacious biota of empire. The ecologically parvenu Europe was populated by invasive, dominating weeds: animals and plants that were pre-adapted to disturbed environments, a basic biota that dated only to the last Ice Age.¹²¹ The European human weeds were successful imperialists because wherever they went indigenous populations and local ecosystems collapsed under their biological advance. As Crosby has described, Europeans established themselves in distant but temperate countries and often successfully shaped them into ‘neo-Europes’: the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Argentina and Uruguay.¹²² These were the environments where Europeans rapidly became numerically dominant over the indigenous peoples, with the key

Riding High

backing of their allies – the domesticated animals, pests, pathogens and weeds that the humans carried with them. These adjuncts of auxiliary invasive species were sometimes consciously marshalled by settlers, but they often effected incidental imperialism.¹²³

Similarly, at the Cape, the seventeenth-century power takeover and technologies of transfer included the horse. Yet, unlike in Crosby's 'lands of demographic takeover', in southern Africa the indigenous population remained demographically dominant, but power was nevertheless soon wrested into the hands of the settlers. Horses in the southern African context were not weeds, but rather delicate hothouse flowers. They failed to flourish, were easily eradicated by local disease, and had to be coaxed and nurtured into defending the white settlement.

The virgin soil epidemics of Crosby's model that decimated local populations worked the other way. Diseases, plant poisoning, predation and such challenges shaped the early cultural understanding and totemic resonance of the horses in southern Africa. Unlike the horse in other frontiers of settlement, like the nineteenth-century American West,¹²⁴ horses did not represent freedom or wildness to the white settlers; instead, they represented civilisation.¹²⁵ This was because there were no indigenous or escaped feral horses to be 'broken in'. Extremely difficult exercises in importation thus had to be undertaken and, even after arrival, equine existence in the colony remained precarious, threatened by lack of fodder,¹²⁶ disease and predators,¹²⁷ both human and animal. The frontier consequently did not develop rodeo or related equestrian games – there were no contests to see who could ride the wildest bronco. Horses were not wild creatures to be tamed; they were at first extensions of western civilisation to be nurtured and protected in order to serve the white expansionist project. Horses first meant (white) civilisation – both symbolically and physically. This was not to remain the case, however.

Horse in southern Africa

The equine weeds of empire found the soil of Africa difficult, and they remained delicate, requiring constant attention. Yet they helped their fellow (human) invaders to flourish, playing a key role in social and political processes in the early settlement of the Cape. After their hard-fought introduction, resisted by the metropole, horses were first used as draught animals to effect changes in

The Reins of Power

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 became a symbol of power and a useful draught animal.

The horse was also utilised by the VOC authorities as a signifier of difference and a marker of social status. It emphasised the difference between native and settler, to facilitate the psycho-social subduing of the indigenous population (and later, to a limited extent, to highlight the differences among white classes). Being such potent symbols, horses became victims of attack and, quite aside from human intimidation, remained vulnerable in their new environment, threatened by disease and natural hazards.

Thus, the role of the horse was predicated on *power* in both symbolic and material manifestations. Their iconographic role as status symbol served as evidence of wealth and power in individual transactions, as well as public spectacle. This helped entrench difference between those of higher and lower status. Equally, in a more material role, they advanced both economic and political ambitions.

From the last decade of the eighteenth century, two distinct horse cultures emerged – one embraced the British-led racing industry, the other a more utilitarian use of horses. There followed a conflict of horse cultures between those who clung to metropolitan fashions and those adopting ‘indigenous’ settler modes. As will be explored in the next chapter, moreover, the divergence led to a morphological difference between the race horses, which were of the 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. Indigenous and newly mixed, mobile groups took the horses’ reins too. History was made with horse power; and equally the horses were shaped by human history, incorporating the environmental and shifting human needs into their very blood.