

Greg Bankoff and Sandra Swart with Peter Boomgaard, William Clarence-Smith, Bernice de Jong-Boers and Dhiravat na Pombejra, *Breeds of Empire: The 'Invention' of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950*. Copenhagen, NIAS Press, 2007, viii+263 pp., paperback, ISBN 9788776940218

Greg Bankoff and Sandra Swart, the principle authors of *Breeds of Empire: The 'Invention of the Horse in Southeast Asia and Southern Africa 1500-1950*, have shone a light into an important, but what they contend is a largely overlooked, connection between the horse and the expansion of trading and political empires. As they note, 'This collection of essays reassesses the variety of ways in which animals—in this case, horses—were utilised and conceived of on the periphery of empire.' Continuing in this vein they make the point that studies involving the interaction between humans and animals 'is now a growing academic field' (2).

Certainly in the realm of horse racing, for example, there are many works about the lives and deeds of the turf's greatest champions. As an example, *Seabiscuit* (by Laura Hillenbrand), the story of a great American racehorse of the 1930s, not only became a best-selling book it was also made into a Hollywood movie. In countries such as Britain and Australia there has been almost a tradition of producing books about great racehorses.

*Breeds of Empire* is divided into two sections. Part One, consisting of five chapters, deals with the trade in equids between Southeast Asia and southern Africa in the century or so prior to the outbreak of the First World War in 1914. Part Two, consisting of four chapters, covers the introduction of the horse to the Philippines and the importance of the animal in southern Africa from 1654 onwards.

The authors note that horses 'were highly significant in the economies and societies of the nineteenth century Indian Ocean and South China Sea. Horses were central to many forms of warfare, whether for cavalry, mounted infantry, field artillery, or the baggage train. They were also extensively employed for urban transport...' (22) South African horses became a wanted item in India from 1812 onwards after achieving success on the racetrack in Calcutta. The Indian Mutiny of 1857 saw the trade in South African horses peak with over 5,000 animals brought to the sub-continent in the succeeding four years.

As the chapters show, the trade in horses encompassed most of the areas bounded by the Indian Ocean rim and into the western Pacific. South Africa exported to India; Burma exported to Northeastern India and Malaya; the Philippines also sent horses to India; while Indonesian horses came into Malaya.

The chief interest in this book for readers based in Thailand comes in Chapter 5: 'Javanese Horses for the

Court of Ayutthaya'. This section is written by Dhiravat na Pombejra, a recently retired history lecturer at Chulalongkorn University whose specialty is seventeenth and eighteenth century Siam.

He notes horses were highly regarded by Ayutthayan monarchs and their courts. This was despite the lands surrounding Ayutthaya not being suitable for horses due to inundation in the rainy season, with transportation mainly by boat. Horses formed part of processions, and basic skills of horsemanship were required for young nobles during the seventeenth century. The animals were largely imported from Persia and Japan.

It is perhaps no real surprise to find evidence of a colour fixation among the Siamese court. There were complaints about the lack of quality of Persian horses brought to Siam in 1696, possibly 'because they were of the wrong colour'. (77)

Dhiravat na Pombejra concentrates on the specifics of the horse trade between Java and Ayutthaya with especial emphasis on the key role played by the United (Dutch) East India Company (VOC). The VOC first established a trading station in Ayutthaya in 1608, six years after setting up their first base of operations in Java. By the middle of the seventeenth century the VOC was in firm control of much of Java by way of treaties with various rulers, and force of arms. The trade in Javanese horses began during the reign of King Narai (1656–1688).

Dhiravat na Pombejra suggests 'around 900 horses were sent to Siam from Java during the 1686–1735 period...' (80) At least 598 of these were sent during the 24-year reign of King Thaisa which encompassed the years 1709 to 1733. These figures, he stresses, are difficult to confirm 'because data on horses *bought* on Java and horses *sent* to Siam appear separately in the various scattered documents.' (80)

Taking the figures at face value, simple mathematics suggests the numbers of Javanese horses being purchased amount to about one animal per month during the period 1686–1708 and 1734–1735. Even during the reign of King Thaisa the number of horses purchased per month number a little over two. The Javanese trade certainly makes an interesting footnote, but it was hardly substantial.

In their conclusion, Bankoff and Swart attempt to put the case for a more concentrated study of the horse as an individual and separate entity, contending that current 'historiographical channels perpetuate the orientalisation of animals in disallowing non-human creatures their own history.' (153) They link the failure of a specialised '*horse-story*' (154) to what they claim is the norm for most historians to focus on the 'distorting mirror of imperial historiography' (154). They believe applying a level of scrutiny to the role of the horse in the Indonesian archipelago, Thailand, the Philippines, and southern Africa 'another trajectory starts to suggest itself.' (154)

*Breeds of Empire* is a worthy addition to that body of scholarship interested in uncovering and expanding the secluded minutiae of history. The authors are concerned the horse has been reduced, because of its domestication, to a level of invisibility within the general framework of history. While this may be true to a large extent, surely without the intervention of man the horse would have remained just another wild animal whose role in the history of nations and people would have been reduced to that of an important, but essentially dependent, footnote. Humankind has taken the horse, adapted it by way of breeding and usage, and turned it into, arguably, the most important creature in the growth of empires and expansion of trade in the world. A *horse*-story in isolation would be just another *Animal Planet* special.

Duncan Stearn

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