

[Horse-riding in the Light of the Civilising Process: An Example in France¹]

Abstract: Humans have had a wide range of relationships with the horse dating back to the Neolithic period. Initially, horses were important for utilitarian purposes including the food and sustenance they provided and more generally contributed to human progress. During the Feudal period only future knights – and later the nobles, were allowed to ride horses, which were used in battle (Legoff 2008). The evolution of horse-riding during the Renaissance is typical of what Elias discusses as part of the civilising process. Within the context of the king's court horse-riding became more precise and technical during periods of non-war and was eventually transformed from military use into sports (Elias and Dunning 1986). Once horses were no longer the preserve of the army, and were being used by the general population, horse-riding quickly developed. Indeed, horse-riding even became popular with women although restrictions on their access to competitions remained.

Key-words: Art, Sport, Equestrianism, Martial, Civilising process.

Introduction

During a large part of human History, horses have been an important part of it until now. As we look into this fact, we can observe that few have looked at horse-riding through the Elias civilising process –as long-term perspective changes of standards of conduct, feeling and morality (Heinich 1997).

Horses have been sought after by humans since the Neolithic age, originally as hunted prey (Digard 2007). Human interest progressively expanded to other areas, for example, activities in which horses' specific skills offered improved efficiency in transport, farming, war, etc (Roche 2008). Horses soon became so close to humans they were given the same special treatment and status as dogs, often being buried alongside their owner (Arbogast 2002). From the Antic period to the Second World War, the horse has been a tool for travelling, farming, working in lots of areas and especially when mounted for fighting (Franchet d'Espèrey 2007: 53). We assume, in an on going thesis, that this can give us an original point of view on equestrianism, of what it has been, or what it is now, and we can ask this question: is horse-riding nothing more than a European martial art? We will answer this question by looking at horse-riding evolution during History. We will focus on the culture of mounted horses in France, but we will speak a little about the others uses of horses in society as they were equally affected by some of the same events.

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A «dyscivilisation» crisis in Europe?

During History, the horse quickly became the embodiment of highly-esteemed «fighting values» for humans (Digard 2007: 42) and horse-riding was recognized as an important fighting technique. Indeed, the «mastering of Equidae» has been formally documented in historical writing: Xenophon, for example, is the author of the «first»² known book on the topic, where elements of what is more popularly known today as the «*haute école*» (French «high school») can be found. This prompted Henriquet (2010) to wonder why these techniques appeared to vanish until the 18th century, given the flurry of horsemanship treaties that have been written from the Renaissance until today. We believe this gap or technical regression in horsemanship – which is only one amongst many, like the Roman method of constructing stone roads or the «reinvention» of the plough which were long-lost until the 10th century (Weber 1986: 17, Legoff 2008: 170-172) to be the result of a «dyscivilisation» period (cf. Elias' theory of the civilisation process) sparked by the fall of the Roman Empire.

It seems, indeed, to be considered as a temporal and spatial breakdown during the historical development, a «dyscivilisation», literally a «barbarization» (Delzescaux 2002: 225-226). After the Roman elites had fallen into decay the local populations experienced a loss of their reference points. The barbarian invasions became more and more frequent, and we can observe then the frontiers of the ancient Empire becoming absorbed by the Barbarians into the rest of the population. The invaders were superior, at this time, through their weapons and their horses (Legoff 2008: 16). Whilst the Roman Empire was getting weaker, pressures were coming from outside from various German people: «*Franks, Alamanni, Burgundians and Vandals*» in the West, and particularly by the Huns in the East (Ellis 1978: 42). Although the German people were not horse-riders, the contact of Goths with Iranian tribes, and Lombards with the Avars allowed them to gain access to this knowledge. All these people, colonized Western Europe «*obliterated the old Roman aristocracy and established their own noblemen on the estates*» (Ellis 1978: 43).

Again, it is significant, according to Jacques Le Goff (2008: 170-172), that the fall of the Roman Empire produced a kind of «technical and technological rupture». As referred to before, existing knowledge during the Antique period would be totally lost for the next period, so, even if Xenophon and his fellows could reach a certain skill of horse-riding techniques during this Antique period, the fall of the Empire may have been the occasion of this loss of horse-riding techniques, also other techniques by Europeans. To this can also be added that the break up of the Empire between Rome and Constantinople made more difficult the possibility for Western people to gain access to the knowledge of Xenophon.

From the Feudal period to the courtisation of warriors

Equestrian activities based on horse-riding have been part of western societies since the middle Ages. During this period, a knight was fighting for his master and «*prêtait ses armes [...] – cheval, épée et lance – à son service*» (Carbonell 1999: 17) which required a lot of money. Horse-riding was practised exclusively by *milites* (future knights) but over time it was taken up by the nobility until the end of the 19th century. Duby argues that Chivalry and Nobility were separated at the very beginning of the middle Ages, but finished by reuniting under the category of knights (Duby 1988: 24-30). At this point in time horse riding served more practical purposes, either fighting or message-carrying. Whilst there is no written proof during the Middle Ages, we can assume as Lagoutte stated (1974: 68) that tournaments were the place where horse-riding knowledge was shared and transmitted, in which knights used to meet together to improve their skills and make themselves known to other people. Knights were usually swearing allegiance to their Lord, and, then, fought for him. In the beginning, this oath was made in a very rude, masculine way, and was based on the residue of the Roman statutes. As Catholicism was becoming important, and as it rose by constructing the states on its model, the initial way to be dubbed as a knight became more and more marked by Catholicism (Baschet 2004). In the 10th century, the notion of a military «order»

² Historical fact conserved and verified nowadays.

emerged charging the knights to protect the people of God (Duby 1988: 26).

At the beginning of horse-riding as a fighting technique, there was no specific equipment to enable warriors to stay on a horse, except for local – theoretical – inventions during the Antique period (Digard 2007: 72). The saddle appeared, formerly made of wood and leather, and then came the bow, for the saddle, near the beginning of our era in central Asia. This increased the saddle technology, and stabilized – apart from some local changes (Spanish saddle, western saddle, Portuguese saddle, etc.), which does not affect the saddle bow in itself. The next evolution saw the creation of stirrups. Indeed, these tools appeared to be very important in war, as it allowed the knights to stabilize themselves on their horses, giving them more freedom to fight with their hands, manipulating a lance or a sword and a shield. These stirrups became generalised in the ninth century (Digard 2007: 83), and are still in use today.

The next evolutions were more strategic than in the tack itself. Indeed, these strategical changes were modifications in the weapons, and then in the strategies of warfare, rather than in horse-riding itself.

As we read, all these changes in fighting techniques during the Feudal period, we can obviously say that war has always been during History one of the best means man found to increase his knowledge. War is obviously one of the main sphere in which strategy and technology are in the top of their progression.

During longer periods of peace, alongside fighters, whom were called to the Court, slowly the court etiquette became important (Elias 1973, 1975), horse-riding changed from a martial to an artistic technique (Lagoutte 1974: 104), leading to the creation of *«haute école»*. Indeed, the purpose of horse-riding at this moment was changing. This knowledge became not that important in warfare but more important at Court. It started to be *«un moyen de se faire une place à la cour, sans devoir abuser des flatteries ou de trop d'intrigues»* (Lagoutte 1974: 105). Indeed, equestrianism becomes then a means to shine in front of the King. Digard says: *«C'est parce qu'ils n'étaient plus à la guerre que les cavaliers ont pu être à la parade»* (Digard 2007: 127). The *«military orientation and ethos»* (Dunning 2003) are indeed transformed as a means to gain access to the favours of the King. Actually, this happens when there is also a change in warfare: nobles, instead of going to the front, stay at the back, and the infantry make the charge. It is interesting to see that, as nobles could be killed with their horses, it is now the lesser people who face the enemy.

At the end of the 16th century, it is a change in the organization of warfare. The specialization of horses and horse-riders is then tightened, because of the invention of gunpowder and the use of firearms, amongst other things (Roche 2011: 295). It limits the action of cavalry and especially the frontal shock (Roche 2011: 302). The wars, because of the death of many horses, which were expensive, led to the creation in the 17th century of the national haras (Digard 2007: 135-136). At this period starts an opposition between the ones who do not want equestrianism to be an art and who wanted it to be a fighting technique, and the ones who wanted to increase their skills and the beauty of the art. These different points of view fluctuate a lot whilst warfare is more or less important throughout time (Lagoutte 1974; Weber 1986; Digard 2007).

While equestrianism had become a tool for nobles to become well known and to shine at Court, we can observe, during the Renaissance period, the first books of a series of authors who wrote from that period to nowadays. The first authors in France were La Broue and Pluvinel, who had studied in Italy where the Naples academy had gained such a huge reputation that every horse-men of Europe went and learnt there (Franchet d'Espèrey 2007: 55-57). Their texts are addressed to the King and if leading a horse is like leading people, the man who teaches horse-riding to the king is his private tutor.

From La Broue and Pluvinel to other famous riders, like Nuno Oliveira, one can observe a progressive modification of the way men use horses. The techniques became more gentle (Henriquet 2010), as if the social attitudes towards horses were following the social changes throughout history. At this point, we can indeed observe that all the tools of dressage are very painful for horses. But till this period to nowadays, we can see that these tools become more and more soft.

A change in warfare: the empire

There was a change, whilst Napoleon 3rd led France in the 19th century and the cavalry took the place of Chivalry. The French Revolution pushed the nobles out of the country. The nobles were still masters of horsemanship but it soon spread to the populace. At this time, Napoleon used techniques from Eastern Europe (Roche 2011: 322). Instead of having a face to face confrontation between two fighters, we can observe huge groups of horse-men going through each other in a violent clash. With sabres out, the most skilled who were able to stay on their horses were sent to the battlefield. It is at this time the English saddle was adopted (Digard 2007: 151), which would have consequences when horse-riding would be open to public. The knights gave way to the army, which was open to a lot of men from many social classes. That historical fact changed the way men were taught to handle horses. Indeed, men of lower classes had to go and possibly be killed during battle and as there were so many of them, they did not have time to learn and they could not be asked to work their horses as well as knights did previously. As the cavalry lost its importance in warfare in favour of the infantry, the economy of war induced some choices. The cavalry still had an important role of support (Roche 2011: 304-305).

As the middle-classes progressively gained powers due to the fact that their roles were more and more important in society, we can observe an influence on the way horse-riding was seen. From Great-Britain came the English saddle and then the rising trot a horse-riding technique easier than the sitting trot (Bouchet 1993). It allowed the population to gain access to this practice, and created a new fashion: trail riding in the Boulogne woods. At the same time, circuses became more and more important. The middle-classes were fond of them, and wanted to see more and more horses. The turf and the possibility to bet on horses, which came from England, also became more and more important. It started to be the place where the horse, in an attempt to breed better strains, was evaluated. The circus was, in the beginning, the new kingdom of horses, as it was created for them. It was then the refuge of high school techniques. Also, for the first time during this period, women had a hand in it (Bouchet 1993: 272-282). However, two men symbolised the confrontation between two ways of thinking, François Baucher and the Count of Aure. Baucher was a dressage expert. He, not being a nobleman, had everything to prove. Aure was a nobleman; he thought a horse could be taught outdoors, to make the best of a horse's ability (Lagoutte 1974: 171). These men personify this confrontation which has had repercussions till nowadays: «*One says that when you are young, you will be like Aure and as an old man like Baucher*» says one of our sources. Horse-riding was then still lead by the military, but there was tension between these two ways of thinking, that would soon exist for all equestrians: ride freely in campaigns like d'Aure, or mastering the technique in a riding-school like Baucher.

The Industrial Revolution and its consequences

Horses played an important role during wars since the industrial Revolution happened. Actually, the invention of the internal combustion engine caused the almost total end of horses used in war, and also in all the spheres of French society. «*Des siècles durant, le cheval a été le maître du temps*» (Roche 2008: 20). This «*time master*» was used in every part of society.

The replacement of carthorses by mechanical cars was slow in towns, decreasing from 1890 to 1930. The changes in campaigns were more brutal: there were 200,000 workhorses in 1960, then 15,000 horses in 1980 (Digard 2007: 173-174). Tractors replaced them rapidly because of their higher capacities and speed.

All these uses of the workhorse felt into disuse. In this case, these horses were about to disappear. Their main purpose became then to be used as a source of fresh meat (Bouchet 1993: 290). The SPA worked hardly in 1850 to provide humane butchery in order to avoid too much pain for horses (Bouchet 1993: XV).

In the Army, the transition had more surprising consequences. While horses became less useful, horse-riders often became aviators. Indeed, the first hunting flight was composed by six observers and six aviators, only three of the aviators were non horse-riders (Krempp 2007: 230). It appears then that since the aviation became developed by the Army, the role of former horse-riders was important. After their last stand at the beginning of World War I, as horses were no longer useful, cavalrymen were asked to fight on foot and in the trenches, which

was not very pleasant for them. Aviation arrived as a salvation, and from 1915, the cavalymen became one of the most important corps participating in this new adventure (Krempp 2007: 233). As aviation missions were to observe and to fight, it replaced formal horse riders in their familiar goal in the Army. Krempp argues that being a horse rider was an advantage in aviation, as it needed to have a good sense of balance, and to «faire corps» with the plane (being a part of the plane). She observes finally that at the beginning of aviation, aviators had been considered as the modern knights, adopting their codes of conduct and vocabulary (Krempp 2007: 234). We see some interesting terms in aviation: the French word «assiette» (seat) is used to qualify the position of the horse rider in his saddle. It is also the word used in aviation to determine the equilibrium of the plane in the air. We can also speak about the fact that horse-riders, in classic horse-riding, are taught to mount a horse on the left hand side, which is a residual of ancient practices, when the knight had to climb on his horse with his armour, and the sword on his left side (Pidancet-Barrière 2005: 376-378). We can possibly think that the reason why we climb into a plane on the left hand side is a survival of these first horse-men aviators.

From the Industrial Revolution onwards, and up until the birth of modern sports, horse-riding shifted from the military to the athletic field, becoming like other sports, a social tool of affective control (Elias and Dunning 1986). Eventually, the army lost the monopoly it enjoyed over these practices, as the number of horse riders quickly rose. However, some of these practices were reserved by the army until the middle of the twentieth century, as operational training disciplines. All the actual Olympic horse-riding events are actually ancient military contests. Military horse-riders obtained many successes in the Olympic Games from 1912 to 1960 (Digard 2007: 178-179). Paralleling the popularisation of horse riding are criticisms that it has become feminised (Digard 2007), a trend started in the seventies and still continues today. It is «*the beginning of the end*» as some of our «old school» people whom were interviewed say nowadays. Elite-level riding remains male-dominated, but women are increasingly challenging their male-counterparts. However, women still experience difficulties to reach high level competition (interviewed professionals support this fact because of their domestic ties with children and their husbands, and when a couple is practising, the man takes priority over his partner...). Our interviews show that nowadays, women and men have a different outlook on horse-riding: «*Women like horses, men like horse-riding*».

Horse-riding in the XXI century

Horse-riding is considered an outdoor sport in France³, but its evolution would make us believe that it is more like a combative, martial art that gradually became a sport. There are almost 700,000 licensed horse-riders in France, the French Equestrian Federation being the third largest federation after the Football League and the French Tennis Federation in 2010⁴. This federation is made up from all the activities you can find in this sport (from jumping to dressage, etc). There are 2.2 million people who say they ride, but a lot of people do not have a licence⁵. There are many varied activities: jumping, dressage, hunting, trialling, natural horsemanship, etc.

Even if their technical and competitive modes of evaluation are different, all the equestrian practices are similar in terms of body posture, which were fixed in the 10th century, as technical innovations were becoming more infrequent. The saddlebow, probably appeared at the beginning of the Christian era, and stirrups, generalized in the 9th century, defined the appropriate way to ride, with a few regional variations modifying the rider position. The differentiation of equestrian activities, symbolized by the opposition between the Count of Aure and François Baucher (Lagoutte 1974), gave birth to a multiplicity of practices, initially divided in arena work *versus* outdoor work. The synthesis realised by L'Hotte⁶ allowed the structuring of these practices with each other. Nevertheless,

3 <http://www.sports.gouv.fr/index/faire-du-sport/les-sports-de-nature>

4 http://www.insee.fr/fr/themes/tableau.asp?reg_id=0&ref_id=nattef05401

5 http://old.ffe.com/infos/documents/2008/enquete_tns_sofres_fival_2007.pdf

6 Pierre Durand, *Le Cadre noir*, in «*Revue historique des armées*», 249 | 2007, [On line], put on line on 01 september 2008. URL : <http://rha.revues.org/index633.html>. Examined on 14 june 2012.

this initial «rivalry» remains meaningful today, as some specialists claim they belong to the Baucher-school. The multiplicity of books, methods, and the rise of American «new gurus» accentuated such debates. Most of the time, the «other one», who does not think the same way, never have a good way of practice: he or she is either mistaken or is not telling the truth. Even today horse-riding remains a «contested terrain» of styles each of which demarks the identity of its participants: proof of such claims would be the dichotomous attitude towards new practices born in the United States, like in Natural Horseman-ship (Parelli 1993), between its promoters and its dissenters. We now speak of the differences between the horse riders, whom are «art» oriented against the horse riders whom are «sport» oriented in dressage, some of them criticizing the others by misunderstanding the practice, by promoting the «Roll Kür», a German technique supposed to hurt the horses (Karl 2006; Heuschmann 2009).

This can be compared to the way martial arts and fighting sports were opposed in France in the middle of the twentieth century. After the arrival of judo as a French sport, we could observe a confrontation between judokas, who were fond of a «nice judo» and judokas who were promoting judo as a sport, with competitions (Régnier 2010). This confrontation is the perfect example of tensions between a practise integrated in the system Elias and Dunning described, and a practise outsider, in which the civilizing process works in another way, pushing its players to a high degree of mastering themselves in self- control.

Nevertheless, judo can be seen as a sport, since it was created by Kano after the Meiji revolution. This period can be seen as an extremely quick evolution, civilization of structures in Japan. After a lengthy feudal period, Japan changed radically, even in the way Japanese leaders dressed themselves, costumes replacing kimonos. Kano, who had a lot of responsibilities in the new government, was a good friend of Coubertin, with whom he shared many of ideas concerning sports. Judo can be seen as a sport model of ancient martial arts, as he chose the safer techniques of Jujitsu and created a new model of practice which finalized its transformation: «*Since the Second World War, Judo has undergone a very rapid transformation from a small-scale, Japan-oriented, rather esoteric martial art to a relatively large-scale, Westernised, modern, international sport*» (Goodger and Goodger 1977: 6). It progressively evolved from a practice surrounded by the «samurai etiquette» and morality of feudal Japan (Mennell 2003) to a sport, with its principles evoked by Elias and Dunning.

We assume that horse riding knew and is still undergoing a similar process, transforming it from an occidental martial art to a sport, at least in France.

Conclusion

Overall, we can see that there has been an historical transformation in the cultural practice of horse-riding – from a fighting technique to an equestrian art. With the Industrial Revolution, it slowly entered the sport domain, but we can see as evidenced by contemporary fighting arts a continuum of practices (Régnier, Héas, Bodin 2002), from equestrian sports to equestrian arts, with a multiplicity of aims, and perceptions that you can find in this kind of activities called martial arts. The European Historical Martial Arts are known to have disappeared and are brought back through research (Cognot 2010, Jaquet 2010). Horse-riding seems to be one of the rare martial arts that continue to today and its evolution seems to be the same as Far Eastern martial arts. If we assume that an orthodox way of doing physical activities is playing sports in the Elias and Dunning meaning, and a heterodox way is another thing, the equestrian sport, like a regular fighting sport, is an orthodox practice, inside the federation in which competition and victory are the goals. The equestrian art, like a martial art, can be seen like a heterodox practice, outside of the federation, with personal, intimate goals.

Horse-riding may be a western martial art but it is easy to overlook this because of its continuous existence in our societies and its logical evolution during the civilising process. Even if each extreme tends to criticize the other «camp», we can obviously observe that, from the Middle Ages to nowadays, one thing has changed gradually for all the people working with horses: the increasingly gentle approach to the training of horses and man's relationship with them.

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