THE HORSE IN WEST AFRICAN HISTORY

The Role of the Horse in the Societies of Pre-Colonial West Africa

Robin Law

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To
Robert Smith

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PREFACE TO THE 2018 RE-ISSUE

This republication of *The Horse in West African History* affords an opportunity to consider how far its arguments have been sustained, modified or refuted by subsequent research and analysis. I attempted such an assessment in an essay fifteen years after the original publication (Law 1995), but can now take account of additional material published during the following 22 years.

The book advanced various hypotheses about the history of the introduction of the horse and its role in West African societies, but two in particular have attracted attention from other scholars. First, I argued for 'a major revolution in the techniques of West African warfare' in the 13th–14th centuries, associated with the introduction of larger breeds of horses, initially imported (mainly through the trans-Saharan trade, but also by Portuguese maritime trade), but subsequently also bred locally, and with the adoption of new equestrian equipment (saddles, stirrups, bitted bridles, and defensive armour). This facilitated the adoption of new cavalry tactics (shock combat at close quarters, as distinct from missile weapons employed at a distance) which, it was suggested, for the first time made cavalry the dominant arm in the warfare of Sudanic West Africa (see especially pp. 119–27). Second, I argued – following earlier studies – that the trade in horses, including trade within West Africa as well as the trans-Saharan and trans-Atlantic import trades, was often closely linked to trading in slaves, with horses not only purchased with slaves, but also employed in warfare which generated captives who could be sold as slaves. Trade and war thus fed upon each other in a self-sustaining process, a 'slave–horse cycle', comparable to the 'slave–gun cycle' which has been posited in the trans-Atlantic slave trade (see especially pp. 62–64).

These arguments were registered in general surveys of West African warfare subsequently published, whether positively (Smith 1989; Reid 2012), or with implicit scepticism (Thornton 1999). A study of African 'arms and armour', however, although including a chapter on West African cavalry, offered an essentially synchronic description of warfare as practised in the 19th century, rather than a historical analysis, and did not engage with these issues (Spring 1993). There have also been studies of the political economy of warfare in particular cavalry-using states, in the middle Niger valley (Roberts 1987) and Bagirmi (Reyna 1991), which, in their stress on the inter-

relations among the trade in horses, raiding for slaves, and the appropriation of revenue in tribute and plunder, seem to reinforce rather than challenge the general thrust of the idea of a 'slave–horse cycle'.

However, little detailed research specifically on the horse has been published since 1980. The most substantial contribution was a volume on 'Horsemen of Africa', comprising a series of lectures delivered at the Centro Studi Archeologia Africana at Milan during 1994 (Pezzoli 1995). These included my own essay mentioned above, but most of the other contributions dealt with artistic representations of horses and horse-riders, and relate only tangentially to the primary concerns of my book. An exception, however, was a piece on harness, which is relevant to (and supportive of) the thesis of a 'revolution' in cavalry techniques in the 13th–14th centuries (Garenne-Marot 1995).

More directly relevant to this issue are two articles relating to Senegambia, by Ivana Elbl (1991) and James Webb (1993), both of which proposed revisions of my analysis, which had used Senegambia as an illustrative case. Elbl adduced evidence for the use of horses in warfare prior to the date of the imputed 'revolution'. As a criticism of my analysis, however, this is arguably misconceived, since it was not denied that horses were employed in warfare in earlier times – the argument was rather that the introduction of new breeds of horses, forms of equipment and military tactics transformed the role of cavalry, and increased its military importance. Elbl's own account, in fact, acknowledges that there was a marked increase both in the number of horses kept and their importance in warfare in Senegambia during the 16th century, but does not explicitly consider whether this was related to innovations in equipment and tactics. Webb, in contrast, explicitly endorsed the concept of a 'cavalry revolution', linked to the introduction of larger horses and new equipment. Both Elbl and Webb, however, did show that the original interpretation of this 'revolution' in Senegambia requires modification. In particular, earlier writers, including myself, exaggerated the significance of imports of horses by the Portuguese, which were simply not sufficiently great in volume to have had a decisive impact, and underestimated the continuing importance of trans-Saharan imports. There remains some ambiguity in this matter, however, since much of evidence cited for the continued importation of horses into Senegambia from the north relates to animals bred in the south-western Sahara, rather than imported across the desert from northern Africa. Strictly, therefore, this was trade within the West African region, rather than importation from outside it, and reflected the local establishment of larger breeds of horses, which was an explicit element in the original formulation of the 'revolution'.

Another recent paper dealt with cavalry in Angola (where horses were introduced by the Portuguese in the 16th century), thus offering a geographical extension of the field of study, although one that differs fundamentally from West Africa, in that the use of cavalry there seems to have been

restricted to the Portuguese colonial state, rather than indigenous African societies (Ferreira 2008).

Finally, it should be noted that a supposed horse-tooth from an early archaeological context, cited as evidence for the chronology of the introduction of the horse (p. 3), has turned to be a misidentification, the tooth being in fact of a donkey (Sutton 1985).

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PREFACE

During the eight years in which I have been engaged in research on the role of the horse in the history of West Africa, I have become accustomed to encountering, especially perhaps from my professional colleagues, a mixture of bafflement and amusement at my choice of research topic. Contrary to a common assumption, I did not undertake this project because I am an enthusiast for horses. I have, in fact, no special affection for these animals, and before I began this research was profoundly ignorant of them; indeed, even now, in spite of the efforts of friends and colleagues to enlighten me, my knowledge of horses remains in many respects embarrassingly defective, as I fear will be only too evident to those with expertise in the field who read this book. My interest in the subject originated in research undertaken for a University of Birmingham Ph.D. thesis, completed in 1971, on the history of Oyo, a kingdom in south-western Nigeria which prior to the nineteenth century made substantial use of cavalry in its armed forces[1]. A number of questions concerning the use of horses in Oyo had proved difficult to resolve, principally because the tradition of horse-keeping in Oyo had more or less completely died out by the time I did my research in the area in the 1960s, and it seemed potentially fruitful to approach them from a comparative perspective, by looking at the history of horses and cavalry in other West African societies. My interest was further stimulated by the appearance, shortly before the completion of my doctoral thesis, of Jack Goody's remarkable book *Technology, tradition and the state in Africa*, which argued that the employment of cavalry forces had had profound effects on the political structures of West African societies in the pre-colonial period[2]. There was, at the end of 1971, little material available to enable an evaluation of Goody's generalizations. Two papers dealing in very general terms with the history of the horse in West Africa had been read at academic conferences, but remained unpublished[3]. Humphrey Fisher was just completing a substantial study of the history of the introduction and use of horses in the northern Nigerian area, which was published in 1972–3[4]. Fisher quickly dispelled initial fears that he had pre-empted my own venture, by encouraging me to undertake a more general study encompassing other areas of West Africa also, and by very generously sharing with me the material he had accumulated. Important monographs

now available by Robert Smith and Joseph Smaldone on the history of warfare, including cavalry warfare, in pre-colonial West Africa were then still some years off[5]. It was in this context that the idea of a general study dealing, in principle, with every aspect of the history of horses and covering the whole of West Africa emerged.

The real subject of this book, it should be stressed, is not the horse, but the human societies in West Africa which made usê of horses. The book is offered as a contribution to our understanding of the character of West African societies during the pre-colonial period. Horses were employed on a substantial scale in pre-colonial West Africa, most obviously in warfare but also very widely as a token of great wealth and high social and political status. Moreover, the keeping of horses, in an environment highly uncongenial to them, involved considerable logistical problems and imposed heavy expenditures upon the societies and individuals concerned. The important role played by horses as an item of military technology, in the symbolism of authority and status, and as large-scale consumers of West African resources, makes the study of their use an illuminating starting-point for the exploration of general questions concerning the economic, social and political character of pre-colonial West African societies. In so far as the horse in pre-colonial West Africa served above all a military function, this book can be seen as a contribution to the study of the relationship between 'war and society', a subject of growing interest in historical studies generally[6] which has already attracted some attention in the field of specifically African history[7]. In so far as the horse culture of West Africa more generally symbolized and reinforced the complex interconnection of military, economic and political power, this book can be seen as a contribution to the developing debate about the economic and social character of pre-colonial African societies, of which other fruits have been the growth of interest in the material basis of political authority[8] and in the institution of domestic slavery[9] and the discussions of Marxist scholars concerning the analysis of African 'modes of production'[10]. At points in this book, no doubt, these general issues will appear to be lost from sight, submerged beneath an accumulation of technical detail on such matters as the breeding and feeding of horses, the shape and functions of horse accoutrements, and the tactics of cavalry warfare. But such detail serves ultimately a theoretical and not an antiquarian purpose. Detailed information is only valuable because it helps, however remotely, to make possible analysis of the general structures and processes under study; while generalization not supported and controlled by detailed research contributes little, beyond its potential heuristic value, to the expansion of knowledge.

On several occasions during the last eight years the conclusion has forced itself upon me that in seeking to extend the scope of this study to cover the whole of West Africa I was attempting the impossible. In fact,

while it sets out to take account of evidence from all areas of West Africa, this book is based upon a very uneven knowledge of the region. In particular, the information used is drawn to a disproportionate extent from Nigeria, which though very much the most populous of the modern states of West Africa is still only one among fifteen. Actual fieldwork on this topic in West Africa was undertaken only in Nigeria and, on a much smaller scale, in Ghana. While written material relating to all areas of West Africa was studied, there is certainly even here a degree of bias in favour of Nigeria, as the area in which I conducted my own earlier research and where in consequence my familiarity with the relevant literature is greater. Even within Nigeria, indeed, the material available to me on some areas was much fuller than on others: I would in particular have very much welcomed more information on the history of horse-keeping in such little-studied areas as the Jos Plateau and the Benue valley. This imbalance is mentioned here not in order to disarm criticism, but because it has important implications for any overall evaluation of the conclusions presented in this book. As will be argued below, there were in West Africa in fact two distinct traditions of horsemanship: a pre-Islamic tradition, characterized by the use of a small breed of horses and by riding without saddles and with a bitless form of bridle, and a tradition derived from the Islamic world to the north of the Sahara, introduced into West Africa from about the thirteenth century onwards, associated with larger horses and with the use of the bit, the saddle and stirrups[11]. The evidence available to me related overwhelmingly to the newer Islamic tradition of horsemanship, since the area in which the pre-Islamic tradition survived most completely into recent times, the Jos Plateau in Nigeria, was one in which I was unable to organize fieldwork of my own and for which there was relatively little information in the existing literature. Moreover, within the area of West Africa following the Islamic tradition of horsemanship, there was by the end of the nineteenth century a clear distinction between the west and the east: in the west (i.e. roughly modern Senegal, Guinea and Mali) cavalry forces had largely adopted the use of firearms, and perhaps in consequence had abandoned the use of elaborate protective armour, and horsemen employed the modern technique of riding involving short stirrup leathers and the flexed leg; whereas in the east (including Upper Volta, Ghana and Nigeria) cavalry still fought principally with the spear and employed protective armour, and continued the older technique of riding with long stirrups and the leg extended.[12] The bias of my information in favour of the eastern area, and more especially my lack of first-hand observation from fieldwork in the west, have certainly rendered interpretation of the causes and significance of these technical changes in the western areas of West Africa more problematical. Further research is, therefore, vitally needed, especially in the Jos Plateau area and in the western parts of West Africa, in order

either to modify or to secure more soundly documented corroboration of my analysis of the pre-Islamic tradition of horsemanship in West Africa and of the changes in the techniques of riding and cavalry warfare which spread across West Africa from the west in recent times.

In the work of research and writing for this book I have received assistance from many individuals and institutions. I owe especially great debts to Humphrey Fisher, Gisela Völger, and Robert Smith, who read and commented upon parts of the work in typescript. Humphrey Fisher also generously permitted me to read and make use of the proofs of the second volume of his translation of Gustav Nachtigal's *Sahara and Sudan* in advance of publication. I also owe a great debt to Barbara Frank, who allowed me to draw upon her as yet still unpublished study of the role of the horse among the Ron of the Jos Plateau[13], and more generally supplied me with most of the knowledge which I have of the horsemanship of the Plateau area. Others from whom I have plundered ideas and information, and to whom I wish to express my profound thanks, include Muhammad Nur Alkali, Solomon Babayemi, Nicholas David, Ekpo Eyo, Bernard Fagg, Paulo Farias, Tim Garrard, M. Dasana Iddi, J. M. Irwin, Marion Johnson, John Lavers, Daniel McCall, Patrick Munson, Ade Obayemi, Jennie Oram, Robert Pokrant, R. S. J. Popkess, Merrick Posnansky, Ingeborg Rentsch, Yvonne Schumann, Thurstan Shaw, Abdullahi Smith, and Richard York. My thanks are also due to the staff of the various institutions in which I undertook research work for this book: in particular, the Library of the University of Stirling, the Department of Ethnography of the Merseyside County Museums at Liverpool, the Museum of Mankind at London, the Nigerian Museum at Lagos, the Jos Museum, and the National Archives at Kaduna. For assistance in the preparation of the illustrations in this book, I am grateful to Francis Pratt, who drew most of the line drawings, and to the staff of the Audio Visual Aids Unit of the University of Stirling. For undertaking most of the work of typing the text, I record my thanks to Betty Neech and Margaret Hendry. And for encouragement and assistance in proceeding from perpetual rewriting to actual publication, my gratitude is due to the former House Editor of the International African Institute, Nicola Harris.

I should also record my thanks for financial assistance received in the course of my research. A field trip to Nigeria in 1973 was financed by the British Academy, the Sir Ernest Cassel Educational Trust, and the University of Stirling. Visits to Nigeria and Ghana during 1975 were financed by the Nuffield Foundation.

For permission to reproduce photographic plates, I wish to thank the following: for Plate I, Professor Thurstan Shaw; for Plates II and III, the Trustees of the British Museum; for Plates IV and VII, Frank Cass & Co. Ltd; for Plate VIII, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd. Plate VI was supplied to the

author by the Library of the University of Birmingham. Part of Chapter 7 of this book is a revised version of my article 'Horses, firearms and political power in pre-colonial West Africa', which first appeared in *Past and Present: a journal of historical studies*, no. 72 (August 1976), pp. 112-132 (World Copyright: The Past and Present Society, Corpus Christi College, Oxford, England): I am grateful to the Past and Present Society for permission to reproduce this material.

University of Stirling,
October 1979. Robin Law.

NOTES TO PREFACE

1. Published in a revised form as *The Oyo empire, c.1600–c.1836* (Oxford, 1977). For the role of cavalry in Oyo, cf. also Robin Law, 'A West African cavalry state: the kingdom of Oyo', *Journal of African History*, XVI (1975), 1–15.
2. Jack Goody, *Technology, tradition and the state in Africa* (London: OUP 1971 reprinted, 1980, by Hutchinson). For an evaluation of Goody's thesis on the political implications of the use of cavalry, cf. Robin Law, 'Horses, firearms and political power in pre-colonial West Africa', *Past and Present*, 72 (1976), 112–132.
3. J. D. Fage, 'Notes on the history of horses in West Africa', paper read to the African History Seminar of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London, 1964; Daniel F. McCall, 'The horse in West African history', paper read at the Conférence Internationale des Africanistes at Dakar, 1967.
4. Humphrey J. Fisher, ' "He swalloweth the ground with fierceness and rage": The horse in the Central Sudan', 2 parts, *Journal of African History*, XIII (1972), 369–388, and XIV (1973), 355–379.
5. Robert Smith, *Warfare and diplomacy in pre-colonial West Africa* (London, 1976); Joseph P. Smaldone, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate* (Cambridge, 1977).
6. As indicated, for example, by the appearance of the *War and Society Newsletter*, published annually since 1973.
7. See e.g. Bethwell A.Ogot (ed.), *War and Society in Africa* (London, 1972), comprising papers read at a conference at Nairobi in 1969. A second conference on 'African states and the military: past and present' was held at the University of Legon, Ghana, in 1975. The first pioneering venture in this field in West Africa was J. F. A. Ajayi and Robert S. Smith, *Yoruba warfare in the nineteenth century*, first published in 1964 (second edn, London, 1971).
8. On which, cf. e.g. Robin Law, 'Slaves, trade and taxes: the material basis of political power in pre-colonial West Africa', *Research in Economic Anthropology*, I (1978), 37–52.
9. For which, see e.g. Martin A. Klein, 'The study of slavery in Africa', *Journal of African History*, XIX (1978), 599–609; Frederick Cooper, 'The problem of slavery in African studies', *ibid.*, XX (1979), 103–125.
10. For which, see Robin Law, 'In search of a Marxist perspective on pre-colonial tropical Africa', *Journal of African History*, XIX (1978), 441–452.
11. See below, esp. pp. 26–28, 89–96, 121–125.

12. See below, esp. pp. 106–107, 131–132, 144–145.
13. Barbara Frank, 'Zur sozialen Bedeutung des Pferdes bei den Ron, oder Challa', *Veröffentlichungen aus dem Ubersee-Museum in Bremen, Reihe B*, forthcoming.

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Chapter One

THE INTRODUCTION AND DIFFUSION OF THE HORSE IN WEST AFRICA

The Introduction of the Horse into West Africa

Although various species of the genus *equus,* of which the donkey and the zebra are the surviving modern representatives, have been present in Africa since very early times, the horse proper (*equus caballus*) is not native to the continent, but was introduced from Asia in relatively recent times.[1] The horse seems originally to have been domesticated in the steppes of central Asia, perhaps early in the third millennium B.C., and from there the use of horses spread into China, India, western Asia and Europe during the second millennium B.C.[2] Originally, when they were first introduced into these outlying areas, horses were used exclusively to pull light war-chariots. The use of horses for heavy draught work was not feasible until the invention of the modern forms of horse harness, utilizing a collar or breast-strap rather than the older yoke, which became known in the west probably only around the eighth century A.D.[3] The technique of horse-riding was known in the eastern Mediterranean by the second half of the second millenium B.C., but did not become common until much later. The earliest extensive use of cavalry, as opposed to chariotry, in warfare was by the Assyrians from the ninth century B.C. onwards.[4] Thereafter, mounted soldiers gradually replaced horse-drawn chariots in warfare throughout the horse-using world.

In Africa, the horse and the horse-drawn war-chariot were introduced first into Egypt, possibly by the Hyksos, invaders from Asia who infiltrated into the Nile valley from *c.* 1720 B.C. onwards.[5] The earliest evidence for the presence of the horse in Africa is a horse skeleton excavated at Buhen, an Egyptian fort in Nubia to the south of Egypt, dated to *c.* 1675 B.C.,[6] and references to horses and chariots become common on Egyptian monuments from the sixteenth century B.C. onwards. It is likely that the horse and the chariot were diffused to the Libyan peoples of Cyrenaica, west of Egypt, from the Nile valley, though it is possible that they were introduced there independently from Europe or western Asia. The horse and the chariot were certainly known in Cyrenaica by the thirteenth/twelfth centuries B.C.: it is recorded that Pharaoh Merneptah of Egypt captured twelve pairs of horses (presum-

ably the teams for twelve chariots) in a campaign against the Libu, a tribe from this area, in *c.* 1231 B.C., while Pharaoh Rameses III captured 183 horses and asses and 93 chariots from the neighbouring tribe of the Meshwesh in *c.* 1187 B.C.[7] The horse and chariot probably arrived in north-west Africa from Cyrenaica; alternatively, they may have been introduced there by the Phoenicians, who established colonies at Carthage and elsewhere along the North African coast from about the ninth century B.C. onwards, or they may have arrived across the Straits of Gibraltar from Spain. Unfortunately, we lack evidence of conditions in north-west Africa before the fifth century B.C., but we then hear of horse-drawn chariots in use among the Garamantes, who inhabited the oases of the Fezzan in the central Sahara, and of war-chariots, presumably horse-drawn, among the Zauekes, a people living in what is now eastern Tunisia.[8] By the late fourth century B.C., we have evidence of horses (and, apparently, chariots) in the western Sahara also, among the 'Ethiopians' of the Atlantic coast.[9] The evidence of numerous rock paintings and engravings suggests that horses were once used on a considerable scale throughout the western and central Sahara, though they seem to have been much less common in the eastern Sahara.[10] The horse apparently ceased to be a normal transport animal in the desert only with the spread there of the camel, another immigrant from Asia, during the first half of the first millennium A.D.[11]

As in Asia and in Egypt, horses were originally used in North Africa and in the Sahara to draw chariots, and riding only developed later. The transition from chariotry to cavalry among the indigenous peoples of North Africa can be dated fairly precisely to around the early third century B.C. The last allusion to the use of war-chariots by the Libyans of north-west Africa relates to 307 B.C.,[12] while the first to cavalry relates to Numidian allies of Carthage fighting in Sicily in 262 B.C.[13] In the Sahara, however, war-chariots may have continued in use rather longer, since Strabo, writing in the first century A.D., refers to their use among the Pharusii and Nigritae, peoples of the western Sahara:[14] while Strabo may well be repeating material from earlier writers rather than reporting contemporary conditions, his sources are unlikely to have been as early as the fourth or third century B.C.

Horses were probably introduced into West Africa across the Sahara from northern Africa. Alternatively, they might have spread westwards from the upper Nile valley: but the rarity of horses in the early rock art of the eastern Sahara, alluded to above, makes this rather less likely. In West Africa, it is possible that horses were ridden from the beginning: at any rate, there is no evidence that horse-drawn chariots (or, indeed, any form of wheeled transport) were ever used there in early times (cf. p. 160). However, the date at which horses first reached West Africa is for the present extremely uncertain. It might, on the evidence at present

available, have been anywhere between the seventeenth century B.C. and the tenth century A.D.—the *terminus post quem* being the known date of the introduction of horses into the Nile valley and the *terminus ante quem* that of the earliest unequivocal record of horses in West Africa in a contemporary source. In some modern accounts, it is assumed that horses arrived in West Africa quite late, their introduction being often associated with supposed invasions of horse-using nomads from the Sahara who are credited with the foundation of the earliest West African kingdoms:[15] for example, Urvoy links the introduction of the horse into the Lake Chad area with the establishment of the Saifawa dynasty, in origin nomads from the central Sahara, in Kanem in *c.* A.D. 800.[16] However, there is no convincing evidence for dating the introduction of horses so late, or for associating them with immigrant conquerors,[17] and it is likely that horses in fact reached West Africa much earlier, probably during the first millennium B.C.

In time, it must be hoped that archaeological evidence will become available which will enable a more precise and confident dating of the introduction of horses into West Africa, but at present there is very little early archaeological evidence for the horse. Horses are, moreover, conspicuously absent from those early sites in West Africa which have been systematically excavated. For example, the village settlements of Dhar Tichitt, in southern Mauritania, which were occupied between *c.* 1000 and *c.* 400 B.C., yielded vast quantities of bones of cattle, but no evidence of the use of horses; though the excavator, Patrick Munson, hypothesizes that the final abandonment of the Dhar Tichitt settlements may have been due to pressure from invading horse-riding peoples who are depicted in local rock art.[18] More curiously, the substantial settlement mound of Daima, south of Lake Chad, which was occupied from *c.* 600 B.C. to around the eleventh century A.D., also produced no trace of horses among its large yield of animal bones.[19] Such negative evidence, however, cannot be regarded as conclusive proof that horses were not yet known in these areas, since the animal bones recovered from sites such as Dhar Tichitt and Daima presumably represent primarily kitchen refuse, in which horse bones would not be expected to occur unless horses were eaten—a practice by no means unknown but certainly uncommon in West Africa in recent times (cf. pp. 169–171). What will probably prove to be the earliest evidence for the horse in West Africa so far discovered is a horse-tooth found in recent excavations by Nicholas David at a rock shelter at Rop in the Plateau area of northern Nigeria: this tooth was found in a Stone Age level thought likely to date from somewhere during the first millennium B.C., but at the time of writing radio-carbon dates for associated bone material were not yet available.[20] A find of horse teeth and bones in association with 'Neolithic' stone axes was also made in 1931 at the site of Wuro Dawudu, in Adamawa Province, to the east of