

## Equestrian and Non-Equestrian Indians of the Gran Chaco during the Colonial Period

Las fuentes etnográficas sobre los indígenas chaquenses de los siglos XVII y XVIII distinguen entre indios de a caballo e indios de a pie. El ensayo trata de elucidar los factores de índole ecológica, ideológica e histórica causantes de esa diferenciación, y ofrece un resumen de los conflictos entre indígenas y españoles en esa época.

In the course of the 17th and 18th centuries, the Indians of the North American plains and prairies gradually adopted the horse. This led to a cultural change described at length in a large number of anthropological expositions. Whereas this so-called "horse complex"<sup>1</sup> represents an amply investigated theme there has been very little research into the comparable developments in South America. In the south of this continent many ethnic groups also adopted the horse. This occurred over an extensive area stretching from the northern limits of the Gran Chaco to the Magellan Straits, and from the present states of Uruguay to Chile. This paper deals specifically with the particular conditions of the ethno-historical development in one of the larger geographical regions of South America, namely, the Gran Chaco.

1 This expression will not be used again in the following in view of the fact that in the Anthropological Institute in Buenos Aires there is a drawing of a horse on a psychiatrist's couch with the motto: El complejo de caballo.

Two preconditions had to be fulfilled before the natives of any given district in the new world could adopt the horse:

1. The conquerers had to possess sufficient horses, so that the Indians could obtain a number of these animals. As long as the whites themselves had only a few horses, they naturally kept jealous guard over the weal and woe and whereabouts of each one. But as soon as the horses had begun to multiply quickly, favoured by environment, the Indians generally had little difficulty in procuring animals for themselves.
2. The Indians had to live in or near a territory permitting economically efficient use of the horse.

In the Spanish chronicles of the 17th and 18th centuries dealing with the natives of the Chaco, distinction is made between "indios de a caballo" and "indios de a pie" i. e. "mounted" and "unmounted" groups. The equestrian Indians included most tribes of the Guaycurú language group, such as the Abipón (Dobrizhoffer 1783-84, 1822; Furlong 1938; Preiß 1979), the Mocabí (Furlong 1938a; Paucke 1942-44, 1959-66), the Toba (Karsten 1923; Miller 1979), the Pilagá (Metrax 1937; Palavecino 1933), and the Guaycurú-Mbayá (Almeida 1845, 1850; Boggiani 1945; Koch-Grünberg 1902, 1903; Prado 1839; Sánchez Labrador 1910-17; Susnik 1971). To be added to these are the Inimacá (Schindler 1967), who spoke a Mataco language and the Calchaquí in the north of Santa Fé of unknown linguistic affiliations (Cervera 1907). This ethnic group was not related to the Calchaquí of Northwest Argentina, though this has often been wrongly assumed.

The non-equestrian tribes belonged to the language groups of the Vilela (Furlong 1939), the Lule (Furlong 1941; Lafone-Quevedo 1894), the Mascoy (Grubb 1911; Koch-Grünberg 1902a) and, with the exception of the above mentioned Inimacá, the tribes of the Mataco group (Baldrich 1889; Tommasini 1937) and the Chamacoco (Balduz 1931; Boggiani 1894), belonging to the Zamuco language group.

A conspectus of different Chaco tribes during the time of colonization is offered in the following works: Aguirre 1911 and Aguirre in Peña 1899; Azara 1809, 1810, 1817; Camaño 1931 and Camaño in Furlong 1955a; Cardus 1886; Cardiel in Furlong 1953; Jolís 1789; 1972; Kersten 1905; Koch-Grünberg 1902, 1903; Lafone-Quevedo 1893; Lozano 1733, 1754-55, 1873-75, 1941; Metrax 1946; Muriel 1918; Muriel in Furlong 1955; Serrano 1947; Techo 1673.

In Gran Chaco, then, the situation differed from that on the plains and prairies or in the pampas and in Patagonia, where gradually all ethnic groups adopted the horse. Why was Gran Chaco the exception? Why the dichotomy among the tribes?

This phenomenon has received scant attention to date, so that no comprehensive explanation has been sought. In this paper a theory will be developed hopefully allowing a better insight into the special conditions and the specific course of development in Gran Chaco. According to this theory an answer to the question under consideration emerges only in the light of the interplay of ecological, ideological, and historical factors prevailing at the time the Chaco tribes adopted the horse.

The Gran Chaco consists of more than 2,000 square miles of great alluvial Plain less than 200 meters above sea level. In the hot season the temperature can exceed 40 °C, in cold nights the temperature sinks below zero.

The Gran Chaco is covered alternatively with savannahs and forests. To the east, along the Paraguay River, there are thinly-treed palm groves while along the water courses of the interior tall reeds and palms are common. Away from the river predominate drought-resisting deciduous hardwood forests, containing several species of quebracho. To the west prevail more and more scrub thorn trees, dwarf shrubs, and giant cacti as well as pineapple and related species (ananaceae) of plants. The forests provide an excellent refuge for animals and men, but for horses they are impenetrable.

The savannahs are covered with coarse grasses that may be interspersed with scattered trees and drought-resistant undergrowth. There is a wide flooding in the rainy season from November to April, as the stoneless, compact soil prevents seepage. The floods dry up slowly after the wet season ends, but many swamps and salt pans remain. These are known as salitrales – shallow depressions that become encrusted with salt through successive flooding and drying by evaporation. Abandoned river channels filled with water in the rainy season are called bañados, if their waters are seasonal, and esteros, if more or less permanent (Wilhelmy and Rohmeder 1963).

Even from this short account it is evident that to keep horses in the Gran Chaco the adverse environmental constraints would have to be taken into account.

For what purpose could the Indians use the horse in such an area? In Gran Chaco there was no big game in herds like the bison in central North America, the wild horses and cattle in the pampas and present-day Uruguay, and the guanacos and deer in Patagonia and in the Pampas. After the adoption of the horse, the inhabitants of all these regions were able to set about big game hunting on a large scale with the result that herds were either eradicated or at least strongly decimated within two centuries, a process aided, certainly, by the white European immigrants. In these regions, the horse was first and foremost a means to simplify and

intensify hunting which led to an economic affluence that favoured trade, ritual and warfare.

Gran Chaco had no such plentiful supply of game; the interior wild-life population is even described as meagre (Wilhelmy and Rohmeder 1963: 71). Furthermore, the horse was only of limited use in hunting because many of the hunted species could avoid capture by fleeing into the thorny forest or into lakes, rivers, or swamps (Jolís 1789: 214; 1972: 153). For this reason even equestrian tribes often hunted on foot, as shown in the drawings and text of Paucke (1959–66, II) and the descriptions of other chroniclers like Sánchez Labrador (1910). Two examples suffice to illustrate this. Marsh deer (*Odocoileus dichotomus*) usually flees into the swamps to escape a horseman. Therefore the tactic of the Indian hunter was to get within lassoing distance as quickly as possible. Nevertheless he dared not approach too near, or he and his horse would be in danger of being run through if the animal turned to attack. The marsh deer had to be lassoed from about ten metres distance and even then, to prevent escape, the hunter had to cut through the sinews of the back legs quickly or endeavour to throw the animal onto its back and break its neck by a sharp tug of the lasso (Pauke 1959–66, II: 830 f.).

Other game species could outrun the heavy horse in the high Chaco grass. Using selected horses the Indians were able to stage drives on ostriches and small deer species on patches of open savannah. A line of beaters slowly formed a large circle; if one of the hunters spotted an animal he gave a signal shout, whereupon all participants drove in upon the animal to converge at a prearranged spot. Horses cannot dodge as quickly as an ostrich, which tries to escape by zigzag running and veering (Sánchez Labrador 1910–17, II: 201 f., 211; Jolís 1972: 165). As it took several hunters to catch an ostrich, at least four or five men cooperated. It is clear from various descriptions of the hunt that often enough several hunters succeeded collectively in bringing down only one animal. They could, of course, kill several animals in successive collective hunts, but the yield was very much less than on the plains and prairies, in Patagonia, or on the pampas where a single horseman could, in a good day, kill several animals within a short time.

In Gran Chaco, therefore, the ecological situation reduced the horse's value in hunting in two ways — for one thing there was the absence of big game in herds, for another, the limited suitability of the terrain for riding. Although the horse was of some help to the Chaco Indians in hunting, its usefulness was restricted. This does not, however, overlook the fact that the horse did help to transport the hunter to localities with game.

When unmounted Chaco groups are mentioned in sources from colonial times, this does not necessarily imply that they owned no horses at all. In the 18th century, most Indian tribes possessed at least a few horses, used as beasts of burden or for riding over short distances. Over longer distances in this intransigent countryside, however, riders had to change horses frequently, so that several were needed for a journey of any length. One of the missionaries mentions that, under particularly adverse circumstances, he had to change horses five times on a four-hour journey (Dobrizhoffer 1783–84, III: 280).

Then what economic advantage had the horse for the Indians of the Gran Chaco? It was most effective within the framework of the warlike cattle raids upon the ranches of the Spanish. In a successful venture the Indians captured hundreds, sometimes even thousands of animals, mainly cattle and horses but sheep too. Speed was of paramount importance, both for a surprise attack and in driving away the booty before pursuit could be organized. The difficult terrain and the wide ranges of Gran Chaco provided an advantageous retreat for the Indians, at the same time hindering the Spaniard's pursuit. In case of a clash, the Indians gained the advantage by reason of their versatility on horseback in the face of the comparative inflexibility of the Spanish cavalry, trained to fight in closed ranks.

Long distances had to be covered on such attacks on the ranches, both before and after the actual raid. To accomplish the journey in the shortest possible time each rider needed several horses, ridden successively, so that none should be exhausted. Dobrizhoffer's above mentioned report shows clearly how necessary it was to own a sufficient number of horses.

Although the mounted Chaco tribes often enough encountered only weak resistance to their raids, nevertheless each participant went in danger of life and limb. But why did some tribes take these risks upon themselves, while others made little or no avail of the economic chance to enrich themselves with booty? Here the ideological factors, which played a role in the emergence of the equestrian groups, enter the picture.

Several historical accounts relate that the Gran Chaco natives adopted the horse and became warlike. Kersten (1905: 19) e. g. wrote of these tribes: "A transformation, even of the inner character, which has been going on ever since they switched over to equestrian nomadism, has made them more like mounted Asiatic peoples; they have become as tough and enduring, as energetic and active as these. Earlier observers also remarked on the superiority of the mounted over the unmounted Chaco tribes and they quite rightly recognized that this dated from the introduction of the horse." Others authors, recently e. g. Tomasini (1978: 17 f.) and Münzel (1978: 399), are also of this opinion.

It was, in fact, the other way round; the warlike tribes adopted the horse. In cases where an earlier characterization of the ethos of Indian groups exists, it can be seen that from the beginning those tribes which later became equestrian defied the Spaniards more intensely than did their neighbours who never became equestrian.

The connection between a warlike ethos and the adoption of the horse is most easily demonstrated with the Guaycurú and Mbayá, who can be regarded as the northern and southern components of the same ethnic group. The Guaycurú were fractious right from the start, defying the conquerors and their coerced allies, the Guaraní. Only a few years after the foundation of Asunción, its Gouvernor, Alvar Núñez Cabeza de Vaca, conducted a campaign against the Guaycurú. As this was not very successful he negotiated a peace treaty, which in no way prevented the Guaycurú from perpetrating further acts of violence.

Therefore the Jesuit Provincial, Diego de Torres, complained in 1610: "The Guaycurú are but few and their men completely naked and they live in the area neighbouring on Asunción, only a river between, and they are so dreadful that they will never be conquered, and they carry on war against the Spaniards and have killed many and have devastated many of their ranches and they keep the city in a state of armed conflict and in considerable fear, and they have wiped out other nations of neighbouring Indians." Numerous examples of similar statements about the Guaycurú could be quoted.

After the first encounter of the conquistadors with the Mbayá. Schmidel (Chap. 44) wrote, "These Maipais are tall, upright, belligerent people, who use all their energy and zeal in the interests of war."

In 1591, Juan Fonte wrote of the Frentones around the settlement of Concepción del Bermejo – who according to the specialists were, in all probability, the groups later called the Abipón – that they held the art of war in high esteem and frequently fought among themselves (Lozano 1754–55, I: 79). In 1609 Diego de Torres called them "... very spirited, very skillful, very choleric people ..." (Leonhardt 1927, I: 16). A few lines further on, this priest mentions the Toba: "Many Spaniards on the Bermejo River reported of these heretical Indians; they say they met the Toba, an extremely warlike people who even go beyond Tarija in order to carry out raids and that they subdue the Chiriguano; it is said that the Toba have 2.000 Indians of war." On the 3rd of September 1582, the Jesuit Gaspar wrote to his Provincial Mastrilli about the Toba, Mocabí, and Pilagá: "... they are very brave people so that even the Chiriguano avoid quarreling with them" This impression set them apart from the Matabo, who, he said, were "... modest and of good ability but not as brave as their neighbours." He adds that they suffered greatly under Chiri-

guano attacks (Lozano 1941: 164). Pater Mendiola, in a letter dated 1635, also writes of the "docile Mataco", whereas he calls the Toba "a very ruthless, very greedy tribe" (Pastells 1912, I: 536). Around 1630, Vázquez de Espinosa in his report on the Indians around Santa Fé described the Calchaquí as a people of war (1948: 641, Nr. 1825).

Had the English, for example, or the French, conquered the La Plata countries instead of the Spaniards, the Indians of the Gran Chaco might probably never have adopted the horse. One of the most highly esteemed and, at the same time, economically important occupations of the Spaniards at home was cattlebreeding. Whenever possible they devoted themselves to this in the new world as well, and cattle-breeding flourished particularly in the La Plata countries. This is apparent e.g. from the following: some few decades after the arrival of the conquistadors, that is, from the end of the 16th century on, a basic stock of several thousand cattle, sheep and horses was placed at the disposal of new settlers on each occasion of the foundation of a new town (Giberti 1974). If the French or English had landed at La Plata they would likely have concentrated on agriculture, so that too few horses would have been available for the Indians ever to have become equestrian, nor would raids on the white ranches have been so directly rewarding as they were under the Spaniards' colonization. If these considerations are correct, then the cattle-breeding-orientated economy of the Spaniards stands out as the historical factor representing an important prerequisite for the development of the equestrian cultures of Gran Chaco.

There is a region in South America in which the Indians never took over the horse although the topology would have warranted its keep. These are the Llanos in the northwest of the continent. As there were neither big game nor cattle ranches in the area during colonial times, the Indians could not have used horses for hunting or making raids. Probably for this reason no equestrian tribes developed in the Llanos.

This paper cannot describe the detailed history of the mounted Chaco Indians' guerilla warfare with the Spaniards but a few important facts will be selected. A more comprehensive ethnohistorical account is given in my recently published book ("Die Reiterstämme des Gran Chaco", 1983).

From the 17th century onwards, frequent attacks of the mounted tribes forced the whites to give up some of their holdings, as the following examples will show.

During the 16th century some inhabitants of Asunción grazed their livestock opposite the settlement on the west bank of the Paraguay River. Soon after 1600 these pastures finally had to be abandoned because of the continual raids (Gandía 1929: 458, 511; Susnik 1971: 32). The first settlement located further inland in Gran Chaco was Concepción, founded

south of the lower end of the Bermejo River in 1585. Concepción flourished for a short while until more and more indigenous Indian groups learned to master the horse (Levillier 1926: 267; Lozano 1873–75, III: 273; Pastells 1912, I: 248; Torre Revello 1943). As the raids constantly increased in number the last inhabitants of Concepción finally left in 1632 (Torre Revello 1943: 161; Zapata Gollán 1966: 30). Santa Fé, founded in 1573, had to be resituated in 1651 to its present location on the Gran Chaco boundary and nearer the bank of the Parana River (Cervera 1907, I: 367; Furlong and Molina 1953). During the next hundred years time and again the threat was articulated in historical documents, that the city would have to be abandoned altogether.

The same danger, if less acute, threatened the towns of Jujuí and Tucumán at the foot of the Andes (Camaño [1778] in Furlong 1955a: 123). This fate overtook the farther outlying settlement Esteco which had suffered heavy attacks. In 1686 and 1690 the Indians even penetrated into the streets of the town, and could be repulsed only after bitter fighting and with the loss of many lives. When an earthquake occurred in 1692, the almost entirely depopulated town was finally abandoned (Abad de Santillán 1965, I: 161; Tommasini 1937, II: 82, 84, 88; Torre Revello 1943).

Two of the trade routes so important for linking the La Plata towns and the Andes district, where the centre of government was located, had also to be given up. One of these routes originally started from Buenos Aires, following first the Paraguay River and then the Bermejo River upstream; traders stopped using it several years before the settlement of Concepción was given up in 1632, as the danger posed by the Indians became too great (Torre Revello 1943). The second relinquished route ran from Santa Fé in the direction of Mar Chiquita, then turned towards the Salado River to follow its upward course. Tribes of horsemen had threatened this route as early as 1624, and in the following decades traders had to be accompanied by military escorts. The route was finally abandoned at the end of the 17th century. The 'camino real' – the royal road from Buenos Aires to the Andes originally ran north of Córdoba along the east side of the mountains. But this route proving too dangerous, the caravans began to cross the mountains close to the town and travel on the west of the Sierra, the side away from the Chaco (Torre Revello 1943).

From the first half of the 17th century the Spaniards were, therefore, compelled to retreat in many places, whereas they had previously been gaining ground. By about 1700 all their outposts in Gran Chaco had been abandoned and the equestrian Indians held sway over the territory.

This situation continued into the first decades of the 18th century. But epidemics and warfare had exacted a heavy toll among the Indians,

whose tribes fought each other as well as the whites. The insidious diseases brought in from Europe probably imposed a much higher levy on native life than warfare did. Most equestrian groups had compacted a peace treaty with one or other township on the Gran Chaco borders in order to barter their wares, consisting largely of booty appropriated in other regions. When the Indians visited the white settlements for trading such products of civilization as iron tools, glass beads and cloth, mirrors and tobacco, they became infected and their lack of resistance brought devastating results as the disease ran rampant.

Little attention is paid to these trade relations in the historical accounts of the La Plata States probably because the cities won their truce at the cost of the neighbouring cities. The trade, however, is well documented (Aguirre 1911: 314; Almeida 1850: 383; Dobrizhoffer 1783–84, II: 311, III: 21, 22; Furlong 1938: 162; Paucke 1959–66, I: 322, II: 581 f.; Prado 1839; Sánchez Labrador 1910–17, I: 195, 314, II: 84; Susnik 1971: 41, 68).

Gradually, about the middle of the 18th century, first one, then another group of the mounted tribes declared themselves willing to settle in Jesuit reductions. But the missionaries' descriptions of the proud and confident, indeed arrogant, bearing of these people hardly reveal that, in fact, such settlement in missions was an indication of the waning military power of the Indians. In retrospect, however, the Indians' acceptance of the missionaries gives the first hint of such a development. The Jesuit reductions fulfilled a double function; for one thing they substantially lowered the number of attacks in which the settled Indians participated. Furthermore, the mission stations were often situated just in the paths of attack of the equestrian tribes, so that they afforded the white holdings a certain protection: "These [missionary] settlements encircle the Chaco forming a cordon at its occidental and oriental confines, and in this way they defended the Spanish provinces against the invasions of those who remained Gentiles in the Chaco" (Camaño [1778] in Furlong 1955a: 125).

In 1776, the Spanish court ordered the foundation of the Vicekingdom of La Plata, to organize a better defence against the English and Portugese in this part of the overseas colonies. The choice of Buenos Aires as the viceroy's seat boosted the economy of the La Plata region. The increased military strength of the Spaniards led, among other things, to the construction of more forts along the Gran Chaco boundaries and to improved maintenance and equipment of the troops stationed there. This robbed the Chaco tribes of their former military superiority, and the risk they ran in making an attack rose steadily. They were no longer assured, as they once had been, of a steady haul of cattle, so that the

tribal economy was increasingly divested of an important asset. To avoid calling down a punitive expedition upon themselves, the Indians policy was now to spare lives instead of taking them in their attacks. In 1700 the equestrian tribes of Gran Chaco had been the scourge of the whites; soon after 1800 they were scarcely more than ordinary cattle thieves. By the beginning of the 19th century their military and economic heyday had petered out. Their holdings of horses decreased steadily, which again confirms the strong dependence of the equestrian Indians of Gran Chaco on their readiness and capacity for warlike enterprise.

From this time on, the whites advanced further and further into Gran Chaco. In 1871 Seelstrang (1884: 368) visited a group of Toba in Gran Chaco, that very tribe which had once numbered among the most dreaded opponents of the whites. Seelstrang reported that these Indians owned not a single horse; he added, in obvious ignorance of their history, that in their partly wooded, partly swampy environment the horse would, anyway, be of little use.

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