Neither the horse nor the Spaniard was native to the Philippines. While the latter might come to the islands to make his destiny – find fortune, acquire land, gain status – the former was always an unwilling migrant with little choice in the matter. Both had to adapt to the new world they found themselves in, yet the conditions were very different from what they had known and the outcomes not what they might have expected. Above all, the conquistador liked to think of himself as a gentleman-soldier, a *caballero*, literally one who rides a horse, a *caballo*. The trouble was there were no horses in the archipelago – or, at least, not in those parts of it occupied by Spaniards in the late sixteenth century. Horses were hard to come by and had to be imported: the famed breeds of New Spain, let alone the metropole, were dangerously far away, so a source nearer to ‘home’ had to be found. The animal, however, responded to its altered circumstances and new environment by rapidly attenuating and within a century was barely able to support a fully grown European rider, in the process losing its iconic appeal. At the same time, its diminished size and steady gait made it a perfect means of locomotion for the indigenous rural population who readily adopted it for transport and as a beast of burden.

The Philippines may have been a rough and ready frontier society in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, yet its capital, Manila, waxed wealthy on the galleon trade and had grown into a fine stone city of considerable dimensions and even greater pretensions during the decades of liberal policies and before the devastating earthquake of 1645. This chapter explores how man and beast acclimatised to a tropical setting that conspired to undermine and circumvent the prestige and social standing of the coloniser, ridiculing one of the most cherished symbols of Iberian hubris, the *caballero*. Big men and small horses, large egos and great hearts make for a Renaissance tale where ridership and social standing were as much a matter of environmental adaptation as ‘good breeding’.
The Spanish Gentleman and His Steed

The Spanish nobility, the *caballeros hidalgos*, retained a close association with horse and arms for far longer than did the elite elsewhere in western Europe. Apart from the grandees or high nobility, the urban patriciate of the Iberian peninsula refused to be military in nature, while their counterparts in the great cities of Europe from Lombardy to Flanders were evolving into more mercantile aristocracies. But the role of heavy cavalry, hitherto the preserve of the nobility, was being undermined in the sixteenth century by developments in warfare: gun-bearing infantry defended by barriers and trenches; new forms of fortifications and siege-craft; and the appearance of the pistoleer, a light cavalryman armed with a pistol. Even if the cavalry persisted into the following century, and staged something of a comeback as a result of Gustavus Adolphus of Sweden’s reforms, nobilities were forced to reconsider the very essence of *noblesse*, the ideals and traits that comprised noble status.

As the influence of the Italian Renaissance spread northward, the characteristics of the noble courtier, one who epitomised *grazia* (grace) and *sprezzatura* (nonchalance), found expression in a new form of horsemanship that provided occasion to demonstrate these same qualities: the *manège equitation* virtually defined gentlemanly status and sanctioned elite title. While their counterparts in France and Italy were gradually foregoing more warlike pursuits by learning effortlessly to put their steeds through intricate and admittedly dangerous manoeuvres, their Spanish cousins still had need for overtly martial skills. They had also developed a unique style of horsemanship, *a la jinete*, modelled on their Muslim adversaries during the medieval Reconquista and suited to frontier warfare, comprising rapid movement and small marauding bands. It was characterised by short stirrups, a fairly low saddle and a palate-bit that enabled the rider to turn his horse far more quickly than by pulling at the sides of the mouth.

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