

THE MILITARY VALUE OF HORSES AND THE SOCIAL VALUE OF THE HORSE IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND

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Horses played a major role in warfare until the mid-twentieth century. English and British armies from the middle ages to the First World War relied on mounted troops and horse-drawn transport. Despite many changes in tactics and technology, military demand for horses generally kept increasing in the long term and peaked in the First World War. Cultural historians and literary critics have suggested that perceptions and representations of the horse's military and social role changed during the early modern period. Bruce Boehrer has argued for a bourgeoisification of the horse in early modern England, based on his readings of Shakespeare plays.¹ Karen Raber and Treva Tucker's collection, *The Culture of the Horse*, was built around a narrative of the decline of medieval heavy cavalry which led the European nobility to redefine their identity in relation to horses. In this view, the *manège* replaced jousting and heavy cavalry service as a signifier of elite status in the sixteenth century.² Although horses continued to be militarily useful throughout the early modern period and beyond, the essays in *The Culture of the Horse* suggest that the myths surrounding them increasingly tended to deny their importance.

As Dan Todman insists, 'myth' does not have to be put in opposition to 'reality', where it becomes synonymous with 'lie'. Following Roland Barthes, he defines myths as beliefs which 'simplify, reducing the complex events of the past to an easily understood set of symbols'.³ These symbols exaggerate some aspects of the past while erasing others, and can come to be seen as the only truth. An alternative narrative of mounted warfare is possible and necessary. A major weakness of Raber and Tucker's volume is that it focused mostly on the

¹ Boehrer B.T., "Shakespeare and the social devaluation of the horse", in Raber K.L. – Tucker T.J. (eds.), *The Culture of the Horse* (New York: 2005) 91.

² Raber K.L. – Tucker T.J., "Introduction", in Raber – Tucker, *Culture of the Horse* 9, 24.

³ Todman D., *The Great War: Myth and Memory* (London: 2007) xiii.

early modern period without properly establishing what went before. While the authors looked at the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in detail, the middle ages were reduced to a simple set of symbols such as 'chivalry' and 'feudalism'. Chivalry, knights, men-at-arms, cavalry and the roles of horses in war are not quite the same thing but Boehrer did not always make it clear which was supposed to be in decline.⁴ In *The Culture of the Horse* changes in the cultural significance of the horse were often assumed to follow naturally from military and economic changes. A re-examination of the horse in war will show that the military effectiveness of cavalry, the social status of cavalrymen and the cultural significance of the horse did not neatly coincide with each other.

Horses in War

Heavy cavalry were at their most dominant on the battlefield in the three centuries between 1000 and 1300, although even in this period winning a battle usually depended on a combination of infantry and cavalry.⁵ In the fourteenth century infantry became more important and were able to defeat cavalry in many battles, but this did not lead to cavalry becoming completely obsolete.⁶ Heavily armoured men-at-arms remained useful because they were all-rounders, who could fight on foot as well as on horseback. The most famous English victories in the Hundred Years War (Crécy, Poitiers and Agincourt) were won by a combination of archers and men-at-arms. Of these battles, only Crécy (1346) conformed to the stereotype of French cavalry being defeated by English infantry.⁷ After this, the French began to copy English practice by dismounting most of their men-at-arms during battles, using only small numbers of cavalry for flank attacks.⁸ At Poitiers (1356) the Anglo-Gascon army initially fought dismounted but a group of mounted men-at-arms under the Captal de Buch attacked

⁴ Boehrer, "Social Devaluation" 91, 97–98.

⁵ Rogers C.J., "Tactics and the face of battle", in Tallett F. – Trim D.J.B. (eds.), *European Warfare 1350–1750* (Cambridge: 2010) 203.

⁶ *Ibid.* 204–205.

⁷ Prestwich M., "The Battle of Crécy", in Ayton A. – Preston P. (eds.), *The Battle of Crécy* (Woodbridge: 2005) 148, 153–154, 156.

⁸ Schnerb B., "Vassals, Allies and Mercenaries: The French Army before and after 1346", in Ayton – Preston, *Crécy* 271.