

Donkeys and mules in the ‘New World’

John Barker [Independent researcher]

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I should say first that I have a real affection for donkeys and mules, having used and worked with them many years ago in Greece. I was living in a deserted hill village and had use of a strong donkey for fetching water from the valley. Then later I worked with mules gathering sacks of olives for the olive mill in places tractors could not reach. Since then baby tractors have been produced and, more significantly bulldozers and graders have made more and more roads and tracks that make more places open to internal combustion vehicles. It is one cause of the decline in donkey and mule numbers, and though my talk is historical I believe its concentration on the animals’ use as transport is relevant.

For the architect/urban planner Le Corbusier the donkey is the enemy, it’s an obsession. In *The City of Tomorrow*, he talks of how man can and should move purposefully in straight lines: “The pack-donkey meanders along, meditates a little in his scatter-brained and distracted fashion, he zig-zags in order to avoid the larger stones, or to ease the climb, or to gain a little shade; he takes the line of least resistance.” His complaint is that the pack-donkey and its style of moving is responsible for the plan of every continental city. The continent here is Europe, but the accusation is that the donkey is the symbol of the primitive, of backwardness.

Compare this to Johann Jacob von Tschudi, a 19th-century traveller in the Andes, describing why mules are superior to both horses and llamas which, in true colonial style, he insists on calling “native horses”. “It is wonderful with what tact and penetration the mule chooses his footing. When he doubts the firmness of the ground he passes his muzzle over it, or turns up the loose parts with his hoof before he ventures to step forward. When he finds himself getting into soft and marshy ground he stands stock still, and refuses to obey the stirrup or the whip. If by accident he sinks into a morass, he makes a halt, and waits very contentedly until he receives assistance.” There were in fact such morasses, especially on the route from Quito to the port of Guayaquil and in those circumstances human carriers were used. This interchange is common in other situations. Human carriers of both men and loads were a common sight in what are now Ecuador and Colombia; they are visible with huge loads in Bolivia now; and ships that had carried human slaves in the 19th century needed little refitting to carry mules to Asia.

There was some kind of epiphany for Le Corbusier when he understands that the model city of Chandrigah in India which is the realisation of his concept of modernity , could not have been built without the use of those backward donkeys as load carriers. It was then his intention to build a statue to the donkey. This was not achieved, but there is such a statue in Diekirch, Luxemburg, of the donkey which shits gold pieces as in the Brothers Grimm story in which the magic words “Brikklebrit” summon forth the gold until moralism intervenes, so that nowadays neoliberals use it as an analogy for social democratic welfarism. Such a statue should, by rights, also have been built by the Spanish invaders in the Americas since it was they, donkeys and mules, which made the colonial trade-based economy work. There is however one such statue outside a monastery in Cuzco, the old Inca capital of Peru. With a football and a book it suggests the donkey’s rule carrying missionaries to the “backward” and illiterate, but perhaps this celebration has more to do with the success of the first waves of monks and priests in Latin America who were specialists in the profitable business of breeding of mules, and it is the role of mules and donkeys especially in Latin America and

especially the Andes with heights up to 5,000 metres above sea level, that I want to describe.

It has been described as one of Columbus's greatest achievements that on his second voyage he took four mules along with donkeys and horses, animals which, it turned out did not exist on the American continent. In the Andes the horse was initially a war machine in the conquest of the Inca Empire. It took too long for indigenous resistance fighters to work out how to deal with men on horses as well their steel weapons. Horses are not so good as pack-animals however, especially on downward slopes, and it was the donkey and mule who began to transform the transport and the trading patterns of the area, or rather allowed for trading as determined by the interests of the colonial power which most of all meant export, mainly of silver, and later guano. Trade had of course existed before the Spanish invasion between the different ecologies of the Andean highlands and the desert-like coastal strip using both llamas and human carriers, but the sheer topography of the region restricted the volume of heavier weight trade. This reality was hard-wired into the imperial Inka system of regional development, food security and social control. Despite the near extinction of both llamas and alpacas in the first hundred years of colonialism, partly because of the introduction of sheep; enforced selling for meat; and from their use on the steepest slopes at the mines of Potosi; and an initial fall in their price, llamas survived to become far more numerous than mules in the 19th century. Donkeys too were far more numerous and both were cheaper to feed than mules. The crucial difference which remained in terms of trade however, is that while a donkey can carry up to 240 lb weight and mule up to 600 lb weight, the llama will not tolerate more than approximately 100 lb. Both donkeys and mules were crucial to transporting the silver of the Potosi mine to the coast for export to Europe.

But in the early period the mule's function was not just for the carrying of the silver, it was rather more gruesome. The Potosi mine was the real El Dorado of the Spanish colonialists. Eight million people died in the course of extracting its silver which gave such a kick-start to European capitalism. The mine had its own attached mint and there, many mules also died at a horrendous rate. Walking round and round, driving the milling machine, it is said that they had a working life span of just two months, and that human slaves were often brought in to replace them.

The main mule suppliers to the mine were Jesuits in what are now Argentina and Paraguay. Mule breeding, it is emphasised is not easy. And the Jesuits with an intellectual training, experience of the animals in Spain, and time on their hands made themselves experts. That was in the early days, but over time Indigenous people, *mestizos* and mulattos became expert breeders themselves as they had been with the alpaca. This probably started with the situation of Indigenous people doing the work of transporting the mules from Argentina into the Andean world. By 1727, their 7,000 mules which carried the Jesuit brand, in addition to the even greater number of donkeys they were exporting ever year, was dwarfed by the total traffic into the Viceroyalty of Peru (Peru and Bolivia) of an estimated 50,000. Nevertheless they still had a "listening post" in Potosí in the form of one Simon Baylina SJ to inform them of market conditions, the best times to sell.

There was always a link between the demand for mules and their price with the level of activity in the mines. A dip occurred at the end of the 17th century, but after that there was an increase in mule numbers. Of this trend we run into conflicting evidence. On the one hand there is documentary evidence of mule breeding or fattening as a business, whereby *corregidor* (a creole or Spaniard who had bought land and command rights from the Spanish crown in the 18th century) who needed to pay for his title with forced labour needed also to sell of mules to Indigenous people, who might not want them, as part of his income under the

repartimento system of forced purchasing. This would suggest a surplus of mules as regards trade. But on the other hand there was a busy regional trade in the Andes. It involved sugar, wheat, cotton, aguardiente and brandy, serving land routes between the northern ports of Peru and Arequipa, Potosi and Cuzco. A traveller at this time with the pen name Concolocorvo talked of 50-60,000 mules used for transport in the highlands.

There is little evidence as to the composition both of “mule trains” and the muleteers, or under what conditions pack muleteers existed. Of the animals themselves we know that donkeys far outnumbered mules and must assume – given that donkeys are cheaper to feed – that “mule-trains” were likely to be a mix of both. As to the muleteer/donkey drivers, the evidence is mixed as to how they were ethnically defined, and whether they were simply workers for *haciendas* or merchants, or owned a team as independent transporters, or became merchants in their own right. By this time what is clear that both indigenous people, *mestizos* and mulattos (the word itself derived from mule) were engaged in the business at all levels. Some light is shone on this by the most serious uprisings by indigenous peoples in the Viceroyalty of Peru in 1780 and 1781. Tupac Amaru II, whose rebellion in the Cuzco region against the injustices of a local *corriegedor*, was in effect the chief of his area –the *cacique* and would negotiate for the community with various levels of the colonial bureaucracy. In this role indigenous people supposedly with a genealogical link to Inka leaders could accumulate land, and he had also inherited horses and mules from his father. Working the mules professionally as he then did, he had the opportunity to become known himself and pick up on indigenous discontents on a wider level.

The more nearly successful uprising was that of Tupac Catari which besieged the city of La Paz for several months and which was only saved by the Spanish at the last minute. Tupac Catari himself had been a worker muleteer, as some 40 years later was the *mestizo* Jose Morelos who started in this way before becoming a priest and leader of the fight for Mexican independence. This is naturally speculation, but like itinerant booksellers and weavers, the muleteer would necessarily have a wider geographical knowledge and range of contacts and therefore was in a perfect position for an agitational and organizing role.

The siege of La Paz had an equally revealing consequence, the big landowners around Cochabamba (now in Bolivia) had sent a large militia to help relieve the siege, and had lost many horses and mules in the process and were unable to replenish them. The price of mules nearly doubled and the authorities there sent worried letters to the Spanish authorities. Brooke Larsen tells us “Only the wealthiest landowners owned enough pack animals to transport their own harvest to distant markets...It conferred an additional advantage to them.” Small farmers would have to pay a premium either to them or whatever independent muleteers they could find, cash up front. Cash up front was not exceptional for as it was the muleteer who took all the risk. If premiums were high it was because any loss or damage to goods was his responsibility in tough terrain where even mules might stumble and rain soak them. It had been the same with those moving the mules from Salta up to Potosi for the Jesuits. It had to be cash up front and at market rates.

By the end of the 18th century, the picture is further complicated by the increasing control taken by the merchants of Buenos Aires over the means of overland transport into the Peruvian Viceroyalty. Buenos Aires had become the main port of entry for imports into the area and the impact of this can be seen when the British blockaded the River Plate in 1796. The shortage of imported clothing encouraged a brief period of enlarged textile production in Cochabamba, but there was no interest by merchants to invest in it, partly from a decent guess that the

blockade wouldn't last, and because their dominance as merchants reflected their dominance of pack-animal transport not as producers.

On this terrain as Erik Langer says of the 19th century in his paper "The Invisible World of the Muleteers", there was "a distinct transfer of wealth to the transportation sector." He argues, somewhat against the impression given by Larsen that it meant a shift of wealth to a peasant class. He does not go into whether these are mestizos or indigenous people. Perhaps this ought not to matter, but others have stressed the importance of at least speaking Spanish to benefit in this way, in addition to how ethnicity mattered when it came to access to credit needed to make the move from muleteer to muleteer-merchant. He does though give a good example of the power of the muleteers as transport professionals. At one level it's the power not to be ripped-off, as in a case he cites where the prefect of Potosi was desperate for bottles of mercury to be transported from the port for working the mines. It was a frustrating experience in part because the state "had previously not paid muleteers on time." Trying to alter the balance, camels were imported as they had been in the 16th century, but this failed, as it had before, as no one knew how to look after them.

A more telling example of muleteer power is that merchants without mules had to plan ahead to take account of when muleteers might be sowing or harvesting their own crops which were not just a matter of food self-sufficiency, but important for the feeding up their animals after long trips. Similarly it was important to muleteers, however many contacts they might make on their travels, that they keep strong ties with their own communities, often financing the costumes, drink and food of carnival festivities. Periods of such celebration also had to be factored in by those in urgent need of moving goods. Against this, to repeat, it was the muleteers who took the risks in tough terrain with few bridges, with the prospect of rain damage and, in the 19th century, of banditry.

It was these risks plus the cost of feeding donkeys and mules that made it often a better deal to hire in muleteers. The exceptions were in the eastern foothills of the Andes where, as in Argentina, grazing land was cheap, and had the advantage that where the mules were merchant-owned, the worker muleteer/donkey driver had to adapt to the merchant's schedule. In other instances, a pack might be bought for some specific trade, but then re-sold. Haciendas –large scale colonially-owned farms – might own a pack as in Cochabamba but it then also might be sold when a specific purposes had been fulfilled.

At the same time, llamas which had survived post-invasion annihilation, to the point that by the 19th century they outnumbered donkeys and mules and which, apart from their greater suitability for transport above 4,000 metres, and their cheaper maintenance costs, kept transport niches that allowed for the limits to what they could carry. One was to carry packets of minerals from mines in the Potosi region that weighed around 50 lb. Another came with the wool boom (both sheep and alpaca) where haciendas would use the llamas of their own peons to carry wool down from the highlands to the merchant houses of Arequipa.

Nevertheless, it is the mule above all – described as the "truck" of the region that transformed transport in the region. In more trade orientated Mexico, 175 mules were entering Mexico City every day, but in the Andes too, it allowed for the patterns of trade made by the Spanish invaders and their monetarisation of the economy, one that involved import and export, and which came to identify itself with "modernity", one which like Le Corbusier's Chandigarh depended on the backward donkey. At the same time the animals gave an entry point for indigenous and *mestizo* people into the colonial economy.

E-mail: harrier@easynet.co.uk

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