

HORSE POWER

EDUCATOR GUIDE

ACTIVITY: Tracking the Hoofbeats of History



ACTIVITY: Tracking the Hoofbeats of History

FROM THE FILM:

In the film we learn about a variety of wild horses and horse breeds, from American Miniature Horses and Mustangs, to the Przewalski's horse that's never been domesticated and closely resemble horses from the last ice age! Horse Power displays the unique qualities and abilities of the various horses around the globe. The film teaches us that while the horse first evolved in North America 4 million years ago, it was in Central Asia that the horse was first tamed. This activity will provide further insight on the origins and history of these marvelous creatures.

ACTIVITY OVERVIEW

Students will learn about the origins of horses and their impact on human history. Then they will apply their knowledge of the history of horses around the globe by locating and labelling the important regions and time periods throughout horse history, and drawing horses within each region.

MATERIALS

- Printed copies of the Horse Power Map (one per student, labeled or unlabeled map depending on age group)
- Crayons, pencil crayons or markers
- Projector with access to YouTube
- **Video resource:** (TED-Ed – [How the Mongols Used Horses to Create an Empire - William T. Taylor](#) (6 minutes)

VIDEO 01 OVERVIEW

(TED-Ed – [How the Mongols used horses to create an empire - William T. Taylor](#))

This video explores the journey of the horse from its origins in North America to its global impact on human civilization and history. The earliest known ancestor of the horse first roamed North America over 55 million years ago where it evolved from the small, dog-sized, forest-dwelling Eohippus into the large, single-toed, modern-day horse we recognize today. Around 10,000 years ago horses crossed the Bering Land Bridge into Eurasia and were first domesticated around 2000 BCE on the Western Eurasian Steppe. The early ancestor of the genus *Equus* also spread into Africa and later diversified into the lineages that would also lead to modern day donkeys and zebras etc. Horses evolved in a separate event from this same ancestor, making these species related but not directly evolving from each other.

Horses also became central to ancient cultures, warfare, and trade. Although they vanished from North America for thousands of years due to hunting, competition with other grazers and climate change as the last Ice Age came to an end, horses returned with Spanish colonization around 1500 CE and quickly became vital to Indigenous life, trade, and transportation. Today, despite modern technology and transportation like the car, horses remain deeply woven into global cultures through sport, labor, and agriculture.



DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

01 Begin by discussing the brief overview of horse origins from the beginning of the film.

QUESTION:

Where did the film say that horses were first domesticated?

ANSWER Horses were first domesticated by humans in Central Asia.

QUESTION:

On what continent did Horses originate from?

ANSWER Horses first originated in North America.

QUESTION:

When did the horse genus Equus that includes modern day horses first appear?

ANSWER 4 million years ago.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

02 Discuss the different species within the **Equus** family (horses, donkeys, and zebras).

Explain that Equus is the genus (taxonomic rank) that includes the horse, but ask the class what other species they think are in it as well. Then explain that zebras and donkeys are a part of this group with horses, and that all three have a common ancestor which they evolved from, which are together part of the larger taxonomic family Equidae.

So, while zebras, horses and donkeys are related they did not evolve from each other, but from their ancient ancestor, Eohippus (or Hyracotherium) a small creature that resembled a small dog. Eohippus traveled into Africa and Eurasia and over long periods of time evolved into different species such as the horse, zebra, and donkey that we can see today.

dawn horse (*Hyracotherium*)



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Eohippus, or Hyracotherium. (Sources: Left - Encyclopedia Britannica, Right - Wikipedia)

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

03 Watch the TED-Ed video: How the Mongols Used Horses to Create an Empire and have a group discussion using the questions below.

QUESTION:

The video mentioned four continents that horses roamed and spread to. Can you name them?

ANSWER Europe and Asia (Eurasia), North America, Africa.

QUESTION:

Which continent did horses originate from?

ANSWER North America.

QUESTION:

For which reasons did horses originally disappear from North America?

ANSWER Climate change during the end of the Last Ice Age, hunting by humans, competition for resources with the bison.

QUESTION:

How did horses travel from North American to Europe and Asia?

ANSWER Via the Bering Land Bridge.

QUESTIONS CONT'D

QUESTION:

Where were horses first domesticated?

ANSWER

The Western Eurasian Steppe around 2000 BCE.

QUESTION:

How did horses arrive back into North America?

ANSWER

They returned as a result of Spanish colonization around 1500 CE and began to spread across the continent through indigenous trading.

QUESTION:

Which empires did horses impact and play an integral role in across the globe?

ANSWER

The Mali Empire, the Han Dynasty, and the Mongol Empire.

QUESTION:

What impact did horses leave on humans? How did they change human life?

ANSWER

There are many reasons, answers can vary: transformed warfare, transportation, trade, sport, became integral to various cultures and religions (seen as spiritual figures).

MAP ACTIVITY

04 MAP ACTIVITY AND FOLLOW-UP DISCUSSION QUESTIONS.

INSTRUCTIONS

- Pass out a map to each student.
- Have the students find and label the continents, and draw horses in each of the four continents mentioned in the videos (Europe, Asia, Africa, North America).
- From the word bank below, match the time periods to the proper region.

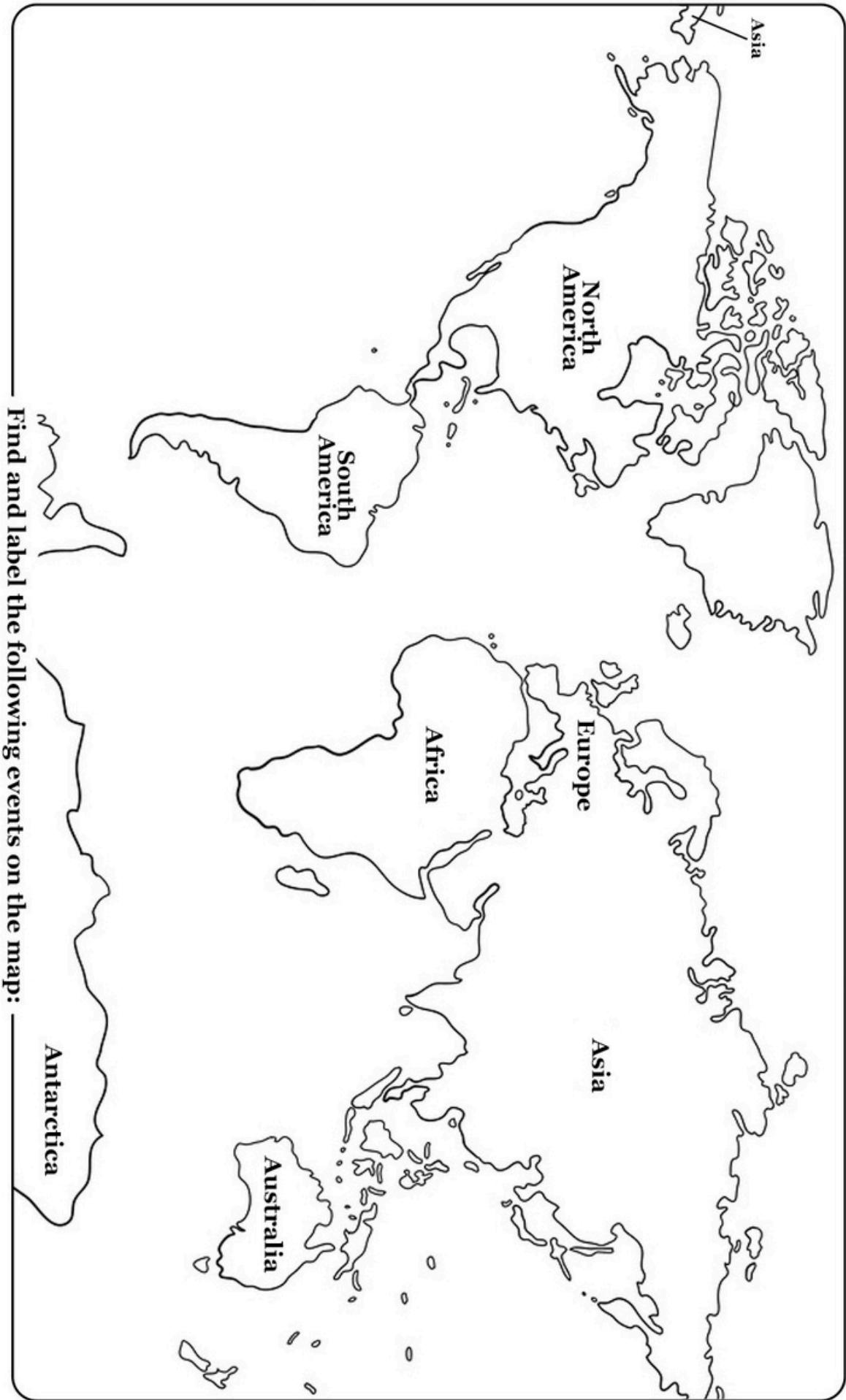
Note for younger students: Use the labeled map and have the students draw the horses in the proper four continents mentioned in the video.

WORD BANK

- **2000 BCE – Horses are first domesticated** (Answer: Asia)
- **1235-1670 CE – Mali Empire** (Answer: Africa)
- **4 million years ago! – Origins of the Horse** (Answer: North America)
- **~1500 – Horses are vital to the Spanish Conquistadors conquests** (Answer: Europe)
- **1500 – Return of the horse by the Spanish** (Answer: North America)
- **1000 BCE – Calvary spreads throughout this continent** (Answer: Asia)
- **100 BCE – Han Dynasty** (Answer: Asia)
- **13th C – Mongol Empire rising to power** (Answer: Asia)
- **1894 – Horse transportation creates hygiene issues in London (The Great Manure Crisis of 1894)** (Answer: Europe)

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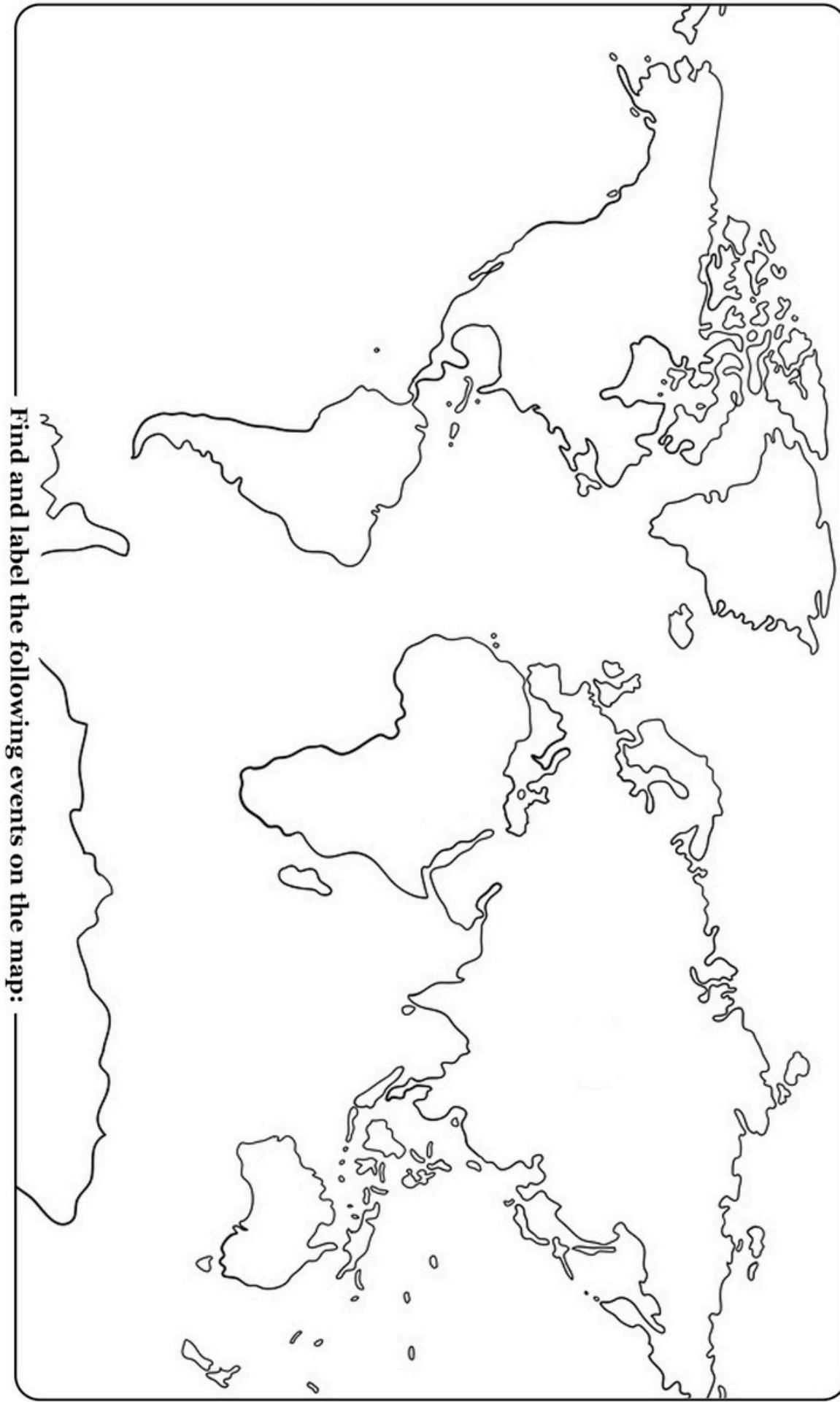
Find and label the following events on the map:

- A) 2000 BCE - Horses are first domesticated
- B) 1235-1670 CE - Mali Empire
- C) 4 million years ago! - Origins of the Horse
- D) 1500 CE - Horses are vital to the Spanish Conquistadors conquests
- E) 1500 CE - Return of the horse by the Spanish
- F) 1000 BCE - Calvary spreads throughout this continent
- G) 100 BCE - Han Dynasty
- H) 13th C - Mongol Empire rising to power
- I) 1894 CE - Horse transportation creates hygiene issues in London (The Great Manure Crisis of 1894)



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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

QUESTION:

What surprised you the most about the history of the horse?

Encourage personal responses. Possible thoughts: interesting that they originated in North America, disappeared, and then returned, fascinating that although they originated in North America they were first domesticated on the other side of the world, etc.

QUESTION:

Why do you think horses had such a powerful impact on so many different cultures around the world?

They made travel and communication faster, horses gave armies a huge advantage in battle, horses helped carry goods and people over long distances, which made trade easier, they became symbols of strength, speed, and status in many cultures.

QUESTION:

What do you think life was like before horses were domesticated?

Travel was much slower and harder, hunting and communication was more difficult, and transporting items and trade over land was much harder and slower relying on humans or oxen.

QUESTION:

Despite the invention of the car and modern technology, how are horses still important today?

In many regions horses still play a vital role with farming, ranching and for transportation. Horses remain extremely popular for sports and recreation including horse riding, racing and rodeo, for cultural festivals and parades, and even for therapy.