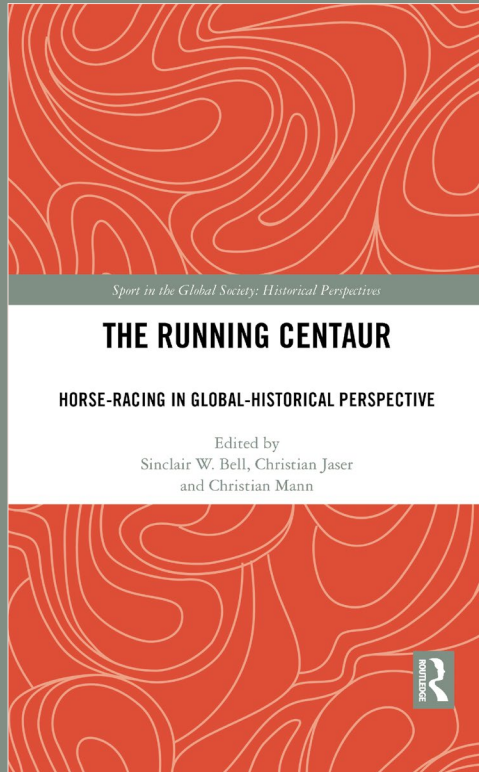


BOOK REVIEW

# Galloping through Culture: Horse Racing and Global History

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*Review of:*

Sinclair W. Bell, Christian Jaser and Christian Mann, eds., *The Running Centaur: Horse-Racing in Global-Historical Perspective*. Sport in the Global Society: Historical Perspectives. London: Routledge, 2022. 216 pp. £130 (hb).

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**T**he horse is an animal that has influenced human society and history in myriad ways, and its social, cultural, and economic significance whether as wild, feral, or domestic species has long been recognized across academic disciplines. This is evidenced by the wide-ranging wealth of publications that explore different aspects of the horse–human relationship over a chronological span that stretches from prehistory to the present day.

One of the primary roles that the domestic horse has fulfilled in the human sphere is that of an athlete. Equestrian competition can take many different forms, but one of the most universal genres of horse sport is racing. *The Running Centaur: Horse-Racing in Global-Historical Perspective* seeks to investigate the importance of the horse through the lens of horse racing in a global context as a way of highlighting cross cultural and chronological connections. The contributors do this by focusing on the historical significance of the racehorse, examining the many social, cultural, political, and economic elements connected to racing. This creates a common theme: the degree to which equestrian sport can be woven into the social fabric and cultural ethos of diverse societies.

This volume succeeds admirably in this endeavour as its authors explore the concept and purpose of horse racing over a period of several millennia presenting readers with a scope that spans cultures and continents. This allows the authors to use the horse as a sort of touchstone within seemingly disparate cultures and periods. The volume begins in ancient Greece and ends with Indigenous North American tribes in the twenty-first century. With racing as a foundation, the authors successfully produce a cohesive thread by situating each chapter within a specific set of questions and topics outlined by the editors in the Introduction. Authors were asked to consider the spatial and architectural framework of racing spaces, race organization, prizes, symbolic representation, and social range and identities. Thus, although the volume covers a wide range of cultural and historical contexts, as well as diverse forms of horse racing, the concept of the race horse and its importance to society serves to connect each chapter back to a common purpose.

In the first chapter, Christian Mann and Sebastian Scharff explore the significance of horse racing within the context of the Greek *agones* (competitions), and the connection to aspects of ancient Greek identity and social structures. The authors provide an overview of the different forms of athletic festivals and the horse racing events connected to them, as well as the role of the athletic festival in Greek society, including its religious significance. We are reminded that participation in these events was a marker of status, and “Victories in horse or chariot races were considered a sign of wealth and power and fostered the legitimation of monarchs, and they could also be used by politicians in democracies” (11). Of note are the sections focusing on the social significance of equestrian victories in terms of establishing authority, legitimacy, and power for the wealthy owners of the victorious racehorses, and how this was celebrated and propagated through monuments, poems, and coinage in a manner which highlights the broader significance of horse racing in the power and political structures of the Greek world, a theme we will see repeated throughout the following chapters.

Sinclair Bell then presents a clear and succinct analysis of chariot racing in Imperial Rome. His chapter builds on several of the concepts explored by Mann and Scharff by showing how horse racing can shift from a means of obtaining personal glory and honour to a phenomenon that became central to the very heart of urban spectacle in the Roman world. Indeed, horse racing here becomes understood as a key component of “Roman-ness”; chariot racing became a fundamental part of social identity and belonging in Roman society—a factor further emphasized, as Bell points out, by the collective identities held by fans of each racing faction. Bell explains the ins and outs of the racing factions and the logistics of the races in a manner that makes it clear that these races were more than pure entertainment. Race events contributed to the complex relationship between spectators, charioteers, race horses, and the emperor in a manner that placed the circus at the heart of Roman society, for “they were events that could play a highly significant role in the way the Romans at all levels of society structured their private experiences, both inside and outside the arena” (53).

David Alan Parnell's chapter on chariot racing in Byzantium does a wonderful job of showing the legacy of Roman chariot racing as it transitioned onto the context of Christian Byzantium. Central to its significance was its role in building and maintaining the relationship between the emperor and the crowd. Parnell focuses on the spatial location of urban hippodromes and the expectation that the emperor himself be physically present during the races in Constantinople. Parnell suggests that "the emperors regarded chariot racing and the opportunity to be with the spectators at chariot races to be of considerable importance to the legitimacy and stability of their reigns" (81). In other words, the hippodrome was a venue where the people expected to have access to the emperor to make their requests and demands known. It served as a site of political and religious reform, as well as violent suppression as emperors sought to obtain or maintain authority via the social significance of horse racing as a long-established form of public entertainment.

*The Running Centaur's* fourth chapter remains situated in the environs of Constantinople/Istanbul as Tülay Artan looks at the role of horse racing within the context of the Ottoman court. Here we are reminded that horse racing can take many different forms, as we move from the hippodrome to the open countryside, where the Ottoman elite engaged in long-distance races across country. This may reflect earlier nomadic traditions, and indeed, this is a topic that it would be useful to have further discussion around as it would situate this style of racing within the cultural context a bit more firmly. Artan builds links with the previous two chapters by considering the changing role of the hippodrome itself. On the one hand it still served as a means of making the sultan visible and creating dynastic legitimacy, but this was no longer accomplished through the medium of racing; instead, the races moved to Kâğıthane, outside the city. Artan highlights the responses to the races by Ottoman and European chroniclers, suggesting that they reflect differing cultural structures and perceptions. A shift to shorter-distance track racing occurs in the 1720s, moving horse racing into the public sphere, and "by the late nineteenth century horse racing had become a fully public entertainment in Istanbul" (109). This shift is notable, and it would

be useful to have further discussion around why it happened — were there particular social, cultural, or political forces that caused the change in format?

Christian Jaser's chapter transports us back to an urban sphere through a comparative study of Italian palio and German scharlach races. This fascinating study highlights the degree to which seemingly similar forms of racing could differ in nuanced ways due to geographical location and social hierarchies. Jaser outlines some commonalities between these races in terms of logistics and audience. In both cases, the races drew large number of spectators from across the social spectrum and they came to serve as a meeting point between the elites and non-elites. Although there were no restrictions regarding status in terms of participation competitive racehorses were expensive, a fact that is particularly evident in the sphere of the palio races. This is where Jaser notes the primary difference between the two races: the less lucrative scharlach races resulted in a short-term commemoration of victory, rather than an enduring statement. Jaser posits that this may be due to the range of participants who came from different economic classes whereas the palio races were the prerogative of a racing elite creating an environment dominated by princes and signori with horses bred specifically for this purpose. In this setting horses became an extension of their owners, and the commemoration of victory served as a form of powerful propaganda, echoing elements of ancient Greek racing. There is a lot of fascinating comparative material in this chapter, but the details skew more towards the palio races, in part because of the available source material. To balance this out, it would have been helpful for the author to explain why these two racing traditions were being compared, given the conclusion that these two forms of races developed in "rather unconnected parallel worlds" (126) as there is perhaps something interesting in the parallel but unrelated development.

In chapter six Isabelle Schürch examines equestrianism and equestrian contests in New Spain. This chapter situates racing within the broader context of competitive equestrianism, with a particular

focus on the period of Spanish transatlantic expansion from the 1490s–1600s. Schürch provides an excellent overview of equestrian performance traditions in Spain, detailing their influence on Spanish identity both through connections to broader medieval practices. Schürch also discusses autochthonous Iberian events that were used “by local elites to display their skills, competence, and power, and to re-enact their social group’s meritorious service during the so-called *Reconquista*” (136). Schürch thus suggests that equestrians reimagined mounted combat within the confines of spectacle rather than the battlefield. One of these competitions, the *juegos de cañas*, was brought across the Atlantic and appears in narratives of the early conquest. Here this martial game was enacted within the sphere of conquest rather than urban spectacle, taking on a new meaning within the context of conquistador society and social identity. Although these were not horse races in the traditional sense, speed, agility, and endurance were traits important to the game, and to mounted combat in general, as Schürch explains. Thus, although formalized racing was not a primary equestrian concern for Spanish or New Spanish identity during this period, we are nonetheless presented with themes that reflect earlier chapters, namely the role of equestrian competition in creating collective identities and transmitting cultural beliefs and practices. This chapter provides some thoughtful perspectives, but a more detailed discussion around the absence of formalized racing practices reflective of established and developing group identities would add a further link to the broader focus of this volume.

The next chapter brings us to a country deeply connected to modern racing: England. Richard Nash argues that the racetrack, organizations, and particular racing meets came to play an important role in politics and kingmaking during the seventeenth and eighteenth century. Moreover, Nash suggests that the Jockey Club did more than manage and organize races, they also played an important role in the politics of church and state during the Protestant–Catholic conflict of the period and its connected issues of succession. During this period of unrest horse racing emerges “not merely as a witness to history, but as an integral feature of political performance” (150).

As we have seen in previous chapters, racing becomes a venue for legitimization, power, authority, and status within a particular cultural context. Here, the establishment of race meets and racing organizations reflected political preferences and support of Whig or Tory platforms, as well as an opportunity for active political campaigning. This is a well-argued chapter that shows the importance of horse racing as a reflection of, and propaganda tool for, the religious, political, and cultural views of different segments of society.

Christiane Eisenberg then looks at connections between the financial world and racing, focusing in particular on the relationship between spending, investments, and racing during the English Financial Revolution on the heels of the Glorious Revolution of 1688. Eisenberg neatly outlines the key details that created significant financial changes during this period, which in turn created an influx of physical cash in the hands of Britons who were looking for ways to spend it within the context of a market in which consumer goods were few and far between. As a result, there was a rise in gambling, betting, and different forms of investment, which in turn shaped ideas around social status and hierarchies. Eisenberg points out several similarities between the betting/wagering culture that emerged in this period, particularly in relation to horse racing, and the ways in which this transferred to the evolving financial market, for “gambling on horse racing was highly suited to make actors on the financial markets more willing to take risks” (173). The actions and innovations of one market could have consequences on the other, which ultimately pushed Parliament and the Crown to introduce disciplinary measures to control their influence and reach, including the Horse Races Act of 1739 which sought to control the number of racing venues and races held by passing requirements and restrictions around prize money and admission fees. Eisenberg’s short but detailed chapter makes a valuable contribution to this volume by reminding readers that the connections between racing and socio-political structures were not limited to the racetrack itself.

In the final chapter, Peter Mitchell explores the cultural context of horse racing amongst the Indigenous tribes of North America.

Mitchell focuses the study on the regions of the Great Plains and the Southwest in what he calls an “initial step toward exploring Indigenous horse racing practices not only in North America but also in other parts of the world to which horses were (re-)introduced as a consequence of the so-called ‘Columbian Exchange’” (182–183). Mitchell looks at the significance of horse racing within the context of Indigenous gaming practices and traditions, building a strong argument about the significance of racing within the parameters of “sacred play” and its connections to ritual and ceremony. Mitchell provides a succinct summary of racing logistics before then moving on to discuss key features that differentiated North American Indigenous racing practices from those of nineteenth-century Euro-American racing; namely the use of magic, witchcraft, traditional medicine, and rituals to influence horses and the outcomes of races. Here we see some fascinating connections to the use of *defixiones* (curse tablets) used in the Roman circus as discussed by Bell (45), and the use of plant and other formulas to improve the abilities of Italian and German racehorses as discussed by Jaser (124). Mitchell makes a strong argument for horse racing as an integral part of cultural identity amongst the tribes of the Great Plains and Southwest. He examines the ways by which attempts were made to suppress racing by colonial governments and powers, and further, he reveals how racing traditions nonetheless endured and persisted into the twenty-first century through Indigenous rodeos and the Indian Relay. In sum, Mitchell’s excellent chapter connects Indigenous practices to the broader global tradition explored throughout this volume by articulating a clear and comprehensive analysis of horse racing as a central feature of social and political concerns through its function as an expression of values, beliefs, and structures.

This volume is a valuable contribution to the fields of equine history and sporting history. The chapters are both informative and accessible to specialists and non-specialists. The cohesion between the chapters does a wonderful job of highlighting why studying human–animal interactions is so valuable to interdisciplinary and cross-cultural research; the figure and histories of the horse



provide an important link across a range of regions and traditions. *The Running Centaur* presents readers with a detailed and wide-ranging analysis of horse racing and its historical significance. It also provides a strong base for further scholarship in this field to pursue the study of horse races and race horses in other cultural contexts, such as the history of racing practices in horse-centric regions like Central Asia and Mongolia. In sum, this volume is a valuable contribution to the field of animal studies as it encourages scholars to consider the significance of human–animal relationships within a cross-cultural and interdisciplinary scope as a means of developing far reaching and significant connections that allow us to consider the ways in which animal history can further our knowledge of cultural traditions and societal structures.