



Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson, eds., *The Horse in Premodern European Culture* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019). PDF, vii + 259 pp, £86.50, ISBN: 9781501513787

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*Review*

Medieval society relied heavily on horses for agriculture, transport, and warfare. Both the ubiquity and the seemingly infinite permutations of medieval horses have made it difficult to approach the subject historically. General histories have tended to be rather underwhelming, and more specific studies have often failed to spark wider discourse.<sup>1</sup> Since the mid-90s, there has been an accelerating trend of medieval and late-antique horse history in French and Italian, but this collection, *The Horse in Premodern European Culture*, is the first dedicated volume of medieval horse studies published in English in around two decades.<sup>2</sup> In the intervening period, environmental and animal studies have grown significantly and research focusing on horses and horse-human relationships in the medieval and modern worlds has been published at a steady rate. As such, this volume set itself the significant task of introducing the reader to ‘the existing scholarship in equestrian history’ and inspiring scholars ‘to contribute to the expanding field of horse history’ (p. 8).

This collection is based on sessions ongoing at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds since 2016. The content of this volume is extremely broad: covering Late Antiquity to the seventeenth century, Scotland to Anatolia, and a wide array of sources including romance, law codes, material culture, veterinary and equestrian texts. This breadth has created several challenges for the editors in reining in the

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<sup>1</sup> R. H. C. Davis, *The Medieval Warhorse: Origin, Development and Redevelopment* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1989); Andrew Ayton, *Knights and Warhorses: Military Service and the English Aristocracy Under Edward III* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 1994).

<sup>2</sup> Antonio Montinaro, *La tradizione del De medicina equorum di Giordano Ruffo: con un censimento dei testimoni manoscritti a stampa* (Milan: Ledizioni, 2015), Bernard Andenmatten, Agostino Paravicini Bagliani, and Eva Pibiri, *Le Cheval Dans La Culture Médiévale* (Florence: SISMEL, 2015), Baudouin Van den Abeele and Anne Marie Doyen-Higuet (eds) *Chevaux, Chiens, Faucons. L’art Vétérinaire Antique et Médiéval à Travers Les Sources Écrites, Archéologiques et Iconographiques*, (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017).

material and giving a cohesive sense of the articles and their intellectual contexts. Unfortunately, they have not always been successful on either count.

The first four contributions deal with 'working horses' and their equipment. Fabienne Meiers provides a fascinating image of the work of riding horses in late-medieval Luxembourg, demonstrating the complex networks of craft- and tradesmen necessary to maintain urban horses and the value of administrative documents in histories of working animals. Floriana Bardoneschi's study of the heterogenous use of horses and oxen on late-medieval farms in northern France provides a welcome accompaniment to Meiers' article. Both give a picture of industrial horses in a period of transition, with Bardoneschi arguing convincingly that farm-horses were better suited than oxen to the more intensive agricultural systems of the later Middle Ages and Meiers highlighting the importance of messenger horses in an increasingly urbanised society. Timothy Dawson and Gail Brownrigg's articles both discuss workhorse equipment, namely packsaddles and horse-harnesses. Both articles are extremely broad and involve much unevidenced equine lore (e.g. p. 46). They introduce the topics but without much sense of existing scholarship or the pitfalls of uncritical analysis.

Jürg Gassman and Jack Gassman's articles both attempt to illuminate a particular area of mounted combat, high-medieval cavalry tactics, and late-medieval mounted crossbowmen. Jürg Gassman's article attempts to bring together a very broad set of analyses on horse physiology and breeding, arms and armour, crusading and tournaments without much sense of existing scholarship. In many ways, it relies on Bachrach's arguments for the survival of Roman military ideals and long-standing disputes over the place of heavy cavalry.<sup>3</sup> Jack Gassman's article would also have benefited from more historiographical engagement and source-sensitivity, for

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<sup>3</sup> Bernard S. Bachrach, 'Caballus et Caballarius in Medieval Warfare', in *The Study of Chivalry: Resources and Approaches*, ed. by Howell Chickering and Thomas H Seiler (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1988), pp. 173–211; Stephen Morillo, 'The "Age of Cavalry" Revisited', in *The Circle of War in the Middle Ages: Essays on Medieval Military and Naval History*, ed. by Donald Kagay and L. J. Andrew Villalon (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1999), pp. 45–58.

instance when discussing iconographic tropes (p. 92) or employing essentialist analyses reliant on 'inherent military logic' (p. 96). The comparison with modern military manuals begs the question of whether a crossbow is broadly equivalent to an assault rifle (p. 95 and p. 97).

Articles 7 and 8 relate to performing horses; with Karen Campbell's contribution offering an intentionally anachronistic analysis of 'reading horses and writing chivalry'. She argues that modern horses are 'taller and better fed' than their medieval cousins, 'but still whisper the same things they always have' (p. 138); allowing for trans- or even ahistorical communication. This is influenced by Donna Haraway but sidesteps the key argument of Animal Theory and Animal History: that humans are not uniquely distinctive from other animals, nor are they the only species that deserves to be historicised. Jennifer Jobst's article discusses Early Modern riding displays. Unfortunately, the well-developed scholarship on Renaissance courtly horsemanship (notably Pia Cuneo's work over the last two decades) that would have informed and helped to contextualise this article is lacking.

Elina Cotterill's contribution describes a set of Middle English horse-medicine collections which she argues were intended for horse-dealers, marshals, and gentry readers. Katrin Boniface's short article details the development of horse-bread, premixed and sometimes pre-cooked horse feed made from grains, legumes, and beans that provided high caloric meals for intensively worked or travelling animals. John Clark's discussion of medieval curb bits is an extension to his 1995 book (*The Medieval Horse and its Equipment c1150–c1450*) and makes clear the huge variety of bits represented in medieval iconography and technical literature – though he is uncertain how many of these were fanciful or commonly used. Marina Viallon's contribution describes a sixteenth-century saddle which paradoxically due to the ruinous state of its perishable portions is particularly suited to analysis. This saddle reflects changes in cavalry tactics and the use of firearms by both mounted and unmounted men; all of which would have had a 'strong influence on the training of horses and on horse riding in general' (p. 200).

The last section looks at the aspect of ‘represented horse’. Edgar Rops and Anastasija Ropa’s articles seek to define the value and status of horses across different texts and contexts. Both articles highlight the shifting and heterogeneous nature of horse-representations, that defy being pinned down. The last article by Miriam Bibby is a fascinating study of the Galloway horse, initially much maligned in genteel English society as ‘northern’ and crude, before becoming a prized riding and racing horse in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries. Bibby’s contribution demonstrates the changing representation of a specifically north-Atlantic horse whilst recognising the pitfalls of equating medieval horse-types with modern breeds, and perhaps raising more questions than it answers.

This volume has successfully brought together a very wide thematic range of articles on aspects of horsemanship and horse-labour, but it is hard to agree that it provides an introduction to medieval horse scholarship.<sup>4</sup> There is not much sense of the field’s development or the volume’s place within it, and the number of articles that do not engage with existing scholarship means that this volume needs too much contextualisation to be deemed introductory. The introduction mentions the ‘animal turn’ but there’s not much sense of how this volume fits into either Animal History with its relationship to ‘history from below’ or the questions and methodologies of Critical Animal Studies.<sup>5</sup> This means that there is not much sense of *how* we should study horses – particularly when their representation in written sources is always negotiated through human narration. Many of the articles presume that the horse has changed little since the Middle Ages (p. 9, p. 48, p. 223). Given that Early Modern and

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<sup>4</sup> For an Anglophone introduction to medieval horses, we must look to the oft-cited but much-maligned Ann Hyland, *The Horse in the Middle Ages* (Stroud: Sutton, 1999). Recent, more exploratory works of horse scholarship include Susan Crane, ‘Chivalry and the Pre/Postmodern’, *postmedieval*, 2 (2011), 69–87; Jordan Claridge and John Langdon, ‘Transport and Transport Technology in Medieval England’, *History Compass*, 9 (2011), 864–75; Bernard Ribemont, ‘Le Cheval et Le Poète. Hippiatrie et Écriture : L’exemple de Guillaume de Machaut, de Jean Froissart et Du Dit Du Hardi Cheval’, in *Le Cheval Dans Le Monde Médiéval*, Seneffiance 32 (Aix-en-Provence: Presses universitaires de Provence, 2014), pp. 511–25; David Gary Shaw, ‘Horses and Actor-Networks: Manufacturing Travel in Later Medieval England’, in *The Historical Animal*, ed. by Susan Nance (Syracuse, New York: Syracuse University Press, 2015), pp. 133–47.

<sup>5</sup> See, for instance, Jason Hribal, ‘Animals, Agency, and Class: Writing the History of Animals from Below’, *Human Ecology Review*, 14 (2007), 101–12 or Karl Steel, *How Not to Make a Human: Pets, Feral Children, Worms, Sky Burial, Oysters*, (Minneapolis : University of Minnesota Press, 2019).

nineteenth-century studies have focussed so much on the adaptation of horses in response to a changing world, it is curious that this volume has assumed a leap-frogging continuity between the Middle Ages and the modern day.<sup>6</sup> This collection excels when articles focus on a specific and limited study; for instance, in articles 1, 2, 11, 12, and 15. Elsewhere discussions tend to be overly broad without recognising the potential for chronological, geographical, or cultural variation that would colour or restrict conclusions. A more focused remit that did not try to encompass the entire panoply of pre-modern European horses might have allowed for stricter editorial control.

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<sup>6</sup> For instance, Donna Landry, *Noble Brutes: How Eastern Horses Transformed English Culture* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); Ann Norton Greene, *Horses at Work: Harnessing Power in Industrial America* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008); Thomas Almeroth-Williams, 'The Brewery Horse and the Importance of Equine Power in Hanoverian London', *Urban History*, 40 (2013), 416–441.

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