
Floriana Bardoneschi’s monograph builds on her doctoral research to provide a wide-ranging account of the working horse’s life in medieval and Renaissance France, focusing on the northern part of the country. Following the recent tendency in animal studies to focus on the animal, its life and its experiences, rather than to concentrate solely on the material or immaterial impacts of the animal’s interaction with humans, Dr Bardoneschi sets out to create a sympathetic account of the historical working horse’s existence, from its birth, through training and working life, and until its last hours. Her project is particularly welcome in the field where much of the existing literature focuses on elite horses and horsemanship of the (mostly European) elites. The latter development is partially justified by the fact that elite horses and their riders have left more prominent and glamorous traces, which are easily detectable in courtly literature, chronicle and art - sources which are well-known from school and easily available in scholarly and popular editions, digital copies, etc. This is not to say that no material survives to help a historian unveil the realities that surrounded the working horse: Dr Bardoneschi convincingly shows a wealth of textual and visual materials that can be used for writing the history of the working horse. For her study, the author uses a rich and varied corpus of administrative documents, such as accounts and charters, as well as treatises on agricultural, and visual sources – manuscript illuminations, stained glass and sculpture. Even courtly literature can on occasion provide some hints as to the use of horses and other draft animals in the countryside, such as at the beginning of Chrétien’s verse romance *Perceval*, where the young hero meets a peasant with a donkey.

Indeed, although few of the recent French studies consider medieval working equids, rich material exists for such a study, and Dr Bardoneschi makes use of diverse sources. In particular, books of hours (particularly those produced in the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries) present not only scenes from courtly life, such as hunting with dogs or falcons, but also the mundane activities of ploughing, harrowing and harvesting. Likewise, manorial and monastic accounts often provide considerable details about the costs of tack and its repair, as well as the machinery drawn by horses and oxen, not to mention the animals themselves and their maintenance costs. Wills, inventories and other documents also provide detailed information about the number and value of equine and bovine workers, their tack and agricultural implements available in the households. To systematize this massive evidence is no mean feat, and to draw a story of the working horse’s life, from birth, to early training, through years of work, and to the grave, is a huge undertaking. In interpreting her documentary and visual evidence, Dr Bardneschi refers to contemporary and earlier treatises on agriculture, to see if the advice provided by the writers was implemented in practice.
Dr Bardoneschi argues convincingly that, just as elsewhere in medieval and early modern Europe, the transition from horses to oxen was neither wholesale nor straightforward. Some areas prioritized the use of bovine power longer than others, and this tendency could have been informed both by geological conditions and economic ones.

Overall, there is no lack of evidence as to the employment of working equids and other animals used to provide traction in medieval and Renaissance France, with Dr Bardoneschi focusing on the agricultural works performed by the horse, excluding the work that equids carried out in the cities. Usefully, Dr Bardoneschi compares her findings on the situation in medieval France to those conducted elsewhere, particularly in England. Dr Bardoneschi both refers to primary sources produced outside medieval France, such as, for instance, English treatises on agriculture and draws some parallels between uses of working horses in England and France at the time, referring in particular to the influential work of John Langdon, though she does not mention the more recent studies of Jordan Claridge.

The monograph is divided into three main parts: the first part is devoted to the practicalities of a horse’s life from birth to death; the second part discusses equipment (tack) used to harness horse power; the third part presents various uses to which horses could be put in the countryside. Usefully, the book contains a list of sources and a bibliography, as well as several indexes – of concepts, people, place names and sources.

This is an important work for better understanding the economic and cultural role of the working horse, an animal that has all too often been eclipsed by its proud relative, the warhorse. Dr Bardoneschi’s contribution is highly recommended for scholars of economic history, history of the countryside, for historians investigating micro-histories and history of daily life, but, above all, for scholars involved in the burgeoning fields of animal studies and equine history. It provides useful models for studying the history of the less prominent equids, for understanding the working animal not as a cipher in the system but as a living, breathing, feeling and developing creature. Other equids, such as donkeys, zebras, mules and other equid hybrids, also wait for their histories to be written, and Dr Bardoneschi’s inspiring project reminds us that this can be done: the sources are there, waiting to be opened and interpreted, to enhance our understanding of the ways in which humanity evolved alongside - and develop - different equids throughout history.

References

