
Recent investigations into the practicalities and symbolism of historical equestrianism have uncovered many hitherto less known aspects of the relations between humans and horses, but one area that remains understudied, at least for medieval and early modern times, is stabling. It is to this new subject that Sarah Duncan turns in her elegantly turned out and lavishly illustrated monograph *Privileged Horses: The Italian Renaissance Court Stable.*

The book explores various aspects of horse stabling and care at the courts of Italian magnates in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. It is divided into three parts, each with its own introduction and subdivided into two to three chapters, followed by a list of the stables with summary information about them, several appendices, a table of currencies and measuring units, notes to the reader and a glossary of Renaissance Italian horse-related terms. The first part discusses different perspectives from which elite horses were viewed: as valuable commodities, objects of art as well as human cognates and companions. The second part introduces the court stable, its architecture, decoration and internal arrangement, as well as the practicalities of a day-to-day horse management in an elite stable or stud. The third and final part is dedicated to horse care, describing the duties of the staff working with horses on the one hand and the veterinary and healthcare provisions made for horses that were summarized in hippiatric treatises.

One point that is somewhat debatable is the author's use of the term “breed” in application to horses bred at Italian studs as well as outside Italy. The term “breed” as understood by most people today implies the existence of a unified studbook and standards used for assessing individual representatives of a breed. In this meaning, the “breed” arguably emerges fully in documentation for the English Thoroughbred, for which individual horse pedigrees can be (partially) traced to the sixteenth century. Prior to that, horses were distinguished by type and use (jennets, coursers and warhorses being the types that could be found in elite Renaissance stables) as well as geographic origin – Barb, Turcoman, etc., but also Friesian, German, Scottish and many others. Thus, in certain cases, where Duncan describes the breeding programmes of individual rulers, who kept detailed records that enabled them to trace particular bloodlines, the term “breed” is quite appropriate, but it is less so in discussing “Barb” horses, especially, as Duncan notes in the glossary, in certain stables the term came to describe any racehorse irrespective of its pedigree.

Sarah Duncan’s study opens new perspectives for comparing horse care provisions across premodern Europe and the Near East and for discussing stables and riding arenas as symbols of wealth and power – which, accidentally, has been the focus of doctoral research completed by other scholars over the last decade. The author engages with these issues partially when she discusses the early modern elite stables in England, or the influence of Italian horsemanship on European equestrian traditions. However, a closer parallel between Renaissance elite stables as display galleries of valuable steeds and means of reasserting the owner’s power would be found in the Muslim stable palaces, such as those constructed in the Mamluk Cairo (the subject of doctoral thesis completed by Agnès Carayon). On the contrary,
medieval English stables and breeding farms in the countryside seem to have been rather modest, and Duncan Berryman’s recent doctoral thesis stresses that, contrary to earlier opinions, they could not have constituted symbols of power, being architecturally modest and indistinguishable from the surrounding service buildings – quite differently from the Italian stables showcased by Sarah Duncan. The Medieval Warhorse project (the first findings of which are presented in an article published in this issue of the journal) suggests the same tendencies at work in one medieval English breeding farm, the royal stud at Odiham. The book opens new directions for comparative studies into premodern equestrian history, presenting new challenges for future research and carefully laying out both materials available for such study and methodologies with which it can be undertaken.

This privately published book is based on the author’s doctoral research conducted at Queen Mary University of London. One of its main assets is its bargain price, given the quality of its paper and the number of colour illustrations, as well as the fact that it has been meticulously researched and contains references to unpublished original sources and reproductions thereof. The author also includes historical drawings of the stables she discusses, both contemporary and later ones (including architectural studies, illuminations, sketches), as well as photographs of the preserved stables, which have been converted to various uses (classrooms, a bar, private accommodation, etc.), or have been fallen into desrepair as well as images of Renaissance horses, using the frescoes, illuminations and paintings of the period. On the downside, a new edition of the book would be improved by careful proofreading, as it includes some typographic and stylistic errors, which do not, however, prevent the reader from enjoying this carefully researched and masterfully written book.

The principal asset of this book, however, is not the illustrations but the critical discussion of Italian Renaissance horsemanship, its material and symbolic aspects. Dr Duncan compares horses to gems or other collectables, which needed a casket or another container or setting in which they could be displayed. Well-bred and trained horses could be extremely expensive at any time, but in Renaissance Italy they became commodified, so that their care, like the care of pet dogs, became yet another way of displaying the owner’s wealth. As elite animals, these horses were given special treatments to ensure their health, which Duncan discusses in chapter eight of her book, as well as exclusive housing. The stables built by magnates were architectural gems, with their facades, and possibly also interiors, being richly decorated. Some of this decoration still survives, while that which does not can sometimes be glimpsed from architectural sketches and drawings made in the preceding centuries. With its wealth of information on equestrian art and architecture, the book will be of value not only to readers interested in equine and equestrian histories but also to art historians and those interested in Renaissance culture more generally.

References