HORSES AND A LUXURY CARRIAGE EXCAVATED AT POMPEII

Gail Brownrigg

In 2018 it was reported that remains of three horses had been discovered in an area that had probably been the stable of a luxurious villa at Civita Giuliana about 700 metres north of the walls of ancient Pompeii. One was sufficiently intact to enable archaeologists to make a plaster cast, another had apparently been saddled and bridled, perhaps in an attempt to flee the fumes and the ash of the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79.

During the excavation, five bronze finds also came to light. Four heavily reworked conifer-wood finds, coated in bronze lamina and half-moon shaped, were found on the horse’s rib cage, and a fifth object formed of three hooks with rivets connected by a ring to a disc, also in bronze, was recovered from under the belly, near the hind limbs. The shape of these elements suggest that they belonged to a particular type of saddle with four horns, two
front and two rear, reinforced by bronze plates, which helped to give stability to the rider in an era prior to the invention of stirrups. There were also four metal rings, used to connect various leather straps and hold the saddle in place on the horse’s back. Such equipment was used for military parades. It is likely that some of the missing harness elements had been stolen by grave robbers.

Saddles of this type, generally thought to have been constructed on a rigid wooden tree, were in use in the Roman world from the 1st century AD, particularly in military contexts. Fresh research in Britain, however, questions whether the saddles used by first-century Roman cavalrymen in fact had a wooden tree.

A previous study had analysed the skeletons of five equids belonging to a rich Roman household in Pompeii. Well preserved by the volcanic ash which covered Pompeii and the nearby settlement of Herculaneum, they were found in the stables at the house of the Casti Amanti (chaste lovers), so called because its walls have frescoes depicting a romantic scene. This house was probably owned by Caius Iulius Polybius, a wealthy politician and baker in ancient Pompeii, whose house contains an open oven and four wheat grindstones.

The team looked at the mitochondrial DNA sequences (mtDNA) of each of the animals. Four standard mtDNA types were quickly identified, but the fifth “horse” appeared to be of an exotic and mysterious DNA type no longer found today. In a subsequent paper, the researchers speculated that this must be from a different breed which had perhaps since disappeared. Subsequent re-examination of the material, however, revealed that an error had been made in the laboratory, accidentally combining a donkey mtDNA sequence with that of a horse, and thus generating a hybrid which had actually never existed.

Interestingly, despite the initial erroneous conclusion, the finding is still an important one: The closest match for the donkey DNA is with that of domestic donkeys which are related to the Somali wild ass, typically found in Italy today. In other European countries, asses are often descended from the Nubian lineage. Thus, the ancient Pompeian donkey DNA sequence, if confirmed, may well represent the origins of that division, and provide valuable early evidence that the Somali breed appeared in Italy at least as early as Roman times.

This year, another excavation has brought to light another important find. An ornate four-wheeled carriage was discovered in a double-level portico connected by a door to the stables of the villa at Civita Giuliana, where the saddled horse had been found buried under volcanic ash.

The portico, which opens onto a courtyard, featured a wooden ceiling with a network of beams, which were carbonised but preserved complete. Beneath this, excavation proceeded carefully due to the fragility of the elements which were progressively emerging from the covering of volcanic material which had flooded in. Slowly revealed was a remarkable ceremonial vehicle discovered almost intact, with iron components, beautiful bronze and tin decorative plaques and floral ornamentation. It had miraculously been spared by both the collapse of the walls and ceiling of the room and by illegal activities, with tunnels passing close to it on two sides.

Archaeologists say efforts to free it safely took weeks after its discovery in January 2021. From the moment it was identified, the excavation proved to be particularly complex due to the fragility of the materials involved and the difficult working conditions. It was necessary to proceed by means of a micro-excision conducted by specialists in the treatment of wood and metals. At the same time, whenever a void was discovered, plaster was poured in as part of an attempt to preserve the imprint of organic material which was no longer present. As a result, it has been possible to preserve the draught pole and platform of the vehicle, and even the imprints of ropes, thus revealing details of its construction.

Mistakenly described by journalists as a “chariot”, the light carriage (0.90 x 1.40 m), on four high wheels with iron tyres, has a seat for either one or two people, surrounded by metal
arm and back rests. Based on information from written sources and the few archaeological traces that have otherwise been found to date, it can probably be identified as a *pilentum*, a vehicle used in the Roman world for personal transport by the elite in ceremonial contexts.

The elegant vehicle is richly decorated along both sides with alternating engraved bronze sheet and red and black painted wooden panels. At the rear there is complex and extensive decoration featuring three registers with a succession of high quality bronze and tin medallions set in the bronze sheet and surrounded by decorative motifs, representing male and female figures in relief, depicted in erotic scenes. The upper section is also embellished with small tin medallions depicting cupids engaged in various activities.

Archaeobotanical analyses has shown that the wood used to create the sides and rear of the carriage, to which the bronze decorative elements were fixed with small nails and clamps, was beech, which is particularly suitable for this kind of production.

The finds are described as “exceptional” and “in an excellent state of preservation.” Experts believe it was probably used in festivities and parades. The director of the site suggests it may have been used to transport a bride to her new household. Massimo Osanna, the outgoing director of the Pompeii archaeological site, said the carriage was the first of its kind discovered in the area, which had so far yielded functional vehicles used for transport and work, but not for ceremonies, such as the cart discovered at the House of Menander. In 1981, two
agricultural vehicles were found buried under the ash in a stable at the port of Stabiae (Castellammare di Stabia) on the coast, (one of which is on display at the new Stabian Antiquarium). Close by was the skeleton of a horse with its hind legs raised, probably frightened by the eruption. Its name, Repentinus, is known from an inscription in the stable.

This type of ceremonial vehicle is an exceptional discovery, not only because it adds an additional element to the history of the villa at Civita Giuliana and the story of the last moments in the lives of those who lived in it, but above all because it represents a unique find in an excellent state of preservation.

“This is an extraordinary discovery that advances our understanding of the ancient world,” Osanna said, adding that the carriage would have accompanied festive moments for the community, such as parades and processions.

Though without parallel among other finds in Italy, it resembles vehicles from Thrace dating to the period of the Roman Empire. A number of two- and four-wheeled examples have been excavated from burial mounds in Bulgaria.

At Karanovo, near Nova Zagora in southeastern Bulgaria, archaeologists discovered an exceptionally rich Thracian tomb including a four-wheeled carriage elaborately decorated with bronze. Buried together with two horses and a dog, in a funerary ritual typical of that period, the lavishly ornamented vehicle dates to the end of the second century A.D.. The bronze-plated wooden body is decorated with scenes from Thracian mythology, including figures of a leaping panther and of a mythological animal combining the body of a panther and the tail of a dolphin. With wheels measuring four feet (1.2 metres) high, it was found during excavations in a burial mound that archaeologists believe was the grave of a wealthy Thracian aristocrat.

Unfortunately, many of these exciting archaeological finds have been damaged by illegal treasure-hunters.

This type of ceremonial carriage can also be compared with vehicles uncovered some fifteen years ago in the burial mound of Mikri Doxipara-Zoni in northern Greece, near the Bulgarian border, although those lack the extraordinary figurative decorations that embellish the Pompeian find.

Pompeii continues to amaze with all of its discoveries, and it will continue to do so for many years yet, with twenty hectares still to be excavated.

Further reading

https://exarc.net/issue-2021-1/ea/reconstruction-roman-cavalry-saddle
http://pompeiisites.org/en/comunicati/the-four-wheeled-processional-chariot-the-last-discovery-of-pompeii/?fbclid=IwAR2PQ7XbN7unGp4SIkuEFXkb0cttn0PFBXYtRpxWSRyj0dbcEjd17mt_52M
http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1/1%202010%2014.htm
https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carro_(Villa_Arianna)_2.JPG
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Stabiae
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Thrace
https://www.mikridoxipara-zoni.gr/findings/WagonsAndHorses/english/index.html
"ICE AGE" HORSE SKELETON FROM UTAH IS NOT SO OLD

Gail Brownrigg

The skeleton of a mare originally thought to belong to a wild horse from the Pleistocene Era may prove even more valuable to researchers as a rare example of a domestic horse first introduced to the Americas by the Spanish and adopted by Indigenous people.

After unearthing its skeleton, researchers initially thought this horse dated to the last Ice Age about 16,000 years ago. “It was found in the ground in these geologic deposits from the Pleistocene—the last Ice Age,” said William Taylor, assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Colorado Boulder and lead author of the study published in American Antiquity. However, new analyses have shown that it was actually a domestic horse (Equus caballus), descended from animals brought to the Americas from the sixteenth century onwards.

New radiocarbon dating of the actual bones together with clues from the horse’s skeleton and DNA now indicate that the mare lived more recently. But because the radiocarbon sample didn't give an exact result, "we can only say that this horse died sometime after 1680," most probably before the European settlers permanently moved into the Salt Lake region during the mid-nineteenth century, Taylor said.

In addition, the researchers found evidence of damage to the horse’s spine that suggest that it had been regularly ridden, either bareback or with a soft saddle. Such pathologies are a “kind of feature that is pretty rare in a wild animal,” Taylor commented. "Once we looked closer, we found other clues, including severe arthritis — and ultimately, genetic data helped us to confirm this idea" that the horse was a domestic horse, not an Ice Age wild equid.
DNA analyses by co-authors at the University of Toulouse in France revealed that the Lehi horse was a female about 12 years old. Despite the animal’s injuries, which would have probably made her lame, people had continued to care for the mare—possibly because they were breeding her with stallions in their herd.

Finally, sequentially sampled stable carbon, oxygen, and strontium isotope values from tooth enamel (δ13C, δ18O, and 87Sr/86Sr) suggest that the horse had been raised locally.

It was probably trained, looked after and ridden by Indigenous people who lived in what is now Utah, possibly by a member of the Ute or Shoshone communities.

“The Lehi horse shows us that there is an incredible archaeological record out there of the early relationship between Indigenous people and horses — a record that tells us things not written in any European histories,” said Taylor, who is also a curator of archaeology at the University of Colorado Museum of Natural History, and has recently created a digital museum exhibit about horses in the ancient American West.

These results show the utility of archaeological science as applied to horse remains in understanding Indigenous horse pastoralism. Consideration of the broader archaeological record suggests there may have been other cases of misidentification of horse bones from early historic contexts.

“This study demonstrates a very sophisticated relationship between Indigenous peoples and horses,” said Taylor. “It also tells us that there might be a lot more important clues to the human-horse story contained in the horse bones that are out there in libraries and museum collections.”

Further reading
https://www.colorado.edu/cumuseum/horses-north-american-west.
MYSTERY CARVING OF A NAKED HORSEMAN UNCOVERED AT VINDOLANDA BY HADRIAN’S WALL

Gail Brownrigg

A beautifully carved sandstone relief depicting a naked male figure holding a spear and standing in front of a horse has been uncovered during the annual excavations at the Roman fort of Vindolanda, near Hadrian’s Wall in Northumberland, in north east England. The small relief apparently depicts a horseman standing beside his horse, but his identity remains a mystery. He wears only a helmet, which carries a decoration which may represent wings.

Sandstone carving of a mysterious Roman god with his horse (or possibly a mule?) discovered at Vindolanda Roman fort. (Image credit: The Vindolanda Trust)

Vindolanda is best known for the Roman writing tablets discovered there. The thin slivers of wood covered in spidery ink writing are the oldest surviving handwritten documents in Britain. The site, which lies just to the south of Hadrian's Wall in Northumbria, is set within a stunning landscape on the first Roman frontier in the north – The Stanegate. First erected by the Roman army before Hadrian's Wall was built, Vindolanda became an important construction and garrison base for the Wall, and a fort in its own right including cavalry barracks dating from AD 105. After Hadrian’s Wall was abandoned by its imperial armies the site remained in use for over 400 years before finally becoming abandoned in the ninth century.
The carved stone, dating from the time of the Roman occupation, was uncovered on 20th May by Richie Milor and David Goldwater, volunteers from Newcastle, who for over 15 years have been making their annual visit to assist with the excavations. This year, they were asked to unearth the flagstone floor which lies within a 4th-century building at the fort. They found the unique carving only a few inches below the topsoil, lying amongst the larger paving stones. "I saw one of the legs of the horse first and then the pointed top of the relief," Goldwater said. Milor added, "We are just absolutely elated, very proud to be part of this discovery, it was actually very emotional. Whether you find something or not, we love coming to this site, playing our small part in the research that takes place, but finding this made it a very special day indeed."

Site archaeologist Marta Alberti, one of the team overseeing the excavations at Vindolanda, is now piecing together the clues to try and establish who the carving may represent. With no comparable discoveries at Vindolanda and no inscription on the relief, those clues are in the details of the carving itself. Marta commented, “The nakedness of the man means he is probably a god, rather than a mere cavalryman. He is also carrying a spear in his left arm, a common attribute of the god of War – Mars, however, when you look at his head, the two almost circular features could be identified as wings: a common attribute of Mercury, god of travel. Horses and donkeys are also often associated with Mercury as a protector of travellers.”

The discovery is the first stone relief of its kind at Vindolanda. Greek and Roman gods and heroes were often shown naked and displaying their perfect bodies, and associated with horses which, though no larger than today’s ponies, were status animals.

The stone floor under which it was found was very close to a large fourth-century cavalry barracks. According to Marta, the units stationed at the fort may have had their own interpretation of Mars, or Mercury, or a third and so far unidentified version of a god combining the qualities of both. This roughly 6-inch-wide by 12-inch-long (16 by 31.5 cm) stone would have fitted into a recess in one of the walls. Research on this unique piece is not yet complete, including studies to establish whether it may once have been coloured.
The artefact will be going on display in the current finds exhibition at the Vindolanda museum from 1st July for the remainder of the 2021 season. Booking is currently required.

**Further reading**


Video: Vindolanda archaeologist Marta Alberti talks about the recent discovery at Vindolanda. https://youtu.be/K7YWrvgfEdA.

https://www.vindolanda.com/roman-vindolanda-fort-museum?gclid=EAIaIQobChMsNXjlp7Q8QIVQWHmCh3yrkgk_EAAAYASAAEgJCEPD_BwE.


TWO SILVER MEDALS IN PARADRESSAGE WON BY THE LATVIAN RIDER RIHARDS SNIKUS IN TOKYO 2020 GAMES

Anastasija Ropa

This summer, the Olympic Games in Tokyo were marked by a scandal in the equestrian part of modern pentathlon, as the pentathletes struggled with an uncooperative horse, the ironically-named Saint Boy. This episode called into question the horse and rider relations in modern pentathlon in particular and equestrian sports, with animal rights activists requiring a change in the rules of modern pentathlon to improve the conditions of the horses involved. In this news item, however, we wanted to share a more positive example of horse and rider relationship, which was gained by watching the paradressage tests only a fortnight after the scandal which marked the Tokyo Olympics.

In the paradressage, the Latvian rider Rihards Snikus with his horse The King of Dance won two silver medals – the first medals won by Latvia in equestrian sports at this level. Currently, Rihards is the only paradressage rider from Latvia competing internationally. A young man from a small country taking a second place only to an American rider and overcoming a rider from Italy, a country with a strong tradition of equestrian sports. How did he get to this level?

These are Rihards’ third Paralympic Games: he came fourth in London with a different horse, Chardonnay, and fifth in the Rio Games – with his current horse, The King of Dance. He is now one of the best-known parathletes in Latvia.
However, his start in life was far from optimistic. Born with a severe disability – a grave case of cerebral palsy – he was raised by his grandparents. While still in school, he started riding as a form of therapy with a riding therapist who would become his riding instructor and accompany him to Rio – Olga Shelle. Olga remembered how long, long ago they set off to their first competition: two ladies in the front seats of the car, Rihards in the back, and a twenty-six-year-old horse (Olga’s first horse, Telfa, in whose honour she named her riding club) in the trailer. Although they were joking about starting their journey to the Olympics, none of them would have imagined that Rihards would write his name on the pages of Paralympic history and inspire both disabled and abled-bodied horse-lovers and lovers of sport.

Links

Rihards and his first dressage horse Telfa: https://vimeo.com/23848045

MULTISPECIES KNOWLEDGES AND THE INDUSTRIALIZATION OF ANIMAL EXPLOITATION, TURKU, 2-3 JUNE 2021
Anastasija Ropa

This conference, dedicated to animal studies, featured a keynote by Prof. Sandra Swart (Stellenbosch University, South Africa), “Bloodlines and Bloodlies: Inventing Equine Breeds.” Prof Swart drew a parallel between race discourses as applied to humans and horses in South Africa, showing how the promotion of the Thoroughbred as the equine model went in hand with the discourse on race by the colonial powers. While Thoroughbreds were less than ideal as working horses, given the local climate and the work these horses had to carry out, unless owned by the elites, they were consistently used for “improving” the local horses, representing the “civilized” horse par excellence. In this way, the keynote responded to themes of multispecies knowledge and animal exploitation, exploring the use of equines in political propaganda. The conference, which included papers on a range of domestic animals, also had two conference papers devoted to equines: Jane Flynn’s “‘So much meat in various shapes.’ The Industrialization of Horse Disposal during The Great War” and Anastasija Ropa’s “The Estonian Peasants Love Their Horses So Much They Use Oxen: Animal Exploitation in the Baltic Provinces of the Russian Empire in the Mid-Nineteenth Century.”
EQUINE CULTURES IN TRANSITION, 22 – 24 JUNE 2021
Anastasija Ropa

Equine Cultures in Transition explored the historical and modern cultures of horsemanship, with papers divided into parallel sessions under the themes of modern lifestyle, history, ethics, literature, art and equine-assisted activities (EAA). The keynotes were given by Kate Dashper, “Interspecies relationships in horse/human tourism” and Thobba Therkildsen Sudmann, “Equine facilitated therapy – health promoting encounters with daring and compassion” on the first day, and by Sue Halden Brown “Equestrian coaching in crisis: meeting the needs and expectations of today’s riders” and Inga Wolframm’s “A strong mind as a vehicle for change” on the second day. Unusually (at least for humanities scholars), the conference papers were limited to ten minutes, and keynotes to twenty minutes, with the keynotes being followed by group discussions in breakout rooms. The conference also featured a workshop in pedagogics led by Sue Halden Brown and a round table chaired by Lynda Birke, “How horses shape academic lives and research.” A book of abstracts and further materials can be found on the conference website: https://www.slu.se/en/ew-calendar/2021/6/equine-cultures-in-transition-conference---past-present-and-future-challenges/.

REPORT ON STUDIES IN EQUESTRIAN HISTORY PRESENTED AT THE INTERNATIONAL MEDIEVAL CONGRESS, LEEDS, 5-9 JULY 2021
Anastasija Ropa

The International Medieval Congress is one of the highlights for medievalists, and, since 2016, the editors of the Rewriting Equestrian History series Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson have been organizing sessions, round tables and fringe events dedicated to horse history. This year was no exception, with two thematic sessions, “Practical Equestrianisms in the Middle Ages” and “Medieval Equestrian Climates” (the latter responding to the special theme of the IMC this year, “Climate”) and a round table “Horset Breeding in the Middle Ages” bringing together horse history scholars and interested audiences.

The session “Practical Equestrianisms” began with Emma Herbert-Davies’s paper “Appraising the warhorse: restaurum equorum in the armies of Edward I & II” exploring the information about riding horses used on campaigns that can be found in the inventories and payment documents dated 1282-1364, focusing on the process of appraising the animals. Jennifer Jobst discussed head position of the ridden horse based on a variety of medieval sources, including hippiatric treatises, visual sources and archaeological artifacts in her multidisciplinary paper, “Horse Head Position in Pre-Modern Times: A Textual, Iconographic, and Archaeological Analysis of 'behind the vertical' and 'hyperflexion'.” Christy Mackenzie, a certified and practicing vet and independent horse historian, discussed another practical aspect of medieval horsemanship, raising the tantalizing question of how effective medieval hippiatric treatments were in “Practical Treatments: Medieval Remedies for the Medieval Horse.”
The session on climates started with Miriam Bibby argued for cultural continuity in horse breeding in the Scottish climate in her paper “Equine Love in a Cold Climate: Horse Breeding for Quality in Medieval Scotland and Northern England.” Subsequently, Andrew Ó Donnghaile presents the information available on the pre-modern Irish saddle and two reconstructions of the saddle in “The Medieval Irish Saddle: a Constant Cultural Climate.” Finally, Alexia Foteini-Stamouli gave an overview of the rich assortment of equestrian information in the Greek epic narrative about Digenis Akritis in “Horses in an Eastern Climate: the Case of Digenis Akritis.”

The round table featured three short contributions by Anastasija Ropa, Miriam Bibby and Jennifer Jobst. The first two papers targeted the myths surrounding the medieval breeding of horses in Livonia and Scotland, respectively, both of which, surprisingly, have been claimed to have received formative Spanish influence in the Middle Ages. Jennifer Jobst, in turn, discussed the breeding of the ideal horse in premodern times.

Individual equine history papers were presented at the IMC as well, evenly spread across various sessions, dedicated to animal history as well as other subjects. Sunny Harrison, whose doctoral research was on the hippiatric treatise of Jordanus Rufus, presented a paper “Deliver this horse from evil: Veterinary Rituals, Epizootic Disease, and Late Medieval Horse Medicine” in a session on medical history, “Climates of Fear, I: Illness, Impairment, and Healing.” In this paper, Dr Harrison explored the medieval treatments of a dangerous equine disease known in medieval treatises as “farcy” (known today as glanders) using what the author calls “charms” (though there is some terminological ambiguity, with many scholars of medieval magic pointing out the artificiality of distinguishing between charms and prayers in medieval culture).

Sessions dedicated to animals included the contributions by Miranda Hajduk, “How to Ride the Zodiac Horse: Teaching Horse / Human Anatomy in New York, Pierpont Morgan Library, MS M.735” and Anastasija Ropa, “Teaching Horses to Eat Indian Food: Some Problems in Importing Horses into Medieval India” to the session “Teaching Animals” sponsored by the M(edeval) A(nimal) D(ata Network). The papers addressed the educational aspects of horsemanship, using strategies of teaching horse and human anatomy in late medieval Italian manuscripts in the former paper and actually teaching (or habituating) horses to a new kind of food and new modes of care in the latter paper. Also Edgar Rops offered a paper “Horses, Hawks, and Other One-Legged Beasts: Injuries to Animals in Medieval Welsh Law” in another animal-focused session, “Disabled and Disabling Animals,” which provocatively explored the issue of disability in non-human animals.