

# Introduction: The Horse as a Liminal Being

Rena Maguire, Anastasija Ropa

In the early 2000s, horse history was limited to a number of once authoritative, but somewhat dated studies written by a few outstanding scholars. Some of them were academics with little practical knowledge of horseflesh, while others, like the famous Ann Hyland, were primarily “horse people” – trainers, riders, and breeders. In the recent decades, a growing interest in animal studies on the one hand, and in material culture on the other, motivated a new generation of historians to plunge into the study of equines and of equestrian practices, often combining a passion for horses and expertise in history. This interest has led to the publication of articles, edited volumes, and monographs, not to mention dedicated conference sections and even entire conferences focusing on the horse and its history.<sup>1</sup> To navigate through the accumulated body of academic writing on horse history and to provide a platform for emerging and established scholars to publish on what, for many, is still a liminal field, a dedicated series with an academic publisher was imperative. The series *Rewriting Equestrian History* was established by Trivent in 2018: its aim is to bring together scholars who recognize the practical and symbolic importance of the horse in history and to provide a forum for raising and debating the new and topical issues in the history of horses and equestrianism.

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<sup>1</sup> Conferences on equine history have been organized by the Equine History Collective in 2018, 2019, and, in virtual format, 2021. In 2020, Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson organized a conference *Historical Practices in Horsemanship and Equestrian Sports*, hosted by the Latvian Academy of Sport Education, in August 2020. To this can be added *Equine Cultures in Transition*, a conference that combines panels on horse history and panels on art, literature, modern lifestyle, ethics, pedagogics, and equine assisted social work, on 22-24 June 2021, by the Swedish University of Agricultural Studies.

The idea for this series emerged as a result of the editors' activity at the International Medieval Congress in Leeds, where, since 2016, Anastasija Ropa and Timothy Dawson have been organizing sessions dedicated to equestrian history.<sup>2</sup> It is fitting that medieval history, where research on horses has been somewhat lagging as compared to other historical periods, is the primary focus of the first two books published in the *Rewriting Equestrian History* series, a monograph by Anastasija Ropa, *Practical Horsemanship in Medieval Arthurian Romance* (2019), and a volume edited by Miriam A. Bibby and Brian G. Scott, *The Materiality of the Horse* (2020). It is no surprise therefore that the first part of this volume, too, concentrates on the medieval period, albeit making reference to modern equestrian practices. However, the series welcomes contributions from all chronological periods, and the second part of the volume brings out the connection between prehistoric, ancient and modern equestrian practices convincingly, showing how the knowledge of horse history is essential not only for historians, but also for equestrians and, indeed, for all people with interest in the history of culture and civilization.

But why the emphasis on borders and liminality? As the previous volume in the series was dedicated to the material aspects of equestrianism and the materiality of its central agent, the horse, it seemed fitting to consider the symbolical implications of horsemanship in the following volume. Indeed, the historical horse is at once material and abstract, as is the notion of the border: borders and frontiers are not only markers delineating geographical spaces (just as a horse is more than just a quadruped historically used by humans mostly, but not only, for transportation), but are also mental constructs. In her discussion of the notion of border from a philosophical perspective, Latvian scholar Mara Grinfelde points out that borders can be not only spatial, dividing one space from another (geographic) space, but also cultural, that is, borders between differing cultures. There are also borders between order and disorder, the ones providing a moral assessment of activities: the borders between what is permitted and what is prohibited. Building on the writings of Waldentfels, Grinfelde affirms that, on the whole, the border concerns not only the material sphere, the "world of things," but also

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<sup>2</sup> It is following the first series of sessions in 2016 that the Equine History Collective, a US-based professional organization for equine historians, was established: see <https://equinehistory.wpcomstaging.com/>.

economic, political, moral, legal and religious spheres.<sup>3</sup> In this volume, the authors consider the presence of horses in all of these spheres in various ways.

The horse moves through our history, straddling the domestic and the legendary, on the boundaries of the human psyche. They may be war-horses, farm-horses or even food, but the horse has captured and inspired the human imagination for millennia. Sometimes the horses have wings and belong to the realms of air, like Tianma (天馬), the dragon horse of China, and Tulpar, its equivalent in Turkey.<sup>4</sup> They also can have fish tails, or horns, and occasionally a mingling of all these. The horse cannot be placed in one single context of human experience, instead existing in the liminal spaces of life, death and everywhere in between.

The Iron Age Scythian burials of Pazyrk,<sup>5</sup> in Siberia, included horses, which were sacrificed so that they could make the journey to the Fields of Heaven. Accordingly, their trappings were spectacular. A chamfrain with horns, turning the horse into a deer or elk, itself a deeply meaningful creature on the steppes.<sup>6</sup> It was not just in the equestrian heartland of the Steppes that the horse could transform – the copper alloy chamfrain found in Torr, Scotland, turned its equine wearer into the stuff of myths, with sweeping horns, extravagantly decorated in the La Tène-derivative style of the European Iron Age, topped by staring-eyed metal waterfowl. Despite their distance from each other, Pazyrk and Torr demonstrate how the domestic horse could shift into the realms of the supernatural, through the enchantment of human technology. The horse may occupy the boundaries of wildness and domesticity, but we choose to accompany

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<sup>3</sup> Mara Grinfelde, “Pārdomas par robežas jēdzienu: filozofiskais aspekts” [Thoughts about the notion of border: philosophical aspect], in *Baltu un slavu kultūrkontakti* [Cultural contacts of the Balts and the Slavs], ed. Janīna Kursīte (Riga: Madris, 2009), 279.

<sup>4</sup> Ji Yong, “Analysis of the heavenly horse Tianma in the Han Dynasty stone reliefs,” *Journal of Nanyang Institute of Technology* (2010) and Khurshid Sayfullayev, and Dildora Komilova, “The national and spiritual essence of Uzbek fairytales in upbringing young generation,” *Mental Enlightenment Scientific-Methodological Journal* 1 (2020): 170-180.

<sup>5</sup> Sebastien Lepetz, “Horse sacrifice in a Pazyryk culture kurgan: the princely tomb of Berel’ (Kazakhstan). Selection criteria and slaughter procedures,” *Anthropozoologica* 48:2 (2013): 309-321.

<sup>6</sup> Boris Piotrovsky, “Early Cultures of the Lands of the Scythians,” *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 32:5 (1973): 12-25.

it, a theme explored in detail by Anastasija Ropa in her study on Jordanus Rufus's hippiatric treatise in chapter two of this volume.

Myth and legend are full of shapeshifting, liminal horses, which veer from adorable to deadly in a hoofbeat. The Irish *púca*, Welsh *pwca* and Cornish *bucca*, taking the form of a shaggy, mischievous young horse, lived in wells or ancient cairns, and could choose to bring good luck or bad, depending on its mood.<sup>7</sup> Its hatred of iron marks it as a wild creature, beyond the domains of domestication. That essential spirit of wildness echoes in horse folklore – that you can very much find yourself lost to human society once you choose to mount one of these supernatural horses. A multitude of world cultures interred horses in burials, the ultimate psychopomp escorting the deceased human on the ultimate journey from which there was no coming back.<sup>8</sup>

The magic of the horse was not diminished with the passing of the ancient world. Instead, a whole culture of horse training, housing and associated technologies were created: two chapters in this volume, by Jennifer Jobst and by Duncan L. Berryman, relate to medieval practices of horse training and stabling, respectively. And yet, the horse still had a hoof in both worlds – the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse are seldom depicted on shabby or humble mounts, traditional mummers dressed as the Mari Lwyd, the skeletal prankster performer of medieval Britain, and the *chansons des gestes* have such creatures as Bayard and Gringolet,<sup>9</sup> with distinctive personalities and wisdom which their humans rely on. Real-life equids may have been tethered by leather and metal, but the essence of wild and ancient magic is always there, even in the gentlest creature.

The contributing authors to this volume explore the theme of the liminality of the horse. How does one reconcile the very different roles played by the horse in human life? The horse has acted as marker of identity and social status in cultures as different as those of the Late Iron

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<sup>7</sup> Deasún Breatnach, “The Púca: a multi-functional Irish supernatural entity,” *Folklore* 104:1-2 (1993): 105-110.

<sup>8</sup> Horse burials often involved sacrifice of the animal, another Indo-European tradition, which is the subject of the recent far-ranging monograph by Anders Kaliff and Terje Oestigaard, *The Great Indo-European Horse Sacrifice. 4000 Years of Cosmological Continuity from Sintashta and the Steppe to Scandinavian Skeid* (Uppsala: Uppsala university, 2020).

<sup>9</sup> The liminal nature of horses in Arthurian romance, such as that of Gawain's Gringolet, is discussed by Philippe Walter, “Le cheval dans la mythologie arthurienne,” in “*Sonò alto un nitrito*”. *Il cavallo nel mito e nella letteratura*, ed. Francesco Zambon (Pisa: Pacini, 2012), 121-134.

Age Ireland (the subject of Rena Maguire's contribution, chapter 8), the Roman Empire (see M. C. Bishop's study, chapter 9), and Byzantium (discussed by Alexia-Foteini Stamouli in chapter 4). It has been a creature with a hotline to the supernatural, a status symbol of aristocrats, a helpmate to the labourer (which is the subject of chapter 6 by Terry Davis), a warrior (an issue considered by Xenia Pauli Jensen and Jacob Kveiborg in chapter 7), and a creature made for sport, often performing all these functions at the same time. Such is the case of many iconic equine breeds, most notably the English Thoroughbred, which has become the object of nineteenth-century mythmaking, some of which is uncovered by Miriam A. Bibby in her chapter concluding the volume.

It is therefore, as editors, our honour to present to the reader a collection of papers exploring the human boundaries, both actual and ideological, on which horses have existed through the past two thousand years. The volume is divided into three sections, with the first dealing with the equestrian apogee of the medieval period. A practical paper on harnessing methods acts as a bridge between the medieval period and the third section, which examines equestrian boundaries of antiquity.

It is our hope that these papers inspire, entertain and inform, and perhaps leave the reader thinking further of the relationship between human and horse.

## **Section One**

1. Jennifer Jobst, "Horse training in the thirteenth century: Insights from Jordanus Rufus"
2. Anastasija Ropa, "Crossing Borders in Equestrian Training: Applying Jordanus Rufus's Advice on Training Young Horses Today"

The first two chapters of the section are dedicated to the same source text: arguably the central horse text of the Middle Ages, the hippiatric treatise of Jordanus Rufus. The authors approach the advice provided in the initial sections of the text, those on horse breeding and training from different perspectives. Jennifer Jobst concentrates on relating the text to contemporary realia, while Anastasija Ropa narrates a practical experiment in applying Rufus's advice on horse training to her own practice. Both studies focus on crossing the border between an untrained, unriden and virtually unhandled, "wild" horse to an

“educated” horse that can serve the purpose for each it is bred in a particular socio-cultural context. Jennifer Jobst is an independent scholar with a background in dressage, who has published on historical riding performances and has translated several medieval and early modern hippiatric and equestrian histories from Middle French and early modern Italian, including parts of Jordanus Rufus’s treatise; in this study, she discusses the training of a medieval warhorse (*destrier*) or elite riding horse (palfrey).

In turn, Anastasija Ropa combines her academic background in literary criticism and translation studies with her practical experience as a horse owner and trainer of young and “problem” horses to show how Rufus’s advice on preparing the horse to cross the border from an unriden colt or filly to a serviceable amateur sport or hobby horse is still topical today. In all, both chapters demonstrate that Rufus’s text has made the transition of time successfully – much of it is as useful to a twenty-first century horse person as it was for a thirteenth-century one. The reason is that Rufus’s text is, essentially, a treatise of human-animal becoming, where the horse crosses the border from “nature” to “culture” only after its human handler/rider/trainer has crossed the border in the reverse direction to take the horse with him/her.

### 3. Duncan L. Berryman, “Housing Horses on the Edge in Later Medieval England”

The horse was of vital importance to every aspect of the medieval world, with the finest animals an indulgence of the great and the good. Duncan Berryman examines the construction of English manorial stables, which may reflect symbols of lordship; effectively, if an aristocrat could house their horses in luxury, the unspoken statement was that their own habitations were even grander. The stables may have been on the boundaries of the great houses, but existed as prestige symbols, just like horse studs, in their own rights.

### 4. Alexia-Foteini Stamouli, “Roman and Enemy Horses and Riders: the Testimony of *Historia Romana* by Nikephoros Gregoras”

In her study of the horse in a Greek historiographic text, Alexia-Foteini Stamouli taps into the realms of the political border-crossing, but also into ideology and religion. Alexia-Foteini Stamouli is a specialist in

Byzantine literature and has presented and published on equines in Byzantine hagiographic, theological and historiographic texts. A window into Byzantine cultures of equestrianism, her source text provides ample evidence of how enemies could be separated from “allies” and “one’s own” people based on their riding skills, ways of treating horses, and the animals they ride. The decision to ride or not to ride and what kind of horse to choose for riding would firmly mark adherence or transgression of ethnic and social borders: there were specific kinds of horses ridden by the military elite, whereas the religious could forego riding at all or choose a humbler equine than a horse – a mule or a donkey.

5. Cristina Oliveros Carlos, “Straight from the Horse’s Mouth: A Study of Horse Type Terms in English, French and Spanish”

In this chapter, Cristina Oliveros Carlos, a linguist and translator with a particular interest in horse-related texts, considers linguistic boundaries where various words designating “horses” could cross – or not – from the Middle Ages up until the present day. Starting from the Latin words “*equus*” and “*caballus*,” which co-existed but belonged to different stylistic registers, the terminology designating horses by type and use in the medieval period was developed, varied, and specific. Due to cross-cultural and cross-border contacts, English, French, and Spanish have retained many etymologically related terms designating horses: but many of them are “false friends” – words that sound similar but that have changed their meaning when crossing the border. On the other hand, there are many autochthonous terms that are not attested in other languages, as well as new, autochthonous meanings and stylistic overtones they develop in their new linguistic and cultural context. The author shows that words denoting horses, like the animals they signified, could cross borders – but they could also change on the new soil. And some of these words never made the transition.

## Section Two

6. Terry Davis, “Harnessing Horsepower: Then and Now”

Working horses are increasingly rare in Europe and North America, unless as recreational animals, used for tourism or leisure. This is not the case in many developing countries, where workers rely on equids for

haulage and agricultural traction, in exactly the same way people of the past depended on working equids. Terry Davis is a master harness-maker for draft horses, based in Shropshire, England. He has an interest in both zooarchaeology and improving the lives and health of working equids. This paper examines best practice for draft animal harness, even if it is improvised equipment. He also poses a question of whether we can use this knowledge to identify the worst kinds of harness-related pathology on equid skeletons of the past, by comparing with injuries caused by poor fitting harness in developing countries.

### **Section Three**

#### 7. Xenia Pauli Jensen and Jacob Kveiborg, “Bridles and Bones – early cavalry in Southern Scandinavia”

Central and western Europe can chart a reasonably precise timeline for the increasing use of the riding horse, rather than chariotry, through the Late Bronze Age and Early Iron Age. The boundaries of Europe, in this case, Scandinavia and the Baltic regions, have very different Iron Age chronologies compared to western and central Europe. Xenia Pauli-Jensen and Jacob Kveiborg, both equine and military specialists from Moesgaard Museum, Denmark, examine the introduction of the riding horse to Scandinavia, during the Late Bronze Age, using the forensics of bridle-wear, to define when the horse changed its status to mounted warhorse, and by doing so, changed its status to be a co-warrior with humans.

#### 8. Rena Maguire, “Livin’ on the Edge: Roman influences on the equestrian equipment of Late Iron Age Ireland”

Like the Baltic regions, Ireland was on the boundary of the Roman Empire. Equitation equipment is among some of the more commonly found artefacts of the Late Iron Age/Roman period. The double-jointed ported snaffles are unlike any others in Europe, with a unique shape and remarkable manufacturing sophistication. Yet these snaffles tell a story of hidden identities and clashing cultures, finally showing previously hidden aspects of the lives of the aristocratic riders and their horses, and their relationship with the beliefs of the Roman Empire itself. Rena Maguire is a specialist in the manufacture and use of lorinery of late

antiquity and late prehistoric Europe, with a specific interest in the Irish Iron Age.

9. M. C. Bishop, “*Dimisso equo*: horse-riding elites on the frontiers of Rome”

The Roman Empire utilised many kinds of equestrians, from the provincial riders, or *peregrines*, to cavalry conscripts, or *ales*. Less evidence survives of civilian equestrians connected to the Empire. There is a hint of ideology in separating the spheres of military and civilian life (the “*dimisso equo*” of the title), but it has proved more problematic to assess differences in the kinds of equipment used. M. C. Bishop, the editor of the *Journal of Roman Military Equipment*, asks if it is possible to identify a boundary between civilian and military equitation (and associated equipment), or if everything came down purely to status and warfare for the Roman elite rider.

10. Miriam A. Bibby, “Mist on the Border: Emperor Severus and the Netherby Arabians that never were”

The abiding myth of Arabian racehorses imported to Britain during the Roman period is examined by Miriam Bibby, currently a PhD researcher studying Scotland’s Galloway pony. Moving firmly in the realms of myth and wishful thinking, popular legend has related the arrival of fineboned Arabian horses to Britain at the bequest of the Emperor Septimus Severus, who wanted to enjoy the spectacle of horse-racing. Using a combination of horse-sense and good old-fashioned primary source texts, Bibby produces evidence that much of this legend is manufactured by nineteenth-century imaginations.

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