

BOOK REVIEW

Chariot Racing in the Roman Empire. By Fik MEIJER. Translated by Liz WATERS. Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv + 185. Hardcover, \$29.95/£15.50. ISBN 978-0-8018-9697-2.

Professor of ancient history at the University of Amsterdam, Meijer has authored various works that have been translated into English, including *A History of Seafaring in the Ancient World* (1986), *Emperors Don't Die in Bed* (2004), and *The Gladiators: History's Most Deadly Sport* (2007). His latest volume, a brief and accessible overview of Roman chariot racing, is an English translation and republication of a work he first published in Dutch in 2004. A four-page Introduction expands upon Juvenal's famous *panem et circenses* remark, notes the popularity of chariot races ("the greatest of Roman passions") (1) with all classes (if not with a few intellectual critics), and suggests that the topic has been understudied. Meijer asserts the need for a book on "both the sport and its social and political background" (4), but his debt to the detailed and authoritative works of A. Cameron (1973, 1976) and J. Humphrey (1986), and also studies by M. Junkelmann (1990), and G. Horsmann (1998), is clear throughout.

Eleven chapters discuss the history, operation, and people of chariot racing from the Bronze Age to the Byzantine Empire. Chapter 1 opens with a dramatic narration of the Nika riot of 532 CE, including the escalating violence of the Green and Blue factions and ultimately the massacre of rioters in the Hippodrome: "It was the biggest supporter bloodbath in history" (12). Chapter 2 surveys chariots and chariot racing from early Greece to first-century BCE Rome. Chapter 3, the second longest at 20 pages, discusses the Circus Maximus (and other circuses at Rome and in the Empire) but it gets a bit technical as Meijer draws heavily on Humphrey. Chapter 4, "Preparation and Organization," clearly summarizes the racing factions (or stables), horses, and charioteers. Chapter 5, "A Day at the Circus Maximus," imaginatively reconstructs rituals and races from Ovid, Martial, and other writers. Chapter 6, "The Heroes of the Arena," places charioteers in society as mostly slaves and freedmen, but it notes famous stars such as Scopus and Diocles. Chapter 7, "The Spectators," the longest at 32 pages, discusses the politicized interaction between "good" and "bad" emperors and

circus crowds, and the devotion and even fanaticism of supporters for their factions or “colors”: “Their faction gave them a chance to scream away all their frustrations and to achieve some kind of status” (105). After noting betting and curse tablets at circuses, Meijer here offers his most original argument (112–19), claiming that there must have been violence and rioting at the Circus Maximus in the first and second centuries CE, but that the ancient sources did not report it. He finds it “... barely conceivable that in the seething Circus Maximus feelings never flared up” (115, similarly 133). The inevitable comparison to modern “football” (i.e. soccer, 115, also 104) follows.

Chapter 8, “Changes around the Racetrack,” notes the “radicalization” of racing at Rome, especially when influenced by paid “clappers,” the spread of the Roman faction system to the Greek East in the Late Empire, the appearance of imperial palaces adjacent to racetracks, the stables’ loss of independence to imperial officials, the entrance of some charioteers into management positions, and the increase of political strife and violence between emperors and spectators at Constantinople. Chapter 9, “The Heroes of the Hippodrome,” drawing on Cameron (1973), notes the height of racing at Constantinople around 500–540 and concentrates on the famous charioteer Porphyrius. Chapter 10, “The Disappearance of Chariot Racing,” briefly covers the decline and end of chariot racing at Rome (by 549) and at Constantinople (after the tenth century). Chapter 11, “Ben-Hur: Chariot Racing in the Movies,” is a rather superfluous assessment of the historical accuracy of the 1959 film. It concludes unsurprisingly that the film compromised accuracy for an imaginative story and spectacular effects.

Despite some overly long direct ancient quotations (e.g., Sophocles on 23–6, Ovid on 40–1, 69–72), Meijer’s lively and informal style suggests a broad popular audience; and the work includes 25 pages of supporting materials: a chronology, glossary, list of racetracks, two maps, seven pages of notes (mostly ancient citations), a two-page selected bibliography (current only to 2003), and an index. The 21 black-and-white images of settings and charioteers assist the work but are not numbered or identified fully.

In sum, although scholars will want more depth and originality, students and general readers will enjoy and benefit from this energetic, sound, and clear synthesis of scholarship on a major phenomenon in Roman society.

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