

Fik Meijer, *Chariot Racing in the Roman Empire* (translated by Liz Waters). Baltimore, MD: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010. Pp. xiv, 185. ISBN-13:978-0-8018-9697-2 (HB). \$29.95 (pb).

This book is an accessible and interesting introduction to the topic, which for the most part is grounded in good scholarship. Meijer's introduction brings to life the Roman love of chariot racing exhibited by both elites and the common people. Just as successful in this regard are Chapters 5 ("A Day at the Circus Maximus") and 7 ("The Spectators"). In the former, translated passages from Ovid and Sidonius Apollinaris put the reader in a seat in a Roman circus, while the latter deals with other aspects of the spectators' experience: for example, their communications with the emperor, their fanatical identification with the colors of the four racing factions, curse tablets inscribed by fans asking demonic gods to harm opposing charioteers and horses, gambling, and crowd violence. Chapters 3 ("The Circus Maximus"), 4 ("Preparation and Organization"), and 6 ("The Heroes of the Arena") complete his discussion of the Circus Maximus.

Chapter 2 ("Chariot Races of the First Century BC and Earlier") begins with the military use of chariots by the Egyptians, Hittites and Mycenaeans. M. points out that it is not clear whether these peoples ever used chariots for racing. He then proceeds to the first unambiguous appearance of the sport, in archaic Greece (Homer and the Olympic Games), and finishes with the earliest evidence for it at Rome from the regal period down to the late Republic. As is crucial in any study of Roman chariot racing, M. devotes ample space to the Eastern Empire, where the sport reached its peak of popularity in the sixth century AD. I did, however, find the choice of his discussion of the Nika Riot in Constantinople as the book's first chapter somewhat odd, especially since the remainder of his treatment of racing in the east is located in chapters 8 through 10: "Changes around the Racetrack," which includes five pages on chariot racing at Rome in late antiquity, "The Heroes of the Hippodrome," and "The Disappearance of Chariot Racing." The final chapter ("*Ben-Hur*: Chariot Racing in the Movies") provides a well-balanced discussion of the William Wyler film as a representation of Roman chariot racing. M. provides handy aids to his readers: a timeline of important events, a list of emperors with dates, two maps—one of the Roman Empire in the imperial era with sites of racetracks in bold face and the other of Rome, a list of racetracks in the Roman Empire with their location and measurements, a glossary, a selected bibliography and index. There are twenty-one illustrations.

There are a few problems. M. at first presents what is the most generally accepted explanation of how a fair start was guaranteed: a catapult system operated by an attendant who pulled a lever to open the starting gates simultaneously (43).¹ Later in the book, however, M., without any comment, appears to give an alternative theory according to which the starting gates were opened manually by attendants called *moratores*: "At the fall of the flag the *moratores* immediately threw open the locks holding the swinging doors shut (76)." No reference to an ancient and/or modern source is presented to support this unlikely assertion.

¹ Numbers in parentheses at end of sentences are page numbers in the book under review.

M.'s claims that a senatorial decree of 19 AD² (which mentions a similar decree of 11 AD—M. mistakenly gives BC for both dates) was designed to keep freeborn men from becoming charioteers. The decree, however, only concerns members of the two Roman upper classes; and moreover, the profession of charioteer is nowhere mentioned; only gladiators and actors are cited as engaging in disgraceful professions (84). Elizabeth Rawson (“Chariot-Racing in the Roman Republic,” *PBSR*, 49 (1981) 10, n.38) points out: “In fact charioteers were not automatically *infamis*, and there seems to have been no attempt in the Empire to ban members of senatorial and equestrian families from acting as such; contrast the stage and the arena....”

Some quibbles on lesser matters. M.'s statement that injured charioteers were carried out of the Circus Maximus through a gate called the *Porta Libitina* is a confusion of the race track with the amphitheater (43). This gate was the portal through which dead or dying gladiators were removed from the arena (Cass. Dio 72.21.3). There are two very strange references to “catacombs” in a discussion of the opening procession into the Circus Maximus: “when a long ceremonial procession made its way out of catacombs into the full light of the arena” and “When the procession had withdrawn to the catacombs...” (67). This must be a problem of translation from the original Dutch into English. It probably refers to the entrance of the procession into the race track and its exit through the substructure of the building surrounding the Circus Maximus. J.H. Humphrey, (*Roman Circuses*, 81) posits a monumental entrance “into the substructures of the *pulvinar*,” which may be to what the “catacombs” refer. M. claims that Agrippa replaced the wooden eggs that were used as lap-counters with dolphins, but Cassius Dio does not support this contention. The historian merely says that Agrippa “set up the eggs and the dolphins,” and his explanation of Agrippa’s motivation indicates that, since eggs had been used as lap-counters in the Circus Maximus since the early second century BC (Livy 41.27.6), the dolphins were added to help track attendants keep a more accurate count of the laps (49.43.2) (44). M.'s contention that after the reign of Augustus there was no further mention of the equestrian exhibition called the Trojan Game (*Troiae lusus*) is contradicted by Suetonius (*Calig.* 18.3 and *Claud.* 21.3) (74). There are some mistakes in the glossary: *introiuga* is an adjective and not a noun; *octoiuga* and *seiuga* are incorrect spellings and should read *octoiugis* and *seiugis*.

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² The decree is inscribed on a bronze tablet found in Larinum.