SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

**Chariot-Racing in the Roman** **Republic** by Elizabeth Rawson, a summary with comments

By Pasko Varnica

PREFACE

I wish I could post **Chariot-Racing in the Roman** **Republic** by Elizabeth Rawson on this website. I may not. The article is copyrighted material by the Journal of Roman Studies, a paper published by Cambridge University press. Should you be interested in purchasing it, you can access:

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Quoting the source of the original material is not an advertisement for PBSR, but only the necessary reference. The cost is $30, an outrageous amount in my opinion for a 16 pages long write-up. Nevertheless, anyone with in-depth interest in chariot racing should give it a serious consideration.

I want to take this opportunity to thank Elizabeth Rawson for undertaking the study of the early history of the races. Although only meager evidence about chariot racing in the Republican times has reached us, the article is well researched, citing a multitude of original material, all thoughtfully presented, discussed and interpreted by Rawson showing familiarity with and knowledge of the topic.

This is a summary with my comments on Rawson’s findings and conclusions. I have omitted from my summary the source material referenced by the article.

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ORIGINS OF CHARIOT RACING[[1]](#footnote-1)

Elizabeth Rawson begins by saying that she undertook this study because little has been written about chariot racing in the Republican time since the late 19th century. Recent work by Alan Cameron (see my review of his **Porphyrius the Charioteer**) deals with the imperial period. She adds that chariot racing is, and I quote “a not unimportant” aspect of Roman life, a statement with which I thoroughly agree, although I would not use a double negative

Rawson indicates that the origins of chariots racing in Rome are more of an Etruscan tradition than a Greek one. While the Romans must have observed races at Sybaris in Greece, it is under an Etruscan king that Circus Maximus was first built. The races were originally funeral ceremonies under Consus, who due to Etruscan influence became a god of the dead. Rawson states that Consus was later wrongly identified with Neptunus Equester, but she does not specify if later stands for modern times or late antiquity.[[2]](#footnote-2)

FINANCING

Race financing followed an interesting sequence of events. At first wealthy individuals sponsored or owned race teams. Chariot racing like auto racing in modern time was an expensive sport and required an adequate financial backing. Sponsors received great honors when their chariots won races. In the next phase of financing, individuals with political ambitions sponsored games. Rawson says that the cause of the move from wealthy individuals to people with political ambitions was either the decline in prosperity in the fifth century B.C.E. or a desire to cut down the influence of distinguished people. I surmise that with the increase in the popularity of chariot racing, politicians saw the writing on the wall, that is, that it would be beneficial to their political aspirations to get involved with the races. In any case, the races continued to be expensive. Therefore, by the 3rd century B.C.E. the state took over the financing of stables to provide horses for the races. I quote “and from the mid-second century a large part of the money for the regular *ludi* was provided by the presiding magistrate, notably the praetor and *aediles”*. By the second century, the Senate had set aside a sum, perhaps a fixed sum, to pay for the games.

RISE OF THE FACTIONS

Factions arose around the third/second century B.C.E. They were a Roman invention and had no Etruscan roots. In my opinion, this makes perfect sense. A sport is popular by definition when it has a large fan base. The fans need a stable and lasting team to route for; that permanence is exactly what factions offered. As a fan, you knew that there would be color rivalry at every race. Factions were then the result of a demand, a free market creation, I would say. I must reiterate that this conclusion is mine and not Rawson’s, although I must thank her for providing evidence material.

On the topic of evidence, Rawson indicates that at the time of Ovid, fan’s enthusiasm was still directed at individual charioteers and not at the factions yet, a conclusion she reaches based on his *Amores* and *Ars Amatoria*. That may be true, but I need more sources to be convinced of it. I should say, a different source, other than Ovid whose forte was writing about relationships and not about fandom loyalty to a color.

FEES

Sifting through many references to *vectigalis*, Rawson says that it is conceivable that in late Republican times “one pays a fee to the treasury for the right to enter one’s horses or chariots in the races”. *Vectigalis*, which in Latin means subject to taxation, when used in the context of chariot racing could be interpreted as “bringing in profits”. The confusing part is that the term is used in sentences that indicate a reciprocal flow of money. It appears that it worked like this: fees were paid, as said above. Prizes by now had become large. Prizes were handed to the winning charioteers but a part of the prize went back to the owners.

This is a reasonable arrangement. Sharing the prize money would defray the exorbitant cost of faction ownership. This arrangement also explains why the second and third placings received prize money.

SENATORS’ RIGHTS

M. Agrippa, who was of senatorial rank, was passionately involved with the races. He “has re-organized *ludi circenses*, as *aedile* he improved Circus Maximus and added dolphins to mark the number of laps.” Was Agrippa’s involvement unique given his high standing with Augustus, or were other senators equally allowed to participate to the races and if so, to what extent?

We know that the right of the senators to hold public contracts was limited. Could they own racehorse stables, own a faction and participate as owners to the games? Rawson admits that the evidence regarding ban of senators’ public contracts pertinent to chariot racing is inadequate and inconclusive. She suggests that it is probable that the senatorial class was permitted to take part in two major games, the *Ludi Romani* and *Ludi Appolinares*. This, she adds, makes sense because the senators were large landowners. Pasture is essential to breed horses.

In conclusion, Chariot-Racing in the Roman Republic by Elizabeth Rawson discusses the Etruscan origins of chariot racing, the financing mechanism, the birth of the factions, the fees paid to race and covers the role of the senatorial class. The article offers an understating of the evolution of chariot racing by connecting the early Roman time with the imperial period. As such, I found it an essential read for the student of this ancient sport.

1. The section subtitles are my own and are intended to give a structure to the article [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. According to J.H. Humphrey, see bibliography on the Home page, the link between Consus and Neptunus Equester is the connection that both gods had with the underworld. Humphrey states: “In the Roman Circuses, Neptune’s importance is to be explained through his widespread equation with Consus.” **Roman Circuses, Arenas for Chariot Racing**, page 259. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)