SPORTS IN ANTIQUITY

Biga, Quadriga or is it Triga

By Pasko Varnica

Our knowledge of chariot racing derives from scattered bits and pieces, a line here, an inscription there. No comprehensive accounts covering the key aspects of the races were ever found among the ancient surviving material. A topic non-deserving attention by the monks who copied the classics, perhaps?

Without sufficient information, one can at best offer an educated guess about the particulars. Lack of original sources may explain why respected academics have not ventured into the topic of chariot race characteristics, types and preferences. This essay is the first published study of the perspective that the Romans held of the many different chariot competitions that were run on race day.

Twenty-four races were held in one day during the Empire. Different drivers, horses, number of chariots per race and number of horses per chariot competed on the same day. Were all races equal in the eyes of the Romans?

Although we are not in possession of sufficiently convincing evidence, the conclusions reached here were puzzled out from practically all original and recent sources that have discussed chariot racing. The surviving literary sources describing chariot racing consist mainly of inscriptions found on funerary stones of successful charioteers. These inscriptions are eulogistic compositions intended to praise the dead chariot driver. From them we have learned that monetary prizes for winning races were not equal and that certain races were held in high regard by being mentioned with a particular esteem.

It is very unlikely that a single list of chariot race preferences could apply to the entire Roman Empire. They raced for centuries. Millions watched the horses run in a circle around the arenas. Circus arenas existed all over the empire. It is highly implausible that everyone went to the races for the same reason and cheered the same race with equal exuberance. Interest in a competition was individual. The pleasure derived from watching a contest was subjective.

Let us look at the composition of the spectators. To start with, we have the pure fan, the person who was body and soul dedicated to the colors of his faction. At an equal level of a faction fan, we have the admirer of a particular chariot driver. Then we have the gambler and lastly a follower, a person who attended the races because of the spectacle and pomp of the event.

The faction fan probably placed equal value on all races because all the factions raced all the time and he was likely on the edge of his seat or standing during every race. The admirer of a particular charioteer would exhibit the same enthusiasm when the favorite driver raced. They raced two horses (biga), three horses (triga), four horses (quadriga) and up all the way to chariots drawn by a team of ten horses. Biga came late in the picture, around the second half of second century C.E. It was likely raced by novice charioteers who had not yet qualified to drive a quadriga (see CIL 2 4314 about Eutyches from Tarragona). Triga and other size teams of horses were far less mentioned than quadrigae. We can conclude then that:

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| Quadriga was the most popular chariot race in the Roman Empire. |

They raced four, eight and twelve chariots, that is, one, two or three chariots per faction. In a race with multiple chariots, the job of secondary drivers of a faction was to assist the primary charioteer to win. Winning a multi-chariot race mattered and the prize pot was unquestionably added to the overall victories of a charioteer. However, the multi-chariot races were not prominently emphasized in the surviving material. It seems that the driver’s skill and faction rivalry was chiefly displayed in a single-chariot race.

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| Single-chariot quadriga races held a special place in the heart of both the faction fan and the charioteer admirer |

The spectacle of twelve quadrigae barreling down the arena must have been awesome, equaling today’s NASCAR cars racing in an oval. Multi-chariot races were probably the darlings of the followers, that is, the people who went to the races for the sheer fun of it. With one to two hundred thousand people in the stands, all the senators and other dignitaries in their seats and the emperor in his podium, the excitement must have been contagious and uncontrollable. This is why the first race of the day, right after the procession, known as *a pompa*, received particular attention by the organizers.

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| *A pompa*, the first race of the day was highly regarded. |

According to addiction experts, the more a game is unpredictable, the more likely gamblers will derive pleasure from the game. Turnover of charioteers was unquestionably high, but young drivers grew up in rank by participating to multi-chariot races, competed with *bigae*, and were consequently known to the public. The one unknown to the spectators were the horses that were engaged for the first time. In general, horses and their pedigree were common knowledge. The daily program, available on a wooden tablet, included the names of the horses scheduled to run in each race. Several inscriptions, particularly ILS 5287 / CIL 6.10048 and ILS 5288 / CIL 6.10047, mention unfamiliar or novice horses. *Equorum anagonum* was a victory with horses that had never run before and was especially honorable. It is unclear if the horses where new to the races or if the driver was unfamiliar with them. Considering that horses’ life span, my guess is the former. New horses were probably introduced frequently. Conceivably, charioteers practiced with beginner horses ahead of time and, consequently were acquainted with them. New horses were that unknown and unpredictable element that gamblers find intriguing. The most enterprising ones likely bribed stable hands for inside information that they believed gave them an edge.

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| Gamblers found the unpredictability of the races with unproven horses addictive. |

At the end of the day when each race played back in the mind of avid fans, two kinds of races were on everyone’s lips: those that were won in the last lap and those where the winner led from the very beginning when the white line was crossed. These races are cited in the inscriptions. They were memorable contests and great victories, but they were not race types and are not included in our classification.

With time, chariot racing acquired a political significance. It became the place for the populace to meet the emperor. It was in the arenas where the will of the people made itself known and where people turned in their hour of need. It is conceivable that some attended the races only to participate to the chorus of requests made to the emperor and that they were uninterested in the competition, but I doubt that. Most Romans were ardent fans of chariot racing.

We cannot forget that some went to the races because a circus arena was conducive to meeting people, as Ovid had suggested in his *Ars Amatoria* (The Art of Love). Which one was their favorite race? In the morning when they walked in the circus arena, they probably had a preference. By the end of the day, if they had met that other special person, in all likelihood they changed their mind. The one race that went on at the time of the meeting, whichever the type of race that was, became their most favorite, assuming they were paying attention.