



The plains of Thessaly seen from their southern edge.

HORSES FOR COURSES

Emma Aston

*explains why horse racing, long the preserve of the elite,
was a quite different affair in ancient Thessaly*

In the modern world, horse racing and money are never far apart. It is, after all, the sport of kings, and – apart from syndicates and a few rare owners of modest means – it takes kingly wealth to play an active role in the sport. A decent flat-racing horse might cost £200,000; a year's training costs around £20,000; transporting a racehorse between Ireland and the US (a common route) can set you back as much as £18,000. Then there are vets' bills, feed, equipment and, of course, the hire of a jockey and other personnel.

Despite the many differences – social, practical, technological – between modernity and antiquity, the expensiveness of racing was a fact then just as it is now. There are, inevitably, difficulties in ascertaining the precise sums involved, such as the value of the horses themselves. In Aristophanes' *Clouds* (lines 21–23), the financially beleaguered Strepsiades could bemoan his debt of 12 minai (1,200 drachmai) to a horse-dealer for a *koppatias*, a Corinthian horse type primarily associated with racing. This sum is commensurate with the cost of a

good war-horse, as demonstrated by the record of cavalry-horse values from fourth- and third-century Athens. To put this in perspective, the half-drachma daily wage for a juror in fifth-century Athens would be expected to provide basic sustenance for a family of three (see Aristophanes' *Wasps* lines 300–02). By the time of Diocletian, whose Edict of maximum prices provides an extraordinary insight into the value of goods and services in the Roman world, a massive gap had opened up between race-horses and war-horses. The maximum price for a top-

quality race-horse in the Edict is 100,000 denarii, whereas a good war-horse is only 36,000 denarii, the same price as a top-quality she-mule.

As for the cost of stabling, transport, veterinary treatment and so on in the Greek world, we are left in the realm of guesswork. Nonetheless, there is a pervasive ancient stereotype of horse racing, and especially chariot racing, as the pastime of the super-rich. The *locus classicus* for this is Alcibiades' speech before the Athenian Assembly in 416 BC (see Thucydides 6.16.2). Alcibiades, who is in the process of persuading the Athenians to undertake the disastrous Sicilian Expedition (a colossal waste of men, money and materials) speaks directly of his own expensive behaviour: in one chariot race at the Olympic Games, he entered no fewer than seven chariots, taking first, second and fourth places. But, he says, his motives went beyond personal prestige: his chariots and their success enhanced the reputation of Athens. He wasn't just splashing his cash – he was placing it at his city's command. The very fact that he has to make this claim reveals just how suspect racing could be in democratic Athens, where conspicuous display by members of the elite was cause for political misgivings and rancour. Outside Athens, chariot racing was especially beloved of Sicilian tyrants, bywords for wealth and excess, who used the great panhellenic festivals at Olympia, Delphi, Nemea and the Isthmus to establish their presence and visibility among the elites of the Greek world.

Perhaps because modern racing chimes with it so strongly, this view of horse racing in antiquity tends to be all we see: rich individuals using their wealth to finance breeding, equipment, logistics and the services of a jockey or charioteer (probably a person of low if not servile status). Whereas athletic contests demonstrated strength and skill (no one ever competed as a hired proxy for someone else), horse racing only really demonstrated wealth.

However, I want to highlight a different situation, one which is often overlooked but which I have been trying recently to bring to greater scholarly notice. This is the picture of horse racing (and equestrian competitions more generally) which one receives from northern Greece – specifically from the region of Thessaly.

'Thessaly was the "horsey" region par excellence in ancient Greece'

Thessalians in the victor records of the panhellenic games

Thessaly was the 'horsey' region par excellence in ancient Greece. When Plato's Socrates wants to tease the young Menon of Pharsalos, in the dialogue that bears his name, he says, 'Menon, the Thessalians have traditionally been famed and admired for their horsemanship and for their wealth; but now, it seems to me, they are admired also for their wisdom' (Socrates goes on to expose Menon's own wisdom as distinctly limited). Thessaly was famous for its cavalry, and horsemanship permeated many aspects of its culture, especially its religion. There is a fundamental environmental reason for this: Thessaly's extensive and well-irrigated plains allowed for the large-scale cultivation of both crops and animals.

Because of the pervasive importance of the horse in Thessalian culture, it is easy to see why the historical novelist Mary Renault, in *The Praise Singer* (1978), has her protagonist, the poet Simonides, remark of an equestrian event at the Isthmian Games: 'The race was won, as happens four times out of five, by one of those young Thessalian lords who ride before they can walk'.

Maybe there is a grain of truth in this. When Thessalians do appear in the victor records of such games it tends to be in the jockey race

rather than the chariot race. This was an activity which did at least mirror the skills of real horsemen; chariots by contrast were never, in historical times, used for practical purposes such as warfare in Greece. Did the Thessalian victors perhaps buck the trend, and ride in the race themselves, rather than getting hirelings to do so for them? We cannot know. But it is undeniable that across all events and all four panhellenic festivals the number of Thessalian victors in the equestrian contests is far lower than we might expect. In the Archaic and Classical periods, Thessalians were more likely to take part in a foot-race or in wrestling, despite their famous skill in horsemanship. Athenians, Spartans and Sicilians all notch up significantly more equestrian victories than Thessalians do.

Also, the great majority of Thessalian equestrian victories come from the third century BC. In a recent conference paper I suggested some specific reasons for the sudden increase, in particular a desire on the part of influential Thessalians to 'network' with the Ptolemies, the rulers of Egypt, who also favoured horse racing at the major festivals. That is a topic for another time. Here I would like to focus on the Classical period, and show that the Thessalians *were* displaying their horses and horsemanship in competitions, but competitions of a very different kind.

Bull-wrestling in Tempe

When the Thessalians start producing coinage in significant quantities in the first half of the fifth century BC, one of the most common types shows a young man on foot, gripping a charging bull by the horns; on the reverse of the coin a horse runs with trailing reins.

There are significant symbolic aspects of the scene, such as the similar appearance of the young man and contemporary depictions of Heracles wrestling the Trojan Bull (for this observation, I am indebted



Silver drachma from Larissa, Thessaly, ca. 470–450 BC. Obverse: young man wrestling bull. Private collection.

to two of my PhD students, Cheryl Gupta and Rosie Mack, who, respectively, noticed the feature and started to investigate it). However, it is clear that a real event is shown. Literary sources – albeit much later – reveal that what is shown is the *taurokathapsia*, a contest in honour of Poseidon in which young men ride after a running bull and then, dismounting, wrestle its head to the ground, while their horse runs on riderless. To call this a race is reductive; though speed was surely part of the test, it was also about agility and courage, and about mastery of both animals, horse and bull. In terms of modern analogies, the *taurokathapsia* feels closer to the rodeos of Texas than to the 3:15 at Kempton Park.

This contest takes us to the core of what it meant to be a Thessalian, and to what horses meant to the Thessalians. First, on the religious side, it commemorated the moment at which Poseidon created the first

horse in the world, Skyphios, by striking the rocks at Tempe in northern Thessaly with his trident (or, in another tradition, by ejaculating on them in his sleep). The fullest account of this myth is in the scholion (an ancient commentary) on Pindar’s *Fourth Pythian Ode*, line 246. Explaining Pindar’s use of the name ‘Poseidon Petraios’, the author recounts the myth of Skyphios and says, ‘They say that a contest is conducted for Poseidon Petraios where the first horse sprang out of the rock’. This myth, to which the contest referred, establishes the Thessalians’ unique claim on the horse through an assertion of primacy. Second, in practical terms, riding after bulls and forcing them into submission would have reflected the pastoral riches and skills for which the region was famous.

The first *taurokathapsia* coins date from a time when the Thessalians were consolidating their shared identity in the decades

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following a period of trauma: the invasion of Greece by Xerxes in 480–479 BC. Thessaly capitulated to Persia, and so lost the good regard of many of her fellow Greeks; at the same time, capitulation did not spare her significant harm, since the overwintering of a substantial Persian army – including cavalry – on her prime grazing and arable land would necessarily have left her natural resources seriously depleted (see Herodotus 8.113). No wonder it was shortly after the Persian withdrawal that the Thessalians started (or started to advertise) the Poseidon festival at which the *taurokathapsia* was performed. They needed to repair their collective self-esteem, and a display of expert horsemanship was the prime way to achieve this.

While the elites of the rest of the Greek world were busy displaying their wealth before panhellenic audiences, the Thessalians were, therefore, competing among fellow Thessalians, in their own homeland, and in contests which displayed locally specific expertise. Hieron of Syracuse financed many chariots and teams, but of course he would never have got his robes dusty by taking the reins himself. By contrast, it is hard to see the young men on the Thessalian coins as lowly employees. The Thessalians had a reputation for thinking it honourable to tend their own horses, even men of high standing, and this surely extended to riding them too. Although direct evidence is lacking, I would be prepared to place a bet on well-born Thessalians having themselves taken part in the *taurokathapsia*. There is a model for this in the equestrian events of the Panathenaia at Athens, another regional festival, though one that sought, with some success, to

attract participants from abroad. One group of the equestrian contests clearly echoed the training and skills of the cavalry, and it has plausibly been suggested that these cannot have been races in which hirelings rode: men of the cavalry would themselves take part and display the skills that were fundamental to their military role within the polis.

On the usefulness of horses

In a now famous quotation, oft-repeated, horses have been called 'the useless animal *par excellence*' in ancient Greece (Sallares 1991: 311). In many regions the cliché holds true. In the typical landscapes of Greece, with natural resources competed for by arable farming and the cultivation of hardy sheep and goats, horses, with their massive alimentary needs and their limited utility, were a luxury few could afford. This perception must mean that equestrian contests, by extension, were useless, except as displays of monetary wealth.

However, I hope to have given a glimpse into another side of things. Horses, for the Thessalians, were fundamental to pastoral and military life, and the *taurokathapsia* in particular reflects that. This was a society that really knew its horses, and for whom they were no mere status symbol. On Thessaly's plains – which stretch away to the horizon, says Livy (*Ab Urbe Condita* 32.4.4), like a vast inland sea – keeping horses for war, herding and transport made perfect practical sense.

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Silver drachma from Larissa, Thessaly, ca. 470–450 BC. Reverse: running horse. Private collection.

Further reading

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Note

Reading PhD student Rosie Mack is developing the theme of horses as more than mere status symbols in her research, with reference to the countless images of horses on Thessalian coins, whose depiction shows an unusual attention to the realities of horses in human society: pregnant mares, mares with foals, young horses still unbacked, war-horses, and a great variety of type and conformation.