

## From the *Palio* to the October Horse: Roman Festivals in Comparative Perspective

Scholars of Roman religion are largely at the mercy of ancient representations of ritual, both written and visual. While we cannot reanimate these representations through direct observation, comparative evidence from contemporary religious festivals may enable us to develop a fuller picture of the social, economic, and political dimensions of civic cult in ancient Rome. This paper takes as a case study the famous *palio* of Siena, a horse-race festival held each summer on 2 July and 16 August.

Twice each summer, ten jockeys representing ten of Siena's seventeen *contrade* (wards) race bareback three times around the Piazza del Campo (for the *palio*, see especially Dundes and Falassi 1975; Logan 1978). The winning horse secures for its *contrada* a silk *palio* (banner) bearing an image of the Virgin Mary. The July *palio* is organized in honor of the festival of the local Madonna of Provenzano while the August *palio* coincides with the feast of the Assumption of the Virgin. Each *palio* is surrounded by feasts, processions, performances, and the seemingly incongruous appearance of the horse in the *contrada* basilica. It is, in other words, an event with rich ritual and cultural elements.

A number of features of the *palio* seem relevant to the study of ancient festival culture. First, while each *palio* cycle is attached to a feast and thus includes a Mass in one of the city's basilicas, this Mass is only one element in a series of ritual actions and celebrations that occur during the festival. In fact, the rituals surrounding the horse race consume far more time and attention than the rituals associated with the basilica. Furthermore, the *palio* is organized through the cooperation of religious and civil authorities. Finally, the rituals associated with the *palio* serve an integrative function by allowing participants to reaffirm their self-identification as members of a particular *contrada*. Social ties are solidified through the planning and enactment

of the various elements of the festival and through the communal drinking and dining that takes place during the period of the *palio*.

In addition to suggesting how the *palio* might illuminate ancient festival culture, this paper will address the limitations of comparisons and cross-cultural study. There are vast differences between ancient Rome and modern Siena, and comparative study certainly risks oversimplification and distortion. We must also contend with the fraught history of comparison in the study of Roman religion. For much of the twentieth century, scholars searching for the Roman equivalent of Christian “faith” concluded that the Romans did not have a religion at all. While their work has been critiqued (rightly, in my view) for its “Christianizing assumptions,” more recent scholarship has tended too far in the opposite direction, placing Roman religion in a position of “analytic isolation” (Ando 2008, xii). This paper argues that we stand to gain important interpretive ground when we compare modern festivals such as the *palio* and Roman festivals such as the October Horse as complex social events.

#### Bibliography:

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