
RIZZI ALESSANDRA. **Ludus/Ludere: Giocare in Italia alla fine del medio evo** Treviso/Roma, Fondazione Benetton/Viella, 1995. Pp. 216. Notes, index. Lire 42,000.

This is the third of the volumes resulting from the Benetton Foundation's involvement in the history of sport, following upon Gherardo Ortalli's *Gioco e giustizia nell'Italia di Comuni and Frederico Rausa's* *L'immagine del vincitore: L'atleta nella statuaria greca dall'età arcaica all'ellenismo*. With a further volume edited by Alessandra Rizzi in preparation on the laws of sport in the Italian communes from the 13th to 16th centuries, there will then be comprehensive coverage of a

ancient world is open to question, but one of its early functions was known to be during sieges, when races were run round the walls of the invested city as a show of strength and confidence. Subsequently the event was brought back home through commemoration and celebration. It is a fascinating and persuasive picture, worthy of its representations and those of similar historical ceremonials that color many Italian towns and cities to this day.

The value of this work for those with a specialist interest in the play of the Middle Ages is self-evident. What, though, of other sport historians? It was a distant time in a far country so far as many will be concerned, dealing with forms of play that are rarely recognizable in terms of modern sporting practice. The author herself has to admit that we know nothing at all beyond the names of numerous games (and that frequently just from decrees banning them) without having any other information about them, an experience familiar to students of medieval play elsewhere. There is, of course, the argument that the history of sport is a seamless garment, that we all have an unending need for the added enlightenment that escape from our immediate narrow concerns can bring, that all who study the sporting past would benefit from any thorough and thoughtful book such as this—which would, incidentally, certainly merit an English translation.

However, more precise arguments also can be made. The whole business of defining sport and play, for instance, which in a broad sense is what the whole of the book is about, has constantly to be a live issue for its historians, and no more so than when some very novel activities are finding their way into the Olympic Games and extending the meanings of the terms. Here the process of definition was a long process, much of it involved in distinguishing gaming from other competitive play. Even today some residual entanglements from the Middle Ages might still be suspected—there is, for example, a stronger tendency in the Mediterranean countries to consider table games more akin to those of the track or the field than is the case in the West. The range of the opposition to gambling is also illuminating as it came under every form of attack—political as a possible cause of riot and disorder, economic as a threat to the town's wealth, and theological as an invention of the devil to undermine Christianity. Some interesting attempts have been made to rank table games according to their balance between skill and chance, with dice at the lowest level and chess at the highest. Even the question of nomenclature is not totally irrelevant to recent times. There is a recognition that one way to avoid bans on individual games is to reinvent them in slightly different form and give them a new name—which has an echo in the suggestion (true or not) that ten-pin bowling was invented to sidestep a ruling against ninepins. At a more fundamental level, the task of accommodating play to a changing environment is a recurring theme of sporting history and well illustrated here in its mutations as the communes' diffuse form of government gradually gave way to a more authoritarian and centralized regime under the ruling knightly or princely families. Cause and effect are no easier to identify here with certainty than in some other sporting changes. On one hand the inherent instability of the commune form of government made the cities particularly sensitive to possible

disorder, some of it probably prompted by aristocratic rivalry for power, as at the Sienna carnival in 1324. On the other hand celebratory sporting festivals were part of the shared fabric of civic life, often with elements such as the palio route incorporated in long-standing laws, and the event as a whole seen as representative of the liberty of its citizens. With functions laid on later from above, the case could often be different. Many were in fact debased or replaced by tourneys as new rulers took over—there are, for instance, contrasting accounts of such happenings at Forlì, joyful and involved in 1455 but declined by 1488 when little enthusiasm could be detected. There are, indeed, many interesting features to be considered from this period. There was the experience of many communities that passed highly restrictive decrees in response to a particularly persuasive preaching friar—Savonarola in Florence the prime but far from the only example—only to ease the restraints within a few years as the mood gradually softened. It was to be a sequence shared by the England of the wandering friars of these centuries and under the Puritan influences 200 years later, and in parts of New England as well as in the old. Also discussed in the book are the tensions that had their various influences on sport and play, tensions between the civic authorities and the churchmen, between what was preached from its pulpits and what took in government. The friars, for example, opposed both conflict sports and races, but the lay authorities of the commune opposed the one but supported the other.

In short this is a very welcome volume from Rizzi. She reports extensively to primary source material, most of it inevitably in medieval Italian or in (untranslated) Latin, and shows a wide range of other reading, all clearly referenced in an admirable index. If it has any shortcomings, these flow in the main from the thematic treatment, which, while being quite justifiable, can make it hard to see what was happening in any individual city at any given time—what was the state of the palio or other such contest, for instance, when gaming was under most local pressure? In this respect Daniel Waley's compact *The Italian City Republics* (1969, and now in its third edition from Longmans, London and New York) makes an excellent companion volume with its more precise attachment to time and place, though what it has to say about sport is no more than marginal. For that the percorso conoscitivo—the knowledgeable journey—mapped and successfully traveled by Alessandra Rizzi is essential.

—DENNIS BRAILSFORD
University of Birmingham