

## Book Reviews

*Ludica, annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*, 2, Treviso, Italy: Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche/Viella, 1996. Pp. 325. Notes, illustrations.

Good academic journals should be full of information, analysis, and debate. Rarely will they be book production masterpieces, nor given the usual constraints on cost, can this be expected. With these things in mind, the first thing that is impressive about *Ludica* is that it is a beautiful volume. It is also a delight to handle, a masterpiece of Italian graphic design, and elegantly presented on paper of high quality. Its sponsor, Benetton, of course is already famous on the Formula 1 motor racing circuit. Benetton's encouragement is bringing to Treviso some of Italy's strongest sports teams, and for the last several years the Benetton Studi Ricerche have been making significant contributions to the study of international sport history and related disciplines. Several important books have already been published; this present work is the second of a planned annual major production. The first volume of *Ludica* (1995) was broad in its interests and appeal, taking in such varied topics as the civilizing process, the body and sport, chess as a metaphor of late medieval society, and sport in colonial Peru. The contents of this second volume admittedly may well at first appear less attractive to the English-speaking reader. It is not that the language barriers themselves are insurmountable—although this is a truly international journal and the articles are in Italian, Spanish, French, and German—where the articles are not in English they usually have an accessible summary. The problem, or indeed the challenge, lies in the choice of the major theme and subtitle of this issue, “Card Games and Playing Cards.”

For virtually the first two-thirds of the volume, however, the contents are quite broad. There is also a final section of about 15 mostly substantial reviews of books in a similar range of languages. The starting point is a study of the Chinese board game Weiqi from the Han dynasty, examining references to it primarily for insights into contemporary thought and attitudes. On a similar track, Caroline Butt's commentary on Caxton's interpretation of chess and its pieces as exemplifications of the social order is one of the several interesting explorations of the symbolism of the game in the Middle Ages. Pierre Arnaud, in “L'Union des Sociétés Françaises de Sports Athletiques et la construction de l'espace sportif dans la France métropolitaine (1887-1897),” produces one of the meticulous surveys for which French records seem peculiarly and valuably equipped. There are contrasts in both geography and social class in the papers on vigorous exercise by Claudio Azzara and Vincente Navarro Adelantado. The first paper is an account of an equestrian sport played exclusively by members of the Byzantine royal family

and their close companions. Sticks were used to hit a ball about the size of an apple, a feature similar to polo, which arose between the tenth and twelfth centuries; a strong case can be made that this equestrian sport enjoyed by the Byzantine royal family is the most ancient of organized team games. The survey by Vincente Navarro is, for the most part, much more plebeian. It deals with traditional sports of the Canaries, which is particularly interesting because of the islands' relative isolation.

It is at this point in the book that attention turns firmly to playing cards and thus presents problems to a reviewer with a different historical specialization. The opening contributions on the manufacture of playing cards in the court at Ferrara do strike a chord, however, because they provide more factual information of the production and costs of sporting artifacts in Britain before the nineteenth century than is known. A failure to fully appreciate the values of what are undoubtedly excellent and informative articles in the rest of the section does not, perhaps, rest solely on personal prejudice. It is reasonable to assert that card playing has never figured as prominently among the games and amusements of the English-speaking world as (judging from its prominence in their recreational histories) it has in the Latin countries. This does, of course, raise challenging questions that evade easy answers. Issues such as those raised in *Ludica 2* should certainly be thought-provoking rather than off-putting. All in all, this is an excellent annual journal that ought certainly to grace the shelves of every academic library.

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