

THEY ARRIVED WITH HORSES

NAPLES: THE CAPITAL OF THE CLASSICAL ART OF EQUITATION



Napolitaine is one of Maresca's top stallions. The horse is trained to pull a buggy and is often used in breed shows and demonstrations around Italy.

*Cecile Zahorka
THE PIXEL NOMAD*

BY JESS MORTON

In 600 BC, when the Etruscans first populated the fertile countryside around Capua, a city 15 miles north of Naples, they arrived with horses. As plains-dwellers, Ancient Etruscans relied on equids to play an important role in their society. The remains of horse skeletons recovered from settlements in the area alludes to their place as elite animals used for racing, war, and leisure.

Farther south on the Italian coast, Ancient Greek cities of Spartan and Aegean colonies had flourished, creating centers of Hellenic culture which served as cultural mixing

pots for the exchange of ideas on horsemanship between the Etruscans, Romans, and other civilizations. In the now famous treatises of Xenophon, writers of Greek horsemanship would lay the foundations for cavalry training in Etruria, Greece, and Ancient Rome.

Later, when the Romans conquered the entire area, their Berber and Turkish stallions mixed with the local Etruscan and Greek mares, creating a larger, stronger cavalry mount that would spread throughout Roman

territories. The equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is one of the most important remaining artifacts of Roman antiquity. The stallion that Aurelius is riding has a convex or Roman profile¹, strong, muscular haunches, and a high-stepping gait—traits that were conserved by breeders for centuries afterwards.

Courageous and intelligent, the Neapolitan Horse evolved. By the 15th century, they were powerful warhorses capable of withstanding the demands of difficult training and high school movements thanks to their natural ability, temperament, and spirit.

THE EQUESTRIAN RENAISSANCE STARTED IN ITALY

After the fall of the Ancient Greek and Roman Empires, the art of equitation was lost for nearly 2,000 years. Fortunately, principles preserved in ancient Greek scripts, like *On Horsemanship* by the Greek general Xenophon, were rediscovered during the Renaissance by Italian scholars.

These ancient texts inspired an important period of enlightenment that radically reshaped the treatment of horses throughout Europe. The Renaissance ideal of art imitating nature specifically applied to the art of horsemanship and the horse, itself, which had been ridden as a beast of burden during the medieval period. Suddenly, the animal was revered as a living piece of art.

The first equestrian academy in Europe was established in Naples in 1530 by Federico Grisone. The Neapolitan

¹ A Roman nose or convex profile on a horse is when there is a bump or a rise somewhere on the part that falls between the horse's forehead and nostrils.



An old drawing, circa 1648, of a collection of horses found in Europe at that time.



Napole, a handsome gelding owned by a young man from Paestum, a former Magna Grecia city

nobleman had studied under Cola Pagano, one of Aragonese King Ferrante's most illustrious horsemen, and he famously combined medieval cavalry techniques with ancient Greek theories.

He published the first treatise on classical horsemanship—*Ordini di cavalcare* (Rules of Riding)—in 1550, which was an international bestseller throughout Europe. Between 1550 and 1623, there were 20 editions printed in Italian, 15 translations in French, six in English, seven in German, and one in Spanish.

Grisone started a revolution in horsemanship that rippled throughout Europe. Naples was soon considered the greatest city in the world to learn the classical art of equitation. Soon, every European court that could afford it was sending their young men to Naples to study under classical masters like Grisono, Pignatelli, and Battista. After a stay that usually began as a teenager and lasted one or two years, the young men returned to their courts demonstrating poise in the saddle, good judgement, quick-wittedness, determination, and stoicism—all necessary skills for a member of the gentry to succeed in life.

GIOSTRE E CAVALIERI (JOUSTING AND KNIGHTS)

The equestrian culture of Naples was celebrated with parades on horseback through the city streets for special occasions such as weddings, birth, and military triumphs. The horse had become the most important symbol, and there was never a public ceremony that did not portray the animal in a position of glory.

Between the 15th and 17th centuries, extravagant equestrian shows became popular in the courts of Italy. These events started out as imitations of ancient Roman triumphs and quickly spread around Europe. Performances usually included a parade followed by a mounted horseback fight in choreographed form. The events provided riders the opportunity to demonstrate their self-control, their poise, and the battle-readiness of their horses. They performed movements such as zigzag half passes, canter pirouettes, and geometrical formations with music, poetry, and costumes.

During the Renaissance and Baroque periods, Naples was the epicenter of an important cultural transformation. Classical Equitation reached a level of extreme refinement, and soon, all European courts that could afford it had their own Italian horsemen and horses imported from the prestigious Neapolitan stud farms.

HORSES BUILT TO PERFORM

The horses most suitable to perform classical exercises were strong, spirited, and well-balanced with excellent conformation. For this, Frederico Grisone chose to use Neapolitan horses in his academy.



Persano horses graze outside the royal palace of Carditello, once a famous Neapolitan horse stud farm owned by Charles of Bourbon.

Neapolitan horses were especially suitable for performing the *haute école*, or airs, above the ground, which are courageous movements designed for warfare combined with highly-controlled, refined training techniques. Horse and rider training generally took place in an indoor *manège*, or riding hall, where the horse was taught everything from the basics all the way up to the *haute école*—movements in which the horse rears up (*Jevade*), jumps up and kicks out (*capriole*), and even jumps on its hind legs (*courbette*).

Neapolitan horses were often used as a means of acquiring diplomatic leverage. An alliance between two princes or counts could be built on a shared interest in fine horses, and Naples certainly possessed a much sought-after product: the studs were widely acclaimed as among the best in Europe.

Horses were often gifted or traded to royalty. Henry VIII imported many Neapolitan horses to improve his depleted cavalry bloodlines, and Neapolitan horses contributed to many prestigious royal breeds in England, Spain, Denmark, and Germany.

The quality of the horses bred in Naples is discussed by Boccaccio in *The Decameron*, when he discusses the misadventures of a horse merchant, Andreuccio da Perugia, who visited the city of Naples because of its exceptional horse breeding.

Pasquale Caracciolo, a Neapolitan nobleman who wrote a famous treatise on horses and horsemanship, enthusiastically described the Neapolitan horse:



Sibilla, one of Maresca's finest mares, is held in high regard by his breeder. The branding is a special mark just for Neapolitan horses.

But if among all horses, those who are adorned with all the qualities and suitable for every kind of exercise are very rare, only the Neapolitans are worthy of such praise, because they are excellent at walking, in performing the passage, in trotting and cantering, as well as in combat, vaulting and hunting; they are very strong and of remarkable lightness, with a clever mind and of great courage; they have a steady head, a pleasant mouth and an amazing obedience to the bridle. Finally, they are so docile and so skilled, that when ridden by a good rider they move to the rhythm and nearly dance.

The annexation of the Bourbon provinces by the Savoy monarchy in 1860 marked the end of the Neapolitan horse. The Italian government dispersed the last of the breeding studs established by Bourbon King Charles III due to perceived ties with the former rulers.

Some say the Neapolitan horse went extinct by the end of the 19th century while others claim they can still be found in other breeds in Italy.

SEARCHING FOR GALLOPING GHOSTS: THE STORY OF GIUSEPPE MARESCA

Giuseppe Maresca, a coffee merchant from Sorrento, learned about the Neapolitan horse as a teenager traveling through Brazil with his father in the 1970s. A Brazilian coffee plantation owner showed him an old painting over lunch and asked him to find him a living example of the breed to add to his private collection of horses.

This prompted the young Maresca to travel throughout Europe searching for any trace of the extinct Neapolitan horse. After trawling through old Lipizzaner breeding registries in Rome, he was pointed toward Eastern Europe, where many dark Neapolitan horses had been exported. In Serbia, which was in the middle of a violent war, he managed to find a black and white photo of a horse that had belonged to General Tito Marshal. The picture was of a horse said to be a descendant of one of the last Neapolitan stallions exported by the Austrians.

The young coffee merchant and his Serbian translator searched through the war-torn countryside until they came upon a half-destroyed farmhouse. Inside was 'Il Vecchio,' the very stallion Maresca had searched half of Europe for. The stallion was already advanced in age, but Maresca successfully brought him back to his home in Sorrento where he produced a foal from one of the broodmares that he had acquired from Capua.

Il Vecchio died shortly after his arrival in Italy much to the dismay of his new owner, but he produced an heir before he passed on, which became the founding stallion for Maresca's Neapolitan Horse. The Neapolitan breed was officially recognized by Italy's Ministry of Agriculture in 2002 and has its own breed registry. Currently, there are fewer than 50 Neapolitan horses in the world. Two of them have been exported to the United States. One is in Virginia, and the other is in Texas.

Formalized studbooks and registries are a fairly recent development in the world of horses—mostly developed in the past century. During the Renaissance, the term *razze* was better described as a certain type of horse, particularly the appropriateness of a horse to a specific environment and riding style of the time. Maresca's line of horses could be considered his own private *razze* of the now extinct Neapolitan breed. His collection of horses bear such a strong semblance to those in Renaissance paintings that these majestic horses thought to be extinct can once again graze the plains of Capua and prance through the crowded streets of Naples.

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The photos are all by French/German photographer Cecile Zahorka from www.thepixelnomad.com



Persano horses—a descendant of the Neapolitan horse—graze near Capua.