

Ancient Greek Horses & their Depictions in Greek Art

Horses in Greece

- In art they were used to represent wealth & power, and were often the companions of Ancient Greek heroes & Gods
- Due to their high cost horses were owned by ancient greek cavalry & the second highest social class called “Hippeis”
 - Hippeis → one who owned a horse, typically greek cavalry or chariot drivers, one with more than 300 medimnoi for yearly income
- Horses were sometimes used in warfare as early as 1600-1100 BCE to pull chariots and carry riders, however were not widely used until 356-323 BCE during the rule of Alexander the Great
- Horses were used in chariot races during funeral games & later in olympic games on courses called hippodromes
 - Much like today, the owner/breeder of the horse would get credited for an olympic win rather than the one driving the chariot
 - This is the reason why the spartan princess Kyniska was credited as the first woman to win the 4 horse chariot race despite not being allowed to directly compete, as she was the breeder & owner of the horses
 - This is how Spartan princess Kyniska was named the first female winner of the four-horse chariot race despite not directly competing
 - Hippodrome → “horse course”, an ancient greek race track featuring very tight turns used for horse racing

Modern Breeds

- There are 8 breeds (mostly) remaining today with ties to ancient greek horses
 - Pindos pony → a pony used for riding & driving, in 2002 there was around 500 left
 - Andravida horse → light draft horse, most today originate from a crossbreed with the Selle Français stallion Calin de Nanteuil in the 1990s, and have since been crossed with many other breeds, they are believed to have descended from the Ancient Greek cavalry horses & were used for carting and transportation during peace
 - Peneia pony → gaited horse (unique gait/movement), used for draftwork, riding, & jumping
 - Zante horse
 - Kreta pony → originated from the isle of crete in the 17th century, NOT an ancient breed, currently used for light agriculture work & racing, they are endangered with about 100 individuals
 - Thessalia pony → pony breed originated from Thessaly, this is the breed that Alexander the Great's horse Bucephalus is believed to be
 - Skyros pony → semi-feral endangered breed frequently used for agriculture work, a rise in agriculture machinery in the 1960s left this already endangered breed with lower numbers
 - Rodope pony

- Many of these breeds have undergone conservation efforts by cross breeding them with modern draft & working breeds, but most individual populations are in the low hundreds for population
- Many of these horses & ponies are smaller than those seen in modern disciplines like racing or jumping
 - This is thought to be a reason why many horses in Greek art are at/around the height of the people in the same pieces

Famous Greek Horses

- **Balius & Xanthus** - 2 immortal horses used by Achilles during the trojan war gifted by Peleus
 - Mentioned in the Iliad as the wept on the battlefield after Patroclus' death,
 - Xanthus was briefly given the ability to speak by Hera and he prophesied the death of Achilles
 - Offspring of the harpy Podarge & the west wind Zephyrus
- **Hippocampus** - half horse half fish used by Poseidon to pull his chariot
- **Mares of Diomedes/Thrace** - flesh eating mares belonging to Diomedes of Thrace & the 8th of Heracles 12 labors
- **Pegasus** - Winged horse ridden by hero Bellerophon (not Her)
 - When Zeus sends a gadfly to sting Pegasus when Bellerophon attempts to ride him to Olympus, Pegasus bucks causing Bellerophon to fall to his death
- **Bucephalus** - horse of Alexander the Great, Thessalian
 - The name "Bucephalus" means "Ox-headed" and was given due to a brand on the horse

Art Mediums

- Coins → horses depicted on coins were often winners or record holders at the Olympic games in chariot or racing classes
- Pottery → depicted in both red figure & black figure pottery often showing people riding or working with horses,
- Pyxides → containers for personal objects like jewelry
- Phiale → a ritual bowl used for libation, ritual pouring
 - This (& the pyxides) depicts a Quadriga, or 4 horse chariot
 - A 2 horse chariot is called a Biga
- Statuette → statuettes of horses where a way to show wealth, and have been found in abundance around gravesites

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