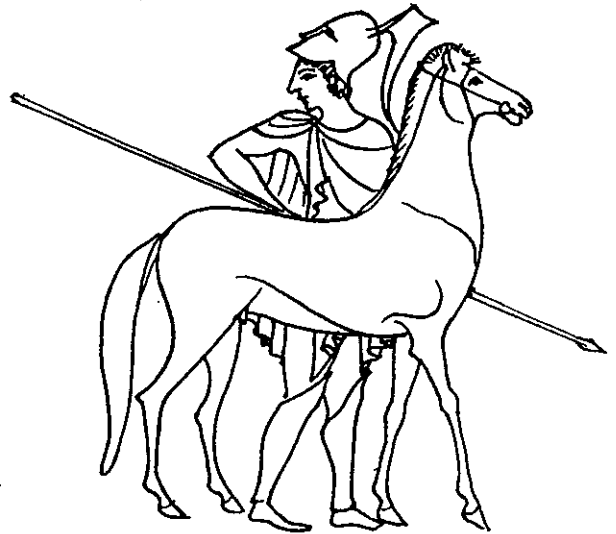


# A short gallop with Homer's horses

Carola Scupham

'Like a stallion who breaks his halter ... and gallops off across the fields in triumph... He tosses up his head; his mane flies back along his shoulders; he knows how beautiful he is' - one of Homer's liveliest similes, a vivid image of energy and spirit. So where did this splendid creature come from?

Horses are generally thought to have arrived in Greece with the earliest Achaeans, on their nomadic travels from the Northern steppes. The ancient words (*hippos*, *equus*, Sanskrit *asvas*, Gothic *aihus*) are Indo-European and it seems that the Mediterranean lands of Crete and Egypt knew no horses in the time of their greatness. It is in Greece that the horse makes its first mythical appearance, too: the Centaur, that wild, passionate, but sensitive creature - for Cheiron taught music and medicine, as well as the fiercer arts - and the glorious winged Pegasus. To those nomadic people, as to the Mongol, Arab, or Red Indian tribes, horse and man became one - a living



*Youth with a horse, after Epiktetos.*



*Pegasus, from a small fifth-century pot called an askos.*

Centaur. Like Poseidon their master, horses are swift, beautiful, wild, and spirited. And since they were also, in the rough and rocky land of Greece, expensive to keep, they became symbols of heroic status and valour into classical times. John Boardman's attractive theory links the - perhaps - 192 horsemen of the Parthenon frieze with the heroised dead of Marathon. And the cavalry of Athens, while never of great tactical importance, had high aristocratic cachet. Greek horses were not very large, however, and for a long period were used only to draw chariots, rather than to ride. Thus the Olympic chariot race was thought of as central to the Games, while riding came later, and never had the same excitement.

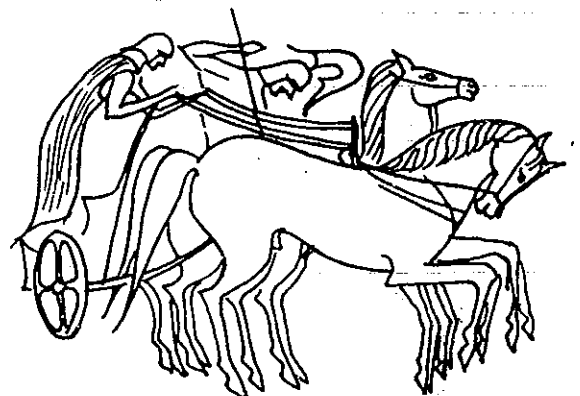
## From realism to symbolism

In Homer's imagined Trojan age, cavalry has no part: the chariot is all. For hard slog, mules and bullocks are used, but in battle, men and horses fight and die together. Both the Horse-taming Trojans and the Horse-breeding Argives have chariots, to bear men swiftly into battle, and even more swiftly away when necessary - drawn by horses like Agamemnon's: 'Their breasts were flecked with foam, and their bellies grey with dust, as they carried the wounded king away from the fighting.' (Indeed, they were glad of this job, not unnaturally: 'They flew eagerly on towards the hollow ships with willing hearts.') The horses, however, are not just part of the fighting

machine of the *Iliad* - they are much more. Just as the dog, faithful companion and guardian of the home, takes its place in the more domestic context of the *Odyssey*, a living emblem of loyalty and security, so in the *Iliad* - the poem of the tragedy of war - the horse has a closer and more emotional bond with man than that of a mere chariot-puller.

From the beginning, when Homer gives pride of place to the horses of Admetus, to the last words of the poem - 'Hector, Tamer of Horses' - they share men's fears and triumphs, sorrows and dangers. The horses remain patiently with the Trojans by the wall throughout the starlit night, 'munching their white barley and waiting for the throned dawn'; they shudder with the men at the sound of Achilles' war-cry; they lead the funeral procession for Patroclus.

The capture of horses, too, makes a particularly dramatic exploit. Diomedes urges Sthenelus to seize the steeds of Aeneas, the horses of Tros, 'the best of all the horses that exist under the sun', and of course the kidnapping of the newly recruited horses of Rhesus in Book 10 makes an exciting, though bloodthirsty, episode. When Dolon, teeth chattering, and white with fear, confesses that he has been promised - what cheek! - the horses of



*A four-horse chariot in the trojan war, from a Chalcidian vase c.540 B.C.*

Achilles as reward for his spying, Odysseus takes the hint; Dolon then whets his appetite: Rhesus' horses are 'the finest I have seen, and the largest - whiter than snow, and like the winds when they run'. And on his return, Odysseus and his captives are acclaimed by Nestor - 'Did some god meet you and give them to you? They shine like the sun itself.' This was a feat well calculated to revive Greek confidence at a moment of gloom.

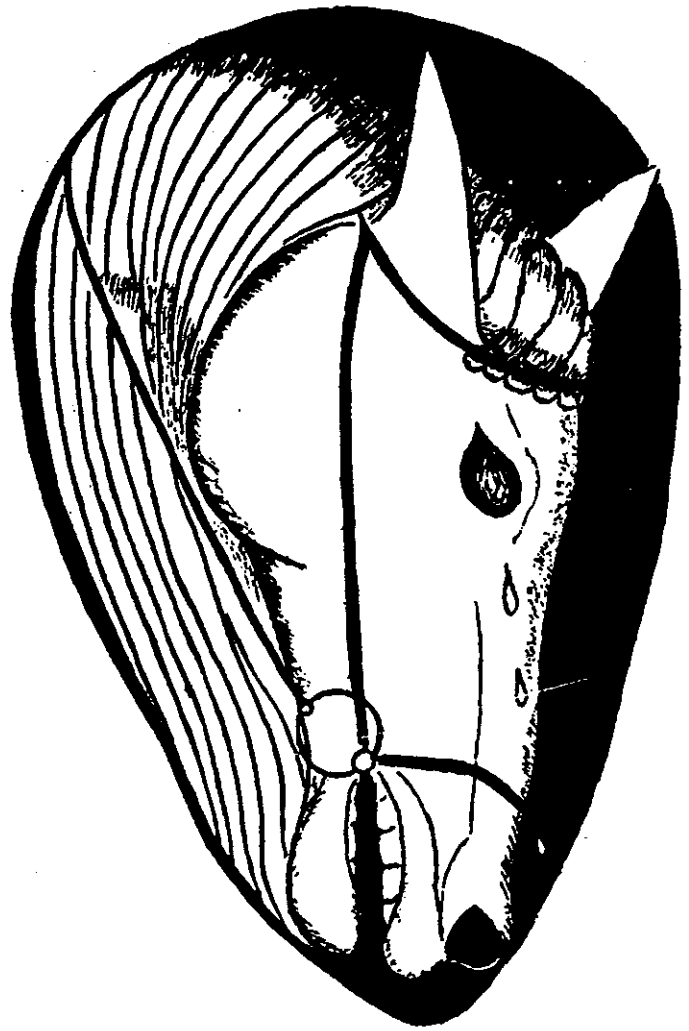
### Achilles' horses

Close as other men's horses are to their hearts, however, there is surely an even more striking relationship between Achilles and his horses, Xanthus and Balius - Chestnut and Dapple - the wind-swift offspring of the Storm-Mare and the West Wind. Like him, they are swift and beautiful, of divine parentage; like him too they are partnered with a mortal - Pedasus, 'Leaper', is their Patroclus. Pedasus is struck and killed by Sarpedon, not long before Patroclus himself falls to Hector; this is the only individual horse's death in the poem, and a sharp reminder of mortality. And when Patroclus is killed, long before Achilles hears the news, Xanthus and Balius stand weeping, and will not move, 'like a grave-stone set on the mound of a dead man or woman' (perhaps we think of Patroclus' own mound), and disfigure their thick manes with tears; Achilles too will soon lie sprawling in the dust, tearing and soiling his own auburn hair (we are told his hair is *xanthé*, the same colour as his horse). Zeus pities them for their share in the human tragedy, and gives them fresh life and energy to continue, just as Achilles himself will feel renewed eagerness and zest for battle - even without breakfast - in Book 19. These same horses, when they are at last yoked for Achilles, are so close to him that they know, like Thetis and the dying Hector, what is in store for him. In one of the strangest passages of the poem, Xanthus speaks, bowing his head in grief, of Achilles' own death. But Achilles answers angrily. He knows he will die soon - that only makes him keener to 'go for it'.

Before we leave Achilles and his horses, we can see them in a more relaxed and cheerful setting, at the races. Achilles is here at his best, without rancour or injured pride, for the moment; generous, warm-hearted, and with a natural authority which can easily subdue the quarrels of others. His own horses would of course win, being the best of all. They will not compete, however; they are still grieving for Patroclus, whose gentle care for them is affectionately recalled. But the horses that do enter have already been introduced earlier in the story, and are good friends of their masters. 'Each man calls to his own horses', and they respond eagerly, 'taking their masters' threats to heart'. Even after the race, a horse is at issue. The second prize is a fine mare, 'six years old, and with a little mule in her belly'. She gets handed first to Eumelus, then to Antilochus, then to Menelaus, then to Antilochus again - confusing for the poor creature. The arguments are curiously reminiscent of those over the captive girls in Book 1 - in fact the whole of Book 23, with its eager strife, its prizes for glory, its sudden quarrels and reconciliations, is a microcosm of the *Iliad* itself.

How closely, then, the horses' lives are interwoven with those of their owners. And how clear it is that Homer's breadth of vision goes far beyond a narrow concern with man alone, encompassing wind and weather, birds and beasts, and most of all, his faithful comrade, the horse.

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*Xanthus mourning, from Ernest Moss. The Iliad for Children.*

## Virgil Translation Competition Result

This was a very difficult one to judge. There were a lot of good versions in strongly contrasting styles. We liked those by Andrew Peacock (King Edward VI School, Southampton); Jonathan Hamston (Hazelwick School); A. Kuartenc and A. Roberts (Eton College); Ben Liddiard, Paul Sheridan and Ian Speakman (John Fisher School); and Melanie Peart (Teesside High School, Eaglescliffe). The winner by a short head was Duncan Belser (from Columbia, South Carolina): his version appears elsewhere in this number of *Omnibus*.