

The Horse and the Hero: Bucephalus and Alexander in Art, History, and Legend

I argue that a common quality underlies the depiction of Alexander's horse Bucephalus in Hellenistic art, Plutarch, Arrian, and the *Greek Alexander Romance*. Throughout these works from disparate periods, the horse assimilates aspects of his master's character. He adopts Alexander's vigor, courage, and divinity, but so too his stubbornness and quick temper. By focusing on this special connection between horse and master, we gain insight into an important, hitherto ignored means of characterization employed throughout the Alexander tradition. Earlier studies of Bucephalus have tended not to consider what the horse reveals about his master. For example, A.R. Anderson wrote about the Bucephalus legend without exploring its symbolism or importance for Alexander's character. Collomia Charles, while she offers a valuable collection of source material and explores how Alexander himself may have used Bucephalus as an aspect of his self-presentation, does not consider how later representations of the horse are designed to throw light on his master.

Our earliest attestation of the characterization of Alexander through his mount is in Hellenistic art, where it is used to promote Alexander's image as strong, vigorous, and possessing a special connection with the divine. Pollitt 1986, Stewart 1993, and Miller 2004 offer invaluable treatments of the visual evidence. In art, representations of Bucephalus are pure propaganda, redounding to the credit of Alexander. This art spurred Arrian and Plutarch to realize that Bucephalus can be used to comment on the character of Alexander, but they do so in a more nuanced fashion. In Arrian and Plutarch, Bucephalus can also represent the darker, savage side of Alexander's character, if sometimes only to offer his master an opportunity to triumph over it. As Whitmarsh 2002 and Hamilton 1969 observe, Plutarch's *Life of Alexander* links Bucephalus' wild spirit (θυμός) to that of the Macedonian king. This same θυμός emerges

later in Plutarch's *Life* as the spur for such disreputable deeds as the murder of Black Cleitus. After Alexander flies into a drunken rage, he behaves for a moment more like a raging Macedonian warhorse than the educated Greek philosopher portrayed elsewhere in the *Life*.

The connection between horse and rider is strongest in the *Romance*. Sometimes they even share an appearance so fierce and unique that it verges on the monstrous. Two Bucephalus episodes that emerge repeatedly in literary portrayals of Alexander's life and legend show the characterization of hero through horse: Alexander's taming of the horse and the death of either horse or rider. There are particularly vivid instances of both in the 8th-century Recension ε of the *Romance*.¹ When Alexander first meets Bucephalus in the earlier Recension α, the horse is a man-eater (ἀνθρωποφάγος, *Historia Alexandri Magni* 1.17.3 Kroll). In ε, Philip is told that a horse has been born (γεγένηται) in his stables that excels Pegasus in beauty (τῷ μὲν κάλλει ὑπὲρ τὸν Πήγασον, *Vita Alexandri regis Macedonium* 4.1 Trumpf). The steed is both strangely noble and fiercely savage. The late recensions ε and γ are also the only versions of the *Romance* in which Bucephalus lives to avenge his master's death: recognizing Alexander's killer, the bullheaded horse runs headlong into a crowd and tears the assassin apart. Bits of gore fall to the ground like snow (*Vita Alexandri regis Macedonum* 46.4 Trumpf). The steed demonstrates speed and impetuous decisiveness in attacking the enemy, just as Alexander did in his numerous battles. The shift in representation of Bucephalus from the earlier to the later recensions shows the tradition realizing more fully the potential for using Bucephalus as an Alexander surrogate.

Bucephalus is both a literal and literary vehicle. Sometimes Alexander emerges positively from comparison with his steed, taking on the superhuman strength and dynamism of an unusually spirited horse. Often, however, the effect produced is more ambiguous, serving also to

¹ Cary 1956 provides an excellent summation of the textual history of the *Romance*.

hint at the beastly in Alexander's nature, especially in the form of his anger. In an echo of the language used of Bucephalus, the Macedonian's anger is often described by the words θυμός and ὀργή. By sharing Bucephalus' traits, Alexander partakes of both animalistic ferocity and transcendent nobility.

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