CAROLYN WILLEKES

THE HORSE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

From Bucephalus to the Hippodrome

I.B. TAURIS

CAROLYN WILLEKES holds degrees in classical studies from the University of Calgary and the University of Guelph. Her recent publications include 'Horse Racing and Chariot Racing', co-authored with Sinclair Bell, in *The Oxford Handbook of Animals in Classical Thought and Life* (2013), and 'Equine Aspects of Alexander the Great's Macedonian Cavalry', in *Greece, Macedon and Persia: Studies in Social, Political and Military History* (2015).

'*The Horse in the Ancient World* is aimed at a broad audience. Its unusual strength lies in Carolyn Willekes' attractive combination of academic expertise with considerable practical experience. This has produced a work of sound scholarship which is also accessible to the general reader. It should be an invaluable companion to classical specialists and equine enthusiasts alike; it is of good quality, and fills a gap in the current literature.'

IAIN G. SPENCE, former Associate Professor of Classics and Ancient History, University of New England, New South Wales, author of *The Cavalry of Classical Greece: A Social and Military History*

'Carolyn Willekes' book is a most welcome addition to a growing list of publications devoted to ancient equestrian and cavalry studies. It is a richly informative work, giving ample evidence of the author's long personal experience with horses and equestrian activity. Throughout her book, Willekes stresses the close relationship between humans and horses since the domestication of the latter in the fourth millennium BCE. Her chapters on the evolution of the horse and horse riding, and her clear categorization of horse types, are clear, concise and persuasive. Willekes' book should appeal to an audience far broader than just horse enthusiasts: she covers the use of the horse in war; in art (for example, offering a provocative interpretation of the Parthenon frieze); and in sports. She also includes lengthy translated excerpts of ancient Greek and Roman writers on what we would call "equine conformation". All in all, this is an enjoyable, well-researched and nicely balanced introduction to the subject.'

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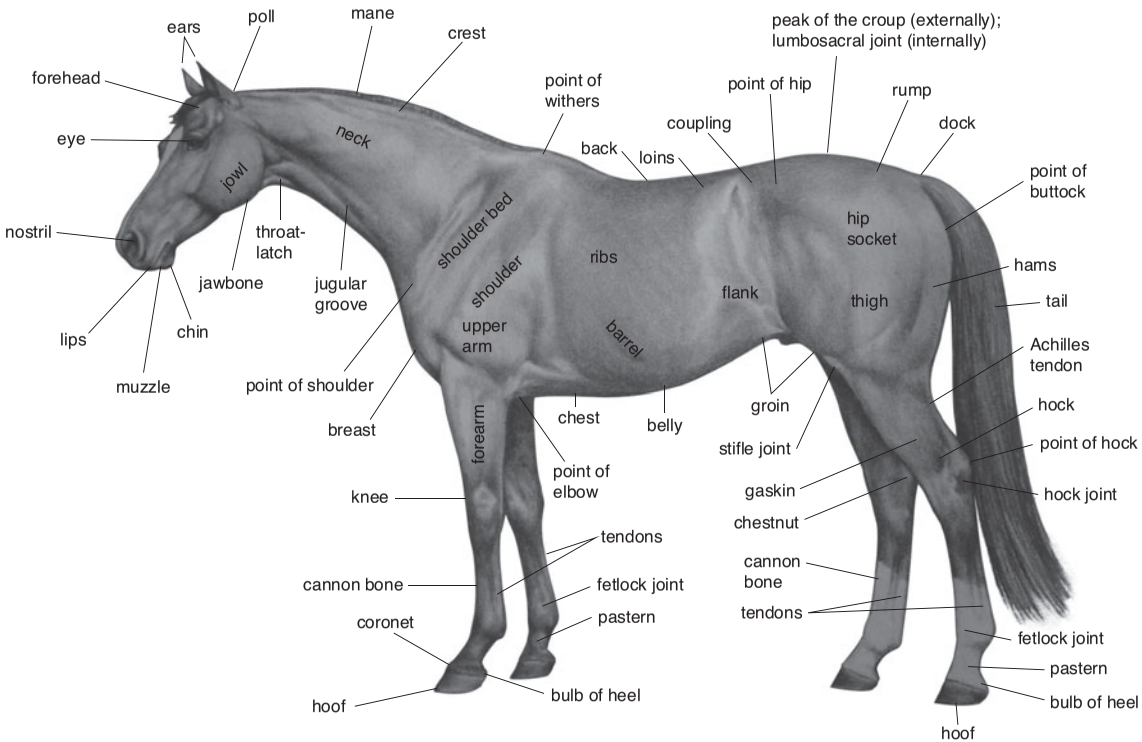

FIGURE 0.1 The anatomy of the horse.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The horse is a remarkable animal and we owe him a great debt. Although dogs are traditionally considered to be our best friends, it is upon the back of a horse that human history was written. I have been blessed with the opportunity to meet extraordinary horsemen from all over the world – thank you for sharing your knowledge and love of all things *Equus* with me. I am ever so grateful to the many horses in my life. They are not only the inspiration for my work, but are also my companions, mentors, therapists and confidants.

This book has been a true labour of love. I consider myself immensely lucky in having been able to combine my two great passions in life – horses and ancient history – with my research and work. It has not been an easy road by any means, but it is one I have trodden with much determination. This would not have been possible without the unwavering support of my parents, who have stood firmly behind me throughout my adventures in graduate school and continue to do so with my academic career. Many thanks to my stalwart graduate supervisor, Waldemar Heckel, who braved cavalry charges and all things equine in the course of my dissertation. His advice, open-mindedness and confidence in my work gave me the confidence to pursue this topic, even if it was from a rather unorthodox angle at times. Thank you also to the numerous colleagues and friends who have encouraged and critiqued my research over the years; I will be forever grateful for your advice and honesty.

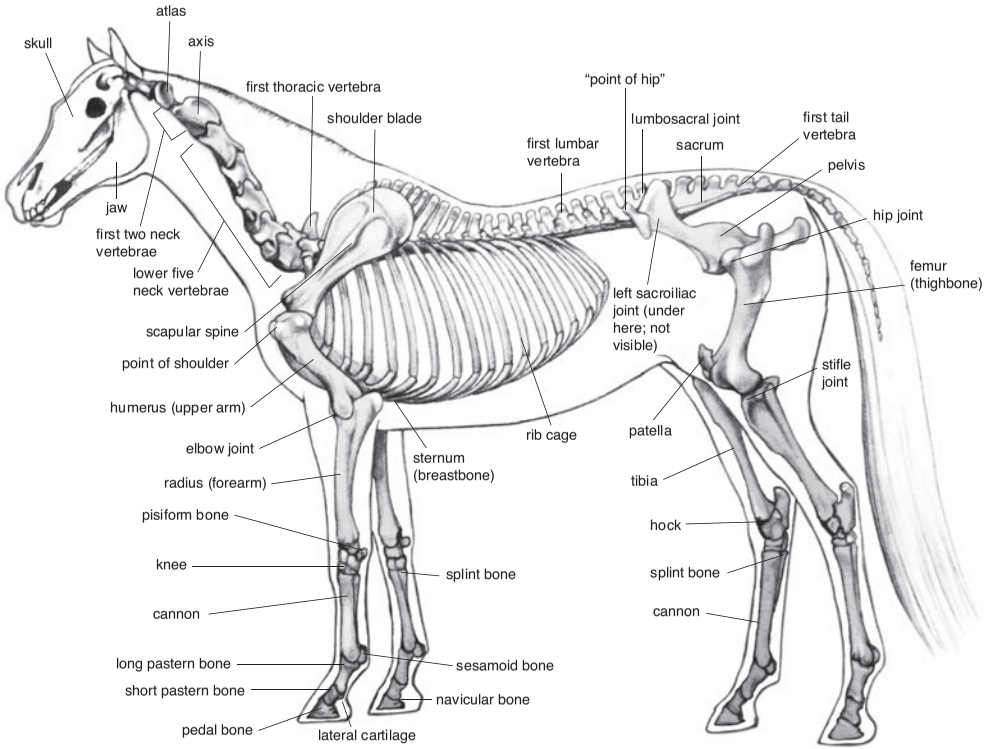

FIGURE 0.2 The equine skeleton.

INTRODUCTION

HORSES AND HUMANS

The horse evokes powerful symbolism. He represents wealth, prestige and conquest. His image graces the emblems of high-octane sports cars like Ferrari, Porsche and Mustang. Royal families own stables full of priceless, purebred horses often found competing on the polo field, racetrack and in the Olympic disciplines of dressage, eventing and show jumping. Horses can be found with starring roles in celebrations and memorials. Indeed, it is almost impossible to imagine a world without the horse. Budiansky, however, in his book *The Nature of Horses* has a chapter entitled 'The Improbability of the Horse' in which he argues that the horse would have gone extinct had it not been domesticated.[1] To most people this might seem a rather far-fetched idea. After all, there are millions of horses all over the world today. In fact, there are more horses on the planet now than there ever have been before. Budiansky, however, is not off the mark with his assessment. One need only look to the non-domesticated relatives of the horse to see the truth in his statement. The quagga, tarpan and Syrian wild ass are extinct; Grevy's zebra is a threatened species; the Mountain zebra, Persian onager and Asiatic wild asses are endangered. The Przewalski horse went extinct in the wild in the 1960s and survived only in zoos through intensive conservation practices. Although the Przewalski horse has been re-released onto reserves in Mongolia, the species is still critically endangered. History makes it clear, then, that domestic equids have thrived while their wild counterparts have suffered (Fig. 0.3).

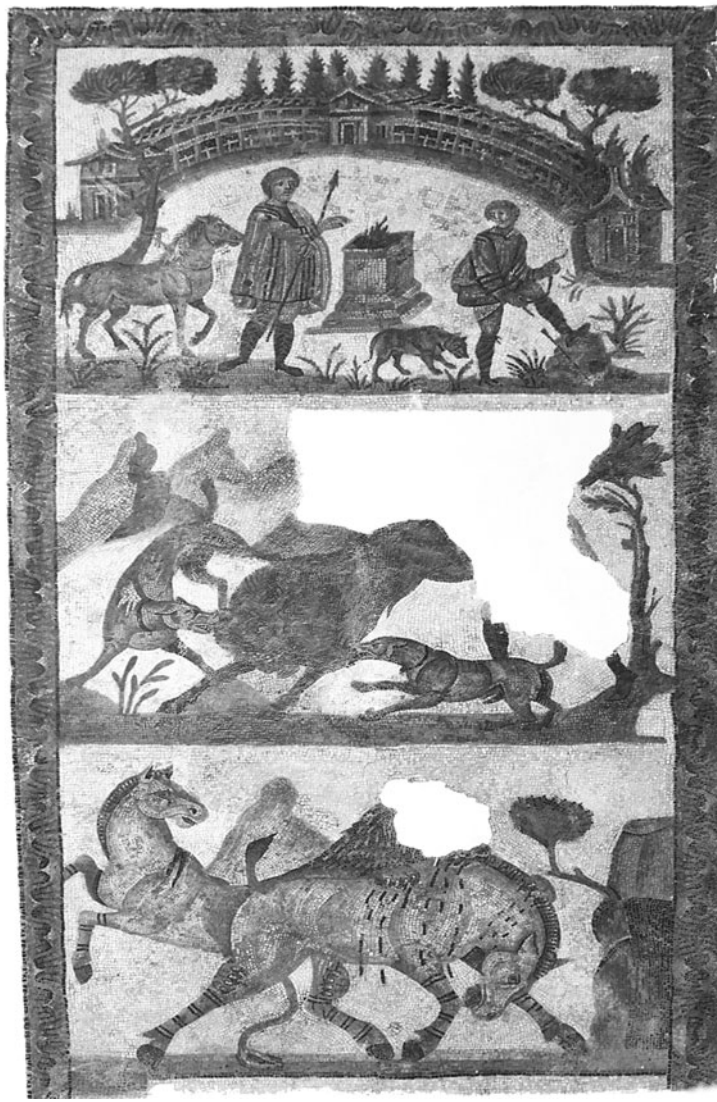

FIGURE 0.3 An onager hunt as depicted on a mosaic from Henchir Toungar, *c.*240 CE.

The domestication of the horse sometime in the fourth millennium BCE altered the future not only of equines, but of humans as well. The horse turned out to be a pretty useful animal.

Cultural, technological and military evolution would have been much slower without them as humans plodded along on donkey-back or in their ox-carts. It is safe to say that the horse very quickly entrenched himself as an essential part of the human world. To understand how firmly equines have rooted themselves in the human psyche we need only look at the history of the horse after the industrial revolution. With the increasing mechanization of transportation, warfare and labour, it was commonly thought that the horse would disappear as he no longer served any practical function and was, at the end of the day, expensive to maintain. The horse remained resilient and re-invented himself. No longer a 'practical' tool, he became an athlete, companion and pet.[2] Horses competing at the top echelons of their sports can be worth millions of dollars and live lives of pampered luxury attended by a retinue of grooms, veterinarians, massage therapists, physiotherapists and chiropractors. Then there is the chubby, backyard pony – part lawnmower, babysitter, therapist and teacher. One might be tempted to assume that the horse–human relationship – this affectionate, personal bond between equine and human – is a relatively modern development. If we turn to the historical record, however, it becomes clear that this emotional attachment is nothing new.

Human fixation or fascination with the horse appears in full force with the Paleolithic cave art from southern France, northern Spain and northern Portugal. These dramatic, often larger than life, murals are found deep inside labyrinthine passages at places like Altamira, Lascaux and Chauvet. They depict a variety of animals including bison, deer, rhinoceroses, mammoths, lions and, of course, horses. This veritable zoo is made up of *wild* animals. The only representations of human–animal interactions are found in hunting contexts. Yet, even in this period the horse is the most prevalent species on display, appearing with a much greater frequency than any other animal. If we keep in mind that these are wild horses with no apparent connection to humans aside from serving as a food source, how do we account for their frequent and often lifelike appearance in art? Why were prehistoric humans so fascinated with the horse (Fig. 0.4)?

This question becomes more convoluted when we introduce domestication. Given the human fascination with the horses for

FIGURE 0.4 Upper Palaeolithic 'báton percé' with a horse-head engraving, *c.*15,000 BCE.

over 20,000 years, we might expect it to have been one of the earliest domesticated mammals. This is not the case. The horse was domesticated long after dogs, cattle, goats, sheep and pigs. Recent evidence from the Botai culture of Kazakhstan suggests that domestication occurred around 3500 BCE. Even after domestication the horse continued to serve as a food source; indeed this was the reason for his domestication in the first place. No one can say when exactly someone first realized he could climb onto the back of a horse and harness equine power for his own advantage, but once it happened the horse–human relationship changed irrevocably. The horse enabled humans to move beyond the boundaries of their valleys and villages and into the wider world. He allowed cultures to interact with each other and for trade to flourish. 'High speed' communication systems developed and warfare began to take place on a much vaster scale. Humans quickly came to rely upon the horse for numerous tasks; so much so that it no longer seemed possible for a society to function without them. Once a culture was introduced to the horse, the animal very quickly took up an essential role in the fabric of their daily lives. This dependence necessitated a shift in the horse–human relationship. No longer was the horse simply a source

of nourishment. This new relationship cannot be called one of master and servant. In fact, the ancient evidence does not often convey the idea of submission or servitude in the horse; instead it seems to have been one of equals or even of affection and friendship.[3] The horse–human relationship permeates the entirety of the ancient world. It is found throughout art and literature. Once you begin to collect all of the evidence for interactions between horses and humans, the human connection with the horse begins to border on obsession. The Greeks even had a word that summed up this relationship perfectly: *'hippomania'*.[4]

The history of the horse, then, is closely intertwined with that of humans. Equids have played an indispensable role in the evolution of human culture for thousands of years. By far the most significant role fulfilled by the horse has been on the battlefield. The martial debt owed to the horse has been immortalized by monuments and epitaphs like that dedicated by Damis to his 'steadfast war-horse/Pierced through the breast by gory Ares'.[5] The courageous glory of the warhorse has been praised in every genre of literature. The *Book of Job* recounts how the horse 'mocks fear and is not dismayed; he does not turn away from the sword nor the rattling quiver, the flashing spear and the javelin'.[6] The sacrifices made by military horses are still honoured by charities such as the Brooke Foundation and on screen and stage in blockbusters such as *War Horse*.

CHAPTER 1

METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this book is to establish a typology for the horses of the ancient world. This typology will be used to examine how the form (conformation) of a horse dictated function – how the horse was used. To accomplish this I have used a multi-source approach to the topic by incorporating artistic representations, literary evidence, other material remains, native breeds and experimental archaeology. All of these sources have inherent advantages and disadvantages when used on their own, but when combined they provide a more complete picture of the horses of the ancient world.[1]

One of the main problems related to the study of ancient horses is terminology, especially in relation to horses and ponies, or breeds and types. A distinction between 'horse' and 'pony' did not exist in antiquity. Categorization by height is arbitrary. Standard practice today dictates that any equine 14.2 hands high (hh) and under is a pony, while anything over that height is a horse.[2] This standardization does not always work: a 14 hh Arabian or Quarter Horse is still a horse, not a pony. Likewise, the Caspian horse of Iran rarely exceeds 13 hh, but is physiologically a horse. The pony is a distinct zoological type that traces its descent from the primitive pony of the Ice Age. Genuine ponies have an ample girth and very efficient digestive organs, which enable them to deal with a food supply that is both meager and difficult to digest. Their legs are strong but comparatively short, intended not for high speeds but rather for maintaining a consistent pace in difficult country. Ponies are sure footed, have plenty of stamina and are of robust

health. Overall, ponies are considered to be tougher than horses and are often 'good doers'. Based on its size to strength ratio, the diminutive Shetland pony is actually the strongest living equine. Many of the horses of antiquity, particularly from the Mediterranean, are miniature horses rather than ponies. These animals have longer, thinner legs, a lean build and generally a 'dry' appearance. Few of them, however, would have exceeded the 14.2 hh height criterion we now use to distinguish a horse from a pony. The large horses we are accustomed to today were the result of direct human intervention and they generally require much more care than the smaller horses of antiquity.[3] In cases where these larger animals become feral, such as the 'wild' descendants of the Spanish horses in the New World, they revert in size and general appearance to resemble their ancient ancestors.[4]

The ancestral horses, those horses that existed before domestication, are called types. They are typically assigned to one of four categories: Equine Type 1 from Northern Europe, Equine Type 2 from the Northern Eurasian Steppe, Equine Type 3 from the Southern Steppe, Equine Type 4 from the Near East. In discussing domestic horses we generally try to assign every horse to a particular breed. But this method cannot work. When we employ the world 'type' we refer to 'a horse that fulfills a particular purpose – like a cob, a hunter and a hack – but does not necessarily belong to a specific breed'. 'Breed', by contrast, denotes 'an equine group bred selectively for consistent characteristics over a long period, whose pedigree is entered into a studbook'.[5] To use the term 'breed' to classify the horses of antiquity is both anachronistic and artificial. Today there are well over 200 recognized breeds of horses and ponies, most with their own studbooks and registries. There are some very distinctive and unique breeds, usually throwbacks to ancient ancestors, such as the Norwegian Fjord or the Icelandic horse, but these are the minority. I have found that the majority of breeds can be placed into groups based on their physiognomy. One example of this is the European sport horse. This group includes the Hanoverian, Oldenburg, Dutch Warmblood, Danish Warmblood, Selle Francais, and Trakehner. Their origins lie in the warhorses of the Medieval world. In more recent times, infusions of Arabian and Thoroughbred blood have lightened their build, changing their conformation to a form suited to the show ring

rather than the battlefield. Each of these breeds has its own studbook with very strict entry requirements based on size, colour, markings and – for stallions in particular – evaluation judging movement and paces in hand and while being ridden. In reality these sport horse breeds are all very similar to one another: they come from a particular geographical region and are bred to excel in the Olympic disciplines. Thus, it is not surprising that they would be conformationally alike. Similar trends can be seen with the draft type, mountain and moorland type, steppe type etc. This classification as 'type' instead of 'breed' should also be applied to the horses of the ancient world. Indeed, I believe it is even more appropriate at that time since horse breeding and physical appearance was determined more by environmental than human influences. In other words, there was very little specialized horse breeding in the ancient world.

ARTISTIC REPRESENTATIONS

The horse is ubiquitous in the art of the ancient world, appearing on temple pediments and friezes, victory monuments, tombs, in sculptural groups, equestrian statues, on vases and other ceramics, in frescoes and mosaics. In fact, one would be hard pressed to find a medium of ancient art from which the horse is absent. The horse turns up with such frequency that it is easy to ignore him. He becomes part of the background, or a stock figure in a scene. When we do notice them, horses in art are regularly dismissed as being either too ideal or too abstract to be of any use in determining the physical appearance of ancient horse types. In the case of the Parthenon frieze, the standard comment is that the horses have been portrayed smaller than they actually were to exaggerate the human form. Such commonly held misconceptions cause scholars to disregard the value of equine imagery. In fact, these painted and sculpted horses can provide a wealth of information. They are remarkably consistent in their depiction of certain conformational features. To explain this, one may consider the following two examples of Greek horses.

The first example from the eighth century BCE presents what we might call an abstract representation of the horse (Fig. 1.1).

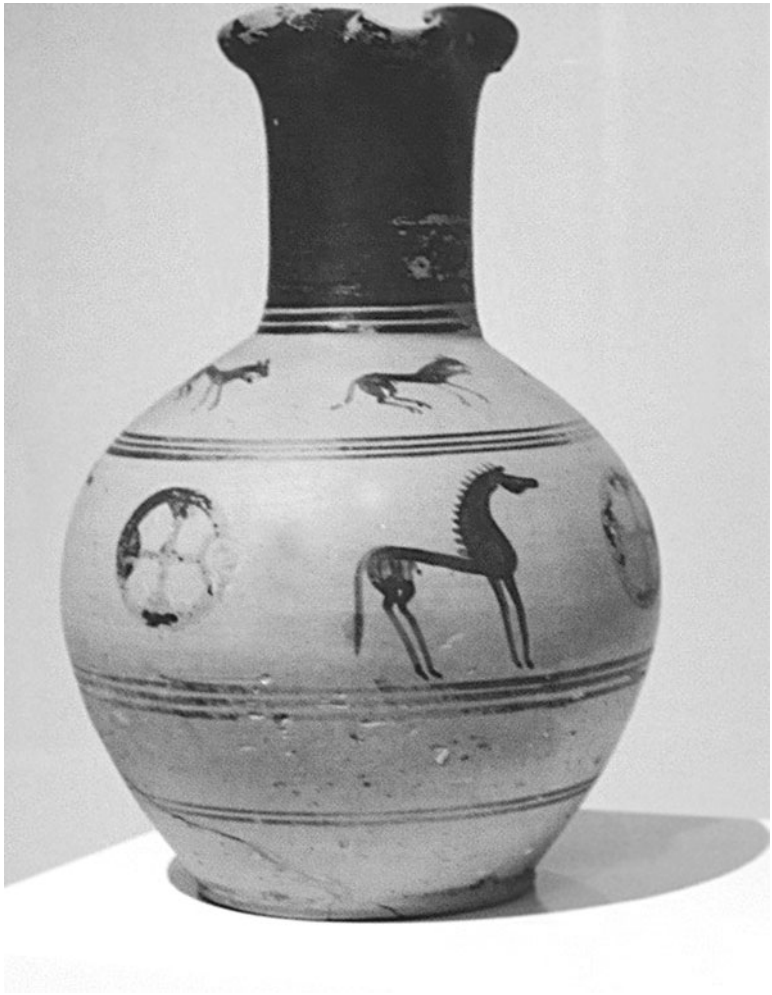

FIGURE 1.1 Trefoil oinochoe attributed to the Painter of the Roaring Lions with a late geometric representation of a horse, *c.*740 BCE.

There are, however, specific conformational features that the artist has chosen to emphasize. These include

1. Very upright head carriage that arches at the poll
2. A slender face with a straight profile
3. A lean body

4. Muscular hindquarters
5. Long legs

Particular emphasis is given to the neck and hindquarters, juxtaposed with the slenderness of the body and legs.

The second example, from the late sixth/early fifth century BCE is a great deal more 'fleshed out' and very clearly equine (Fig. 1.2). Despite the considerable attention to detail, the conformational features emphasized are identical to those of our more abstract horse with an upright, muscular neck; narrow, straight face; lean body; muscular haunches; long, slender legs – elements that we can call hallmark characteristics of the Greek horse.

The above two examples show that even an 'abstract' representation of a horse displays aspects of reality. The Greek images of equines all display the same conformational features. The importance of these features and the overall appearance of the Greek-type horse are discussed in relation to the Mediterranean horse.

FIGURE 1.2 Black-figure Skyphos attributed to the Painter of Philadelphia, *c*.500 BCE.

At the opposite end of the scale from our abstract, linear horses are those labelled as too ideal to be real. The prancing, galloping horses of the Parthenon frieze are a prime example of this style of iconography (Fig. 1.3). These poor horses seem to receive constant scholarly abuse: either they have been down-sized/shrunken to exaggerate the human form or they are too perfect to be representations of real animals. The first argument (that of the dwarfed horses) will be addressed throughout the book; the second statement (the perfect horse) can be dealt with here. The claim that the Parthenon horses are 'perfect' or 'ideal' is indeed correct. The equines sculpted on this frieze are the ideal equine. This does not, however, discount their usefulness to this study. What we see on the Parthenon frieze is the ideal specimen of the Greek horse. Pheidias and his colleagues portrayed the horses they were familiar with – native Greek stock – but as perfect specimens. Of course, the perfect horse does not exist today, nor did he in antiquity, but the concept of perfection did. This ideal equine is described by Greek and Latin authors – Xenophon, Virgil, Varro, Columella, Vegetius, Oppian – and he appears regularly in art. He is the ancient equivalent of our modern breed registries and studbooks. These registries contain descriptions of the ideal specimen for that particular breed or type. Any horse intended to be included in the registry is evaluated against this standard of perfection on conformation, movement and temperament. The idealized representations from antiquity are like these studbooks. They depict the native horses the artists saw on a regular basis as conformational ideals. The physical features found on these representations are the same as those on the living horses; the only

FIGURE 1.3 Sketch detail from the west frieze of the Parthenon.

exception being that the living examples would not have possessed every conformational ideal.

We also must answer this question: whose horses are being portrayed in the art? This is especially relevant if we look outside Greece proper at the Greek colonies of Asia Minor and the Black Sea, as well as Rome, particularly in the late Republic and early Imperial periods. In areas of rich cultural interaction, such as Greek colonies where Greek artists might be producing commissioned pieces for 'natives', it does seem fair to ask 'which horses are these?' Likewise in Rome, where artistic styles from all over the Mediterranean and its history were imported and re-invented to suit Roman tastes and ideas, we might question the veracity of the equids produced. Are these Roman horses or not? Once again I am confident in stating that the animals portrayed are the native equines, local horses familiar to both artist and commissioner were familiar. It is hard to imagine a Scythian chieftain would commission a piece and allow a horse other than his own type to be portrayed.

Similarly Roman art, for all that it borrows and adjusts styles of other cultures and earlier periods, nonetheless portrays an Italian horse. The Alexander Mosaic from the House of the Faun in Pompeii is an excellent example of this. Herodotus tells us that Nesaean horses always pulled the chariot of the Persian king:

> After them came the ten sacred horses called Nesaean, splendidly arrayed. (They are called Nesaean after the great plain in Media that produces these big horses.) Behind these ten horses came the sacred chariot of Zeus, drawn by eight white horses, and in behind the horses their charioteer followed on foot, holding the reins; for no human being may mount into the seat. Behind this came Xerxes himself in a chariot drawn by Nesaean horses.[6]

The Nesaean horse has a very distinct appearance, with his convex rams head, thick powerful neck and stocky body. The four black horses yoked to Darius' chariot in the mosaic, however, are distinctly not Nesaean. Much like the Macedonian horses, they fit the standard Italian/Greek type.

LITERARY EVIDENCE

The literary record is full of references to horses. No matter what the genre, the horse always makes an appearance. Inscriptions, particularly the circus inscriptions from the Roman Empire, are one important source of written information. Successful charioteers were fond of putting up monuments listing the names, colours and 'breeds' of their best horses. Likewise, lead tablets from the Athenian Agora record the colours and brands of cavalry mounts brought in for the *dokimasia*.

As far as extant Greek and Latin texts are concerned, Xenophon's *Art of Horsemanship* is by far the most detailed horse-training manual surviving from antiquity. This text deals with selecting a conformationally sound animal, training, care, exercise and equipment. Most of the advice offered by Xenophon is sound and continues to influence horsemanship and training today. The *Art of Horsemanship* was the impetus for the revival of 'Classical Riding' in fifteenth-century Europe. Through the Renaissance texts the ideas of Xenophon have been passed down to the modern discipline of Classical Riding through the traditions of the Spanish Riding School in Vienna, the Cadre Noir at Saumur in France and the Royal Andalusian School of Equestrian Art in Jerez, Spain. Xenophon produced a second text devoted to horsemanship. His *On the Cavalry Commander* discusses the duties and obligations of the cavalry commander, as well as training exercises for war and spectacle.

The other major horse-related texts deal primarily with horse husbandry. The practice of *hippotrophia* is treated by Varro and Columella (*On Agriculture*), and Vegetius (*On Veterinary Medicine*) all of whom present detailed accounts of horse breeding, raising and care. Virgil (*Georgics*) likewise devotes some time to the ideal horse and how to train him. Aristotle (*On the Generation of Animals*) examines the reproductive cycles of the horse. Oppian (*On Hunting*) gives the most substantial list of horse 'breeds'; but references are found in other authors, most notably Strabo (*Geography*) and Pliny the Elder (*Natural History*).

The military horse appears in both historical prose and 'historical' poetry. There is also a tradition of equine anecdotes, most notably in Aelian's *Historical Miscellany* and *On Animals*.