



Bucephalus

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Bucephalus (bu-ceph-a-lus) was the famous and well-loved stallion of Alexander the Great (king of Macedonia from 336 b.c. until his death) whose breeding was said to have been of the “best Thessalian strain” from the renowned stallion-breeding region of Thessaly, Greece. Bucephalus is believed to have been born in 355 b.c. The horse was reported to have been a massive creature with a massive head (Bucephalus means “Ox-Head” in Ancient Greek), and is described as having a black coat with a large white star on his brow.

History has provided several origin stories for this famous horse. One legend tells that a 12-year old Alexander won the horse, Bucephalus, in a wager with his father, Philip II of Macedon.

A horse dealer offered the horse to Alexander’s father for an enormous sum, but the animal appeared to be unstable and could not be tamed. Since no one could temper the animal, Philip wasn’t interested, but Alexander promised to pay for the horse should he fail to tame it. Alexander was allowed to try and surprised everyone by subduing the steed. Alexander spoke soothingly and turned the horse away from the imposing sun so that it didn’t see the shadow that seemed to distress it, and so tamed the horse.

In another version Bucephalus was given as a gift to Alexander’s father, Philip II. The horse proved to be too vicious and unmanageable and would not allow anyone to mount him. Alexander, just a boy at the time, undertook the challenge to tame the horse, much to the amusement of the older men around him. Alexander, however, had noticed that the horse was afraid of its shadow and gently turned its head toward the sun and was able to mount him and attach the bridle. Philip II was so impressed and declared that Alexander would secure for himself a large kingdom, as Macedonia was too small for him.

Alexander named his prize stallion Bucephalus and rode him for nearly two decades and through numerous battles to create his mighty empire. Bucephalus died of battle wounds in 326 b.c. in Alexander’s last battle. Alexander founded the city of Bucephala (thought to be the modern town of Jhelum, Pakistan) in memory of his wonderful horse.



Alexander and Bucephalus by Domenico Maria Canuti, 17th century