

# The Legend of Bucephalus

The most famous horse in history.

**Genre:** Events, History, Military, People



**A wild horse who only Alexander the Great could tame.**

*The "horse... appeared to be savage and altogether intractable, neither allowing any one to mount him, nor heeding the voice of any of [the King's] attendants, but rearing up against all of them."*

Plutarch, 200 AD *Plutarch's Lives*



**Plutarch described Bucephalus as wild and untameable.**



If it wasn't for the writings of Plutarch (an ancient Greek philosopher AD 46), we'd never know about one of the most remarkable horses in history. A Persian horse named Bucephalus was brought to Macedonia and presented to King Phillip II (Alexander the Great's father) in 346 BCE by Philoneicus of Thessaly. Aside from using the entire alphabet to write the names in that sentence, Philoneicus wanted to be nice and gift the King a horse.



**Bucephalus depicted as wild and untameable by Domenico Maria Canuti, an Italian painter of the 17th century.**

Bucephalus, which would be the name Alexander would give to him later, was uncontrollable. He reared up against anyone who approached him, and when you're the biggest, most unmanageable horse in Macedonia people take notice. Thankfully one of the people in the crowd was Alexander. Unlike everyone else who wanted to dismiss this temperamental dark stallion, Alexander thought he could be tamed.

He yelled out to the King's men:

*"What a horse they are losing, because, for lack of skill and courage, they cannot manage him!"*

Alexander's comment greatly annoyed King Phillip, who believed the horse to be "wild and unbroken". But Alexander was determined, as was his nature, and continued: "I could manage better than others have." Like many children today, Alexander thought he knew better than his father.

The conversation went something like this:

**Alexander:** "Father, give me the reigns, I can handle this horse."

**King:** "Do you think you know more than me?"

**Alexander:** "Yes, I do. And if this horse runs all over the place and won't listen to me, I'll pay you for him. Deal?"

**King:** "Deal. Good luck buddy!"



**Alexander mounted the wild Bucephalus in front of his father and a laughing crowd that were highly doubtful of Alexander's ability to ride the horse.**



There was laughter in the crowd when Alexander said something like the above to his father, the king of Macedonia. According to Plutarch:

*“Alexander ran to the horse, took hold of his bridle-rein, and turned him towards the sun; for he had noticed, as it would seem, that the horse was greatly disturbed by the sight of his own shadow falling in front of him and dancing about.”*

Plutarch, 200 AD *Plutarch's Lives*



**An illustration of Alexander turning Bucephalus towards the sun by Walter Crane and Mary Macgregor in *The Story of Greece: Told to Boys and Girls* (1914).**

What others saw as a horse out of control, was Bucephalus essentially confusing his giant shadow for the figure of another horse. When Alexander realised this, he turned Bucephalus toward the sun, so his shadow was behind him, and slowly and carefully took the reins. No shadow to scare the horse meant Alexander could mount the powerful steed and prove his father wrong.

*“Philip and his company were speechless with anxiety at first; but when Alexander made the turn in proper fashion and came back towards them proud and exultant, all the rest broke into loud cries, but his father, as we are told, actually shed tears of joy, and when Alexander had dismounted, kissed him, saying: ‘My son, seek thee out a kingdom equal to thyself; Macedonia has not room for thee.’”*

Plutarch, 200 AD *Plutarch's Lives*

Taming the once thought to be wild Bucephalus was a turning point in Alexander's life. From that day onwards, Alexander only grew in confidence and determination. He would fight many battles, all the time with Bucephalus by his side. The two of them were like peanut butter and honey, or whatever two things went together really well a long, long time ago. They were inseparable, with Alexander being the only one that could ride him. The bond they formed was built on respect and trust and linked them together forever.



**Once Alexander tamed Bucephalus, the horse became his fighting companion for many years to come.**



This friendship, and the legacy they created together, led to Bucephalus being deemed one of the most famous horses in history. Bucephalus was a noble and fearless horse that accompanied one of the most famous generals in history to battle time after time. It goes without saying that this royal horse wouldn't have been remembered if he slept all day in his stable and ate his weight in carrots every night. His life truly was extraordinary.

After Bucephalus passed away of old age, Alexander founded a city and named it after his dear friend to honour him forever.

\*Quotes from Plutarch. Plutarch's Lives. with an English Translation by. Bernadotte Perrin. Cambridge, MA. Harvard University Press. London. William Heinemann Ltd. 1919. 7.



### Good to Think About

Give each answer  
your best shot!



1. How was Alexander able to tame the wild horse?

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2. What did Alexander's success with Bucephalus reveal about his character?

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3. Why did Alexander become attached to Bucephalus?

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4. Why is Bucephalus now named as one of the most famous horses in history?

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## Key Vocabulary

- intractable
- remarkable
- uncontrollable
- temperamental
- courageous
- determination
- exultant
- dismounted
- accompanied
- extraordinary



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