Taraxippus, the Terrifying Horse Scarer: Apparition Appeared Across Racetracks in Ancient Greece

Taraxippus had one word devoted to ghosts that frightened horses during a chariot race—a Taraxippus. This spectral spook, usually the ghost of someone involved with, or killed by, horses, appeared at racetracks across Greece, and were propitiated with sacrifices.

Greek city-states had their own ghost stories that honored legendary heroes; different spirits were said to haunt local spots. For example, the chronicler Pausanias described the racetrack, or hippodrome, at Olympia. The long side of the track had a spot that was home to “Taraxippus, the terror of the horses.” During a race, the spirit would reach out from its hidey-hole, shaped like “a round altar,” and terrify the racehorses. As a result, gushed Pausanias, “the fear leads to disorder, the chariots generally crash and the charioteers are injured.” Charioteers would sacrifice to the Taraxippus before the race, so he wouldn’t freak out their mounts.

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Who was the original Taraxippus at Olympia? According to Lycophron, a Hellenistic poet, Olympia was home to “the horse-alrighting tomb of earth-born Ischenus.” He might have the son of a giant, a local noble sacrificed to appease the gods and end a famine. Others said the Taraxippus at Olympia was a skilled horseman named Olenius. Alternatively, he was Demeon, a former companion of Heracles. In one of his labors, Heracles had to shovel out King Augeas of Elis’s excrement-filled stables, and after a series of complications, the hero killed Augeas after completing the labor. Demeon’s loyal steed, who’d galloped by his side until his death, was buried with his master at Elis. Pausanias opined that “the most probable of the stories in my opinion makes Taraxippus a surname of Horse Poseidon,” the lord of equines and the sea.
But the most fascinating story comes from the doomed House of Atreus, which eventually yielded Menelaus and Agamemnon. The father of cursed King Atreus was Pelops, a prince who wanted to win the hand of Hippodamia, daughter of Oenomaus of Pisa. But the king didn’t want to give up his little girl. Either because he was in love with her himself or because he’d been warned he would die by his son-in-law’s hand, he challenged her suitors to a chariot race. If the youth won, he’d get Hippodamia; if Oenomaus won, the kid’s head would be nailed to a post.

One of the murdered suitors, Alcathus, was rumored to be the Taraxippus. “Having been unsuccessful on the course, he is a spiteful and hostile deity to chariot-drivers,” said Pausanias. In Restless Dead: Encounters between the Living and the Dead in Ancient Greece, classicist Sarah Fies Johnston noted that the Taraxippus is a ghost who lived an unfulfilled life, so it sought revenge on the living. Johnston noted that “those who return from the dead of their own accord seek to victimize one of two types of people”—those who did the deceased wrong or didn’t get revenge for a wrong done to the deceased (Johnston 224). Other say it was Oenomaus himself in that weird mound-passage way. Johnston’s thesis would fit either of these guys.
But back to Pelops. The courtship race, of course, was rigged; his prospective bride’s dad, Oenomaus, had magical horses given to him by his father, the god Ares, that could run faster than any other. But Pelops wasn’t any normal young man; he was favored by the gods, who had accidentally taken a bite out of him at a banquet. Poseidon favored Pelops because he was hot, and “gave him a winged chariot, such that even when it ran through the sea the axles were not wet,” Pseudo-Apollodorus wrote in the Epitome, part of his Library.

Pelops and Oenomaus were evenly matched with their divine steeds and chariots... But Pelops had an ace in the hole. He bribed Oenomaus’s charioteer, Myrtilus, to sub out the real linchpins in the king’s chariot wheels for wax ones, so the chariot would collapse during the race. Myrtilus obliged because he himself was in love with Hippodamia, and as a result, that “caused Oenomaus to lose the race and to be entangled in the reins and dragged to death.” With his dying breath, the king cursed the treacherous Myrtilus, his ex-right-hand man, “Praying that he might perish by the hand of Pelops.”

The curse didn’t escape Myrtilus, who then became Pelops’s charioteer. When Pelops and Hippodamia were on their honeymoon, Myrtilus attempted to rape his mistress, so Pelops threw him into the sea. On his way down, the horseman cursed Pelops’s house (hence the incest, baby-eating, spouse-and-daughter killing in the next generations of the House of Atreus).

In this case, Myrtilus was getting back at Pelops for his murder and bribing him to betray his ex-master. And it’s Myrtilus who’s commonly thought to have inspired the Taraxippus. According to Pausanias, Pelops dedicated an empty mound to Myrtilus and “sacrificed to him in an effort to calm the anger of the murdered man.” That mound was probably in lieu of a grave, since Myrtilus drowned and his body wasn’t available for burial. A semi-delirious Myrtilus got
the name Taraxippus because he was a “horse scarer,” after how he’d freaked out Oenomaus’s steeds and killed him.

Death of Mytilus depicted on a cinerary urn (CC BY-SA 1.0)

Here’s one final, unusual interpretation of the Taraxippus story. Pelops buried a mysterious object near the hippodrome. He got it from Amphion, one of the original kings of Thebes, and Pausanias claimed “it was the buried thing which frightened the mares of Oenomaus, as well as those of every charioteer since.” According to the person who told Pausanias the story, who was from Egypt, both Amphion of Thebes and the famed musician Orpheus were thought to be great wizards (Orpheus was a Pied Piper who could summon animals with his music, while, by playing his lyre, Amphion charmed a bunch of stones into place to build his city’s walls). So the object they gave him must have been creepily magical. No word on what the thing was.

The Taraxippus at Elis wasn’t the only horse ghost in Greece. Another tomb-slash-dirt mound honoring a fallen man was Glaucus, son of the clever King Sisyphus, at the isthmus of Corinth. Glaucus was participating in funeral games honoring his friend Acastus’s deceased dad when “he was killed by his horses,” said Pausanias. How did he die? Maybe in a chariot race; maybe “his own mares devoured Glaucus, son of Sisyphus, at the funeral games of Peias,” according to the Roman mythographer Hyginus.

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At Nemea (home of the Nemean lion, whom Hercules slew and whose pelt he later wore), there wasn’t a Taraxippus, per se, but a giant red rock reared up above the hippodrome. The sight flashing off its crimson surface spooked racehorses, since they thought it was fire approaching. And finally, Pausanias thought the racecourse in the town of Cirra—near Apollo’s sanctuary at Delphi—might have a Taraxippus haunting the Pythian Games. Pausanias summarized succinctly: “But the race course itself is not of a nature to startle the horses, either by reason of a hero or on any other account.”
In ancient Greece and Rome, charioteers, leaders in a very popular sport, were a very superstitious bunch. Someone could easily drug a horse, bribe a charioteer, or rig a race in any number of other ways. There was a whole subset of magic devoted to fixing competitions or prevent the other team from winning. Individuals could hire ritually condemn charioteers to horrible fates: they’d inscribe maledictions on tiny lead tablets called defixiones, asking the infernal powers that be to hurt their enemies’ bodies and bind them. Many of these little curse tablets survived, “with factions, fans, and charioteers seeking advantages not just by tricks and skills on the course but by hampering the performance of a man and beast by defixiones” (Gager). Charioteers also adorned their chariots with apotropaic charms (amulets to ward o off the Evil Eye and malicious influences), including some shaped like phallos.

Top image: Frightened horse (public domain)

By Carly Silver

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ANCIENT IMAGE GALLERIES
The horse (“hippos”) was first domesticated in what is now Kazakhstan five thousand years ago and eight breeds were cultivated in Ancient Greece. Some areas of the Greek world were particularly famed for their horsemanship, for example Thessaly. Horses represented wealth and status as well as being integral to a thriving economy and an essential… replica ancient Greek marble horse head of Selene from the Parthenon, available from It’s All Greek London! replica ancient Greek bronze geometric horse available from It’s All Greek London! replica ancient Greek bronze neighing horse available from It’s All Greek London! In Greek mythology, the Taraxippus (plural: taraxipoi, “horse disturber”, Latin equorum conturbator) was a presence, variously identified as a ghost or dangerous site, blamed for frightening horses at hippodromes throughout Greece. Some taraxipoi were associated with the Greek hero cults or with Poseidon in his aspect as a god of horses (Ancient Greek: Ποσειδῶν ἵππος) who brought about the death of Hippolytus. Pausanias, the ancient source offering the greatest number of explanations, regards it Taraxippus, the Terrifying Horse Scarer: Apparition Appeared Across Racetracks in Ancient Greece. Art Deco Buildings Art Deco Furniture Art Nouveau Pintura Dolphin Art Sculpture Art Animal Sculptures Art Deco Design Art Deco Fashion Public Art. File:Hippocamp and Dolphins Kansas City-City Hall. “Traditional Home Greek key trim on the roman shades in the kitchen and a ginger jar filled with magnolia leaves are lovely touches in this traditional space.” “We spot our ‘Balza’ design in colorway ‘Indigo’ in this chic designed by Julie Dodson of As seen in Traditional Home Photo.” “Learn about Houston-based Interior Designer Dodson Interiors, view their design portfolio, and read their latest news.”