

hippeis

The aristocrats
of Athens

μουσείο ακρόπολης
acropolis museum



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The use of the horse with military chariots is known to go back at least as far as the 16th century BC. In the 2nd millennium BC, the significance of horses is marked by the practice of burying them along with their owners. In the Trojan War, the Greeks conquered Troy by offering their enemies a 'gift' in the form of the infamous Trojan horse ('Doureios hippos').

Owning and maintaining a horse was an expensive matter. According to literary sources, in 421 BC, a horse cost 1200 silver Attic drachmae. This was a vast amount of money, affordable only by the aristocrats, and thus the horse was a symbol of power, wealth and social status. In the 6th century BC, many aristocratic families flaunted their superiority by selecting names that began or ended with the word 'hippos' (meaning horse; e.g. 'Hippias' and 'Hipparchos', sons of the tyrant Peisistratos, or 'Xanthippos', father of Pericles).

When the lawmaker Solon (early 6th century BC) divided the citizens of the Athenian state into four social classes, he placed these aristocrats into the second highest class, the class of the Hippeis. During the rule of Pericles (461-429 BC), the role of the Hippeis was modified and a formation of one thousand men (cavalry) was established to participate in military activities and important religious festivals, such as the Great Panathenaia.

Ancient writers, such as Thucydides and Xenophon, refer to the Hippeis' contribution to the Athenians' victories over the Spartans, whilst Aristophanes named one of his comedies 'Hippeis' (424 BC). The Athenians' stance changed radically in 404 BC, after the end of the Peloponnesian War, when the class of the Hippeis helped to overthrow Athenian democracy and establish the oligarchy of the Thirty Tyrants.

The statues of horsemen in the Museum's Archaic Gallery were most likely dedications made by the class of the Hippeis. It is worth noting that the most significant concentration of such statues has been found on the Acropolis of Athens, dating to the 6th century BC. Exquisitely

carved, they were a display of the wealth and power of their dedicators.

The earliest and most well-known of these statues is the 'Rampin Horseman' (550 BC), whose head is in the Louvre Museum (**Fig. 1**). He wears a victory wreath of oak or celery leaves, which is associated with a victory in the Nemean or the Isthmian games.

Another unique statue is the 'Persian' or 'Scythian' horseman (520 BC) (**Fig. 2**). He wears an eastern costume with diamond and palmette decoration, similar to that on a plate in Oxford, bearing the inscription 'Μιλτιάδης καλός' ('Miltiades is good-looking'). This has led to the suggestion that this statue may in fact be a representation of the military general Miltiades when he was defending the military and commercial interests of Athens in the Black Sea.

The second largest rider (520-510 BC) bears chiselling marks and thus may have been reused as building material in the Acropolis walls in antiquity. Another impressive horseman (late 6th century BC) is naked but for sandals and rides a horse with a blue mane.

The 'Hippalektryon' (**Fig. 3**) is a mythical creature, a strange combination of horse and cockerel. Although it is known from vase painting, this is the only example in sculpture. It is possible that the rider is Poseidon, the patron of the class of the Hippeis.

The size of the horses in these statues is particularly small, creating the impression that at the time, horses were small-bodied. In reality, however, their size most probably ranged between that of a small pony and a modern Arabic horse, though one cannot be certain.

No statues of horsemen from the 5th century BC survived from the Athenian Acropolis. However, horsemen are represented in all their splendour on the Parthenon frieze (**Fig. 4**), where, sometimes on horseback and sometimes on foot, they are seen to participate gracefully and proudly in the magnificent procession of the Panathenaia.



Fig. 1
Acr.590, The 'Rampin Horseman'. 560-550 BC



Fig. 2
Acr.606, The 'Persian' or 'Scythian' horseman. ca. 520 BC



Fig. 3
Acr.597, The 'Hippalektryon'. 520-510 BC



Fig. 4
Block IX of the west frieze of the Parthenon.

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