THE TAWNY HIPPALEKTRYON

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In the battle of dramatic criticism with which Aristophanes regaled his audience in the Frogs, Euripides attacks Aeschylus for using big words the spectator could not understand, and Dionysos himself admits that he spent long, sleepless nights trying to find out what manner of bird the “tawny cock-horse,” the ἔσυθος ἵππολεκτρυῶν, was. Though Aeschylus supplies the answer, that it was a device painted on ships, Euripides continues in his criticism, declaring that there was no need to have a cock brought into tragedies, and asserts that in his plays, at least, there is neither cock-horse nor goat-stag, such as are depicted in Persian tapestries. It thus appears that the cock-horse was no longer known in the days of Aristophanes; in fact, the expression “tawny cock-horse” had become the image of something at once inflated and ridiculous, to judge by other passages in the comedies. Nor indeed could the ancient commentators and lexicographers make much of the word: their explanations are farfetched and ill-founded, though we owe to them a quotation from a lost play by Aeschylus, the Myrmidons, in which the poet describes how the tawny cock-horse, the great labor of outpoured paint, was dripping—presumably when the Trojans set fire to the ship on which it was painted.

In spite of Aristophanes’s strictures it is unlikely that Aeschylus invented the hippalektryon or coined the word for which he was de-rided by later generations. For such a monster, half cock and half horse, does indeed appear in archaic Greek art, and unlike Dionysos in the Frogs, archaeologists were not at a loss to understand this species of bird when they first saw it on Greek vases, in bronze, or in fragments among the marbles of the Persian debris on the Acropolis. True, among the many fantastic hybrids which Greek legend and art have made famous, the cock-horse has remained relatively obscure. It has no prototype in Egypt or the Near East, and Aristophanes, speaking in the character of Euripides, is wrong in connecting it with oriental tapestries. But then it must be remembered that the domestic fowl proper was a relative newcomer to the barnyards of Greece, and the cock, to the Greeks of Aristophanes’s time, was still the “Persian bird,” much as the turkey, the pheasant, the guinea hen recalled to later generations by their names their reputed homelands.

In the summer of 1951 the Museum acquired an Attic black-figured drinking cup with a hippalektryon ridden by a youth on the tondo of the interior. Whether it is “tawny” we cannot tell, as the colors are those of the black-figure technique, with the body painted in black, the tail, the primaries, and saddle feathers incised, and the sickles painted in dull red, a color also used for the mane of the horse. The lesser sickles are painted in white, and the outlines of the wing bar are also white, with dots between. The equine component begins
where one expects the hackle, but the horse's forelegs are attached to the breast of the cock. The horse is bridled, and there are small white dots on the reins.

Hippalektryones with riders are known from sixteen black-figured vases, dating from the third quarter of the sixth to the beginning of the fifth century B.C. Usually the rider is a youth, nude, as on our kylix, or dressed in a short chiton or a Thracian cloak. Sometimes he wears a helmet or the wide-brimmed hat worn by horsemen and travelers. Occasionally he carries a spear. On three vases, a lekythos in Athens (CC 713), another in the Louvre (CA 1928), and an eye-cup in London (B 433), the rider is bearded; on one, an unpublished lekythos in Berlin (inv. 4774), he is Poseidon, for he holds a trident and a dolphin. These hippalektryones with riders perhaps go back to a marble statue on the Athenian Acropolis, of which fragments were found in 1887. The head of the rider, his arms, and the head and forelegs of the horse are missing, as well as the shanks of the cock below the hocks, and most of the outspread wings and tail. A pillar with a volute capital helped support the statue. This perhaps inspired a Boeotian terracotta statuette of the same period, now in the Louvre. The type occurs also on the bezel of an archaic gold ring in this Museum, where the engraver, however, has left off the forelegs of the horse, perhaps for lack of space.

Earlier, however, than any of these hippalektryones with riders is a pair without rid-
the second quarter of the sixth century B.C. and belongs to a group of Attic vases that combine narrative with purely decorative elements. In this group we find for the first time not only the horse-cock but also other cock combinations for which we have no Greek names, such as the boar-cock, the panther-cock, and an even stranger breed, the girl-cock, in which the head and neck of a girl are joined to a cock’s body. Neighboring Boeotia has produced another one of these, a goat-cock, but as Boeotian black-figure owes much to Attic vases, the type need not be a Boeotian invention. Another goat-cock occurs on a chalcedony in the Cabinet des Médailles at Paris (1075), and a bull-cock is known from an en-

ABOVE: Inside of Attic black-figured lip cup signed by Xenokles. Middle of the VI century. In the collection of David M. Robinson. BELOW: Detail of Attic black-figured lekythos. Late VI century. Louvre (CA 1928)

graved gem, a sard, in the British Museum (523). None of these cock combinations occurs in the East, and unlike the other famous monsters—the griffin, the sphinx, and the siren—the cock-monsters may well have been created in Attica in the second quarter of the sixth century B.C. Panther-cock, boar-cock, and girl-cock die out soon after; the horse-cock alone lingers on. Did the Attic artist select it as a more appropriate steed? In any event, with the burial of the statue on the Acropolis, which Aeschylus could still have known, the horse-cock disappears from the repertory of Greek art, and its very name, ἵππο-αλεκτρῳν, ceases to evoke the image of a cock-horse, so dear to a previous generation, and becomes something quaint

ABOVE: Detail of Attic black-figured neck-amphora. Late VI century. Munich (1619, J.86)
and obsolete, at once ridiculous and unintelligible. Many of the Attic vases with hippalektryones had, however, been exported into Etruria, and the hybrid had thus been introduced into the repertory of the Etruscans. Whether they were familiar with its Greek name and literary history cannot be ascertained, but the Etruscans were always lovers of the fanciful, and the presence of hippalektryones on their gold rings, engraved gems, bronze handles, and bullas attests to the hybrid’s popularity.

In our days, thanks to the rediscovery of archaic art, the hippalektryon once more delights us; we need not take Euripides’s side in the contest with Aeschylus; rather, with Sir Thomas Browne “we shall tolerate flying horses, black swans, hyd- ras, centaurs, harpies, and satyrs, for these are monstrosities, rarities, or else poetical fancies, whose shadowed moralities require their substantial falsities.”

Accession number 51.11.11. Height 5 1/8 inches. Published in Monnaies et Médailles S. A. Bâle, Vente publique, X, 22/23 Juin 1951, pl. 19, no. 408; Archaeology, Spring, 1952, p. 29. On the hippalektryon see further H. Lamer in Paulys Real-Encyclopädie, vol. 8, 1913, cols. 1651 ff. Add to his list an Attic black-figured Siana cup, Fogg Art Museum 3.1909 (Corpus Vasorum Antiquorum, pl. 9, 4); an Attic black-figured lip cup in the collec-
pp. 161 ff.); the gold ring in the Museum (95.15.313, Richter, Catalogue of Engraved Gems, no. 16, pl. 3), and the bronze reliefs from Eleutherae in the British Museum (1902.12—15.5, Payne, Necrocorinthia, p. 229, fig. 104 C). In Etruscan art the hippalektryon appears on bronze handles in the Cabinet des Médailles (no. 1458) and in the Nationalmuseum at Copenhagen (inv. 3244), and on a gold bulla in Tarquinia (Monumenti Antichi, vol. 36, 358, fig. 92). I wish to thank Mme Mollard, M. P. Devambez, Professor E. Langlotz, Dr. R. Lullies, and Dr. N. Breitenstein for permission to publish hippalektryones in their care. The illustration of the kalpis in Florence is from Annali dell’ Instituto, 1874, pl. F.

**ABOVE:** Bezel of a gold ring, perhaps Etruscan. About eight times actual size. Purchase, 1895. **BELOW:** Etruscan bronze handle, one of a pair. In the Nationalmuseum, Copenhagen.