

## Dead horses in Arthurian Romance (and beyond)

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Arthurian Literature features the knight in symbiosis with his mount. This 'pact' becomes linguistically obvious in German with the shift from the term *Reiter* to the conceptually loaded *Ritter* in the 12<sup>th</sup> century.

With the given importance and implicit omnipresence of the horse it is of special interest to examine the meaning of the separation from the knight and his horse (*destrier*). This talk focuses on the disintegration of the knightly symbiosis using examples from Middle High German Arthurian texts such as Hartmann's *Erec* and *Iwein* and Wolfram's *Willehalm* and *Parzival*. There are plenty of examples that present a broken symbiosis like riderless horses on a battlefield or knights who lost their mounts in jousts. Some *âventiuren* even specifically require the knight to leave his horse behind and prove his knightly qualities in a humble, 'grounded', fashion (like 'Schastel marveile' in *Parzival*). The most drastic type of separation, however, is the death of the horse.

Looking back on a tradition that sees Alexander's *Bukephalos* as a prominent example of post mortem reverence as well as the use of the horse as sacrificial animal, the literary sacrifice of the horse implies much more than the evoking of presumed empathy. It will be shown that it is used as a narrative device that serves a variety of purposes ranging from narratological landmarks to symbolic layers that support the narrative.

The understanding of the absence of the horse contributes to a deeper comprehension of the knight and reflects upon this special human-animal relationship. Whereas the Arthurian horse possesses condensed and manifold semantics, the death of the horse has become an ever valid motive that can be found in military history as well as in contemporary films and pop culture.