

**The Well Dressed Horse:
A class about Horse Costume in the Middle Ages**

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A Cross-Cultural Survey Of Equine Military Costume In the Middle Ages
By: Viscountess Kassandra Tenebrosa

As I became interested in making barding for a horse, I wondered what my persona's horse (late 12th c. Byzantine) would have worn into battle. This, plus a desire to make more affordable barding for my horse, encouraged me to begin researching the topic.

I have attempted to make available as many cultures as possible, and as large a time frame as possible. All pictures in the accompanying figures have come from illuminations and sculptures from period. Although I have looked through many books doing my research, I have uncovered only a fraction of what is out there. I have focused my search to military horses; those in battle scenes or preparing for battle.

Figure 1 shows possibly the most universal of horse trappings through culture and time. With its simple breast collar, and occasional breeching, this is the basis for many of the slightly more elaborate trappings. Most military pictures show the barding to be made of leather, and in most pleasure situations (such as hunting or riding) it is made of cloth, sometimes very ornate. Byzantine light calvary uses this style, and you will often find metal pendulars hanging from both the breast collar and breeching. An excellent example of this can be found on the Troyes ivory casket dating from the 11th c. A.D.

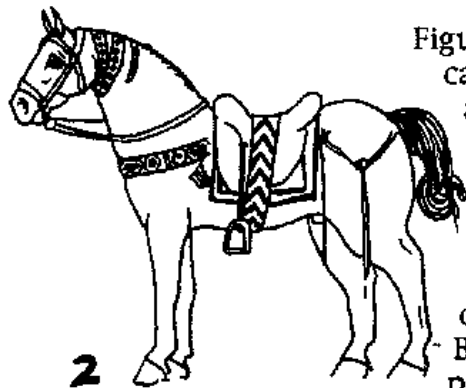
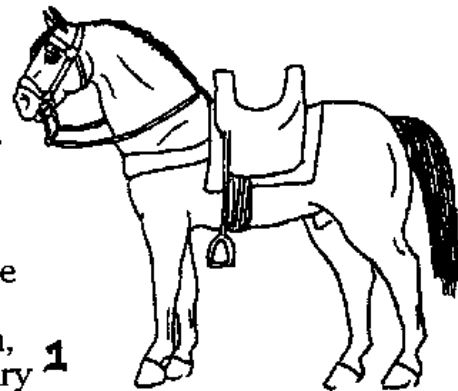


Figure 2 shows a variation of Byzantine light calvary with a more decorated breast collar and breeching showing straps hanging from them. Illuminations show this as if it were knotted leather hanging from the breeching. A decorated over girth is shown. If you check closely, many illuminations show a patterned girth in many different cultures. One of the unique features of Byzantine horses is the neck strap. While the purpose is unknown, this strap shows up repeatedly, perhaps denoting rank. Some appear as plain leather; others quite ornate. To replicate this, one must be creative to devise a way to keep it in place, as the illuminations are difficult to interpret. Another interesting note about the Byzantine horse is that the tails are often depicted as being knotted.

Figure 3 is an example of Byzantine/Persian heavy cavalry armored in lamellar, which is consisted of small plates laced together to form armor. In period the plates would have been made from hardened leather, horn, bone, layered felt, or in some cases, iron. A statue of Sassanian heavy cavalry show the horse armored only on the front, with its head, neck and chest covered. This type of armor was a revival of the Roman cataphract (heavy cavalry) and was known to the Byzantine as klibanophoros. Like the trappings in Figure 1, this armor can be found throughout the current Middle Ages time period, although not as wide spread culturally, and would be rather expensive, not only for the time period, but for us as well.

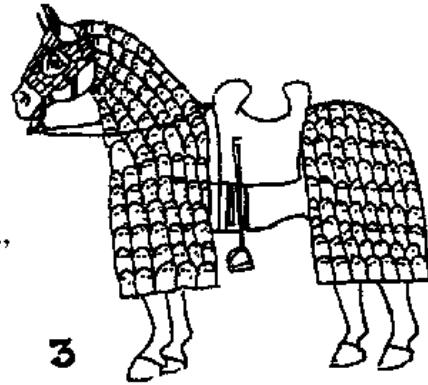
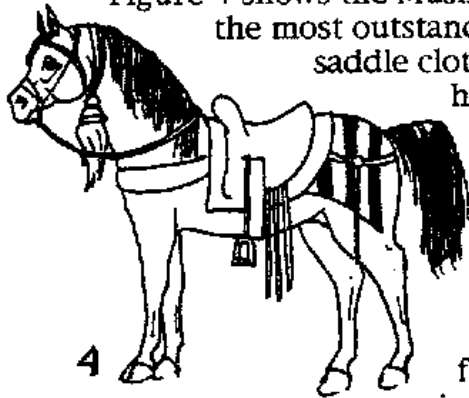
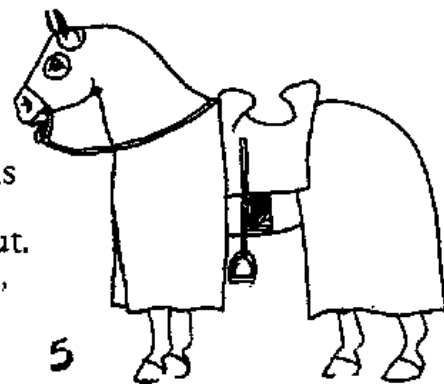


Figure 4 shows the Muslim horse. Similar in trappings to Figure 1, the most outstanding differences are the highly decorated saddle cloth or quarter sheet covering the horse's hindquarters. The neck tassel is also an interesting difference, although you can see the similarity with the Byzantine neck strap. The reason for the neck tassel is uncertain, however it may have been used to denote rank or unit. There are a few examples of Muslim horses wearing full caparisons as well, one of interest being from the Freer Canteen. This is a silver inlaid flask from the early 13th c. A.D. and shows a horse wearing a "woven" caparison that covers the neck and body. The chamfron is separate, and it appears that it may be lamellar. It is possible that this is artistic interpretation of a more rigid body armor.

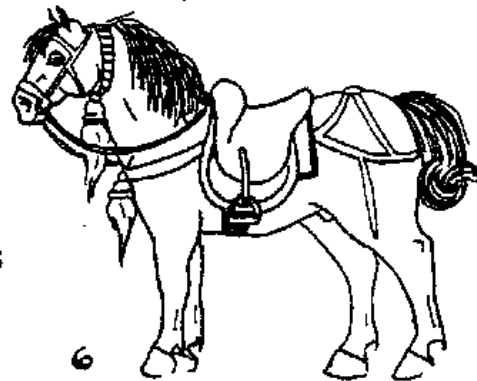


The easiest example of horse barding is Figure 5, the caparisoned horse. Primarily seen on Western European horses, it was used in a variety of manners. Quilted, with chain mail sandwiched between the layers, this was an extremely effective armor. It is seen also covering horses with a layer of chain underneath the cloth caparison. For warfare, often two sets of reins are shown, one being of leather, the other of chain wrapped in leather, to prevent being cut. It becomes quite popular for heraldic display, and elaborate, with tassels from the ears and along the back, as seen in the Manesse Anthology dating from the early 14th c. A.D.

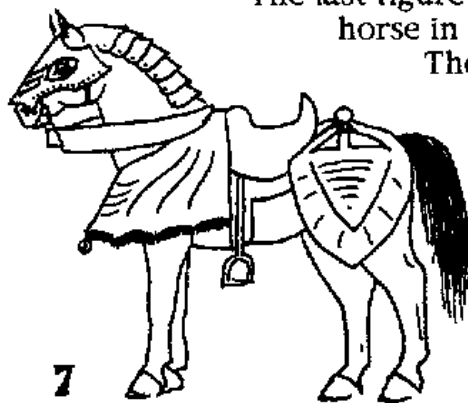


Additions of chamfrons to the caparison are seen in the 14th and 15th c., and an interesting ivory carving from Florence shows a chamfron worn with some kind of armor-like breast collar and a hind sheet which appears to be similar to the back part of a caparison. This type of barding is one of the most popular types to recreate within the Society, although climate can limit some people from using quilted caparisons or brocade/tapestry fabrics. It lends itself well to our use of heraldry and really gives the right appearance to the horse.

In Figure 6 we see the Mongol pony, and it is easy to see the similarities with the Muslim and Byzantine light cavalry. Tassels are found again at the neck and occasionally at the chest as well. Stirrups were often shorter than the European counterpart, aiding in the archery that was done from horseback. The tail is found knotted like the Byzantine horse.



The last figure shown is of a horse in Maximilian plate dating from the 15th c.



The horse in Figure 7 would more likely be used in a tournament situation or procession than in battle. Chamfrons and crinets similar to this are shown in use with trappings similar to Figures 1 and 5 especially in tournament situations. Crests rather fanciful and feathered are occasionally seen atop the horse's chamfron.

In researching this, I find the cultural crossover interesting and the longevity of many types of horse armor fascinating.

Caparisons obviously served the horse well, else it would not appear so prominently throughout the Middle Ages. I encourage everyone to look closely at period art to discover new and different ways to outfit your horse.

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