

On the Care and Keeping of Horses in Medieval Europe

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Introduction

The inspiration for this paper came from my desire to learn more about how horses were kept day to day in the period I try to re-create in the SCA. In the last few years I have gotten involved with equestrian activities, and have learned a lot about how horses are kept in the modern world. In the modern world there are many different ideas about how to keep horses, and I imagine the same was true in period times.

I will focus on 14th century England, though will discuss other times and places as they are relevant. I attempt to build a complete picture, but it is difficult to find information on such a mundane topic. Most people are interested in how horses were used for warfare, tournament, agriculture, and/or transportation – but aren't as interested in how horses were kept or cared for. In this paper I humbly attempt to start to fill that gap.

Where Horses Were Kept

In modern times, horses are mainly kept in barns each in their own box stall. A box stall is 10-12 feet wide in both dimensions. They are 'turned out' for some portion of the day in a fenced area. Some horses are kept outside all the time, and are provided with a shed that they can go in at will to get out of the weather.¹

Horses were housed similarly in period. Keeping horses in stables or barns has been done throughout history, even back to ancient Greeks.² In modern times, a large consideration of horse care is giving them enough turn out time. In period, it would seem that horses most likely got enough exercise every day that they did not need turn out. There was an understanding that horses did need exercise, and could not be kept in a stall constantly and then expected to work. Gervase Markham wrote 'Where, on the contrarie part, who is so simple that hee knoweth not, if a Horse be kept in the stable and want exercise, his hooves will straighten, his sinewes dry uppe, and he prove lame incurable.'³ Markham also writes that horses should lay down to rest in their stall, which indicates that their stalls were big enough for horses to comfortably lie down in.⁴ Horses kept by peasant farmers for agriculture may have also been kept in the fallow fields with other livestock.⁵

What Horses Were Fed

In modern times, horses are fed mainly hay (dried grass of various types) and commercial grain mixtures. Some horses are fed on pasture grasses during the parts of the year when they are available, and some horses are not fed any grain.

In period, horses were fed similarly. They were fed mainly hay and oats. During the summer months, instead of hay they were fed freshly mown grass. Other foods that

1 [PAV], pgs. 138-141

2 [XEN], pg. 28

3 [MAR], chap. 3 pg. 3

4 [MAR], chap. 3 pg. 7

5 [GIM], pg. 39

horses were fed include beans, bran, and 'horse-bread'.⁶ Horse bread was “baked of 'pure beans and peas without mixture of other grain or bran'”.^{7,8} The horses feed was tailored to its amount of work, like today. In 14th century London it cost between 6 ¼ d. to 7 ½ d. to feed a horse. Annually this worked out to about what a skilled craftsman could make in a year, making it clear that only the very well-to-do could afford to keep a horse. In modern times, horses are still expensive to feed, but much less than the annual salary of a skilled worker (we spend about \$1,000 to \$1,500 a year per horse for feed).

In modern times, horses are also commonly fed dietary supplements that include such things as vitamins, medication, parasite control, etc. According to Gervase Markham, who wrote about the subject in the early 17th century, there were supplements fed with the main purpose being to purge the horse's body of anything bad.⁹ Some of these may have had the effect of parasite control, but such supplements as vitamins or joint supplements were probably not known.

How Horses Were Cared For

Shoes

In modern times, the term for a person who maintains a horse's feet is farrier. There are different philosophies on horse shoeing today. Some horses are kept with shoes on all four feet, some with shoes only on the front feet, and some without shoes. Farriers are generally called to trim and reshoe a horse every 4 to 6 weeks. Modern horse shoes are mainly made from steel, though aluminum is sometimes used as well due to its lighter weight.

In medieval times, the state of horse shoeing was similar. The concept of shoeing horses was imported from Asia into Europe in the 9th or 10th century, and was well practiced through most of the medieval period.¹⁰ Horseshoes were being mass produced by the 12th century.¹¹ Most horses wore shoes, though some on only their front feet.¹² Shoes were made of iron, not steel¹³ (steel was invented in Roman times if not earlier, but only used for tools and where needed due to it's cost). Calkins (raised features on the heel portion of the shoes) were popular on medieval horseshoes to improve traction¹⁴, and are rarely if ever used today. Farriers (referred to as marshals in period¹⁵, though the name means

6 [WOO], pg. 191

7 [CLA], pg 8, right hand side

8 For an interesting paper on recreating horse bread, see <http://ilaria.veltri.tripod.com/horsebread.html>

9 [CHE], pgs. 305-306

10 [GIE], pg. 46

11 [GIE], pg. 149

12 [CLA], pg. 76

13 [GIM], pgs. 33-34

14 [CLA], pg. 82. The use of calkins became less popular over time - in their finds, 91% of Norman/13th century shoes had calkins, 78% of 13th to mid-14th century shoes had them, and they were on only 56% of 14th/15th century shoes.

15 [CLA], pg. 13

much more than just farrier) used all the holes in the shoes for nails (commonly 6 to 9 nails), as opposed to modern times where farriers tend not to use all the holes – usually 6 to 7 nails in shoes with 8 holes.¹⁶ Another difference is that horses were commonly shod inside a travis – an open wood frame¹⁷, similar in concept to shoeing stocks that are sometimes used for draft horses in modern times. There is evidence that period shoes were either worn much longer than modern shoes or the horses were worked hard, or both – most shoes found in excavations were worn heavily and some were worn through.¹⁸ This was probably very similar to automobile maintenance today – there's always something more important or appealing to spend money on than new tires for your car, so they will only get replaced when needed (and sometimes well past when they are really needed).

Grooming

Today horses are groomed mainly with rubber curry combs and brushes. There are many different variations of both available, as well as a multitude of other implements available, but curry combs and brushes are the main tools. The curry comb is used first to bring the dirt to the surface of the horse's coat, and the brushes are used afterwards to remove the dirt. In warm weather, horses are sometimes bathed with a shampoo mixture designed for equine use. There are also many different sprays and solutions available for specific things – such as shampoo for white horses, sprays to make it easier to groom the mane and tail, etc.

According to a 17th century writer, Gervase Markham, horses should be groomed with a “curry combe”, then dusted with “some dead horse tayle nailed to a sticke” (perhaps similar to a horse hair brush), then rubbed over (especially the legs) with “a wispe of straw wrethen hard together”, followed by rubbing him over with your wet hands, and finally shined with a clean coarse cloth “insomuch that you shall almost discerne your face therein”.¹⁹ It is likely that what Markham wrote was just describing what was common practice at the time and had been similar for previous centuries. In the medieval period, much is known of curry combs or 'hors combes', as they were made of metal and some survive to this day.²⁰ They had a handle mounted at 90 degrees to the comb. Many of them had loose rings on them, either as a decoration or perhaps as a way to make a soothing sound for the horse during grooming. Metal curry combs such as this fell out of favor in the late 19th and early 20th century. It seems that other than the upgrades in technology (such as the replacement of the metal curry comb for a plastic/rubber one and the invention of innumerable grooming sprays and shampoos), the grooming of horses has not changed much since medieval times.

16 [CLA], pgs. 82-83

17 [CLA], pg. 18

18 [CLA], pg. 83

19 [MAR], chap. 3 pg.

20 [CLA], pgs. 157-168

What Horses Were Used For

Agriculture

In early period, oxen were the main agricultural animal used to pull plows. Horses were beginning to be used and grew in popularity over time, as they worked faster and longer than oxen.²¹ The drawback of using a horse was that a horse cost more to maintain than an ox. By the 13th century, most of Europe had switched to using horses, except for England. Part of the reason for this may have been that in England, oxen were considered edible and horses were not. For some reason, the English respected the edict from the Christian church that horses were not be eaten, though this was ignored in the rest of Europe.²² Horses used as plow animals were probably worked heavily during the planting season, and may have been used to pull wagons the rest of the year.

Transportation

Transportation was the chief use of horses in the medieval period, either ridden or pulling a wagon or cart. Horses were available for hire for those who did not need a horse every day.²³ In addition to hiring a horse, one could also hire the service of a porter or carter to transport something. Horses for hire and porter's horses were likely worked very hard, day in and day out. One imagines that similarly to rental cars today, hired horses were not always treated very well. A large household would have kept a stable of horses, but unless they moved frequently they would have only kept horses they needed day to day, and they would hire or borrow horses when making large moves.²⁴

Desirable riding horses in period were trained to amble.²⁵ This gait is referred to today as a 'pace' and is ridden only in some breeds that do it naturally. In other breeds, such as Missouri Foxtrotters, pacing is considered undesirable – even referred to as the “dreaded pace” by some people.

War and Tournaments

Much has been written about the use of horses in wars and in tournaments, there is little I can add. Obviously today horses are no longer used for these purposes, except by small groups recreating tournaments. One tidbit of information of a more mundane nature was that knights would generally ride their palfreys (who ambled) for travelling, and only mount their destriers (or warhorses) when close the fight.²⁶ This is apparently where the English idiom of “on your high horse” came from.

21 [GIM], pgs. 33-38

22 [GIE], pg. 47

23 [CLA], pgs. 8-9

24 [WOO], pg. 186

25 [JAN], pg. 74

26 [JAN], pg. 74

Hunting

Hunting was a sport practiced by upper class people in period times, and the sport is still popular today, where it is known as fox hunting. Markham, in his “A Discourse on Horsemanship” spends a whole chapter on the grooming, feeding, and training of a horse for hunting. In period, the hunt was not limited to foxes, and the rider's technique for riding over a fence has changed. Up until the 19th century, riders sat back in the saddle while jumping, and now the accepted method is to ride in a “forward seat” and come up out of the saddle over a fence.²⁷

Conclusion

Day to day care of horses has not changed radically from medieval England to now. Horses are still kept in stalls. They are fed hay along with another high calorie food – today we feed commercially processed grain mixtures, in period many different things were fed but chiefly oats. Water is a basic necessity of life, and has assuredly not changed. Horses' hooves were trimmed and shod with iron shoes by professionals. The main difference in horses' lives between now and then is the use to which they are put. In modern times, horses are almost exclusively used for pleasure or sport. In medieval times horses were a big part of daily life, from plowing fields, to transporting goods and people, to an instrument of war.

27 [CHE], pgs. 196-197

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