

# Dressing the Horse and Rider

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An overview of human riding attire and decorative horse-coverings through the SCA period, with suggestions for adapting or disguising modern safety helmets and footwear. Attire for a variety of situations will be covered, including battle, tournament, formal and casual civilian riding.

**If a person can dress like this to work in the kitchen.... why dress like this to ride a horse?**



I hope to demonstrate that even the most beautiful of medieval clothing can be well-suited to riding horses.



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### **Overview:**

In our modern lives, we have very large wardrobes, with many items of clothing reserved for a single specific use. For example, we have office clothes, formal clothes, grubby gardening clothes, a rain coat, hiking boots, riding breeches, ski jacket and so on. We tend to be used to riding horses in specific pants, boots, jackets and other clothes which we do not use for other activities.

Our medieval counterparts had, in general, far fewer garments, and each one served a wider range of functions. Of course, a courtier would have fancy clothes for formal occasions, but a person would not change into riding clothes to travel from his home to a destination, and then change into non-riding clothes upon arrival. People lived around their livestock and their horses and these were part of daily life, so clothing was made to suit this. I have been asked, "What modifications do I need to make to my garb to make it work on horseback?" My answer is that if you make your clothing the way it was made in the Middle Ages, it will work well for riding. I encourage SCA equestrians to avoid the temptation simply to throw a tunic over their usual modern riding clothes.

In this class I will cover some silhouettes which work particularly well, and offer some suggestions for looking at medieval images to get clothing ideas. I will also discuss some ways to accommodate modern safety considerations and SCA requirements.

### **Planning your wardrobe:**

When planning your wardrobe, consider the context of your riding. Will you be entering a tournament, fighting in a battle, riding in a court procession, a carousel, a mock hunt, or simply riding for pleasure? All of these situations have different requirements for clothing. A tournament may require armor, as well as display of heraldry, weapons, a crest, and caparison for your horse. A battle (though these are not yet done in the SCA) would involve different armor, less caparison, different weapons, and possibly more armor for the horse. A court procession will require your finest presentation, and civilian rather than military garments, while riding for your own amusement may be done in anything from the most casual turnout to whatever pleases you. A carousel may require clothing and caparison which show the rider's and horse's movements off to their best advantage, or may even involve fantastical costumes.



Military riders with sturdy tack, armor and weapons, compared with a civilian rider who rides bareback, in soft clothing and light shoes.



Consider your persona's time and place, of course, but also consider your own safety. Before the 17<sup>th</sup> century, most shoes were made with smooth leather soles and no heel. Many people feel more secure around horses, especially when using stirrups, wearing shoes or boots with a heel. Perhaps you can come up with a period-looking solution, either by choosing a boot without too many modern details, or by wearing clothing which covers the feet when mounted. Adding an appropriate-looking top to a commercially-made boot may be a good compromise.

Minors are required by SCA regulations to wear boots with heels and an approved helmet. Helmets are a good idea for adults too, especially when riding an unfamiliar horse or in an unfamiliar setting, and there are many ways to cover or disguise a helmet, which will be addressed later. Be aware of loose clothing and accessories when mounting, dismounting and using weapons. I have heard a tale of a knight who got his chain caught on the horn of a western saddle when dismounting, which would have been alarming for all involved. Noisy garments, especially armor, require some introducing to the horse. Long trailing hems will require special attention so that they do not get under hoof, and may become very inconvenient in muddy conditions.

Consider your range of motion when fitting garments- can you lift your arms enough to groom / mount / put a bridle on a horse? Does your garment have enough fullness to sit astride the horse? Can your horse move adequately in the caparison or barding? Does that beautiful portuguese saddle really fit? Checking these considerations often will ensure that the garments don't tear or break in use.

### Medieval riders:

When looking at historical images, it is important to keep the same kinds of questions in mind. What is being portrayed? Is this a battle or a tournament? Are these real people or allegorical, symbolic figures? What details can you discern from the image about the shape and construction of the garment? Is a lining visible? Do the folds look like thin or heavy fabric? What colors are used? Is there decoration? How loose or tight are the garments?

Following are some historical images of riders and modern interpretations by SCA riders:

### Twelfth Century:



12<sup>th</sup> Century Bibles (unknown). Battle scenes. Thorkel Haraldsson, 2006.

The soldiers are dressed very much like the civilians of the time, in knee-length tunics, hose and shoes, with the addition of a simple helmet and hauberk. Large kite-shaped shields are carried. The horses wear bridles and saddles with breastcollars and high pommels and cantles. The stirrups are worn quite long and have a triangular shape. The attire is utilitarian, with very little decoration; however the tack is depicted in a wide range of colors.



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### Thirteenth Century:



Maciejowski Bible, circa 1250. Battle scenes.

Each rider wears a mail shirt with attached hood and mittens, and mail leggings which cover the feet. Most riders wear a lined, belted sleeveless surcoat over this, and some wear an additional flat-topped helm. Many horses wear solid-colored, hooded caparisons which cover the tack and ears, whether their riders are armored trumpeters or active combatants. The caparisons hang in deep folds with linings visible at the front edges and hems. At the far right, one of the horses has an elaborately decorated red caparison which does not match the rider's shield. Breastcollars are visible on most of the horses. Tack appears in tan, grey, black, blue, red and white.

### Fourteenth Century:



Manesse Codex, 1305-1340. Tournament scenes. Guillaume de Garrigues, 2005-2006

The importance of heraldry in tournament costume is apparent here, with brightly-colored caparisons and surcoats. The riders wear mail shirts and hose, covered by surcoats which usually match their horses' caparisons. One wears a helm covered with fabric mantling and a huge, elaborate crest. The hooded caparisons of the horses appear to be lined in fur. These caparisons are worn under the bridles, and the saddles are very deep. One rider has an all-over pattern, while the others have small shields scattered over their caparisons on backgrounds of contrasting color. Note that while Guillaume's saddle is a modern shape, very little of it is visible when in use.



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Manesse Codex, 1305-1340. Hunting scenes. Valkura, 2007. Cornelia, 2005.

The riders wear the voluminous, long or knee-length tunics common to civilian fashion of the time, with hats and in one case, an overgarment. The right image shows a tunic which appears to be slit at the front and lined in fur. All of the tunics have closely fitted forearms. Note that the skirts of the garments are not spread out over the back of the horse, but are gathered under the riders' legs.

The horses wear bridles and saddles with breastcollars and cruppers. One of the saddles has a high pommel and cantle, while the saddle of the red horse on the right has a flatter shape. Some of the saddle rigging is cut into decorative shapes, and this can be a great way to dress up your horse. Often referred to as "strap barding", this leather harness can be found in a variety of colors and shapes, and used in a range of situations. This can be a good alternative to a full caparison for versatility, or if your horse overheats easily. Note the tack colors- red bridles, light brown and black saddles, light brown, yellow and red straps.



Romance of Alexander, circa 1340. Rignach of Argyll, 2007

Noble tourneyers, each with his heraldic device displayed on his shield and each quarter of his horse's hooded, two-piece caparison. The horses' bridles are worn underneath the hoods. These caparisons hang very smoothly, with few folds.



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Romance of Alexander, circa 1340. Joust.

These shorter, narrower surcoats seem to be slit or cut away at the front and are worn over the armor. Large crests are worn, though the horses are dressed rather simply, in saddles with brightly colored breastplates and chamfrons.



Romance of Alexander, circa 1340. Civilian riders. Guillaume, 2005.

The long sleeved tunics are knee length, and fit close to the body and arms, then flare to a wider skirt for riding. Note that the man on the right is riding bareback. The hoods with short shoulder capes which were very popular in the 14<sup>th</sup> century are quite practical for riding as they provide warmth without encumbering the rider.



Romance of Alexander, circa 1340. Women hunting. Annisa, 2007.

These women wear dresses which are close-fitting through the torso and sleeves, but have enough fullness in the skirt to sit astride the horse. They do not wear overgowns, which is notable as the majority of the women in this manuscript wear two visible layers. While images can be found of 14<sup>th</sup> century women (and occasionally men) riding side-saddle, it does not seem to be the predominant way for women to ride at this time. Note that these women do not spread their skirts over the backs of their horses. This is very practical, as the inside of a skirt will get very dirty very quickly on the back of the horse. The horses wear low-profile saddles with simple, colorful rigging, and matching bridles.



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Manesse Codex, 1305-1340. Hunting/Courting scene.

These riders wear the civilian fashions of the time, consisting of a tunic with snug-fitting forearms covered by a very full sleeveless overgarment, and hat or veils. The lady's horse wears a high-backed saddle with crupper and breastcollar, with the addition of a long, decorated blanket cut into tabs at the hem. The crupper has a fringe of tassels. The bridles appear to have metal accents on the brow, and the tack colors are light brown, yellow, red and black.

### Fifteenth Century:



Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460. Tournament procession.

*“And after the king of arms should come the...judges, side by side, each on a fair palfrey covered with the judge's coat of arms right down to the ground...”*

The judges of the tournament enter the town with their heralds and their horses decked out in heraldic coverings. This procession includes trumpeters, heralds, judges, footmen, and knights. The judges wear formal long coats and chaperon hats, and the heralds wear their masters' tabards. The rest wear civilian fashions consisting of close-fitting hose, doublets with padded shoulders and short coats, with hats or caps. The riders wear boots, while the footmen wear low shoes.

The judges' horses wear long hooded caparisons with the heraldry repeated on each quarter, and the reins are decorated with broad bands. The other horses have a wide variety of “strap barding” styles, including a very elaborate blue fringed version on the white horse just behind the judges.



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Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460. Tournament. Madrone Equestrian Guild, 2004-2008.

The riders wear short or long coats with slits in the back and front. The circular cut of women's skirts provides plenty of fullness for riding. The tourneyers' horses wear hoodless fabric caparisons with heraldry, or "strap barding" to attend a tournament. The caparisons are lined, and hang in heavy-looking folds.



Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460. Rittmaster Frye, 2007.

The Duke of Brittany's horse enters the city for a tournament in special parade caparison, followed by the Duke's buglers and herald. The buglers wear livery coats, and their horses wear sturdy "strap barding".



Livre des Tournois, René d'Anjou, circa 1460. Tournament advertisement poster.

Two dukes wear a grand array of heraldry, from their splendid armor and surcoats to their elaborate crests and mantling. The horses wear hoodless caparisons which cover their chest armor and the riders' legs. The reins are covered to match, and the horses even wear small crests and miniature shields on their metal chamfrons.



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## Sixteenth Century :



John Derrick, The Image of Irelande, 1581. Soldiers. Gordon, Neb Frye, 2005-2008

The riders wear the shirts, doublets, breeches, coats and hats fashionable at the time. Typically equestrian elements are the long boots. The tack is utilitarian, with deep, padded saddles and extra rigging as needed.



John Derrick, The Image of Irelande, 1581. Battle between English and Irish soldiers

English soldiers on the left and Irish soldiers on the right. Note the differences in the helmets and tack of the two groups.



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### Seventeenth century riders:



Diego Velazquez: Queen Margarita on Horseback, 1634/35; Queen Isabella of Bourbon, Wife of Philip IV.

By the sixteenth century riding sidesaddle was more common for noble women, though these two queens ride astride. Both horses wear breastcollars and substantial though not particularly colorful tack with decorative accents. The women's dresses are spread over the backs of the horses, and protected by huge, carpet-like blankets on the horses. Note that Queen Margarita's horse has "paint" markings, an uncommon sight on the horses of earlier European nobility.

### Eastern riders:



These styles are pretty far outside my area of study, but it is interesting to note that the lady playing the harp is riding astride her horse.



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### **A few tips:**

If the skirt of a tunic or coat is not very full, slits in the front and back will help it to lie smoothly when mounted. This technique has been used by riders throughout history (and fiction). Slits at the sides can also work.



**Footwear:** For safety purposes, minors participating in SCA equestrian activities are required to wear sturdy boots with enough of a heel to prevent the foot slipping through the stirrup. Adults may also feel more comfortable with a heel, especially when riding with stirrups. Many commercially available styles of riding boot look acceptably “period”. In general, most English-style boots look all right. Western “cowboy” boots are very distinctive in shape and decoration, while plain, flatter-heeled roping boots look better. Many shoes and boots not made specifically for equestrian activities can also work, for example, the inexpensive boots sold by [scaboos.com](http://scaboos.com) are often used. As with footwear for general SCA use, use your best judgement to determine a balance of function and form. Consider the tack you will be using, your familiarity with the horses you will be dealing with, and your requirements for arch and ankle support, toe protection, traction, water resistance, etc.

**Fabric and washability:** Horses are dirty, and like to rub their slobbery heads on clean clothing. Anything you wear while dealing with horses should be washable. Pre-wash all fabrics to be used in making clothes to be worn around horses. Of course, I also say the same thing about making any clothing to be worn while camping.



**Clothing for women:** Many women opt to dress like men when riding, as it seems simpler not to have to deal with a long dress. Consider this: until the 20<sup>th</sup> century, european women wore long skirts. All daily tasks were accomplished in this attire. In the ages before the train and automobile, travel was accomplished on foot or with the help of horses and other quadrupeds. I ride in the same dresses that I wear at any SCA event, and find them to be quite functional and comfortable. So, I encourage women to wear what their persona would wear when on horseback.



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Several women have asked me what modifications they should make to their dresses so that they may ride in them. The answer is usually, nothing! If your clothing is accurately made, you will probably find that it works just fine as it is. Some things to check would be:

- Undergarments. Linen or wool knee-length stockings are accurate for most of our period, and provide some leg protection. Linen braies (boxer shorts), bike shorts, or other pants may be useful. Many SCA women choose to wear riding pants under their skirts. Neutral colors won't be distracting, and historically accurate stockings may still be worn to cover and help protect the lower leg.
- Fullness of skirt. Try straddling something in your dress. Is there enough fullness that the skirt does not inhibit movement? Does the skirt pull up indecently?
- Length. Be practical- long trains aren't the most practical thing for the outdoors, much less a working situation. A floor-length or ankle length hem is a better idea, and wearing a belt so that the side closest to the horse can be tucked up is handy when leading and grooming. Keep track of your hem so that it doesn't end up under hoof, and have someone assist you when mounting so that you can arrange your skirt, especially if you are using a saddle with a high cantle.
- Extras. If you ride in a western or australian saddle with a horn, be extra careful when mounting and dismounting so you don't catch clothing, belts, sleeves or necklaces on the horn. Aprons can be very handy.

**Clothing for men:** Consider whether your usual period clothing will work. Usually it will.

Some features of horsemen's clothing:

- Slits at center front and back. Since men's garments often have less fullness in the skirt, a slit from the hem to the waist may be useful.
- Length. Long enough to cover & protect legs, short enough to stay out of the way.
- Pants. Either hose, breeches or trousers.
- Boots. Long boots are very useful to protect the legs from the stirrup leathers, and to provide extra grip.

**Headwear-** If you are not using a helmet, wear the usual headwear of your persona. You may want to consider securing any very loose fabric to prevent it from obscuring your vision, but in general, you shouldn't need to make any modifications. Sun hats or other broad-brimmed hats may be pinned to a coif worn underneath to prevent the hat blowing off.

Minors must wear approved helmets, and many adults also prefer to use helmets when riding. A riding helmet may be covered in a variety of ways. Since the helmet is larger than your head, wider, bulkier styles of hat will adapt best to being used as helmet covers and will be more convincing than trying to make it look like a close-fitting style, which will seem to hover oddly away from the head. Turbans, padded chaperons, and hats with brims will mask the bulk of the helmet well. The popular An Tirian wool cap with fur trim can also work. A wimple, liripipe, coif or drape under the chin can cover the helmet's harness, and low profile helmets will produce the most convincing-looking hats.

**Some modern riding helmets, covered to look like hats of the rider's persona:**



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I hope that I have shown that a wide variety of historical styles of clothing may be worn safely and comfortably for equestrian activities, and that modern elements may be incorporated where needed without sacrificing a historical appearance. Horses at events can provide spectacular historical impact, and the better we look, the more we add to the pageantry and feeling of stepping back in time.

### Resources:

Fabric websites:

- [www.fabrics-store.com](http://www.fabrics-store.com) (linen for \$3-8 a yard.)
- [www.fashionfabricsclub.com](http://www.fashionfabricsclub.com) (linen, silk, wool and more)

Period dress accessories:

- [www.medievalwares.com](http://www.medievalwares.com): pins, buttons, etc.
- [www.fetteredcockpewters.com](http://www.fetteredcockpewters.com): buttons, buckles, pins, etc.
- [www.historicenterprises.com](http://www.historicenterprises.com) sewing tools, pins

Books:

- Textiles and Clothing- Museum of London
- Woven into the Earth- Else Ostergard
- Cut my Cote- Dorothy Burnham

Websites for info:

- Madrone Equestrian Guild site- <http://madrone.equestrianguild.org/> many articles and resources.
- <http://www.vertetsable.com/> excellent late period site, also has some really great basic info including basic sewing, seam finishing, rectangular construction, etc.
- <http://www.curiousfrau.com/> again, later stuff but still excellent
- <http://www.forest.gen.nz/Medieval/articles/Tunics/TUNICS.HTML> a good article on making a tunic, including a cutting diagram and instructions for doing the measurements, etc
- [http://www.virtue.to/articles/tunic\\_worksheet.html](http://www.virtue.to/articles/tunic_worksheet.html) and another
- <http://www.personal.utulsa.edu/~marc-carlson/cloth/bockhome.html> a comprehensive website with tons of line drawings of period extant garments from a variety of times and places
- Contessa Illaria's barbing page- <http://ilaria.veltri.tripod.com/overviewbards.html#closed>
- Manesse Codex- <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/> many images of riders, including caparisons with heraldry displayed in a variety of ways.

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