All about Horses during the Middle Ages

- Breeding
- Uses
- Armor
- Anatomy

Higgins Armory Museum in Worcester, MA
Here are a few pictures of horses from the Middle Ages.
Let's get ready to learn all about horses!

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What is a Horse?

A horse is a large hoofed mammal that evolved from species of smaller multi-toed mammals that existed almost 55 million years ago. The horse was first domesticated (used by humans) about 6,000 years ago.

Horses are used every day for exercise, entertainment, agriculture, and transportation. Horses are herbivores (animals that eat plants) and they enjoy eating carrots, oats, and tall grasses.

Wow! There are about 75 million horses in the world!
History of Horse Breeding

Horse breeding is the selective reproduction of horses in which two horses mate and have a baby with certain qualities. Today horse breeders can help make foals more healthy and strong by giving foals proper food and medical care.

During the time of the Roman Empire, horse breeding was very important, but when the empire declined so did the interest in breeding. Horses then bred as they pleased, so trying to breed horses in the Middle Ages was difficult. There were several small breeding centers throughout Europe, but breeding techniques mostly had to be developed all over again.
More on horse breeding

The ancestors of the medieval horse are unknown. It is believed that the horses came from either Spain or the Middle East, brought back from the Crusades. Spanish horses were the most expensive to buy, and their horses were the most desired. Other places quality war horses originated from were France and Scandinavia. Successful horse breeding was very important to warfare, so many breeding centers were opened throughout Europe. Monks were known to breed some of the best horses, and they kept the most accurate records.

Guess What? A pony is not a baby horse, it is actually a small full grown horse.
Different Horse Breeds Used in the Middle Ages

**Thoroughbred**

Thoroughbred horses stand 14.2 to 17.2 hands high and have a solid color. This breed of horses was originally made by mating an Arab stallion and an English mare. This horse breed was so inbred that the ancestry of every thoroughbred can be traced to three different stallions (Byerley Turk, Darley Arabian, Godolphin Arabian). Thoroughbreds are known for their gallant and lively temperament.
Andulasian

The andulasian horse breed originated in Spain. It is a cross of two Iberian horse breeds. The andulasian was also used in medieval times as a breeding horse because of its strength, height, and agility. This breed is about 15.2 to 16.2 hands high, and they are known for their long flowing mane and tails. The majority of andulasian horses are grey or white, and the breed is always one color. Andulasians are known to be intelligent, sensitive, cooperative and able to learn quickly.

Wow! One hand used for horse measurement is equivalent to 4 inches!
Shires

Shire horses originated in England during the Middle Ages. Farmers used shires the most during that time because of their strength and versatility. Today shires are used as show horses, but occasionally they are still used on the farm.

Shire horses are known for their immense size. The breed stands from 16.2 to 18 hands high! Shires are usually black, bay, brown, or grey in color, with white feathering on their legs. Shires also are used often because of their gentle and patient nature.
Types of Medieval Horses

The Destrier

In the Middle Ages horses had different quality ratings and prices. The most expensive and well bred horses, destriers, were used by the noble lords and knights because they displayed a large amount of wealth and importance. Destriers were usually taller horses that were one solid color, such as an andalusian. They were extremely valuable on the battlefield because they provided the knight with power. Destriers were highly trained before they were sold, and this made them extremely expensive and rare.

Fun fact! Horses belong to the equus family. Equus is derived from a Greek word meaning quickness.
The palfrey was the “everyday horse” of a knight. The palfrey was shorter and longer than a destrier, but their gait was much smoother which provided comfort for rider when they were not in battle. Most noble women used the palfrey because of its smooth step and high quality. The palfrey was also used by lower level knights during battle. This horse was used for multiple purposes such as travel and battle.
Courser

Unlike the destrier and palfrey, the courser was a fast and easily maneuverable horse. The courser was used as a messenger horse in armies and were sometimes used by kings to add speed to their travel. Coursers were known for their endurance but not for their refinement. Many of these horses were poorly trained, but they cost significantly less than the destrier and palfrey.

Did you know? Horses have small stomachs which is why you see them grazing all day long!
Rouncy

Horses helped medieval society develop new farming techniques.

The rouncy horse was used to carry heavy objects and farm the land. They were usually heavier than the destrier, palfrey, and the courser. These horses were the farmers horse and were usually poorly trained. Rouncy horses had good endurance because they had to work in the fields or travel all day long. There was no special breeding that was associated with the rouncy. It was a horse for the lower class.
Genetics Basics

Genetics is the science of heredity in living organisms. When organisms inherit traits from their parents, they are inheriting specific genes. There are many different types of genes that make up different sections of chromosomes. DNA is deoxyribonucleic acid, a molecule that is composed of different patterns of nucleotides. These patterns are translated by a cell to make different proteins that determine hair color, eye color, and height.

Different traits are passed on by parents based on whether they are dominant or recessive. For example, brown eyes is a dominant gene, so if your mom has blue eyes and your dad has brown eyes you will have brown eyes because the dominant gene overrules the recessive gene.
For centuries breeders have been using genetics to help improve horse breeds. When breeders crossbred a strong horse with a fast horse, it resulted in a new stronger, faster breed of horses. This was how the horse breeders developed the hundreds of horse breeds that exist today.
Ways the Horse was Used

In the Middle Ages there were no cars, no army trucks or tanks, and no video games. Horses were used everyday in many ways. They were used in the armies as part of the cavalry. Horses were a very important part of jousting which was a popular form of entertainment. They were also used on the farm, as transportation, and in hunting parties.
During medieval times, horses had many different jobs on the battle field. The fastest horses carried the lightly armed riders. The strongest horses carried the equipment. A horse’s personality and capabilities determined how it would be used.
Jousting

The idea behind jousting tournaments was to prepare for battle. Participants originally used the same armor and weapons as they did on the battlefield. Over time the sport developed into a game. Horses wore little armor and were bred to be larger. The armor the riders wore was typically lightweight and more decorative. Horses were also decorated to represent a knight’s family or their lord.

Wow! It took stable hands just as long as riders to prepare for a jousting match!
One of the major developments of the Middle Ages was large scale plowing which made it possible to **till** heavy soil. Strong animals were required to pull plows across the big fields.

Inventions like the horse collar and the iron horse shoe made it easier for a horse to plow a field. Typically horses plowed in teams of four or six. A team of horses could usually plow an acre of land a day, compared to team of eight oxen that could only plow half an acre a day.
Transportation

During the Middle Ages everyone used pack animals to travel, whether they were rich or poor. Kings and queens had large caravans of horses, while peasants would merely rent an animal. The best kind of horse for travel was one with a smooth walk. In Europe, there was no uniform system of roads, and most of the paths were dirt. Horses that pulled wagons were called draught horses. They were typically short and could pull almost 600 pounds.

Did you know? Pack horses were called “hackneys”
A popular past time of the Middle Ages was hunting. Noblemen brought their fastest horses to the hunting parties. Typically they would also bring hounds to track down animals such as deer, boar, wolves, and rabbits.
Horse Armor

Horse armor was as expensive and time consuming to make as human's armor. Bard-ing was another word for horse armor. Armor for horses was necessary because enemies attacked horses as a way to slow their riders down. Each piece of armor has its own name. The champron was designed to protect the horse’s face. It extended from the horse’s ears to its muzzle, with flanges to cover its eyes. The criniere was a set of metal pieces that covered the neck of a horse. These pieces connected to the champron. A horse’s hindquarters were covered by a croupier. This piece was typically made of leather, chain, or plate. Boiled leather was a common material for horse armor, but plate metal was much more protective.
More on horse armor

To the right is a picture of a horse in full armor, below is a champron

The flanchard covered the horse’s flank and was attached to the side of the saddle, then around the front or rear of the horse and then to the saddle again. Usually the flanchard was made of metal plates riveted to leather. Sometimes there was an opening for a rider to use spurs. A petral was also attached to the saddle, protecting the horse’s chest. Horses were also covered in caparisons, which were like long robes made of cloth. There was also a form of protection for the horse’s reins. Thin metal plates were riveted to the leather to prevent the reins from being cut.
Here are a few pictures of horses from the Middle Ages.

Glossary

**Foal** - a young animal of the horse family; especially: one under one year

**Hand** - is a unit of length measurement, originally based on the breadth of a male human hand and now standardized at 4 inches

**DNA** - deoxyribonucleic acid is a nucleic acid that contains the genetic instructions used in the development and functioning of all known living organisms

**Thoroughbred** - bred from the best blood through a long line, mix of Arab stallion and English mare

**Stallion** - a male horse kept for breeding

**Hindquarter** - the rear of a four-legged animal

**Spurs** - worn on the heel of a boot, used when riding horses

**Till** - to work by plowing, sowing, and raising crops

**Dominant** - a quality that is stronger than another gene for the same trait.

**Recessive** - a quality that is weaker than another gene for the same trait
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