

Knights and Destriers: Representations and Symbolism of the Medieval Warhorse in Medieval Art

Marina Viallon

The horse is a common figure in medieval art. This is especially the case within the context of military representations, among which one often finds the figure of the knight riding his noble steed. Indeed, the horse cannot be dissociated from knighthood, a new military form of nobility born in the eleventh century. Yet, at its beginning, chivalry was above all a function: knights were elite horse-riding warriors who subsequently elaborated for themselves ethical rules that became the framework of their identity. Their warhorses played a crucial part in this

Unlike today, husbandry in the Middle Ages largely ignored specific breeds of horses. Horses were designated, with regards to their geographical origin or their function, the latter according to their natural qualities or their training. For example, the palfrey was a costly civilian horse with the capacity of marching amble, a more comfortable gait for travelling. But the most expensive horse of the medieval stable was the destrier, or great horse, the stallion trained for war and tournament. Physically the perfect destrier was tall (the tallest of medieval horses, between 1.50 and 1.60 metres)¹ with thin legs but a compact and muscular body.

The word destrier, meaning “right handed” seems to appear in Old French texts in the beginning of the twelfth century, with the spread of the most well-known knightly form of combat: the charge with the couched lance. This technique, first observed among the Norman riders of the Bayeux tapestry, consists in holding a lance under the right armpit, and passing it over the horse’s neck, on his left side (protected by the great shield) for hitting another fighter by his left; and all of this on the back of a galloping horse.² It was a powerful blow (it could pierce a man covered with chain mail), but the charge was also meant

¹ A medium size for today, but they were the tallest horses at that time. That is why the warhorse was commonly called ‘great horse’ in English.

² Carol Gillmor, “Practical Chivalry: The Training of Horses for Tournaments and Warfare,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, n.s. 13 (1992): 15.

to disorganise the enemy's ranks and to have a pronounced psychological impact upon them.

The use of the horse was essential to the use of the lance, for the power of its impact is determined by its speed and its strength; the rider's job consisting in keeping the right position, controlling the horse and aiming at his opponent. This was very difficult and required extensive training from childhood and could only be practiced efficiently by those who had the time and money to afford such a training. Warhorses likewise required special training. First, they needed to become acclimatized to the sounds and violence of combat. Secondly, for the couched lance technique, they had to accept running directly towards another rider (a rather unnatural thing for a horse), while also galloping on the right lead for the meeting. Indeed, the gallop is an asymmetrical gait, and by galloping on the right lead (the right front leg advancing and touching the ground forward to a greater extent than the left one, used by the animal to keep its balance in curves), it could compensate an impact coming from its left. This special training may be an explanation for the name *destrier* (literally "right-handed horse").

Because the horse was actually giving the blow, it also learned both to push, and to take the blow given to its rider. Warhorses were selected to be tall, fast, manoeuvrable and strong enough to both give and receive blows. That is why the lance, until the very end of the practice of chivalry, remained the most knightly of weapons; because only a long-trained knight on a costly trained horse could use it efficiently.

All of these technical explanations are important for understanding the relationship between these horses and the creation of chivalry, and why the warhorse was considered in representations (both pictorial and literary) as the knight's true double.

This symbolic doubling, for example, is one reason why warhorses are always presented as males. In reality, even if stallions were indeed preferred, females were also used in war. In artistic representations, however, the qualities of the warhorse must reflect those of its rider, and so showing a knight riding a mare would have questioned his virility, and all the qualities attached to it (courage, strength, power, etc.).

Several examples of the symbolic treatment of warhorses are visible in King René's *Book of Tournaments*, illustrated by Barthélémy d'Eyck (Bibliothèque Nationale de France, c. 1465). One such instance is the image depicting the participants' official entry into town just before the tournament. Part of this official ceremony is the warhorses' parade, which precedes the knights' entry. A big black *destrier*, wearing Brittany's colours, is ridden (as René says) by a "very small page", certainly for the purpose of visually increasing the beast's stature. It is followed by musicians and then the duke of Brittany and his knights. These figures are not riding warhorses but *palfreys*, of shorter size. Indeed, they never employed the warhorse for travelling to the tournament or the battlefield in order to save its strength for combat (and also because *palfreys* and

civilian saddles were more comfortable for travelling). Parading these horses without their noble riders give to these animals a high distinction and allow the audience to appreciate their qualities. René was a well-known horse-lover, and it can explain that this practice held his attention.

If the destriers' parade is important in René's treatise, it is also because they became, with the rise of chivalry, a strong element in the identity of this military social class. A warhorse was expensive both to buy and to keep, and if we add its exceptional size and its special training, it was a luxury that a man was proud to display in public, both in reality and in artistic representations.

An illustration from the Westminster psalter, dated to about 1250 (British Library, MS Royal 2 A XII, f. 220), shows a knight kneeling in front of a king. He is depicted with all the attributes of his class: full military equipment of the latest fashion (chain mail covering the whole body, a sword, lance, helm, and spurs) and his warhorse behind him. Thus, the latter is really considered to be part of the knight's iconography (this image representing not a real knight but the perfect idea of a knight). Moreover, on his warhorse, the knight stands above other men, and confirms in this way his social superiority. In his *Book of the order of Chivalry* written in 1275, Ramon Lulle, describing the symbolism of every piece of the knight's equipment, says clearly about the warhorse: "The horse is given to the knight to signify the nobility of courage, so that he may be mounted higher up than other men".³ By extension, the knight on his horse was also a symbol of pride and vanity in medieval iconography. On Conques Abbey's great tympanum (France), representing the Last Judgement, in Hell the knight guilty of pride is violently pulled down from his horse by a demon.

For the knights, war and above all tournament, were avenues for showing off nobility and power. The beauty of the warhorse, often sung in romances and *chansons de geste*, was part of this display. Beside the horse's own beauty, finery and rich equipment was used to increased its splendour, and through that, the rider's own prestige. When their owners could afford it, these horses were adorned with rich tack and precious fabric such as the long caparisons covering the animal from head to feet, represented on many medieval images. Appearing in the middle of the thirteenth century, the primary use of these caparisons is still not known: perhaps either a protection against sun or bad weather or a mimicking of Saracen trappings encountered during crusades or in Spain? In any way, even if the caparisons depicted in the Maciejowski Bible (Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, MS M 638, c. 1250) are still plain, in the second half of the century they became the favoured location for the display of heraldry.

The coat of arms was a means of recognition for knights, both on the battlefield and during tournaments, and because the shield's size decreased around 1200 due to advancements in armour, displaying one's coat of arms on

³ Raymond Lulle, *Le livre de l'ordre de la chevalerie*, transl. Bruno Hapel (Paris: Guy Trédaniel, 1990), 58.

one's horse was an excellent way to be seen and identified from a long distance. Unfortunately, these gorgeous pieces of fabric are only known today through artistic representations, even if some fragments preserved in museums are thought to once have been parts of horse caparisons. Such is the case of a fourteenth-century embroidery preserved in the Musée de Cluny in Paris (*Broderie aux léopards*, Cl. 20367, c. 1330), probably made for Edward III, which shows the royal arms of England. It provides an example of the precious pieces of fabric warhorses were sometime adorned with.

During combat, however, the destrier was very exposed to injuries and from the twelfth century onwards numerous images showing different types of horse armour reveal a special attention to its protection. Indeed, the animal was so costly that fighters even tried to preserve their opponents' mounts, hoping to catch them and keep them for themselves. During tournaments it was even forbidden and harshly punishable to hurt them on purpose. Over and above matters of expense, however, riding an injured horse or having it killed during battle was very dangerous for the knight. He could lose control of his animal or have to fight on foot, where his equipment was less advantageous and his life more at risk.

Between the twelfth and the end of the fourteenth century chain mail constituted the main type of armour for warhorses. It had the advantage of being supple, but the disadvantage of being heavy for the animal. The manufacture of this form of protection was time-consuming and costly, especially for the amount needed to cover the body of a horse. Therefore, only the wealthiest knights could afford it, and like rich fabric it could also serve as a display of wealth and power amongst the knights themselves.

From the late thirteenth century onwards, horse armour saw the addition of rigid parts, made with leather and then metal, especially on the head and neck, the body parts most exposed to injuries given by other riders. From the fifteenth century onwards, fully rigid horse armour was used to protect the entire body, even if armourers were never able to find a way to protect the legs, vulnerable against footmen, without restraining the horse's movement.

Nevertheless, Lorenz Helmschmid, Emperor Maximilian I's great armourer, seems to have created in around 1500 several fully articulated bards for horses, which included the legs. These, however, were more examples of the armourer's master pieces than truly functional defences, and they stayed prototypes. The silver presentation coins (*Doppelguldiner*) struck from 1508 onwards to celebrate Maximilian's coronation as emperor, show him with such a horse armour.⁴ Useless in combat (a horse could barely walk with it), This incredible piece could have been presented in parades or pageants, where such an equipment would have gardened the audience's amazement. It was also a

⁴ *The Armored Horse in Europe, 1480-1620*, ed. Stuart W. Pyhrr, Donald J. LaRocca and Dirk Breiding (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art and Yale University Press, 2005), 35.

way for Maximilian to tell people that he was keeping in his armoury a person capable of doing what nobody had done before, and to thereby demonstrate his power.

Actually, apart from head and neck protections, it seems that metal horse armours were not used at war but only for parade and tournaments, perhaps because they were too heavy or too unstable. For battle, similar bards were worn, made in *cuir bouilli* (hardened leather), covered with rich fabric or simply painted, having the advantage of being lighter and cheaper.

Representations of the medieval warhorse tell us about the technical and symbolic role of this animal in the chivalric society. They complete more discreet sources such as texts or objects that did not survive in great quantity. Like in every use of iconographic sources, however, prudence must be observed and it is always important to understand what the artist wanted to show. More than a depiction of a realistic animal, this horse was therefore often represented as a mark of military high status, and a mark of knighthood. It symbolically carried qualities associated to chivalry: nobility, courage, strength, but could also go along with the deadly sin of pride. Thus, the warhorse or destrier was an absolute symbol of a class that, in the last centuries of the Middle Ages, justified its social domination through an elitist practice and a real *mise-en-scène* of horse combat, in actual fact more often in tournaments than on the battlefield. During these feasts, fully armoured and on the back of destriers covered with gold and rich fabric, knights were giving to their peers and the people a transcended image of themselves, then willingly reproduced in art. Without any doubt these amazing images are responsible of the place still taken by the proud knight on his prancing warhorse in our mental popular image of knighthood in the Middle Ages.

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Vorwort

In diesem Heft von *Medium Ævum Quotidianum* zeigt sich im Besonderen die Internationalität, die sich heute in Forschungen zur Kultur- und Alltagsgeschichte des Mittelalters erkennen lässt. Jene Situation kann zur Hoffnung Anlass geben, dass sich auch die internationale und kontinentenübergreifende Kooperation in Zukunft in ähnlicher Weise verstärken wird.

Die zwei ersten Beiträge von Autorinnen aus Argentinien und Frankreich, Andrea Vanina Neyra und Marina Viallon, basieren auf Vorträgen, die am International Medieval Congress in Leeds im Jahre 2014 in einer Sektion zu „Animals and Identity“ präsentiert wurden. Anne M. Scott von der Western Australian University analysiert die Exempla des englischen Gilbertinermönches Robert Mannyng (ca. 1275-ca. 1338) in dessen *Handlyng Synne*. Der vierte Beitrag der rumänisch-ungarischen Wissenschaftlerin Andrea-Bianka Znorovszky konzentriert sich auf das Phänomen des Cross-Dressings von heiligen Frauen und dessen Repräsentation im visuellen Befund.

Gerhard Jaritz