

Women riding in Medieval times – Practical experiences

By Isabell Winter 2009

These are some notes on practical solutions/problems I have encountered while recreating riding during medieval times. Please note this is my opinion based on personal experience.

It has been rather difficult to find pictures of women riding during medieval times, books have a lot of men riding but very few women. The women that are pictured are commonly stylized and/or fantasy based so it can become hard to sort fact from fiction.

Clothing Notes

Women generally wore dresses, but riding in a dress can be awkward. Wearing hose under a dress would act similar to modern day jodhpurs to prevent pinching by the stirrup leathers and plucking of hair. I have found separate skirts and bodices have their own advantages and disadvantages over dresses. My notes are primarily for astride riding, unless headed up as side saddle (note modern side saddle usage however).

Skirts – really nice to wear, watch the weight however as nice heavy wool skirts will hang lovely but do make you sit up tall as the back of the skirt drapes over the back of the horse. On the other hand, light floaty skirts become like parachutes and your modesty may not remain. Either way ensure the horse is happy with any option used. I have done desensitization including throwing towels over my horse heads and they really don't care anymore, so a rustling skirt did not faze them. You may however get some strange looks if you road ride in urban or even the country side like I have. Being made to sit up from the waist is not a bad thing but it took me by surprise when I first started, and I was glad to have started with a skirt rather than the weight pull from my shoulders in a dress.

Also consider the period of time riding and what you are planning to undertake. I have experimented and competed a small endurance ride (15km) in full garb, wearing a medium to heavy weight wool skirt with separate chemise and bodice (modern jodhpurs underneath) and within a few kilometers my nicely draped skirt was starting to change colour and become darker as my horse started becoming sweaty. By the end of the ride, he was dripping sweat and while I had pulled the skirt up to sit directly behind the saddle rather than drape over his backside at times, the fabric has wicked up the sweat so not the most pleasant. Riding in garb made for some interesting comments from people on the ride and some great photos however.

Dresses – Once again depending on weight you will get different situations. A nice cotton dress with a belt to pull it in at the waist reduces the shoulder drag you can experience from a heavier weight dress.

Skirt/dress circumference – this was interesting, for me a skirt with a 3m hem did not cover my knees, by the time it went over the front of the saddle, down over your legs and then over the back of the saddle my knees were visible – not very lady like. I then made a riding skirt using a German full circle design which resulted in an approx 9m hem – this has worked very well for riding in, gives lovely drape, covers down and over my ankles while astride and not bulky around the waist which could lead to problems while on horse back.

Side saddle – I have an 1850's original side saddle so not period for medieval times as theirs were more literally side saddle. This also works in a large circumference skirt/dress, but did find cotton jodhpurs on decorated leather did not work so well for going faster than a walk – things became very slippery very fast, and with the horse being new to the experience and myself being self taught and not ridden side saddle for 8 years I decided best to not push the experience. So important to consider your underwear ladies, when preparing to ride in medieval garb.

Long distance traveling – I have found one picture of a woman riding horseback from “The medieval horse and its equipment c.1150-c.1450” John Clark, 2004. What was fascinating about this picture was the woman was riding astride in what I term overhose I have no idea what the actual term is and I have not yet found a second illustration to prove this was common. Basically the ‘Overhose’ allowed the lady to ride astride while wearing a dress as her dress then tucked into them, they appear to be joined in the middle and cover your feet also, so this would also reduce the road grime and horse dust that you could otherwise find in your clothing. The illustrated lady is completing a journey but had enough money to hire a horse for the journey – hiring horses was not cheap but that's another story.

But as mentioned from completing a modern endurance ride you do get dirty and sweaty, I find it hard to believe that women would want to get their outer dresses dirty. You could argue that you could wear older clothes or non fancy clothing and this is a possibility, but given the expense to own and keep a horse if you were from the city, having the luxury to ride could be argued that you had enough money that maybe you didn't worry – still not pleasant however to be wearing a horse sweat soaked dress.

Precessions – Illustrations I have come across show women all dressed up and in what could be their best outfits. I strongly believe that these women would have had a blanket or similar on the horse to prevent getting their expensive dresses dirty. Even riding for a short time in a precession you have horse dust work its way into your fabric. I have found some picture evidence of blankets on the horses to keep the ladies dresses clean and am working at collating these into one location. In some illustrations the women are sitting behind a lord on a blanket for sitting upon extending from the saddle, but not just a large saddle blanket, more specifically designed, once again some of these illustrations are more fantasy than factual so it can be hard to tell sometimes.

Examples of women riding in the SCA - Lochac



Cotton dress with belt to collect at Waist, 14th century coathardie style with short sleeves, very easy to ride in, light enough to be comfortable, but heavy enough to give nice drape and hang.



Blauit style dress, has fabric belt and long sleeves, almost full circle skirt, also gives very nice drape and coverage on the horse



Separate skirt and bodice. Silk skirt, with very large hem, lots of fabric but very good coverage while on the horse – this was created for May Crown tournament 2008