

2000 YEARS OF SHOEING? -Dr. vet. med. H. Strasser

It is often cited as an argument for the indispensability of horseshoes by their supporters that horseshoes have been in use for thousands of years for riding and draft horses. According to the most recent findings, however, it is certain that the horseshoe was first introduced to Western and Central Europe in the 9th Century, and was previously completely unknown.

In Ancient Greece, too, the riding horses went barefoot. The Greek Xenophon began his treatise "On the Art of Riding" (written about 400 BC) with horses' hooves, and emphasized the great importance of regular hoofcare. His book deals exclusively with the husbandry and training of military horses, which could perform their duties very well without shoes.

Markus Junkelmann writes in his book "The Riders of Rome" (Die Reiter Roms vol.3) "The great distances covered by Scythian, Persian, Macedonian and Carthagian cavalries during their campaigns think only of the battles of Alexander the Great show that cavalry, even without horseshoes, is capable of the greatest of achievements."

And what about the Ancient Romans' attitude to hoof protection? We know of the so called "hippo sandal" of iron, "soleae ferreae" in Latin, which was in use in the Celtic Roman area north of the Alps from the middle of the 1st century to the 4th Century AD. The hooves were wrapped and placed in the shoes, which were then fastened with the help of bands running through hooks and eyes at the front and back ends of the shoes. The hippo sandals were usually allowed to be worn only by draft and pack animals walking on "paved" roads, since a gait faster than the walk seems to have been impossible with the hippo sandals.

Nailed on horseshoes are to be found neither in Roman literature, nor depicted in art. The equestrian statue of Caesar Marcus Aurelius (died 180AD) shows a horse with beautiful natural hooves. Since the sculptor represented every detail of the horse and rider very realistically and accurately, he certainly would not have simply left out a form of hoof protection. But no Roman work of art shows even a single shod hoof, while in the Middle Ages shod hooves are always clearly shown even in simple pictures.

There are various medieval paintings in which the artist has faithfully represented the shod hooves as contracted hooves as contracted hooves are in fact a consequence of shoeing.

The invention of nailed on horseshoes has been ascribed to the Celts, who are supposed to have been using them already in Roman times. If, however, horseshoes had actually been in use by the Gauls, Celts or Germanic tribes, Julius Caesar would certainly have mentioned them in his book "The Conquest of Gaul". Also, neither in Pompeii or Herculaneum, nor in the ruins of other Roman forts where mounted units were stationed, have horseshoes been found amongst the considerable iron artifacts. And among the remains of 30 fallen military horses in Krefeld Gellep, there was not a single horseshoe to be found.

The Swiss researcher Walter Drack compared artifacts of supposedly Celtic horseshoes with shoes from precisely datable medieval finds, and observed that the "Celtic" shoes were the same type used in central Europe from the 10th to the 16th Centuries. On this subject Markus Junkelmann writes: "The silence of written and pictorial sources, the topological identity of all discovered 'originals' with medieval and early modern pieces, as well as the material improbability that the horseshoe, after it was first invented, should then over centuries be only sporadically used, while at the same time the existing, awkward hoof shoe remained in use,

support with virtual certainty that there were neither Celtic nor Roman horseshoes."

Nowadays, the working and military horse has become a leisure and sporting companion who often suffers, through the confined keeping usual in most areas, from extreme lack of movement. Is it not thought provoking, this assumption that a horse, which is only allowed to move 1 4 hours a day if that supposedly cannot do without constant shoeing?

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