

The Emperor's New Saddle Cloth: The Ephippium of the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius

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FOR DIETRICH VON BOTHMER IN HONOR OF HIS SEVENTIETH BIRTHDAY

AMONG THE WORKS OF ART surviving from classical antiquity, one of the most influential is doubtless the equestrian statue of Emperor Marcus Aurelius (reigned A.D. 161–80) (Figure 1). For centuries it stood in the Lateran, until it was transferred, in 1538, to the Campidoglio by Michelangelo; it survived largely because it was erroneously believed to be an effigy of Constantine, the first Christian emperor. By a combination of this unjustified attribution, its own artistic merits, and its conspicuous presence, it served as a model for the majority of equestrian statues throughout the entire history of European art.¹

A reduced free copy by Filarete (1400–ca. 1465) is the earliest known dated small bronze of the Italian Renaissance (Figure 2). Its plinth bears a presentation inscription to Piero de' Medici (Filarete's benefactor) and the date 1465.² Although Filarete permitted himself some artistic liberties by adding an oversize helmet as a support for the horse's raised foreleg, and by completing the fragmentary breaststrap of the original, he took great pains to duplicate the ephippium, the saddle blanket of the emperor's mount, with its elaborate border of zigzag cuts, stepped lappets, and sawtooth patterns.

Half a century later, François I had a plaster cast made of Marcus Aurelius's horse and it was displayed in one of the courtyards of Fontainebleau, which, from then on, became known as la Cour du Cheval Blanc. It remained there until 1626, when it had to

be removed because of weather damage. This horse was the inspiration for several works of the School of Fontainebleau—such as an enamel plaque, formerly in the Lenoir collection, with an equestrian portrait of Henri II wearing a Roman toga and Diane de Poitiers riding pillion (Figure 3),³ and also the Louvre's marble relief of Charles IX of France as a Roman emperor on horseback; he wears classical parade armor and strikes a more dramatic pose than the pensive philosopher emperor (Figure 4).⁴ In spite of the changes made in the representations of their riders, the horses in these effigies are faithfully modeled after Marcus Aurelius's steed, as shown by their meticulously reproduced saddle blankets. This exact copying even went as far as to include the fragment of the breaststrap, which in the original is now without a purpose, since the once separately applied center piece of the breast harness has been lost.⁵ Quite obviously, this particular saddle was considered to be an authentic piece of Imperial Roman horse equipment; otherwise, it would not have been so carefully copied.

And as recently as 1951, in a reconstruction of the lost equestrian statue from the Column of Justinian at Istanbul, the Byzantine emperor's horse was given a saddle blanket that bore the pattern of Marcus Aurelius's ephippium (Figure 5),⁶ though, according to late-medieval illustrations of Justinian's statue, he was originally represented as riding bareback.⁷

However, the triple-layered construction of the



1. Bronze equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius. Roman, A.D. 2d century. Rome, Campidoglio (photo: Anderson)



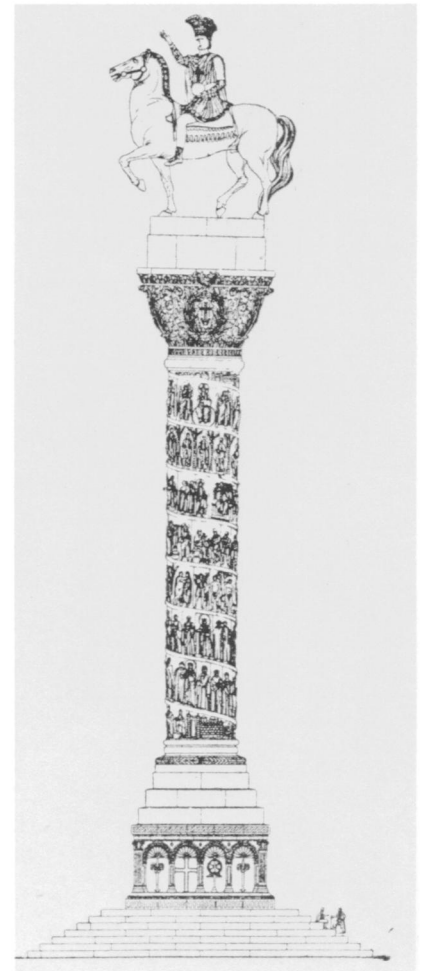
2. Bronze statuette, reduced copy of the statue of Marcus Aurelius, by Antonio Averlino, called Filarete (1400–ca. 1465), dated 1465. Dresden, Skulpturensammlung, Staatliche Kunstsammlungen (photo: Staatliche Kunstsammlungen Dresden)

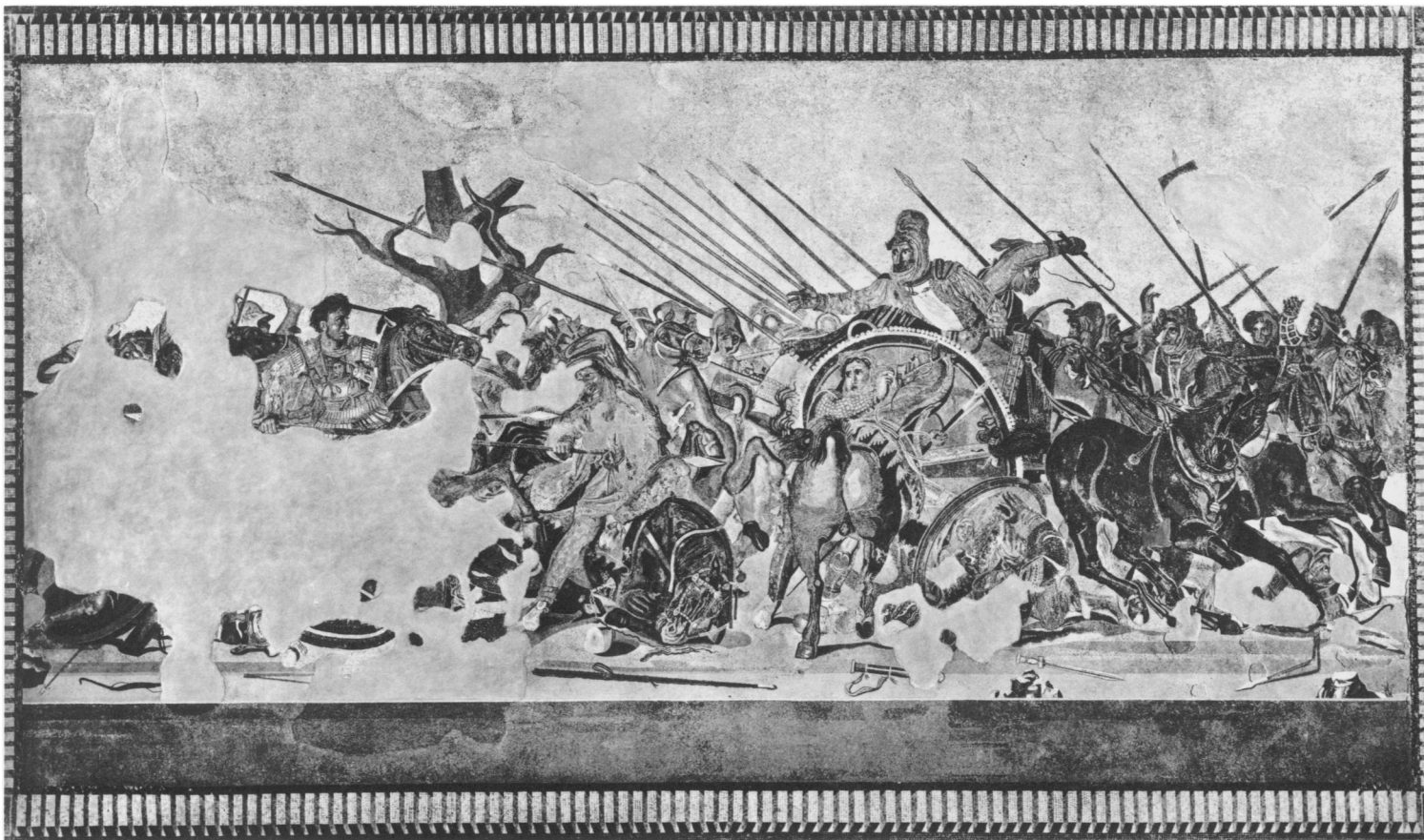
3. Drawing after an enamel representing Henri II and Diane de Poitiers on horseback; formerly Lenoir collection (after Steinmann)



4. Marble relief of Charles IX on horseback. Paris, Louvre (photo: Arch. Phot. Paris)

5. Reconstruction of the Column of Justinian (or Theodosius). Istanbul (after Mamboury)





6. Mosaic of the *Battle of Alexander and Darius*, found 1831 in Pompeii. Naples, National Museum (photo: Anderson)

ephippium in Marcus Aurelius's statue—with a zigzag-edged element on top of one with a border of stepped lappets, which in turn overlaps one with a sawtooth border—is actually quite out of the ordinary. Roman saddle blankets of the second century A.D., as shown in the reliefs of the Trajan and Marcus Aurelius columns, were mostly simple rectangles of cloth, sometimes with a heavy fringe at the bottom edges that hung down below the horses' bellies. The mounts of the emperors themselves, and those of their cavalry guard units, sported more elaborate saddles that had a shorter, zigzag-edged seat cover on top of the longer fringed blanket.⁸ This top layer seems to have been loosely attached to the lower saddle cloth, because it is sometimes shown draped over shields hanging on the saddle horns with riders dismounted; this was probably done to protect the painted surfaces of the shields in inclement weather.⁹ Incidentally, the Germanic hostiles are, as a rule, represented as riding bareback.

The two fragmentary equestrian statues from Caroteto di Pergola, found in 1946, have ephippia of similar shape, but simpler construction than that of Marcus Aurelius.¹⁰ They have single-layer saddle blankets: one has a sawtooth edge at its bottom and stepped lappets along its crupper edge, and the other has stepped lappets all around.

Very similar design arrangements are to be found in the celebrated mosaic of the Battle of Alexander and Darius, which was found at Pompeii (Figure 6),¹¹ where two of the horses on the Persian side are depicted with clearly identifiable saddle blankets. On the collapsing horse of the hapless rider struck by Alexander's lance, there is an ephippium with a sawtooth border along its bottom and a dagged version of stepped lappets at its rear edge, while the other horse—in the center of the composition, in front of Darius's chariot wheel, where it is held by its dismounted rider, who loyally offers his steed to his king for a speedier flight—bears a saddle blanket bordered by stepped lappets. Evidently these saddle blankets with stepped edges were considered to be typical for Eastern horsemen, and, indeed, they can

be regularly found on Achaemenian seals and coins, in the reliefs of Persepolis, on decorated Scythian sword scabbards, and on Iranian horse rhytons (Figures 7, 8, 9).¹² In 1984, Bernard Goldman coined the term “the Persian Saddle Blanket” for this peculiar saddle cloth, although he had to admit that its origins seem to have been with the steppe nomads in the North, because the “half merlon,” as he calls the stepped lappet, would be an impractical decoration for woven fabrics, but eminently suited for felt, the material favored by the nomads.¹³

A surviving example of such a saddle blanket of felt, with stepped lappets along its lower edge, was

found in a state of perfect preservation in one of the frozen tumuli, known as kurgan V, at Pazyryk in Siberia (Figure 10).¹⁴ This burial mound of a nomad prince, from around 300 B.C., also yielded a large felt tapestry with appliqué figures of horsemen displaying the same saddle blankets with stepped lappets (Figure 11), and among its further treasures was one of the earliest known Oriental pile carpets (Figure 12), also with representations of horsemen going around the border, as if in solemn procession.¹⁵ Each horse bears a saddle blanket edged in stepped lappets.

It seems that these saddle blankets with stepped

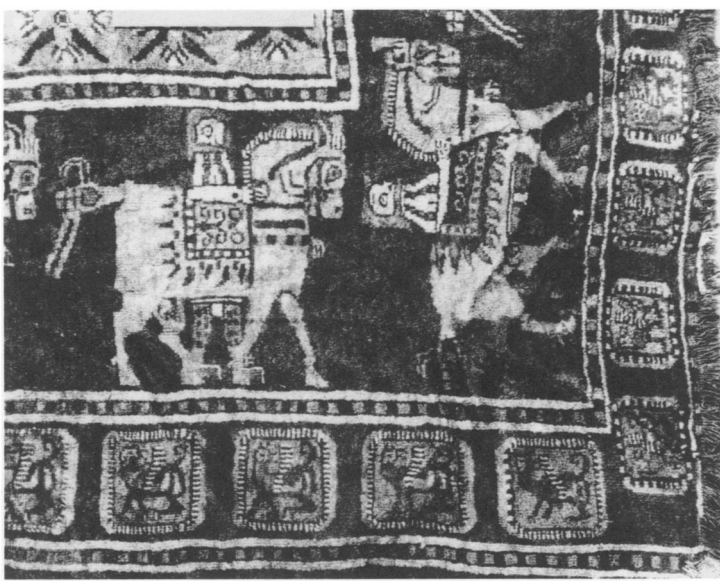


7. Seal, Iranian, first millennium B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Purchase, funds from various donors, 1893, 93.17.17

8. Detail of a gold akinakes scabbard, Scythian, ca. 300 B.C. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Rogers Fund, 1930, 30.11.12



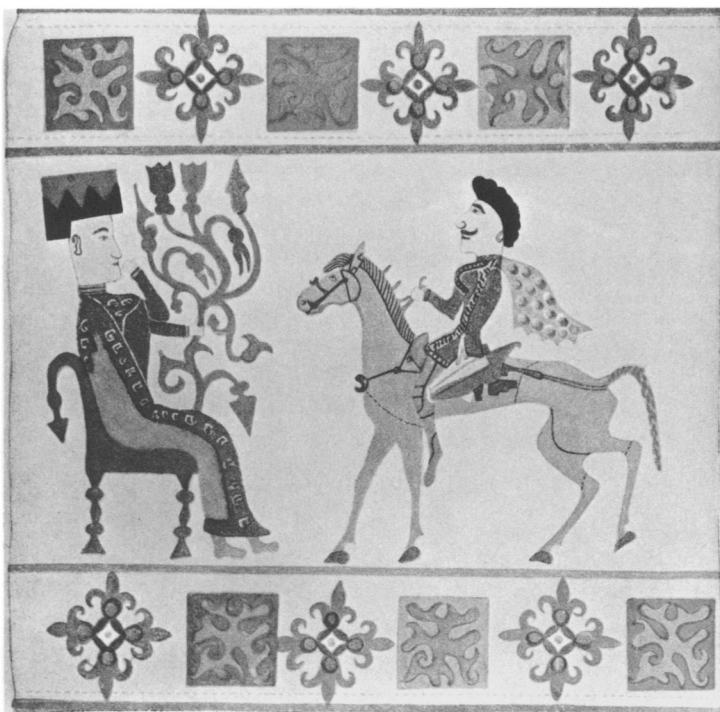
9. Clay horse rhyton, Iranian, 8th–5th century B.C., Teheran Museum (after Ghirshman)



10. Saddle blanket of felt, found in kurgan V, Pazyryk, Siberia; probably Sarmatian, ca. 300 B.C. Leningrad, Hermitage Museum (after Jettmar)

edges were an element of material culture shared among the horsemen of Iranian stock, whether highly civilized Achaemenian Persians or “barbarian” nomads, such as Scythians and Sarmatians.¹⁶ The nomad princes of the Siberian kurgans are thought to have been Sarmatians. By the first century A.D. Sarmatian tribes had drifted so far westward that their outriders made contact with the Romans in the Danube region.¹⁷ These tribes—Alani, Roxolani, Antae,

11. Horseman, detail of a felt tapestry, found in kurgan V, Pazyryk, Siberia; probably Sarmatian, ca. 300 B.C. Leningrad, Hermitage Museum (after Jettmar)



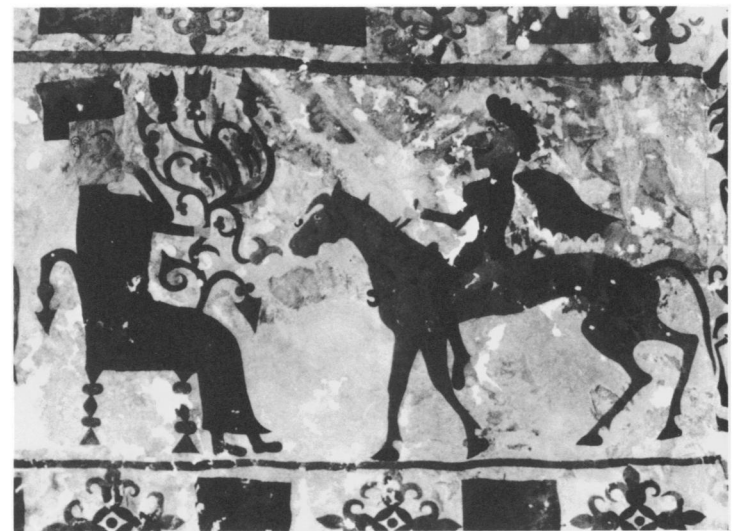
and Jazyges—were horse nomads and in warfare rode as heavy armored cavalry (the Late Roman heavy cavalry, *cataphractarii* and *clibanarii*, was modeled after Sarmatian prototypes).¹⁸ In A.D. 175 Marcus Aurelius succeeded in inflicting a crushing defeat on the westernmost of these Sarmatians, the Jazyges of Pannonia, which is now Hungary.¹⁹ After this military success Marcus Aurelius added the honorific “Sarmaticus” to his name.

From this it seems most likely that Marcus Aurelius’s mount in his equestrian monument is a captured Sarmatian war steed, which he rides, demonstratively saddled in Sarmatian fashion, in celebration of his victory in far-off Pannonia.

APPENDIX

Part of the peace terms with the defeated Jazyges was that in A.D. 175 they had to contribute 8,000 warriors as cavalry auxiliaries to the Roman army; 5,500 of these were sent to Northern Britain attached to the Legio VI Victrix to fight Pictish would-be invaders.²⁰ These Sarmatians in Britain, incidentally, were not returned to their homeland after their twenty-year term of service had expired, but were settled in a kibbutzlike military colony at Bremetennacum, now Ribchester, in present-day Lancashire, to raise horses for the Roman cavalry and to guard the coastal area at the mouth of the river Ribble against Irish pirates. This *cuneus veteranorum Sarmatarum* at Bremetennacum is still listed in the official

12. Reconstructive drawing of a pile carpet, found in kurgan V, Pazyryk, Siberia; probably 4th century B.C. Leningrad, Hermitage Museum (after Jettmar)



muster roll of the Late Roman army, *Notitia Dignitatum*, ca. A.D. 428.²¹ Considering this late survival, combined with the facts that Sarmatians were heavy-armored cavalry, fought under battle standards in dragon-shape, had as representations of their tribal god of war a naked sword thrust in the ground or a platform,²² and finally, that in A.D. 175 the praefectus of the Legio VI Victrix was a certain Lucius Artorius Castus,²³ it is possible that Marcus Aurelius's victory had another lasting influence,

this time on medieval literature, by contributing to the development of legends about King Arthur.²⁴

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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NOTES

1. Kurt Kluge and Karl Leo Heinrich Lehmann-Hartleben, *Grossbronzen der römischen Kaiserzeit*, 3 vols. (Berlin/Leipzig, 1927) II, p. 85; S. A. Callisen, "The Equestrian Statue of Louis XIV in Dijon and Related Monuments," *The Art Bulletin* 23 (1941) pp. 131–140; Harald von Roques de Maumont, *Antike Reiterstandbilder* (Berlin, 1958) pp. 56–60, fig. 29; Jocelyn M. C. Toynbee, *Animals in Roman Life and Art* (New York, 1973) pp. 172–173; P. Fehl, "The Placement of the Equestrian Statue of Marcus Aurelius in the Middle Ages," *Journal of the Warburg Institute* (1974) pp. 362–368; Licia Borelli Vlad, Giulia Fogolari, and Anna Guidi Toniato, "The stylistic problem of the Horses of San Marco" in *The Horses of San Marco, Venice* (London, 1979) pp. 15–41, fig. 49; and *Die Pferde von San Marco in Venedig*, exh. cat. (Berlin, 1982) cat. nos. 177, 178, 180–184.

2. Wolfgang von Oettingen, *Antonio Averlino, genannt Filarete*, in *Beiträge zur Kunstgeschichte* 6 (Leipzig, 1888) pp. 13–14; and Joachim Menzhausen, "Marcus Aurelius on Horseback," *The Splendor of Dresden*, exh. cat. (Washington/New York/San Francisco, 1978) no. 47, p. 85, ill. The statuette came to the Kunstkammer of Prince Elector Christian I of Saxony (r. 1586–91) as a present from Guglielmo Gonzaga, Duke of Mantua, in the late 16th century, and is now inv. no. H 155/37 in the Skulpturensammlung, Dresden.

3. Ernst Steinmann, "Die Zerstörung der Königsdenkmäler in Paris," *Monatshefte der Kunstwissenschaft* (1917) pp. 337–380, pl. 52, fig. 9; and Callisen, "Equestrian Statue of Louis XIV," p. 136, fig. 8.

4. Michèle Beaulieu, "Le Roi Charles IX à Cheval," *Fontainebleau: Art in France, 1528–1610*, 2 vols., exh. cat. (Ottawa, 1973) II, no. 540, p. 117, cover ill.; Musée du Louvre, inv. R. F. 1474, attributed to Germain Pilon (1528–90). The reversal of the position of the horse might be the result of its being copied after a print.

5. The now-lost center section of the breaststrap and the medallions, also lost, on the horse's headstall were possibly enameled (as in Filarete's reduction) and were therefore made separately.

6. Ernest Mamboury, *Istanbul Touristique* (Istanbul, 1951) p. 261; and Guido Perocco, "The Horses of San Marco in Venice," in *The Horses of San Marco*, pp. 49–79, fig. 81; see also "Die Pferde von San Marco in Venedig," in *Die Pferde von San Marco*, pp. 55–72, fig. 36.

7. Phyllis Williams Lehmann, "Theodosius or Justinian? A Renaissance Drawing of a Byzantine Rider," *The Art Bulletin* 41 (Mar. 1959).

8. Lino Rossi, *Trajan's Column and the Dacian Wars* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1971) p. 135, figs. 7, 8; p. 142, fig. 19; p. 149, fig. 31; p. 151, fig. 32; p. 157, figs. 42, 43; p. 159, fig. 44; p. 178, figs. 78, 79; and C. Caprino et al., *La Colonna di Marco Aurelio* (Rome, 1955) pl. iv, fig. 9 (IIC); pl. xviii, figs. 36, 37 (xxvi, xxvii, xxviii); pl. xxxii, fig. 65 (LI); pl. xxxvi, figs. 71, 72 (LVI); pl. xlvi, figs. 91, 92 (LXXIV, LXXV); pl. l, fig. 99 (LXXIX); pl. lv, fig. 109 (XCI); pl. lvii, fig. 114 (XCV); pl. lviii, fig. 115 (XCV); and pl. lxiv, fig. 128 (CVIII); see also H. Russell Robinson, *The Armour of Imperial Rome* (New York, 1975) chap. 7, "Horse Armour," pp. 190–196; and Paul Holder and Peter Connolly, "Cohortes Equitatae from Augustus to Hadrian," *Military Illustrated: Past & Present* 13 (June–July 1988) pp. 21–32, ill.

Among the sixteen monuments with saddle blankets illustrated in Roques de Maumont, *Reiterstandbilder*, only the ephippium of Marcus Aurelius's mount (fig. 29) shows stepped lap-pets; on one statuette from Pompeii (fig. 11), perhaps representing Alexander the Great, the ephippium has a crenelated fringe; on three other statues (figs. 10, 30, 50) the saddle blankets are animal skins with the paws still attached.

9. Rossi, *Trajan's Column*, p. 157, figs. 42, 43; p. 159, fig. 44.

10. *Bronzi Dorati da Cartoceto* (Cantini, 1987) pls. 34, 39, 40; and in *Die Pferde von San Marco*, pp. 188–189, cat. nos. 91, 92.

11. Unfortunately, there are great lacunae in the mosaic. Therefore, neither Alexander's saddle nor any of those of the other Greek horsemen have been preserved; they could have offered a comparison.

12. Hans Henning von der Osten, "The Ancient Seals from the Near East in the Metropolitan Museum," *MMAB* 13 (1931) 2, no. 14; idem, *Die Welt der Perser* (Stuttgart, 1956) pls. 18, 86; Roman Ghirshman, *The Arts of Ancient Iran: From Its Origin to the Time of Alexander the Great* (New York, 1964) p. 261, fig. 345; p. 288, fig. 346; p. 289, fig. 347; p. 291, fig. 348; and idem, "La Selle en Iran," *Iranica Antiqua* 10 (1973); pp. 94–107, figs. 2, 3, pl. L.

13. Bernard Goldman, "The Persian Saddle Blanket," *Studia Iranica* 13 (1984) pp. 7–18, pls. I–VI; and Elfriede R. Knauer, "Gleanings," *Studia Iranica* 15 (1986) pp. 265–266, pl. I.

Knauer draws attention to the statue of Marcus Aurelius, in

response to Goldman, who had stated that the "Persian Saddle Blanket," formerly a status symbol of nobility, had disappeared in the second century B.C.

14. Karl Jettmar, *Art of the Steppes* (New York, 1964) p. 113, pl. 17 (saddle blanket), p. 115, pl. 18 (tapestry), pp. 118–121, pl. 19, fig. 103 (carpet); Tamara Talbot-Rice, *Ancient Arts of Central Asia* (New York, 1965) p. 35, fig. 26 (carpet), pp. 38–39, fig. 30 (tapestry); E. D. Phillips, *The Royal Hordes: Nomad Peoples of the Steppes* (London/New York, 1965) pp. 83–85, fig. 92 (carpet), 93 (tapestry); Mikhail P. Gryaznov, *The Ancient Civilization of Southern Siberia: An Archaeological Adventure* (New York, 1969) pl. 118 (saddle blanket), pls. 134–135 (carpet), pl. 137 (tapestry); and Ghirshman, *Arts of Ancient Iran*, pp. 360, 361, figs. 466, 467 (carpet).

It is interesting that the surviving saddle blanket has a fragment of the breaststrap remaining at exactly the same spot as in Marcus Aurelius's statue.

15. The carpet measures 200 by 190 cm. and has 36 knots per cm. (215 knots to the square inch). In the outer bordures (griffin medallions, horsemen, and star bursts) are markings suggesting starting points for a dicing game.

16. In *Die Pferde von San Marco*, cat. no. 143, there is a bronze statuette of a centaur, described there as workshop of Riccio, ca. 1500, which has a caparison with a triple border of stepped lapets and sawtooth patterns copied from Marcus Aurelius's ephippium. Cat. no. 43 is a terra-cotta relief plaque of the second half of the 6th century B.C., from Southwestern Turkey, which shows a horseman pursuing a griffin. Here the saddle blanket is painted on with a large sawtooth pattern (N. Thomas, "Recent Acquisitions by Birmingham City Museum," *Archaeological Reports for 1964–1965* [1965] pp. 64ff.). Cat. no. 140 is a drawing by Polidoro da Caravaggio (1490/1500–48?) after the Ammendola sarcophagus, ca. A.D. 180 in the National Museum, Rome, which shows the hindquarters of a horse with a saddle blanket edged in a sawtooth cut. This horse, ridden by a Roman officer slaying a barbarian, was possibly meant to be a captured steed; the same might be true of the saddle horses wearing seat covers with zigzag edges that are found among the cavalry campaigning in the Balkans against Dacians and Sarmatians in the friezes of Trajan's Column. For the Ammendola sarcophagus, see Bernard Andreae, *Motivgeschichtliche Untersuchungen zu den römischen Schlachtsarkophagen* (Berlin, 1956) pl. 4.

One of the Three Wise Men on horseback in the sculptural decoration of the so-called Trivulzio candelabrum in the cathedral of Milan has an unusual saddle blanket with stepped lapets. Apparently, the 12th-century artist was still aware of a tradition that saddles of this type were "Eastern," and therefore appropriate for the Three Kings from the Orient. For the Milan candelabrum, see Otto Homburger, *Der Trivulzio-Kandelaber* (Zurich, 1949) pl. 45.

17. Tadeusz Sulimirski, "The Forgotten Sarmatians: A once-mighty folk scattered among the nations," chap. 12 in *Vanished Civilizations* (London/New York, 1963) pp. 279–298; and idem, *The Sarmatians* (New York, 1970).

18. Ortwin Gamber, "Dakische und sarmatische Waffen auf den Reliefs der Trajanssäule," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen zu Wien* 60 (1964) pp. 74ff.; J. W. Eadie, "The Development of Roman Mailed Cavalry," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 57 (1967) pp. 161–173; and Ortwin Gamber, "Kataphrakten, Clibanarier, Normannenreiter," *Jahrbuch der Kunsthistorischen Sammlungen Wien* 64 (1968) pp. 7ff.

19. Earnest Cary, *Dio's Roman History* (London/New York, 1927) epitome of Book LXXII, 22.1, pp. 35–36; Roques de Maumont, *Reiterstandbilder*, p. 58, rejects Max Wegner's theory in *Herrscherbildnisse in antoninischer Zeit* (Berlin, 1939) p. 114, that the statue should have been erected when Marcus Aurelius added the title "Armenicus" to his name in A.D. 164. Instead, he suggests that it might have been shortly after A.D. 147, when Marcus Aurelius became co-regent.

Armenia, though, is within the range of distribution of the "Persian Saddle Blanket"; see Burchard Brentjes, *Drei Jahrtausende Armenien* (Leipzig, 1973) pl. 5, where he illustrates the horseman rhyton found at Erebuni, Armenia, in 1968. The ephippia of the Cartoceto statues, which are thought to date from the early first century B.C., might originate from Asia Minor as they are too early to be Balkan booty; but they might be diplomatic presents from somewhere in the steppes.

Richard Brilliant, *Roman Art from the Republic to Constantine* (London, 1974) p. 115, fig. II.33, dates it at "about A.D. 176" in the caption.

20. Cary, *Dio's History*, Book LXXII, 22.1, 2, pp. 35–36; Sulimirski, "Forgotten Sarmatians," p. 293; and idem, *Sarmatians*, pp. 175–176, fig. 65.

21. Otto Seeck, *Notitia Dignitatum* (Berlin, 1876) OC. XL, 54, p. 212; and I. A. Richmond, "The Sarmatae, Bremetennacum Veteranorum and the Regio Bremetennaciensis," *The Journal of Roman Studies* 35 (1945) pp. 16–29.

22. Herodotus VI, 62, and Ammianus Marcellinus XXXI, 2.23.

23. Kemp Malone, "Artorius," *Modern Philology* 22 (1924) pp. 367ff.

24. Helmut Nickel, "Wer waren König Artus' Ritter? Über die geschichtliche Grundlage der Artussagen," *Waffen- und Kostümkunde* (1975) Heft 1, pp. 1–28; idem, "The Dawn of Chivalry," *From the Lands of the Scythians: Ancient Treasures from the Museums of the U.S.S.R., 3000 B.C.–100 B.C.*, exh. cat. (New York, 1975) pp. 150–152; and C. Scott Littleton and Ann C. Thomas, "The Sarmatian Connection: New Light on the Origin of the Arthurian and Holy Grail Legends," *Folklore* 91 (1978) pp. 513–527.