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FINDING PERFECT EQUESTRIAN EQUIPMENT. SOME THOUGHTS ABOUT MEDIEVAL AND MODERN HYBRIDS OF STIRRUPS AND SPURS FROM CENTRAL EUROPE

Abstract: Spurs and stirrups have played massive role in harnessing horses. Already from the early Middle Ages stirrups were made with different kinds of enigmatic rollers, knobs and projections on the side and bottom part of the foot rest. Solving their secret was possible thanks to the nowadays, Venezuelan llaneros, who use this kind of stirrups. They adopt elements permanently affixed to stirrups as spurs. Due to the cultural and the prestige roles of spurs in the middle ages this construction never became much popular. Known examples from Germany come from the period when chivalric custom was in the time of his final shaping. However it gained popularity in the Middle East.

Keywords: equestrian equipment, spurs, stirrups, middle ages, modern period

Already from the time when humans domesticated the horse (4500 BC), he tried to harness its will to ease riding on its back. To accomplish that he used some elements of horse gear (saddle, halter, bit, stirrups, horseshoes) and equestrian equipment (spurs, whip) which he invented and developed throughout the ages¹. The most important role played the spurs and the stirrups which helped directing a horse to move forward or laterally while riding². They were used to refine the riding aids (commands) and to back up the natural aids (the leg, seat, hands and voice)³. Although they were attached to different elements – spurs to the feet of a rider and stirrups to a saddle, the combined use of both of them allowed the rider to efficiently guide a stallion⁴.

The form of stirrups, which were invented most likely in ca. 4th c., strongly evolved during the ages⁵. Already from the early Middle Ages they were made with different kinds of enigmatic rollers, knobs and projections on the side of the foot rest⁶. The explanation of its role given by many researchers was problematic. They interpreted them as a form of decoration or as elements which were supposed to strengthen stirrups construction⁷.

There is however a group of stirrups, with considerable elements finished with round finial, attached to the bottom

part of the footrest, the function of which cannot be explained as decorative or by reasons of construction (Fig. 1:4-9). The most striking examples were found in the territory of Germany in Klein Wanzleben in Saxony-Anhalt, Rottenburg in Baden-Württemberg and Salzgitter-Gebhardshagen in Niedersachsen (Fig. 1:1-3)⁸. According to late Norbert Goßler⁹ they belong to BII type and can be dated to the 12th-beginning of the 14th c.

We owe the solving of this riddle to the ethnological sources from the territory of Venezuela. The cowboys there, who are called llaneros, use stirrups which are equipped with triangular element which is attached to the footrest and finished with a round finial. The form of the bottom part of this footrest clearly corresponds with the stirrups discovered in the territory of Germany. Due to the character of llaneros' work they do not use spurs attached to the riders' feet but adopt elements permanently affixed to the stirrups as spurs (Fig. 2:2). The rider bends the foot forward in the stirrup and by using the element attached to the bottom part of the footrest he pokes it against the horse's belly. We know this kind of stirrups at least from the 19th-c. iconography (Fig. 2:1), however they can be used even earlier.

This kind of composition of spurs and stirrups should not surprise us because there are known examples of using this sorts of hybrids even by very noble persons, for example Christopher the Strong of Bavaria (1416-1448)¹⁰.

¹ Dvořáková 2007, 30.

² Dien 1986, 33-35.

³ White 1962, 11-20.

⁴ Müller-Hickler 1925, 6-7.

⁵ Świętosławski 1990, 34-76.

⁶ Świętosławski 1990, 43-45.

⁷ Zschille and Forrer 1896, 8; Świętosławski 1990, 53-54.

⁸ Rempel 1964, 315, Fig. 4-5; Brachmann 1973, 308-309; Gross 1992, 126, Fig. 2:2, 5:5.

⁹ Goßler 2011, cat. 26.2, 227, 397.

¹⁰ Zschille and Forrer 1891, Tab. XVII: 8; Feldhaus 1922, 30.

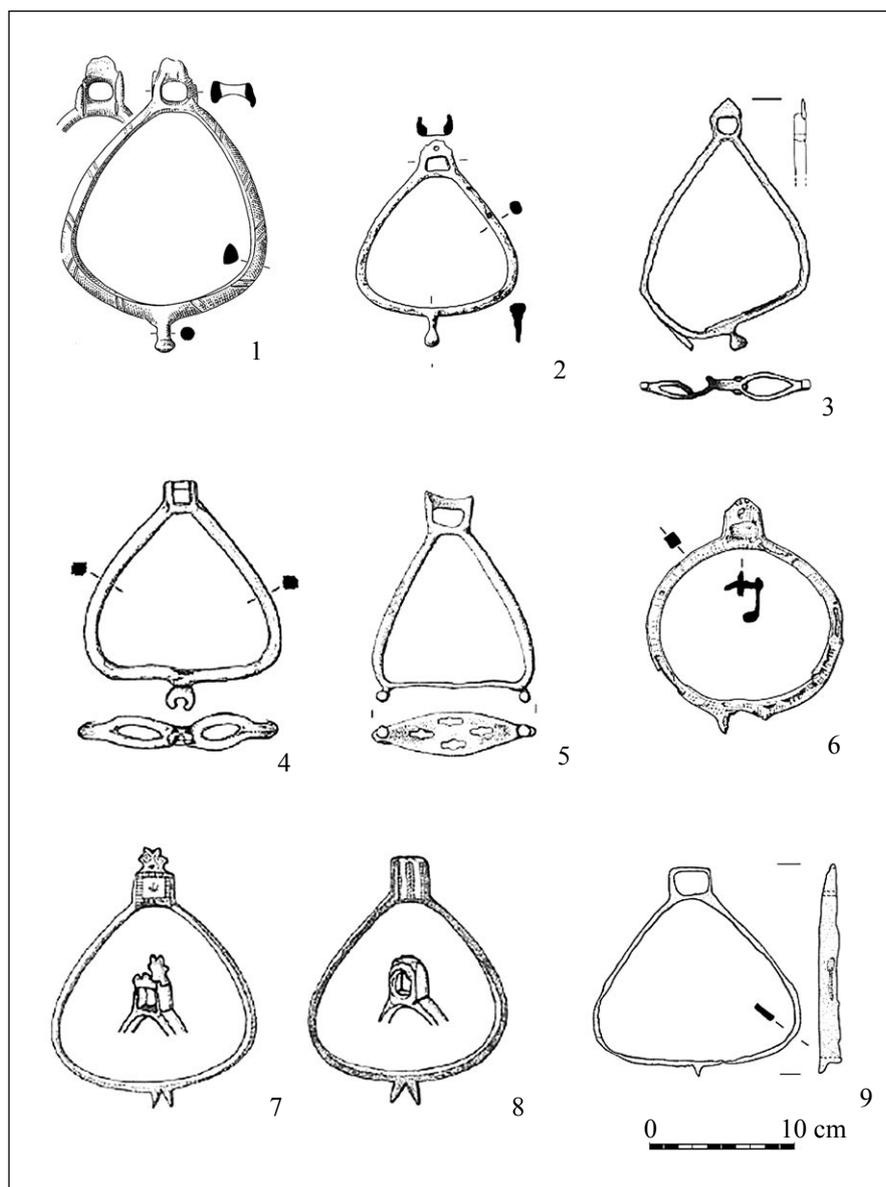


Fig. 1. Stirrups from Germany with projections attached to the bottom part of the footrest: 1 – Klein Wanzleben, Lkr. Börde; 2 – Rottenburg, Lkr. Tübingen; 3 – Salzgitter-Gebhardshagen, city; 4 – Höxter, city; 5 – Bad Zwischenahn, Lkr. Ammerld; 6 – Romastried, Lkr. Ostallgäu; 7-8 – Bingen, Lkr. Mainz-Bingen; 9 – Lübeck, city. After Goßler 2011.

His stirrups (now in the collection of National Museum in Munich, cat. 5008-11) made from gilded copper alloy were richly decorated with floral ornament and tracery (Fig. 3:1). Without any doubt they belong to Świętosławski's type VIA, which according to this scholar should be dated to the last quarter of the 15th-beginning of the 16th c.¹¹ The Christopher's stirrups were probably made circa 1480. Long necked spurs were attached to the asymmetrical stirrups by hinge to the back bottom part of the sides and it could be easily removed from it if needed¹².

We know this kind of stirrup combining attributes of spurs and stirrups from the former Zschille's collection. It is dated to the 17th c. and the goad was permanently fixed to the back part of the foot rest (Fig. 3:6)¹³.

However, this was not the only place where goads were attached. In case of copper alloy stirrup which was bought

in the 1920s in Macedonia, rowel goad was connected to the inner side of the stirrup, in the spot where it was broadest (Fig. 3:5)¹⁴. It is 15 cm high and 12 cm broad. It represents form of Świętosławski's type VB, which he dated to the 14th-15th c., but this artefact should be dated to the modern period. The artefact from Macedonia was bought by Feldhaus from the collection of an anonymous Turk. In the light of the opinion of great American arms and armour specialist, George Cameron Stone¹⁵, this information takes on extra meaning. Stone claimed that riders in Turkey and the Middle East used special stirrups with the projections on one side¹⁶ to be used as spurs. He supported his opinion by publishing 18th-c. stirrup of this sort from Tunis (Fig. 3:4), in form of Świętosławski's type VB.

Middle Eastern parallel allows us to explain the significance of the presence of two projections on the side of the

¹¹ Świętosławski 1990, 58-60.

¹² Lenz 1955, cat. 5008-11, Fig. 50.

¹³ Zschille and Forrer 1891, Tab. XVII: 7; 1896, Tab. XIV: 7.

¹⁴ Feldhaus 1917, 343; Świętosławski 1990, 57-58.

¹⁵ Stone 1999, Fig. 755:10.

¹⁶ Zschille and Forrer 1896, Tab. VII:10.



Fig. 2. 1 – Part of Arturo's Michelena, Vuelvan Caras painting, dated to ca. 1890, showing the llaneros using of special stirrups; 2 – stirrups used nowadays by llaneros. After <http://encontrarte.aporrea.org/imagenes/Efemerides/ABRIL/04-08/02/vuelvancarass.jpg>.

stirrup of Świętosławski's VIA type, discovered in the late 15th or the beginning of the 16th c. context in Sarvaly village in Hungary (Fig. 3:2)¹⁷. Similar Hungarian stirrup with three projections on the side, dated to circa 1500, is known from the former Zschille collection. What is more curious this artefact had also conical protrusion on the bottom part of foot rest (Fig. 3:3). In the light of above remarks they might have been used as a spur¹⁸. Due to the intensive contacts between Kingdom of Hungary and Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th c., Hungarian adaptation of this idea seems probable.

Because of the cultural and prestige role of spurs as an attribute of a knight, the use of such a stirrup with projectiles, can be considered an extravagance. One should however remember that the iron spurs were the status symbol of the horsemen generally, not only a knight¹⁹. Spurs for a page or a valet were merely tinned, while those for esquires were

silvered²⁰. Gilded spurs were buckled on to a man's heels as part of the formal ceremony of making him a knight and only gilt spurs were considered to be the prerogative of the knight²¹. A knight's golden spurs symbolize the swiftness with which he was to carry out God's commandments²². For medieval Authors by placing the precious metal near his feet knight manifests his disdain for worldly things, and his obligation to commit no evil that might dishonor his order. *His spurs are sharpened to goad his steed just as a knight should goad the people to virtue, but a virtuous knight should also make himself feared by the wicked*²³.

One should also have in mind that not only knights travelled on the horse back. Because medieval roads were generally of poor quality and carriages for human passengers were very rare, priest, monks, nobles and higher public servant rode also astride. They were interested in making their way fast and comfortably and did not care about the prestigious role of the spurs. Upper-class wives also frequently rode horses for sport and accompanied their husbands on a crusade or to tournaments. From the 13th c., when available, they used chair-like side-saddle with handles and a foot-rest which allowed women of the elite to ride while wearing glamorous robes. But they were not universally adopted

¹⁷ Holl and Parádi 1982, 84, Fig. 35:2, 109: 1; Świętosławski 1990, 58-60.

¹⁸ There is one more stirrup, which we know only from the archives, that we should also consider. It was found in Przemkowo in Western Poland. Due to the fact that the projection from the side of the stirrup has a sharp end, which would hurt the belly of a horse when using it as a spur, its function as a hybrid seems less probable. It looks like in this case the side element was most likely for the lance butt. Archiwum Państwowe we Wrocławiu. Wydział samorządowy Prowincji Śląskiej. Kreis Sprottau, Sygn. Jedn. 765.

¹⁹ Ellis 2004, 124.

²⁰ Grancsay 1941, 170.

²¹ Drugmand 1988, 8.

²² Boulton 2000, 9.

²³ Martorel and De Galba 1984, Ch. XXV.

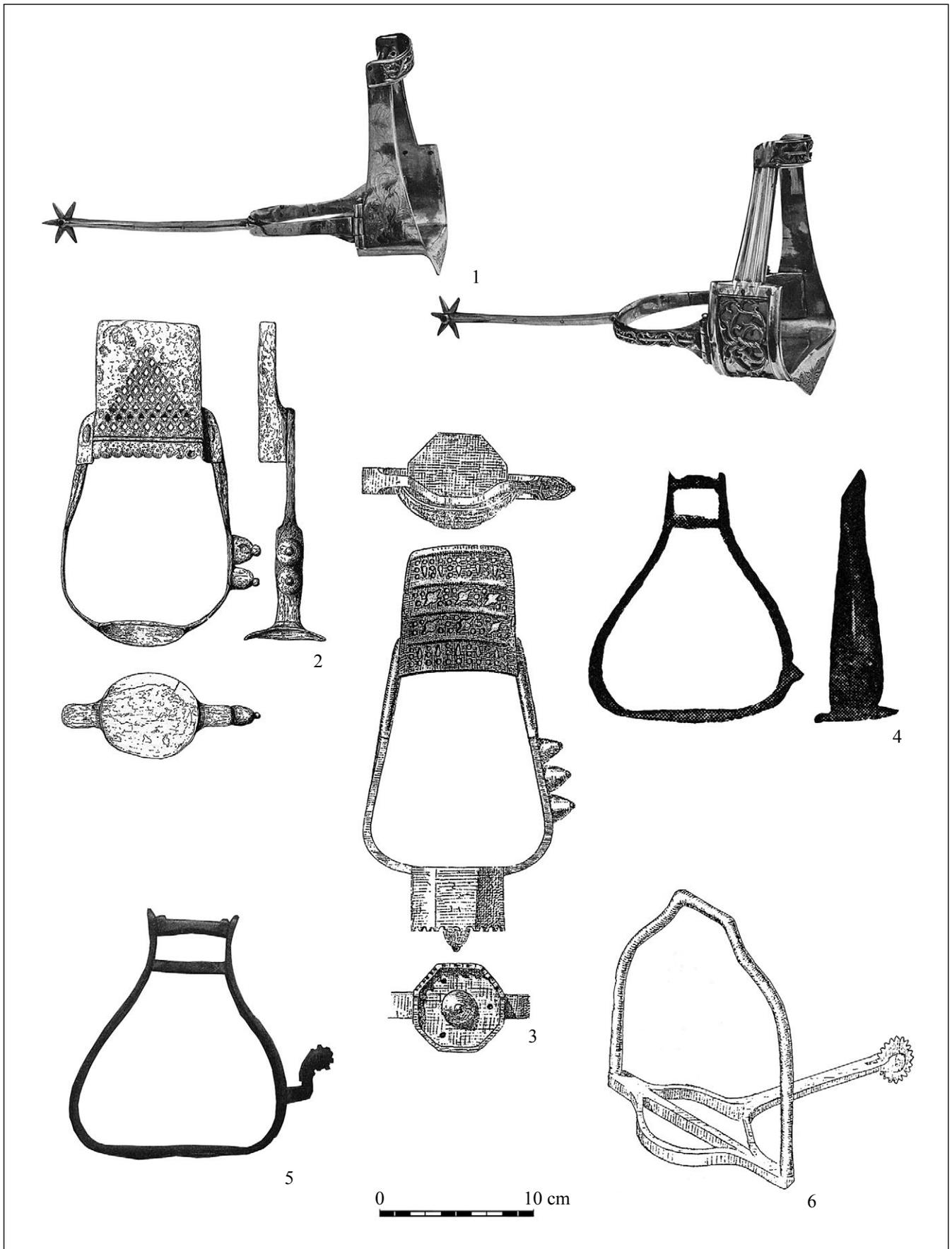


Fig. 3. Hybrids of spurs and stirrups: 1 – a pair belonging to Christopher of Bavaria, c. 1480; 2 – Sarvaly, Hungary, end of the 15th-beginning of the 16th c.; 3 – Hungary, former Zschille collection, c. 1500; 4 – Tunis, Tunisia, 18th c.; 5 – Macedonia, former Feldhaus collection, modern period; 6 – Germany, former Zschille collection, 17th c. (1 after Lenz 1955; 2 after after Holl and Parádi 1982; 3, 6 after Zschille and Forrer 1896; 4 after Stone 1935; 5 after Feldhaus 1917).

during the Middle Ages and most medieval women rode astride. Women wore spurs only when necessary for riding, they would have been a inconvenience with long skirts and because such skirts would have concealed them, they had no fashion-wise interest to women²⁴.

One should also remember that the spurs were one of the most frequently damaged or lost rider's equipment²⁵, what in the battlefield conditions, would make driving a horse harder. In the case of loosing spurs, elements

attached permanently to the stirrup, would ensure the possibility of further horse riding.

Despite the universality of this construction it never became much popular. It was probably connected with the cultural and the prestige roles of spurs. Above mentioned examples from Germany come from the period when chivalric custom was in the time of his final shaping and perhaps this is the reason why they were used there for some time.

Sources

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²⁴ Ellis 1991, 54.

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Streszczenie

Poszukując doskonałego końskiego ekwipunku.

Uwagi o znaleziskach średniowiecznych i nowożytnych hybryd strzemion i ostróg z Europy Środkowej

Już od momentu oswojenia konia, człowiek starał się okiełznać jego wolę i ułatwić sobie na nim jazdę. Temu miały służyć wynalezione w ciągu wieków elementy rzędu końskiego (siodło, ogłowie, strzemiona, podkowy) oraz oporządzenia jeździeckiego (ostrogi, nahajki). Szczególnie dużą rolę odgrywały tu ostrogi i strzemiona, niezwykle ułatwiające jazdę oraz kierowanie wierzchowcem. Były one przytwierdzane do różnych elementów – ostrogi jeździec miał przypięte paskami do stóp, a strzemiona na puśliskach były umocowane do siodła, jednak wspólne używanie obu umożliwiała właściwe powodowanie koniem. Oba elementy podlegały ewolucji związanej przede wszystkim z techniką walki.

Już od wczesnego średniowiecza strzemiona zaopatrywano na kabłąku oraz w dolnej partii stopki w rozmaite wałki i wypustki. Wyjaśnienie ich obecności sprawiało badaczom ogromne problemy; wskazywano na kwestie dekoracyjne lub potrzebę wzmocnienia konstrukcji strzemienia. Z terenu Niemiec znamy jednak przykłady, gdzie wytłumaczenie obecności tych elementów tymi względami nie jest możliwe. Analogie etnologiczne z Ameryki Południowej pozwalają identyfikować te elementy jako zamienniki ostróg, którymi jeźdźcy posługują się w trakcie jazdy. Artykuł przybliży znane inne przykłady tego typu hybryd, omawia ich formę oraz chronologię. Zabytki tego typu znane są na terenie Europy, jednak nie osiągnęły tam nigdy dużej popularności. Miało to bez wątpienia związek z kulturową i prestiżową rolą ostróg jako atrybutu rycerza. Dużo większą popularnością omawiane przedmioty miały cieszyć się na terenie Turcji i Bliskiego Wschodu.