

What did cavalry Auxiliary soldiers wear at the time of Hadrian?

The cavalry soldiers wore similar items to the Infantry soldiers. They were paid more money than infantry soldiers, so they often spent money on buying highly decorated helmets and other items of kit, including the harness used by their horses.

They wore a soft kit under their armour which consisted of a tunic, trousers (which reached to just below the knee and were worn to avoid chaffing when sitting in the saddle), a scarf, a belt, socks and boots.

They also wore armour consisting of a padded top, ring mail (which often had a short slit on either side to make it easier to sit on a horse) and a helmet. However, cavalry helmets were often elaborate, and had highly decorated cheek pieces. They could also wear helmets with a face plate over their own face. These helmets were worn when the cavalry did their displays (hippika gymnasia), but it is also probable they were worn in battle. Although they impaired vision and hearing the impersonal expression on the face would help frighten the enemy.

Some cavalrymen also wore greaves (lower leg protection). These could also be highly decorated.



In terms of weapons, cavalry soldiers spent many long hours practising how to throw javelins accurately when riding at speed, while some skilled units also used bow and arrows. They showed off these skills in the training displays (hippika gymnasia). When the soldiers got closer to the enemy they used long spears, like the infantry – not an easy weapon to manoeuvre when on horseback – using their height above the enemy infantrymen to full advantage. At some point they dropped their spear and drew their sword (taking care not to hit their horse’s head). The sword was the long slashing sword called a spatha, developed from Iron Age examples in Europe. It was held in a scabbard, made from leather and wood. They also carried an oval-shaped shield like the auxiliary infantry soldier.



What did a cavalry horse wear?

The equipment of the Roman cavalry horse was both functional and decorative. The saddle, bridles and straps were used to aid the rider, but they also provided the opportunity to add fancy decoration, such as shiny metal mounts and pendants, which sometimes had religious symbolism. The Romans believed such symbols would protect the horse and rider.

A wooden frame with leather cover was the basic construction for the Roman saddle. Four horns at each corner were stiffened by metal plates to help give a solid base. This allowed the horse to be ridden without stirrups. A saddle cloth, usually with a decorative fringe, was placed under the saddle.

Both breast and haunch straps as well as the girth were used to hold the saddle in place.

The bridle was the part of the horse harness worn on the head. It connected the reins held by the rider to the iron bit in the mouth of the horse, which was used to control the horse. Some of the bits used by the Romans were quite cruel, as it was more important to a cavalry soldier to make sure his horse obeyed him in battle than it was to be kind to it.

Horses also wore chamfrons (a mask and headpiece) to protect the horse's head during battle and the practice manoeuvres known as the Hippika Gymnasia. There were metal cages over the eyes to protect them.

