

# Horsey Toys

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MKA- Rischa Leinweber, Seattle, WA



**BRUEGEL, Pieter the Elder**  
Children's Games, Detail 1559-60  
Oil on wood, 118 x 161 cm Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna

**H**uman children, like the young of most mammals, use play to develop and strengthen skills that will be needed when they are grown. Toys were used by prehistoric children, but these toys were probably crude even by medieval standards. By the middle ages, toys had gotten more sophisticated, and were being mass produced in some locations by 1300, and later were manufactured for export. Toys of many types were made and played with during the middle ages, but here I will focus on toys of the Horsey variety.

### **Hobby Horse-**

As children saw adults riding horses, they were probably inclined to copy them, as children today copy adults by making car sounds and pretend driving. Hobby horses were a type of toy also whose exact origins are fuzzy, but I would imagine that as animals were domesticated, children observed and re-enacted the events in their lives. They would have imitated the adults with some type of object as a stand-in for a horse, A long stick or bare branch for instance,



eventually giving their stick horse a head, and reins.

Hobby horses have been around since at least Jesus' time and were a toy that Jesus himself may have played with, According to Strickland Gibson, noted toy historian, remarking on an unknown Dutch or German Artist's 15<sup>th</sup> century drawing of the Christ child on a hobbyhorse. (Foley p 12)

Dan Foley says that hobbyhorses were sold everywhere in Europe at summer fairs. He also cites a 14<sup>th</sup> century Chinese wall hanging that depicts a group of Chinese youngsters riding hobby horses with wooden wheels.

From The Society for Medieval Archaeology, Monograph Series: No 13, E.A Rybinya states: "Typical of representational toys are more than 70 stylized horses in a

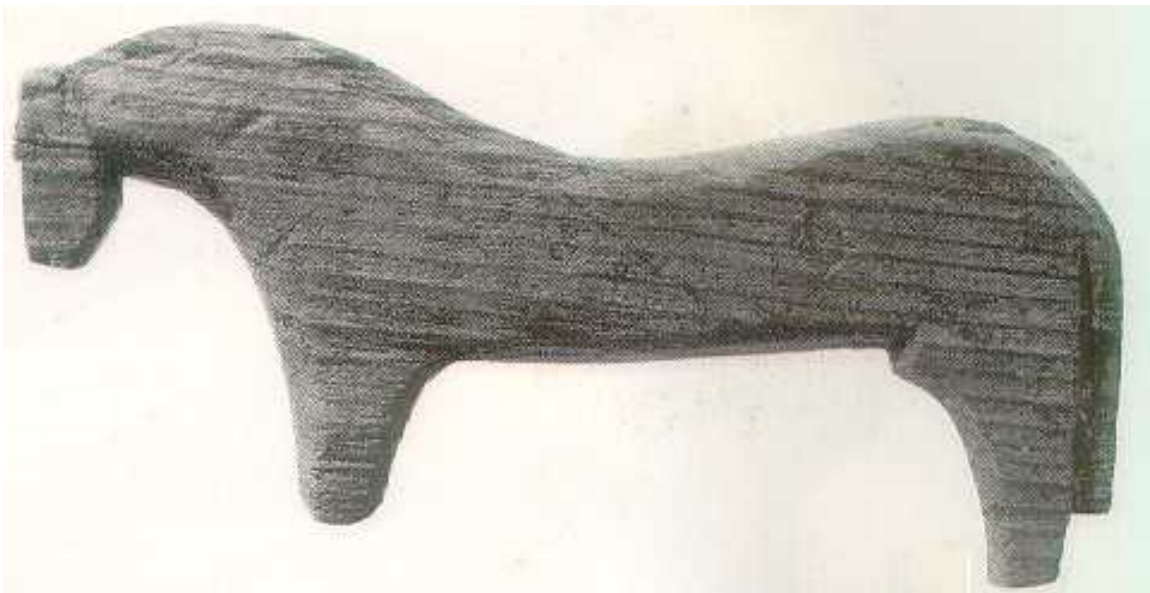
number of versions: a horse on wheels, both with and without a saddle, which looks like a stick with a horse's head on top.”

Many scenes of children on hobbyhorses are frequently documented in illuminated texts and paintings. The color image above is from a 15<sup>th</sup> century French Book of Hours (Frazier p 68)

In Hungary, clay horses with holes in the abdomen which would receive a stick are described as “Hobby Horses” by Petenyi, similar to a merry go round horse. I have not seen this method of play with horses in any other documentation, with the exception of candy dolls (see Addendum 1). This writer wonders if the insertion of the stick is only for molding and drying the delicate horse legs before firing, and not for playing with the horse on the stick. All the examples cited in Toys and Games in Medieval and Early Modern Hungary have their legs broken off, theoretically supporting the argument.

### **Wooden Horses-**

The most common toys found in archaeological digs from early in the SCA time period are balls, both leather and wood, Tops and carved wooden toys such as horses and swords. There are many examples of beautiful stylistic horses carved of wood, such as the one shown here from Trondheim, Norway which dates from c. 1075-1125 and is 12.7 cm in length. (Viking to Crusader) There are also many that are more crudely carved, more likely by an amateur, or a child.

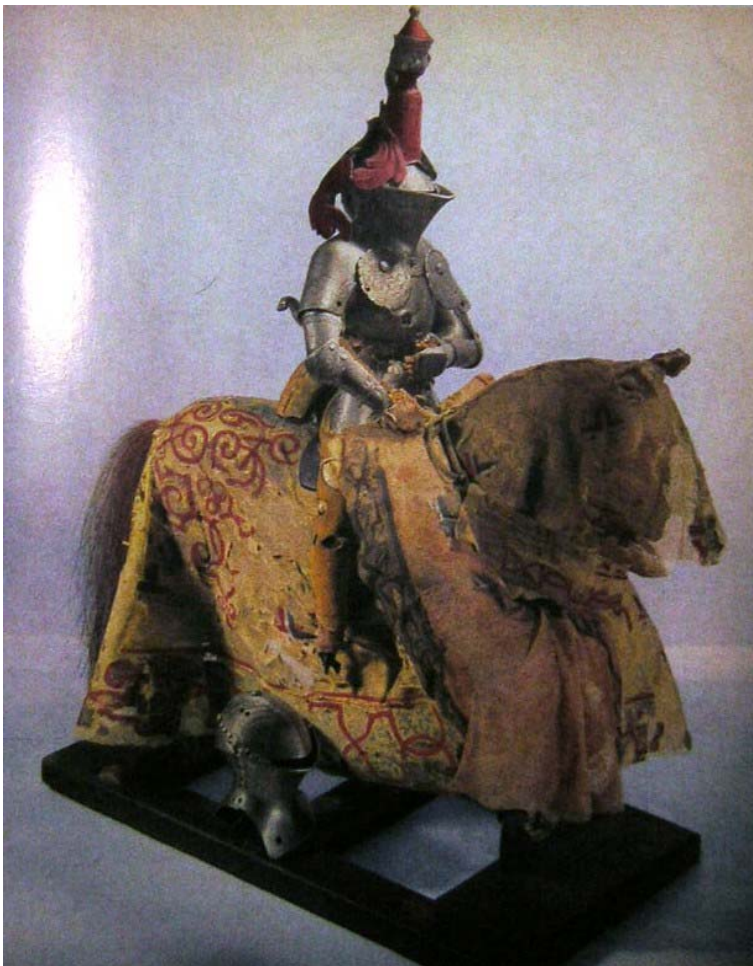


Horses like these were surely carved on a winter day, by an adult relative as an entertainment for children who being cooped up in the house all day were getting anxious for something to distract themselves from the dark and dreary days. A toy horse and a story could transport those in the house on that dreary day to a warm summer day filled with adventure!

Here is a great website with directions on how to make a Viking toy horse.

<http://www.angelfire.com/wy/svenskildbiter/Viking/vikhorse.html>

In the World of Toys, Dr Josef Kadert cites Roman-era toy Trojan horses made of wood and filled with clay or ceramic Greek soldiers inside. These were made and sold on Turkey's west coast, around Historic Troy. (Kandert p 11)



### **Table top Horse Games**

Later in our Time period, there are examples of carved wooden horse toys, with wheels which a jousting game could be played on tables.

In this excellent example from a German Museum a knight dressed in real metal armor. Figure and horse's body are wood. The crest is from the patrician family Holzschuber of Nuremburg.

This woodcut by Hans Burgkmair (Fritzsch, p 21) shows German Prince Maximilian's childhood activities, including some table-top jousting using a toy very much like the above extant example. Prince Maximilian was born in 1459 in Vienna the son of the Emperor Frederick III and Eleanore of Portugal.

Note also the working "toy" cannon, a popular toy of the day.

In *Games and toys in Medieval and Early Modern Hungary*, Sandor Petenyi describes jousting kits with bronze horses made with a lost wax method which have a hole in the breast of the horse into which a lance is inserted for table top jousting games. Based on the infrequency of these and other horse toy finds in Hungary he believes that they were imported to Hungary from central Europe.



Ill. 4 Games of the young Emperor Maximilian. Woodcut by Hans Burgkmair, 1516. Drawing from Gröber.

## Clay and Pewter



According to Dan Foley, horses made of clay have been traced to the days of the Pharaohs.

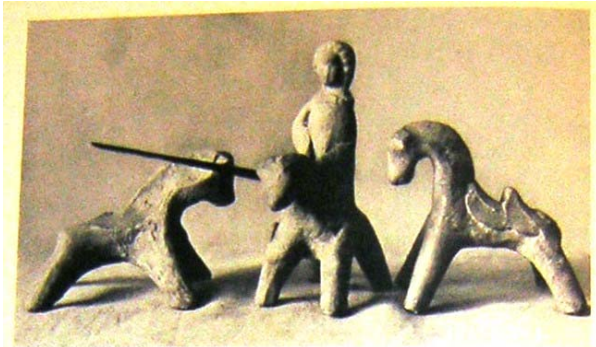
It is interesting that though examples of ceramic horses alone and with riders are found throughout Germany, Russia and Scandinavia; Egan says very few have been found in England. Only one example from the Museum of London exists, and has been considered to be a chess piece.

These Toy finds from a Carmelite friary at Esslingen am Neckar (Germany, close to the Belgium/

Luxembourg border) show some horse shapes, along with pottery and human figures and a chicken.

The following is quoted from the website detailing this excavation:

<http://home.bawue.de/~wmwerner/essling/english/karmel08.html> “Typically for an urban excavation, a large amount of medieval toys were found, which came from the Carmelites neighbors along the stream, not from the friary itself.”

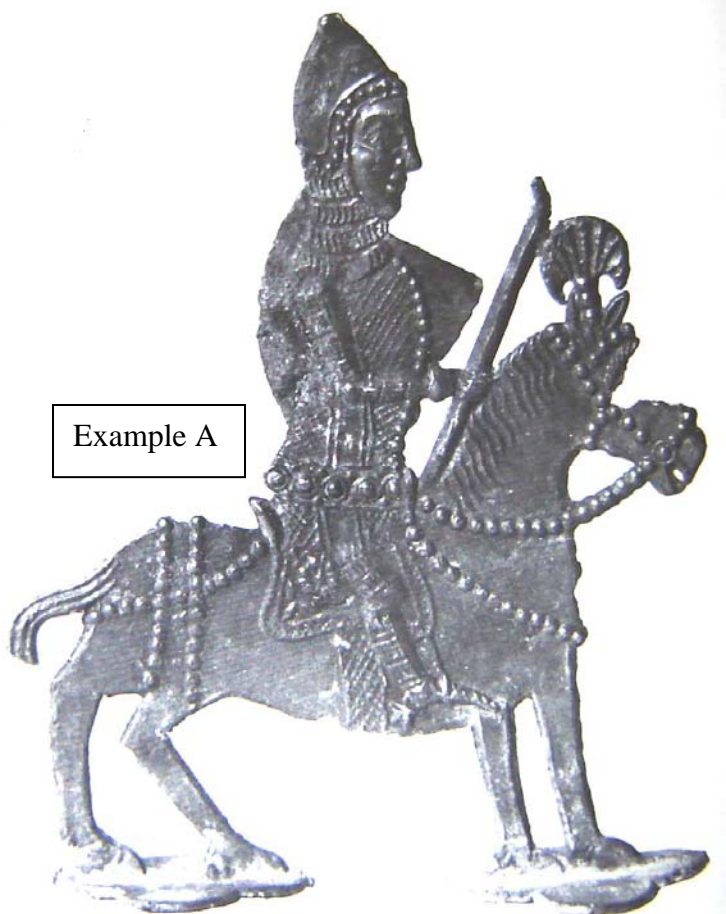


21. Strassburg, Prähistorisches Museum Ht.  $\frac{3}{4}$  in.

These German clay horses from the Strassburg Museum, (Grober) are from the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. Various sources claim that by the 14<sup>th</sup> century, Nuremburg was a well-known center for toy manufacture.

In recent years Pewter Horses, along with many other toys, have been found along the Thames by hobbyists with metal detectors, and by dredging the river. Most medieval pewter objects, toys included, were made of a pewter lead alloy, or even all lead. We know now that this practice is dangerous, especially in the case of children’s toys. In “Playthings from the Past” Geoff Egan catalogs a wide variety of pewter toys from the Museum of London. Egan’s examples of Horses are varied. Some have riders or knights and some do not, there are also elaborate pewter carts and wagons, with horses pulling them, though these are generally from the 17<sup>th</sup> century and later.

My first example, Example A, is a flat mold which has cast feet to help it stand, and was from 1500 or later (Culff p 38). Example B is a mounted knight from the 13<sup>th</sup> century. It is hollow-cast. (Egan, Front Cover)



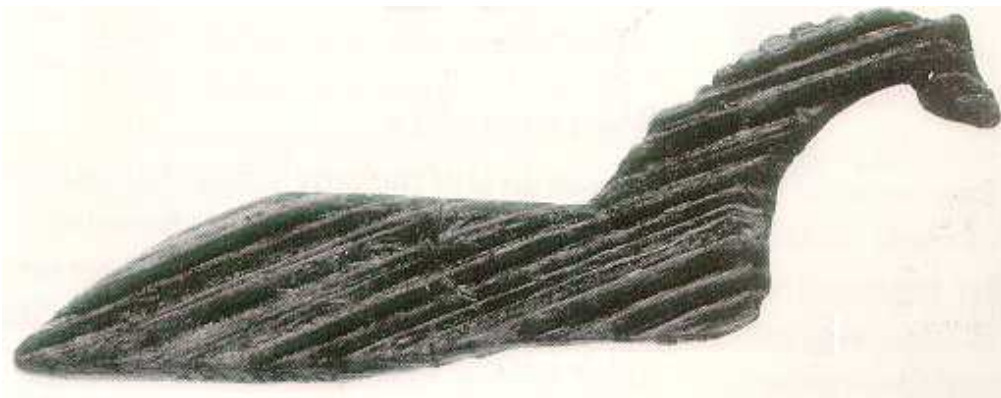
Another molding method seems to be a double mold for the body and neck (and rider) and the legs of the horse were poured flat on the top of the mold in a single layer, were then folded down after taken out of the mold. The example shown here is from 1300 and is 55mm in height. Egan states that some of these pewter toys would have most certainly been painted.



Example B

Karl Grober states that these Pewter and Lead figures are definitely toys, and not Pilgrim's tokens.

**Re-interpretation: Is it a horse?**



When is a toy horse not a horse? When it is a sea monster!

There is a wooden toy that is called a toy horse, when to me it is obviously a wooden sea

monster. This "horse" was found at Staraja Ladoga from 8<sup>th</sup>-9<sup>th</sup> century and was compared to other horses of the same time period. (Else Rosedahl; Viking to Crusader)

My primary argument is that he doesn't have legs. They didn't break off because they wouldn't have broken off at an angle to the grain of the wood which is clear in the photo. He is swimming, swimming right up to a toy boat to scare the sailors?...Hmmm.

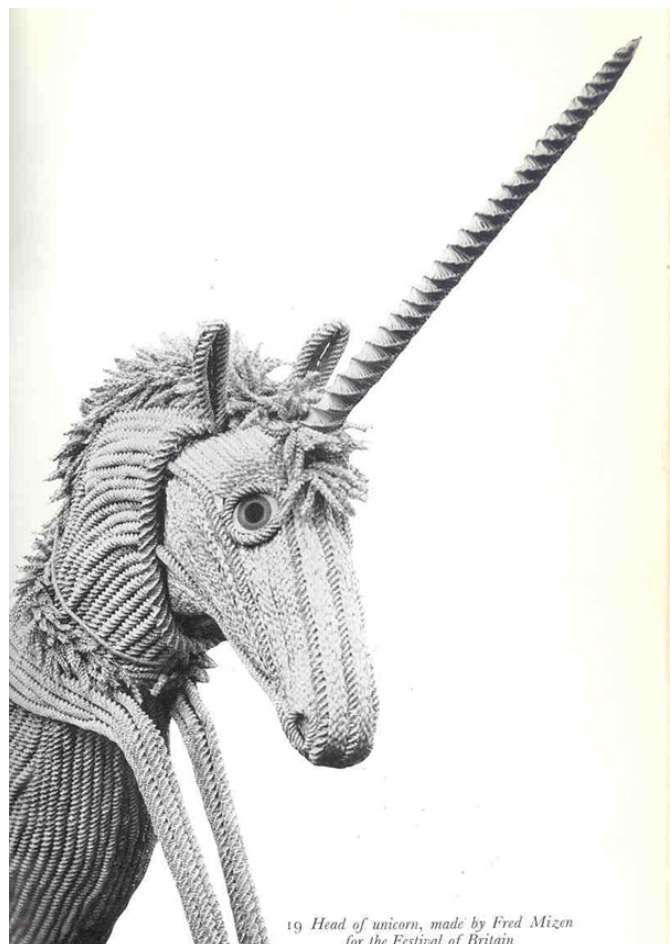
## Speculation: Straw Horses

Objects made of straw have been and still are a tradition in many countries. Today, Sweden, Norway, and Belarus are famous for their straw artisans. Straw “corn dollies” made with ripe wheat are a harvest tradition ritual throughout England, creating a way to keep some of the grain safe for planning the next year (Sanford). In Mexico and China, and other countries, straw toys and household objects are common finds in rural markets today. (Kandert)

Since straw is very biodegradable, ancient examples would not still exist, even in the best of conditions. So far I have found only scant mentions of straw woven into toys, however I expect that since Horses were such a primary part of medieval life, it is easy to speculate that children probably made toys, and especially horses, from straw. Toy horses made of straw could have been small hand-size toys tied with thread, or just the stuffing for horses heads made of fabric built onto sticks as in hobby horses, as in this Old English Nursery Rhyme:

I had a little hobby horse  
And it was dapple grey  
Its head was made of pea straw  
Its tail was made of hay  
-Old English nursery rhyme  
Dan Foley

This straw head of a unicorn is modern. It was made for display for an English festival. (Sanford p 33)



This is a description from *A Medieval Miscellany* (p 31) of a celebration where children were on horses made of wicker: (wicker is kinda like straw...isint it?)

*During the entrance of King Henry IV of Castile to the city of Jaden in 1464, the children were allowed a major role. Close to half a league from the city, all the cannons of the cathedral, the municipal officials came to meet the king... Five Hundred knights very well dressed and some dressed in Moorish fashion, with false beards and heavy wooden lances engaged in a mock*



*battle. Further along the road, thirty other men came dressed as Moorish women playing tambourines and bells and giving great cries in the Moorish fashion.... And further along the road four thousand children came out of the city riding on wicker horses and playing music, plus another one thousand children armed with wicker crossbows and also engaged in mock battle.*

As straw was such an easily available resource, I can imagine many toys made from straw through the ages, with the expectation that such a toy would be temporary at best, played with for a day or until the toy fell apart.

#### A Final Note.

Playthings for children have been made through the ages, and as shown here cover a wide variety of methods, materials and maker skill levels, from child made toys to finely crafted objects made by highly skilled artisans. Representing horse toys in Medieval Re-enactment can take many shapes, leaving lots of room for imagination! Happy horsing around!



Viking to Crusader,  
a horse find from the Faroes Islands

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## Addendum 1: Candy Dolls

Candy, Gingerbread and bread and even cheese dolls, and also toy horses, made for fairs and festivals have been cited in several of the Toy books from the Bibliography above. This 17<sup>th</sup> century German document describes the making of Toy dolls with Tragacanth gum and sugar which makes a paste which holds together well for shaping and molding.

The candy dolls were decorated with paint made from fruit or vegetable juices, saffron, and also gold leaf. The bread dolls were sometimes painted and varnished and not intended for eating.



Tragacanth is a gum made from milkweed or Vetch.

Document cited from  
Culff p 32