

EUROPEAN ARMOUR



CLAUDE BLAIR



1 St. George, by Friedrich Herlin. South German, 1460-2
The Saint wears an Italian 'export' armour. *Stadtmuseum, Nördlingen*

European Armour

*

circa 1066 to circa 1700

*

CLAUDE BLAIR



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To Joan

'Those who look upon a collection of Ancient Armour as a mere assemblage of *curiosities* have formed a very inadequate idea of its purpose and usefulness.'

J. HEWITT

Catalogue of the Tower Armouries, 1859

Preface

THE writing of a short general history of any large subject is bound to be something of an exercise in the art of cramming quarts into pint pots, and the present work is no exception. I have tried at least to touch on all aspects of the history of medieval and later armour but, because of limited space, I have dealt with some of these less fully than others. As the book is designed primarily to satisfy the long-felt need for an up-to-date English text-book on armour it seemed to me that the main emphasis should be placed on providing basic information; I have therefore devoted over three-quarters of it to an account of the evolution of field armour, chiefly from the point of view of form and construction. A particular difficulty that faces all writers on the evolution of armour arises from the fact that, although all the parts of a harness* belong together, they developed independently. I have accordingly treated them independently in the hope that the reader will be able to obtain an adequate impression of the development of the complete armour from a study of the half-tone plates. Ideally, however, I should have preferred to have an introductory chapter on this subject. Lack of space has similarly prevented me from going into the questions of the different schools of etched decoration, and of the differences in style between armours produced in different local centres, important though these are. I have similarly omitted all references to modern reproductions and fakes and have barely mentioned the semi-Oriental armour worn in Eastern Europe. I have tried to be factual and to avoid controversial matters as much as possible, and for this reason have not attempted to give an account of the group of armours and pieces of armour which, despite their very Italian form, some people believe to be of French or Flemish origin. As matters stand at present there is simply not enough definite information about them to justify separating them from the Italian armours in a book of this sort.

Finally, a word about terminology. The modern practice, which I have followed, is to employ the English terms used while armour was still regularly worn or, where no old one can be found, a modern descriptive term. The use of old terms is not without its difficulties, however, for different words were used for the same thing at different

* *Suit* of armour is a late term. The usual terms employed prior to c. 1600 were simply *harness* or *armour*.

PREFACE

periods, and, conversely, the same word for different things, whereas it is necessary for the modern writer to be consistent. This means that some terms have had to be given a much more restricted meaning than they would perhaps have had when they were in everyday use, while others have been used to describe objects dating from a time when the term itself had become obsolescent or had not yet been introduced. Nevertheless, the terminology used in this book attempts to get closer to contemporary usage than did that of the 19th- and early 20th-century writers on armour, most of whose works bristle with misnomers and collectors' jargon. I have, where appropriate, drawn the reader's attention to the more glaring and persistent of these errors.*

Although it is impossible for me to thank by name all the people who, in one way or another, have contributed towards this book I would particularly like to express my gratitude to the following: the officials of the many public collections of armour who have allowed me to examine objects under their care or who have supplied information about them by letter; my former colleagues at the Tower of London Armouries; Dr. Bruno Thomas and Dr. Ortwin Gamber of the Waffensammlung, Vienna; Mr. S. V. Grancsay of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York; Monsieur Clément Bosson of the Geneva Museum; Mr. E. Martin Burgess; Mr. John H. Harvey, F.S.A.; Mr. A. V. B. Norman; Miss Blanche M. A. Byrne and Mr. Howard L. Blackmore, F.S.A. Graf Hans Trapp has very kindly allowed me to illustrate a number of pieces from his incomparable family armoury at Churburg, while Mr. C. O. von Kienbusch of New York and Mr. R. T. Gwynn of Epsom have generously placed photographs of objects in their important private collections at my disposal. I am also grateful to Mr. J. F. Hayward and Mr. A. R. Dufty, Sec. S.A., for reading through the MS. of the book and making many valuable criticisms and suggestions. A special word of thanks is due to Mr. H. R. Robinson of the Tower of London Armouries both for his splendid drawings and for many valuable suggestions for the choosing thereof. Finally, I owe a great debt to four people: to my mother and my late father, and to my old friend Dr. J. T. D'Ewart, F.S.A., who encouraged my early interest in armour, and to my wife, who encourages my continuing interest.

August, 1958

CLAUDE BLAIR

* Most of them stem from Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick, but his great pioneer work in the field of arms and armour must not be underestimated because of this.

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Abbreviations

A.J.	<i>The Archaeological Journal</i> . Published by the Royal Archaeological Institute, etc., London
Arch.	<i>Archaeologia</i> . Published by the Society of Antiquaries of London
B.M.	British Museum
Gay.	Victor Gay, <i>Glossaire Archéologique du Moyen Âge et de la Renaissance</i> , 2 vols., Paris, 1887 and 1928
K.H.M.	Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna
M.A.	Musée de l'Armée, Paris
M.M.	Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York
N.H.M:S.	National Historical Museum, Stockholm
P.R.O.	Public Record Office, London
R.A.M.	Real Armeria, Madrid
S.L.M.	Schweizerisches Landesmuseum, Zürich
T.L.A.	Tower of London Armouries
Vienna	Waffensammlung, Vienna (part of the Kunsthistorisches Museum)
W.C.L.	Wallace Collection, London
W.S.V.	As under 'Vienna'
Z.H.W.K.	<i>Zeitschrift für Historische Waffenkunde</i> . See bibliography

N.B. I have reduced references to a minimum in order to save space but have tried to give the sources of all quotations from documents. I have also tried, where possible, to give the catalogue-numbers of armours and pieces to which I make reference but it has not always been possible to discover these.

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1. The Age of Mail

c. 1066-c. 1250

ARMOUR can be divided on a constructional basis into three groups: (1) Soft armour, that is quilted fabric and leather that has not been subjected to any hardening process. (2) Mail, that is a defence of inter-linked metal rings (294). (3) Plate, of metal, cuir-bouilli,* whalebone or horn. This last group can be sub-divided according to whether it is composed of: (a) large plates articulated only where necessary for the movement of the body and limbs; (b) smaller plates riveted or sewn to fabric to produce a completely flexible defence (the so-called *coat-of-plates* construction); (c) small plates joined together by a complex system of lacing (the so-called *lamellar* construction) (295).

All the above kinds of armour were known in the Ancient World and were widely used in the Roman army under the Empire. With the breaking up of the Western Empire, however, plate appears to have gone almost entirely out of use—in Western Europe at least—except for the helmet. The process was probably a very gradual one, particularly amongst those peoples who had been long under Roman influence, but the information about this period is so scanty that it is at present impossible to form a clear picture. It is likely that some form of plate was always known, for the smith who was capable of making helmets of the type that remained in common use must also have been capable of making plate body-armour. Certainly a kind of lamellar armour appears to have been worn by the Vendel people of Scandinavia, by the Franks under Charlemagne and by the Vikings, and there is ample evidence for the long-continued use of this construction in Eastern Europe. A version of the coat-of-plates construction made of small overlapping scales seems also to have remained in constant use (296-8). Despite this it is probably safe to say that during the period c. 600-c.1250 when anything other than soft armour was worn it was in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred made of mail.

The problem of the origin of mail does not concern us here. Suffice it to say that, although it was probably ultimately of Eastern origin, it was not, as is popularly believed, brought back to Europe by the Crusaders but was in use here at least as early as the 2nd century B.C.

* Leather hardened by soaking it in heated wax.

THE AGE OF MAIL

It is the most difficult of all types of armour to date, for its construction appears to vary so little whatever its age or country of origin. Recent research by Mr. E. Martin Burgess¹ seems to indicate that this lack of variation may be more apparent than real, but there is still insufficient evidence available for any definite conclusions to be drawn.

European mail appears to have been composed invariably of circular rings arranged so that each one has four others linked through it (294). The rings themselves are always of one of two types: riveted (each made of a short length of wire with its two ends flattened, overlapped and joined by a rivet), or solid (made without any join). Any mail that has links with the ends simply butted together is almost certain to be Oriental or a modern reproduction.* Solid links are always found arranged in alternate rows with riveted links (294), but as this type of construction appears to have gone out of fashion in about 1400 it is not often encountered. The other construction, in which all the links are riveted, remained in use as long as mail did, and the vast majority of surviving specimens are made in this way.

A great many misconceptions about mail were current in the 19th century, most of them stemming from an article by Sir Samuel Rush Meyrick on 'Antient Military Garments formerly worn in England'.² They still appear from time to time in otherwise reliable works on social history, monumental brasses and the like, and it is necessary to warn the reader against them. I can do no better than quote the late F. M. Kelly's remarks on the subject:

And at the start let me define plainly what I mean by 'mail'. I hold that in the Middle Ages and, indeed, as long as armour continued, so to speak, as 'a going concern', the term applied properly, nay, exclusively, to that type of defence composed . . . of interlinked rings. Only through a *late* poetical licence did it come to be extended to armour in general. 'Chain-mail' is a mere piece of modern pleonasm; 'scale-mail' and still more 'plate mail' stark nonsense. As for Meyrick's proposed classification of mail—'ringed', 'single', 'double-chain', 'mascléd', 'rustred', 'trelliced', etc.—it may be dismissed without further ado. His categories, in so far as they were not pure invention, rested wholly on a misconception of the evidence; the passages he cites to support his theories of 'ringed', 'trelliced', 'mascléd', etc., all refer to what he calls 'chain' mail; otherwise MAIL pure and simple.³

* The fragments of mail found in the Sutton Hoo ship-burial and now in the British Museum appear to be an exception.



2 Detail from the Bayeux Tapestry, 1066–82



3 'The Victory of Humility over Pride'

Detail from the Trier *Jungfrauenspiegel*. German, c. 1200. The coat of arms is a later addition. Kestner Museum, Hanover



4 Effigy of William Longespée the Elder, English, c. 1240. (After Stothard.) *Salisbury Cathedral*

5 (right), 6 (below) Details from the Maciejowski Bible. French, c. 1250. *Pierpont Morgan Library, New York*

