

Common Questions About Arms & Armor

1. **What is mail?**

Mail is a form of armor made of interlocking iron rings. An armor form for over 1,000 years, mail could be worn as a full outfit over the body or in pieces covering the head or limbs. Sword blows could not break the rings, and the “holes” were too small to allow blade tips to penetrate; however, mail provided little or no protection from crushing weapons such as maces, flails or hammers. Plate armor replaced mail partly because it spread the force of these crushing weapons over a wide area and deflected blades better. Mail is still worn today in butchers’ gloves and divers’ anti-shark suits.

2. **Of what materials did plate armor consist?**

Plate armor, like the kind worn in Europe from the 1400s to the 1600s, was made of hard wrought iron or steel. There were three different types of plate armor:

- ◆ **Combat Armor** was strong and had smooth, glancing surfaces to deflect weapons. It was relatively lightweight and allowed the wearer great maneuverability. (45-70 lbs.)
- ◆ **Parade Armor** was generally worn at court and for special events. It is heavily decorated and often too weak to deflect weapons or too awkward for wear in battle. It (30-80 lbs.)
- ◆ **Jousting armor** was very heavy, offered maximum protection on the left side of the torso and did not permit much freedom of movement. (80 lbs. and more)

3. **What is a lance?**

A lance is a long, shafted weapon averaging 10-14 feet in length. In the Middle Ages and Renaissance Period, it carried a metal tip, pointed for battle or blunted for the joust. It was carried solely by knights and other mounted troops. Knights relied on the lance-rest bolted to the breastplate to assist with anchoring the lance. A lance-rest acted as a fulcrum to help support the weight of the lance and also served as a shock absorber to counteract the force of impact from the lance when striking an opponent.

4. **How long did it take to make a suit of armor and how much did it cost?**

In the 1500s, an armorer and his assistants could have completed a plain combat suit in a few weeks. In general, a high-quality, custom-made armor could equate to one-quarter of a knight’s annual income. Many knights could not purchase a full suit and wore only the pieces they could afford or find scattered on the battlefield.

5. **How long did it take to put on or take off armor? Did knights dress themselves?**

A classic suit of plate armor of the 1400s or 1500s was difficult to put on by yourself—as with cleaning, servants were an essential part of a knight’s equipment. Efforts with modern reproductions suggest that the process took about 15 minutes.

6. **Did women wear armor?**

Some important women are said to have worn armor. Joan of Arc is probably the most famous. Women, however, were never knights.

7. How did they go to the bathroom?

Going into battle was like going on a long car ride—it was best to think of these things beforehand. Armor would generally be put on only when it was needed; in a pinch, most armor would not stop the wearer from unlacing his undergarments and pulling them down.

8. How physically comfortable was the armored knight?

Well-made armor did not greatly restrict the wearer's freedom of movement: it was designed to move the way the human body moves. The combination of armor and the necessary padding underneath could be very hot, a serious problem given the exertion of battle. Death by heat exhaustion was a very real risk. Unless stunned or seriously injured, knights could get to their feet quite quickly. While not light, the weight of an armor was well-distributed. A knight in armor could have mounted his horse easily by using stirrups. For very heavy jousting armors, the knights could put the leg defenses on first, then put the remaining pieces on once seated

8. How can a knight see out of his helmet? Why isn't the opening larger?

Knights had slits for vision and ventilation. To the sides and below, vision was very limited, so a combat helmet was designed to move freely. Jousting helmets were designed to provide maximum protection, and jousters did not require as much visibility, so their eye slits were smaller, and usually recessed. The charging knight would lean at the hips forward to see his opponent, then sit back just prior to impact, protecting his eyes from splinters from a broken lance. The door on the right-hand side of many jousting helmets is for ventilation between jousts.

9. Was anything worn under the armor?

Until the late 1500s, a padded and quilted jacket known as an arming doublet was worn under both plate and mail armor. Late 16th-century armor often appears in paintings worn over civilian costume. After 1600 it became common to wear a 'buff-coat' under the armor; this was a stiff coat of heavy leather, which might reach well down the thighs. Helmets also had a padded lining, often stuffed with horsehair or grasses, and major pieces of armor had cloth linings to keep the plates from wearing on one another and the garments underneath.

10. How could soldiers tell friends from enemies?

In the Middle Ages, the 'coat of arms' (coat armor) was worn over the knight's mail, showing his family or national emblem. With the appearance of plate armor and increasing reliance on professional rather than feudal armies, other devices such as different colored sashes, plumes, armbands, or special devices (such as a sprig of a particular plant worn in the hat) might be used. National uniforms did not appear until well into the 17th century, although already by 1300 it was common for individual military units to have some kind of uniform over-garment.

11. When and why did the wearing of a full suit of plate armor start to decline?

The wearing of a full suit of plate armor started to decline in the mid-1500s due to the increased use of small portable firearms whose bullets could penetrate plate armor.