

ISLAMIC ARMOUR

An introduction

by

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THE arming of Eastern races depended on the standard of their culture and the materials to hand as well as on the climate and terrain. Whereas in the North of Africa mail was worn, as it was in Arabia, Turkey, Persia, Egypt and India, the Kaffir of the south fought almost naked and carried only a large hide shield for his defense.

Armour was used by the Arabs before the advent of Islam. It consisted then of a mail shirt (*dera'*) covering the greater part of the body. The Arabs had many names for their coats of mail, according to their size, shape, material, place of manufacture, or name of the maker.

Dera' is the general Arabic name for a cuirass or shirt of mail and *Zereh* the Persian. It is a long, narrow, blouse-like garment, having short sleeves descending to the middle of the upper arms, which was sometimes formed of interwoven rings, or chainwork.

In the hot near eastern climate and in India mail was preferred for its flexibility to complete plate armour, although plates were used for certain parts of the body, but body armour of plate was never developed to the same extent as in Europe.

Indo-Persian armour consisted as a rule of a helmet with nasal and three plumes, a coat of mail with four plates, front, back and sides, known as the «four mirrors», and short vambraces on the arms, and a circular metal shield with four bosses. Rich ornamentation was lavished upon it, especially damascening with gold and silver. Changes of form were not as rapid as in the west.

As a substitute for mail a padded garment faced with velvet and studded with rivets was worn.

Syria and Egypt

The Islamic Orient retained a fashion in armour, which was most highly developed in Europe during the 12th and 13th centuries. In the crusades, the Arab chiefs wore armour of ring or chain mail, admirably wrought, strong, and capable of great resistance, yet light and flexible, and in every respect very greatly superior to the more

massive and cumbersome personal equipment of the Crusaders. In *Ayyubid* society (1171-1250) the wearing of armour seems to have been the privilege of the military aristocracy, and we are indebted to the memoirs of Usama ibn Munkidk, an Arab knight, that the armour of a prince during the Ayyubid period can be visualized (1). It consisted of a helmet (khawdha), a mail shirt (dera' or zardiya), stockings (ranat), leggings (sak al-muza) and boots (khuff) with spurs (mihmaāz), while his arms comprised sword (saif), dagger (dashan or nimdja), or knife (sikkina), lance (rumh), javelin (harba), and shield (turs or da-raka).

Three kinds of armour were mainly in use in Syria and Egypt from the 12th to the 15th century, if not also after: the coat of mail, the splint armour and the brigandine —the most common kind was the plain coat of mail.

From casual references, coats of mail were worn singly or double, short or long, and some of them were not merely long but dragging, covering the horseman's legs. Links of this and earlier chain mail sometimes bear a stamped ornament, in the form of lines, grooves,



Fig. 1. Mail-shirt of Sultan Qaitbay. Egypt, 15th century. (Topkapu Saray Museum, Istanbul).

dots, or scriptural texts. Each link of Islamic mail is riveted, sometimes with two armour pegs, which pierce the metal right through (2).

From early *Mamelukes* (12th cent.) onward, coats of mail reinforced by rectangular overlapping splints (djawshan) had been extensively used, and some time later under the Circassian dynasty in Egypt (14th-15th Cent.) they were employed almost exclusively for the expensive armour of high emirs (princes). To the same type, belongs the coat of mail of Sultan Qaitbay (ruled 1468-1496) which is exhibited at Top Kapu museum in Istanbul (3) (fig. 1). Two armguards of Sultan Qanzuh al Ghuri (1501-1516) can be seen at the same museum.

The Turks of Asia Minor used to wear the splint armour, yet there exists a variety of Turkish mail-shirts, perhaps the most important of which is that in the Badisches Landesmuseum in Karlsruhe (fig. 2). The shirt once belonged to Mostafa Agha Rhodési, the commander of the Janissaries during the siege of Vienna, 1683. A complete Turkish armour of man and horse (16-17th cent.) is at Moser Collection, Bern.

The brigandine (kazaghand) mentioned by prince Usama must have been a common garment in his days, although it was fine enough to be

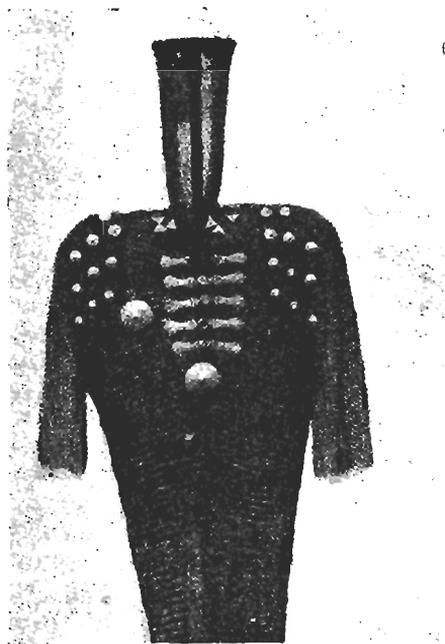


Fig. 2. Turkish mail-shirt of Mostafa Agha Rhodési, commander of the Janissaries in Vienna 1683. (Badisches Landesmuseum, Karlsruhe).

worn by Sultans as well (!) Sultan *Salah el-Din Ayyubi* (1138-1191) used to wear a brigandine constantly when riding. It had a collar, and although a knife could cut it, the blade could not penetrate as far as to the body. No actual specimen of an Ayyubid studded jerkin is known; only one of a Mameluke brigandine, once kept in the storeroom of the Museo Nazionale in Florence. It is a short jacket, not more than 70 cms. long, made of very strong material, with long sleeves and collar, covered with crimson velvet and sprinkled over with small brass nails. The inscription on the collar reads in translation: «Glory to our Lord, the Sultan al-Malik al-Zahir Abu Sa'id Djaqm³q may God Strengthen his victories» (4). M. Herz dates the brigandine very closely, 1438-56.

Persian armour

The armour of Persia and Central Asia seems to have enjoyed great renown in the eighth century. For the tenth, eleventh, and twelfth centuries, we have only a few documentary references and no illustrations at all, but from the beginning of the 13th century on, miniatures provide accurate pictorial records, especially manuscripts of the *Shah-Nāma*, which describes the arming of Persian horses for single combats and for battle.

The manufacture of armour was well organised by Ghazan-Khan (1295-1304). There were in each province and town many armourers, both Persians and Mongols, who made bows, arrows, quivers, swords, etc., they received annually a salary from the State, and were in return to furnish a certain number of arms.

With the XVth century, we come to the point where we have actual pieces of Persian armour such as corslets, and these can be fairly well identified by comparison with the miniatures which are rich in illustrative material and are often dated. The mail shirt reinforced with iron plates, once in the Oriental department of the Zeughaus, Berlin, is a good example of the protective armour of the first half of the XVth cent. The rings in the chain mail of this period have, as a rule, a flat rectangular cross-section. Until late in the XIXth. cent. the rings were always fastened with rivets.

In addition to mail shirts, the Tartar-Mongolian form of armour was also used, consisting of two round shields, one on the breast, the other on the back, together with side plates, neck piece and stomach plates. All these were usually made of damascened steel, connected by the necessary segments of chain mail. It is noteworthy that in the XVIth cent., the breast and back pieces were ornamented with

flutings. Two such suits of armour, in the Museum of the palace of Topkapu, Istanbul, are decorated on the rim and the centre of the breast and back disks with gold inlaid inscriptions, while the side plates are ornamented with vines and flowers, exceptionally rich and elegant in execution.

In the XVth century, a new type of armour appears, called «the four mirrors» (charaina) consisting of four iron plates, hinged together: two large ones to cover the breast and back respectively, and one on either side with an arm hole cut out. This corslet which was often lined with silk and trimmed with coloured silk bindings, was worn over the mail shirt. On the plates were areas of rich ornament, incised or inlaid in gold, with decorative designs —and inscriptions, usually quotations from the Quran.

To conclude, the typical armour suit (Indo-Persian) consisted of a shirt of chain-mail (zirah baktar), over which was buckled a cuirass in four pieces (char aina). On each fore-arm was an arm-guard (dastana), that on the right arm usually being longer than the other, as it was not protected by the circular shield (dhal). The head was covered by a hemispherical helmet with a nasal coming down in front, and

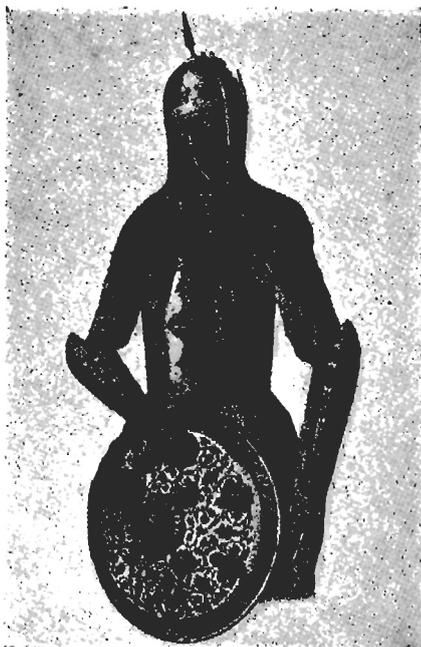


Fig. 3. Persian armour, early part of the 18th century. (Zarskoe Selo Collection).

with a curtain of chain-mail hanging from the sides and back resembling the medieval camail (fig. 3) (5).

One cannot miss to mention that the golden age of the Islamic armour in Persia extended from the end of the 14th cent. to the beginning of the 17th cent. The influence of Persia upon the armourer's art in India was very marked, particularly during the period of the Mogul Empire in India, and many types are common to both countries.

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We can't forget that there is close similarity of Islamic pieces of armour, that even an expert would probably not be able to distinguish armour from Persia, Egypt, Turkey, Algeria or Circassia. Nevertheless, one should not be disappointed. There is yet a vast field for the connoisseur to study with patience, experience and also knowledge.

NOTES

(1) Usamah's Memoirs, entitled *Kitab al-I'tibar*. Edited by P. K. Hitti. Princeton, 1930.

(2) B. Dean: *Handbook of Arms and Armour* (4th ed.). New York, 1930, p. 245.

(3) L. A. Mayer: *Saracenic arms and armour*. (*Ars Islamica*, Vol. X, 1943.)

(4) M. Herz: *Armes et armures arabes*. (*Bull. institut français d'Arch. Orientale*, VII. Cairo, 1910.)

(5) *Handbook to the Ethnographical Collections in the British Museum*. 1925, p. 44.