NOTICES OF ARMOUR IN THE MIDDLE AGES, AND ESPECIALLY
OF A SERIES OF EARLY HELMETS PRESERVED IN THE
ARMOURY AT PARHAM PARK, SUSSEX.

By the Hon. ROBERT CURZON.

From the earliest ages of which we have any historical
account, the greatest expense which has been incurred by
nations, and for which the heaviest taxes have been levied
on the people, is the immense outlay necessary for the
costly amusement of killing each other, and the consequent
necessary precaution of defending ourselves from those who
pass their lives in endeavouring to kill us.

Down to a very recent period the art of defence was
superior to the art of offence; it is only quite of late years
that the science of mutual destruction has rendered castles
and fortifications generally untenable, and defensive armour
of no avail: the Gothic castle cannot resist the Armstrong
gun, any more than the bravest Paladin could stand a
minute against the Whitworth rifle. Things were different
in the old times. It is entirely owing to the art of defence
having been inferior to that of offence, that the wonderful
victories were gained by the atrocious miscreants, Cortes
and Pizarro, against the defenceless inhabitants of Mexico
and Peru. In all hand-to-hand engagements, the man best
defended by his armour is almost certainly the conqueror;
it is only when missiles are brought into play that the strong
man armed finds himself on a level with the enemy of
weaker body; but, with the stronger mind, brute strength
gives way before the keener intellect. Of this result no better
example can be given than that of David and Goliath, when the giant, in his complete panoply of brass, fell like a slaughtered ox before the skill of his youthful antagonist. The principles of the art of war changed entirely, not exactly with the invention of gunpowder, but as soon as fire-arms arrived at such a degree of precision in their manufacture as to make their effects more or less certain when brought into the field. This is another point to be considered in the history of arms. The gunpowder of the middle ages was imperfect; sometimes its strength was hardly more than sufficient to hurl the great stone ball a few hundred yards from the cannon, at other times, having been compounded according to that ancient system called the rule of thumb, it was too strong by half, and burst its gun, to the destruction of the artillery-men who loaded it. The same mishap occurs among the half-civilized nations of Asia and Africa, who make their own gunpowder and their own guns and pistols; these weapons sometimes, indeed very often, will not go off. I remember a traveller in Albania who had an altercation with his guide. "I have pistols," said the traveller. "So have I," said the guide. "Yes," said the traveller, "but mine are sure to go off if I pull the trigger, and yours may not." "Ah, that makes a difference," said the guide, who for the rest of the journey was much more civil than before. In India, Persia, and Koordistaun armour is still worn as a defence, and people feel secure within the high walls of their castles when they only expect to be attacked by a swarm of undisciplined cavalry, or by infantry armed with matchlock guns, or even by artillery loaded with gunpowder which is only fit for fireworks.

Many years ago I was dining in the refectory with the monks in the monastery of St. Katherine on Mount Sinai, when we heard a great noise of firing guns and shouting outside. I immediately inquired what it was, when a monk walked leisurely into the room, and said—"It is only the Gebeli tribe of Arabs firing at the walls because we will not give them any more bread;" so we went on with our dinner. The Arabs continued their attack for some time, till, being out of powder, or out of patience, they drew off, without having given the slightest alarm to the inhabitants of the fortified monastery. This I thought a curious instance of the practice of war according to the ancient method.
A short time before these same Arabs had laid a regular siege to the monastery. This ancient building, of the fifth century, with high and thick walls of granite, is situated in a desert valley; there is no vegetation in the neighbourhood, except what is grown by the monks in a walled garden under the higher walls of the monastery itself. The Arabs in multitudes surrounded the beleaguered fortress (more majorum) after the ancient manner, and the monks looked at them out of the loop-holes high up from the ground: they were very snug inside, with plenty of food, no wine, because the Scripture admonition forbids Christians to get drunk with wine, but plenty of arraghi, or arrack, because that strong spirit not having been invented at the time, no mention is made thereof in Holy Writ. The Arabs outside were not so comfortable; they had no arrack and but little food. Bread or corn had to be brought from the cultivated lands far off, moreover it had to be paid for, and money was scarce in the camp of the besiegers.

There was a tall cypress tree which grew in the garden near the monastery. The Arabs, waiting for a dark night, cut this tree down in such a way that it fell against the walls, and they swarmed up the tree, intending presently to chop up the monks into cabobs. A cunning monk, however, one of the church militant, was ready for them; no sooner had the boughs of the tall cypress rested on the battlements of the monastery, than he tied a strong rope to the top of it, and waiting till the tree was full of Arabs, climbing silently one after the other to scale the walls, the monastic community, giving a long pull, a strong pull, and a pull all together in a sideways direction, brought the tree full of Arabs down with a crash upon the earth. How many Arabs were squashed, how many legs and arms were broken, does not appear; but there was a great cry in the darkness of the night, some blood upon the ground, and the Arabs, giving up the siege as a bad job, mounted their camels and departed, sending soon afterwards some of their sheiks and old men; these plenipotentiaries made a treaty with the monks, who agreed to give so many loaves of black bread whenever any of the tribe passed that way; this bread was an abomination, never tasted by the monks themselves, and only possible to be swallowed (though not digested) by savages in a dreadful state of hunger and destitution. Even of this bread the
quantity doled out became less and less, which was the cause of the futile attack above mentioned.

I tell this story only as an example of a country where, at the present day, the military arts of attack and defence are not more advanced than they were 2300 years ago at the siege of Troy.

Knights, or horsemen in complete suits of chain armour, armed with lances and swords, may still be met with in the rocky defiles of Circassia, waging an unequal war against the Russians. The mountains of Kara Dagh (the Black Mountains), on the shores of the Caspian Sea, are still famous for the manufacture of arms and armour, and I have myself often watched the progress of an old armourer at Erzeroom, who was celebrated for the excellence of the small round shields of steel still used by the robber hordes of Kordistaun.

In all these lands the art of defence is still far in advance of the science of offence; and, as in ancient times, the well-armed champion on his war horse can set at defiance almost any number of half-armed and undisciplined savages.

Defensive armour has been in constant use from the earliest dawn of history down to the present day in Asia, and down to the last century in Europe; but, excepting a few pieces of Greek armour and still fewer pieces of Roman armour in bronze, the specimens of defensive armour which have been preserved were all included until a very recent time within a period of little more than 200 years.

It is not more than forty years ago when Sir Samuel Meyrick first awakened public attention in England to this subject. He published a book, illustrated by Skelton, describing his own magnificent collection at Goodrich Court. This work has since become the text book to which conservators of public museums and private collectors refer as the authority for the dates of all kinds of European arms and armour, and, as far as it goes, it is unequalled by any other publication for the information which it affords. The Meyrick collection, however, contained no specimen of armour more ancient than the middle of the fifteenth century, with the exception of one tilting helmet, of the fourteenth century, from Hereford Cathedral, which had formerly belonged to Sir Richard Pembridge, who died in 1375. All knowledge of the forms and peculiarities of more ancient armour was
derived solely from sculptures on the tombs of knights and nobles remaining in Cathedrals and parish churches both in England and abroad.

Since that time, and within the last ten or twelve years, several real specimens of very ancient armour have been brought to light, and they have found their way mostly into the armouries at the Tower and at Woolwich, or have been deposited in the collection formed at Grimston, Yorkshire, by the late Lord Londesborough, in the armoury at Warwick Castle, or in that at Parham Park. Some armour of the same early character, heretofore unknown, may likewise now be found in the Musée de l’Artillerie or in other collections at Paris, Copenhagen, and in some continental museums.¹

These rare specimens are of the greatest interest to artists and students of historical antiquities, and exactly resemble the representations on early tombs which have been so correctly drawn and described in Stothard’s Monumental Effigies.

In the collection formed by myself at Parham there are three complete suits of armour, of the dates respectively of 1160, 1250, and 1350, also three complete suits of Gothic armour with long pointed toes, prior to the year 1452, as well as many detached pieces of very early date, and several cross-hilted swords of the same period.

It is remarkable that an ancient knight’s sword is perhaps the rarest of all the arms which have come down to our days, and this is the more singular, because every man in the middle ages wore one of those swords; from the great baron down to his most humble retainer, no one stirred without one, and there must have been thousands of such weapons, though so very few have been preserved.

It is to be observed, that almost all the early helmets, or heaulmes, which are described in the following pages, were made each for one particular knight or noble, according to his idea of what was suitable for his own wear; consequently, although the general type of the period when these ancient

¹ Two helmets obtained in this country have unfortunately been transferred to the Musée de l’Artillerie; one of these, stated to have been brought from a church near Faversham, and by some persons conjectured to have been worn by King Stephen, is figured, Journ. Brit. Arch. Ass., vol. x. pl. 16. The second, a portion of a helmet of the times of Henry III., was likewise purchased in England for the Armoury at Paris.
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pieces of armour were made is readily perceived, each particular specimen varies in its details, and no two helmets of the same date are exactly alike. In more recent times this was not the case; after the year 1500 there were great shops, where armour was sold by the "milliners," or armourers of Milan, and by others; and whole suits of armour are frequently found exactly like each other, as they were made for sale to the first comer, and not for any person in particular.

The reason why a series of early helmets is now presented to the reader without the addition of any other pieces of armour, is, because during the time of chain armour, from the year 1000 till the year 1300, the helmet was the only part of the armour which was made of plate. Although the chain mail was well calculated to resist the cut of a sword, it could not keep out the point of a lance given with the impetus of a charge from a mounted adversary; the body was defended from this attack by the shield, which was made of wood covered with leather and silk; it was not covered with steel till a much later period; at an earlier epoch it had been covered with brass. The chain armour was, I think, in most instances sewed on to a tunic of leather, and its pressure was kept off from the breast by a cuirass. A solitary fragment of one of these is in the possession of Mr. Eastwood, which was found in a stone coffin with the chain armour of a knight of the thirteenth century; it is made of two or three thicknesses of leather like that used for the soles of shoes, sewed together with leather thongs.

Between the years 1300 and 1400 the chain armour was much lighter, and pieces of plate were worn on the arms and legs. The gauntlets were not separated from the arm-pieces till the middle of the fourteenth century, and on the breast the cuirass of leather was replaced by an iron breast-plate without a back-plate. This was called a plastron de fer; the chain hauberk was no longer sewn to an under tunic of leather or canvas.

After the year 1400 suits of complete plate armour were universally worn, and numerous specimens are to be seen in all parts of Europe. But the extreme rarity of any pieces of defensive armour before that time, will, I hope, render even the present imperfect series of ancient helmets
acceptable to those who take an interest in military antiquities.

I will now proceed to describe in chronological order the helmets which are preserved in my collection at Parham.

I.—Greek Helmet of Bronze: one of three brought from the neighbourhood of Athens. Another, likewise at Parham, with engraved borders, and otherwise a beautiful specimen, is precisely of the same form, though it was found in a tomb in the south of Italy.

II.—English Helmet, of hard steel, or perhaps of iron hammered hard when cold. It is of very good workmanship. This unique helmet was purchased at a sale in Oxfordshire. A representation of a helmet of this kind may be seen in the enameled plate which portrays Geoffrey Plantagenet, Earl of Anjou, who died in 1149, figured in Stothard’s Monumental Effigies; also in a small tablet of gilt brass belonging to Lord Londesborough, found in the Temple Church, and figured, Gent. Mag. 1833; Fairholt’s Costume in England, p. 118, second edit.; and the type occurs in several illuminated manuscripts. The date of this helmet is about the year 1100.

III.—Hood of Chain-mail. The rings are of the size of a fourpenny piece, and are not riveted; those round the face, and on the edge of the camail or tippet, are of brass. Another at Parham, without the camail, has part of the original leather lining still remaining. Date possibly about 1120.
IV.—Cylindrical Helmet with a close visor; it is in remarkable preservation. The two side pieces are riveted together, the top is not riveted, but welded on to the sides. This, and the helmet next described, are, I believe, the only specimens extant in England of close helmets with flat tops. Date about 1150. Another was sold by Mr. Eastwood to a dealer at Paris.

V.—Cylindrical Helmet with a close visor. The top is slightly convex, with a Maltese cross embossed upon the crown. The top of this helmet is riveted to the sides. It is much smaller than the last specimen. Date about 1190.

At Warwick Castle there is a flat-topped cylindrical helmet, with the aventail, found at Eynsford Castle, Kent. Engraved, Journ. Brit. Arch. Assoc., vol. vi. p. 443.

VI.—Cylindrical Helmet of the thirteenth century. The face open. It has had a visor or aventail opening with a hinge on the left side; it has upon the crown a cross with a circle on the centre, embossed; the sides are made of one piece, the seam meeting in front, where it is covered with a bar in the form of a cross, riveted on. The ring at the back appears to be more modern than the helmet, although it must have been added at a remote period.

There seem to be four specimens of helmets of this kind in this country, viz.

1. At the Tower Armoury, much resembling that at Parham; it has the aventail. Described in this Journal, vol. viii. p. 420. See woodcut at the close of this memoir.

2. At Grimston, in Lord Londesborough's Armoury. The aventail wanting. It has the remains of a camail of very large rings. This helmet has a ring upon the crown. It has been engraved by Mr. Fairholt, Miscellanea Graphica, plate vii., and Journal Brit. Arch. Assoc., vol. x. pl. 16.
IV.—Cylindrical Helmet with a close visor; date about 1150.

V.—Cylindrical Helmet with a close visor; date about 1190.

VI.—Cylindrical Helmet; date thirteenth century.
VII.—Tilting Helmet; date fourteenth century.

VIII.—Basinet with a visor; date about 1310.
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3. A Helmet in the Tower Armoury, with a nasal to which a mentonnière of mail was attached by a hook.

4. The Helmet here figured.

VII.—Tilting Helmet, an extraordinary and fine specimen, with an extra moveable plate on the left side, which is probably unique, although often seen in illuminated MSS. This helmet was originally painted red, and I believe that armour before the end of the fifteenth century was frequently painted in Germany and England. In Italy, and also in warmer and more luxurious countries, the old surcoat was superseded by covering the armour with silk and velvet. There is a helmet of the fifteenth century in the Tower Armoury (a salade), and another belonging to Lord Londesborough covered with its original paint. At Parham there are three covered with red velvet, one japanned black, and another gilt; all of these being salades of the fifteenth century. This would account for the figures in colored armour seen in painted glass, illuminations, and monumental effigies painted in bright colors.

There seem to be five specimens extant of this kind of Tilting helmet in England, viz.—

1. The specimen here figured.


4. One in the Tower Armoury.

5. Another at the Tower. These two are, however, not so fine as the three first.

A very fine specimen of this kind of helmet was sold by Mr. Pratt to a dealer at Paris some years ago. Figured, Journ. Brit. Arch. Ass., vol. vii. p. 161.

VIII.—Basinet with a visor. Date c. 1310. An equestrian figure on the tomb of Aymer de Valence, in Westminster Abbey, has a helmet of this character; it was worn without a camail, but with a tippet of mail attached to a steel collar round the neck. The specimen here figured is of very hard steel. On the visor is a demi-lion rampant; round the lower edges are representations of feathers, drilled through the cold steel, not punched when hot. This is the most
ancient basinet known to me, and I am not aware that any other specimen exists.

IX.—Tilting Helmet. Date c. 1325. A helmet of this kind is represented with the effigy of Sir William de Staunton. He died in 1326. See Stothard's Monumental Effigies. I know of no other specimen, and suppose this to be unique. Helmets of this fashion are constantly seen in sculptures and illuminations of the fourteenth century.

X.—Basinet, with pointed visor and camail. This basinet is a modern fabrication, the peculiar visor and the camail are, however, ancient. This type of helmet is of such great rarity, that I hope I may be excused for giving a wood-cut and description of it, although part of the present specimen is certainly not genuine. At the same time it is not quite modern; it was obtained from the north of Italy, and perhaps was a funereal helmet, made up to hang over a monument in a church. The camail was not brought with it, and is, I believe, unique; this is of the date of the end of the fourteenth century, the rings being riveted and smaller than those of an earlier period. The rings are larger and stronger at the upper part, and lighter on the lower part, where the camail rested upon the armour of the shoulders. The mode in which it is fastened to the basinet is curious; it is kept in its place by a cord, which passes through a row of staples, or 'vervilles,' over a piece of leather, as may be seen on the effigy of Edward the Black Prince and numerous monuments in various churches. The only three specimens of this helmet in England are, one from Westphalia belonging to Lord Londesborough; figured by Mr. Fairholt, Miscell. Graph., pl. xxxv.; one in the Tower, from the Brocas Collection, and the one in the Meyrick collection, but neither has a camail. There is a helmet also in the Tower Armoury with a solid gorget, in the form of a camail. It belonged to Sir Richard de Abberbury of Donnington Castle, Berkshire, temp. Rich. II., as stated in this Journal, vol. ix., p. 93. See woodcut at the close of this memoir.

Basinets were in universal use throughout Europe during the whole of the fourteenth century. In England, they were usually worn without a visor. Of these, examples are to be seen at Warwick Castle, and in the Meyrick collection. On the Continent they are more numerous. Several specimens exist in the Musée de l'Artillerie at Paris; in
XIII.—Tilting Helmet; date about 1325.

X.—Italian Basinet with pointed visor and camail; date about the close of the fourteenth century.
XI.—Tilting Helmet; date about 1380.

XIII.—German Salade; date about 1420.  
XIV.—Venetian Salade; date about 1450.
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the Castle of Ambras in the Tyrol; and in private collections, to which they have been added at enormous prices.

XI.—Tilting Helmet. Date 1380. I have never seen any other helmet precisely like this; but I imagine, from its high crown and general character, that it must belong to the latter part of the fourteenth century. The holes at the top are for fixing on the crest; the large staple at the back is for the support of the lambrequins or mantelet, seen in heraldic drawings; and also, with the staple in front, for fastening the helmet firmly to the back and breast-plate, with sufficient security to resist the blow of the lance upon the forehead.¹

XII.—Venetian Helmet with a nasal. Date about 1390 (?) This is a transition between a basinet and a salade. It has a sharp ridge on the top, and seems to have been worn with a camail affixed inside the helmet, or with a mentonniere. There is a hole in the crown, for fixing on a plume or a crest.

XIII.—German Salade. Date 1430. This curious helmet belongs to the Gothic armour with long pointed feet which was used in the fifteenth century. The winged sides are joined to the back with hinges, and fastened by a strap behind. It is difficult to know what the object of this peculiar construction can have been, as the helmet, being open and very wide, could be readily put upon the head without any further opening. It has an aperture on the top for affixing the crest, and a row of small holes for sewing on the lining; there is a set of holes, two and two together, which may have served in the attachment of a camail. This is altogether a very singular specimen of that quaint style of armour called in French “armure à la poulaine.”

¹ In Cobham Church, Kent, there is a helmet of this character, but the upper part is of different fashion, low and slanting off obliquely from the ocularium. It has a ring in front, and a hook behind; on the apex there are four small staples for affixing the crest. It may have belonged to Sir Thomas de Cobham, who died 1395. Figured, Catal. of Exhibition at Ironmongers' Hall, 1861, p. 157. The tilting helmet of Henry V. in Westminster Abbey is also given, p. 145.
XIV.—Venetian Salade. Date 1450.

This helmet retains its original covering of crimson velvet with arabesque ornaments of gilt metal, of a perfectly oriental character. This kind of head-piece, the most beautiful and most useful of all the mediæval helmets, was worn all through the south of Europe, during the end of the fourteenth and the whole of the fifteenth century. It seems, from the illuminations in manuscripts, to have been generally covered with colored velvet, or gilt and richly ornamented with a wreath, crest, and plumes. There are seven specimens at Parham; one of these is japanned or enameled black, one is gilt, one only seems to have been worn in polished steel; the rest are, or have been, covered with velvet. One, which belonged to the “Generale di mare,” or Admiral, Antonio Canal, who commanded the Venetian fleet at a battle off Negropont in the year 1450, has its original quilted lining, as well as the covering of red velvet; the ornaments, probably of silver gilt, have been torn off. Some of these helmets are short, like the present specimen; others are long covering the neck down to the shoulders. It was a privilege in the great days of the Venetian Republic, that any distinguished noble might hang his helmet and sword in the hall of his ancestral palace. A few may still be seen, supported on large arms of carved wood projecting from the walls. They are placed on each side of an elaborately carved and gilt frame, containing the family arms, being a more artistic and dignified form of the “hatchment” which is hung over the door of the house after a funeral in this country.

XV.—Tilting Helmet. Date about the year 1420.

This helmet is the immediate predecessor of those used in Germany and other countries in the reign of the Emperor Maximilian, a specimen of which is engraved in this Journal, vol. xxi., p. 60. It will be observed that the height of the crown in the present example is greater than that of the helmets of the Maximilian period, although in the general form it much resembles them. The four holes on each side, above the ears, are for the purpose of tying the ends of cords attached to a strong wadded cap, which was worn inside the tilting helmet, and which was secured by that means in its place in the centre of the helmet, and prevented the head of the wearer from a concussion against the inside, which it did not touch in any part. A single specimen of the cap with
XV. - Tilting Helmet; date about 1420.

XVI. - Tilting Helmet of copper gilt; date about 1450.
this curious arrangement of cords exists in the Ambras collection at Vienna. This helmet was fastened to the breast and back-plates by one screw and four straps, two in front and two behind. These were superseded in the Maximilian helmets by bolts and fastenings of iron, which gave a greater security to the helmet but less security to the knight who wore it; a strong blow with the lance would knock off this helmet, but the wearer went with it over his horse's crupper. In the Maximilian tournaments, the curious contrivance of the wadded cap, added to the thickness of the helmet (and the skull) saved the knight from the otherwise inevitable concussion of the brain when he was hurled with such violence to the ground in this tremendous horse-play.

XVI.—Tilting Helmet. Date about 1490.

This helmet is of unusual size and weight; it is made of copper gilt. Helmets of this form were used in Germany, and indeed everywhere, at tournaments, before and during the reign of the Emperor Maximilian. One almost similar to the specimen at Parham, here figured, hangs in the hall at Bramshill in Hampshire. Tilting helmets of the Maximilian period are to be seen in the Tower Armoury, the Arsenal at Woolwich, the Meyrick collection, and in St. George's Chapel at Windsor. On the Continent there are numerous specimens, in national and other collections.

Armour of brass or copper was not uncommon in the middle ages. The reason why so few specimens remain is because they were melted down for the value of the metal. Chaucer, in his description of the equipment of Sir Thopas, mentions "his helm of latoun bright;" the hard mixed metal resembling brass being commonly called at that period laten, in French laiton.

The gauntlets of Edward the Black Prince, suspended over his tomb in Canterbury Cathedral, are of copper or laten. There are several complete suits of brass armour and two of silver at Dresden. The armour of the Duc de Sully at Paris is, as I believe, of copper. I have a chanfron for a horse's head and a long gauntlet for the right arm, which probably belonged to the Sultan Saladin; these are of copper heavily gilt. Some years ago I saw at Naples the fragments of an ancient Greek shirt of mail of brass.
EXAMPLES OF MEDIEVAL HELMETS.

Cylindrical Helmet; thirteenth century. Tower Armoury.

Visored Basinet; temp. Richard II. Tower Armoury.