

On the Prolonged Use of Fifteenth-Century Armour

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Close to a half century ago, the late Sir James Mann obtained permission to examine what he had been told were some sixteenth century armours in a Franciscan monastery near Mantua and in so doing made a discovery that was to prove of great importance to students of European armour.¹ The existence of these previously unrecorded pieces, traditionally taken from the battlefield of Marignano in 1515, had come to light during a conversation held some three years earlier with a friend and colleague, the Baron de Cosson.²

The armour concerned had been painted and made up in the form of effigies and as a result was thought for some time to be of papier mâché. On close examination, however, a number of the figures were found to contain elements of armour not only of early-sixteenth-century date, but also from the second half of the fifteenth century.³ Some of these were of rare form, hitherto known only by illustration.⁴ Under the guidance of Sir James Mann, the individual pieces were cleaned and rearranged into complete armours of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, with all parts contemporary as far as possible, special care having been taken to match the armourer's marks.

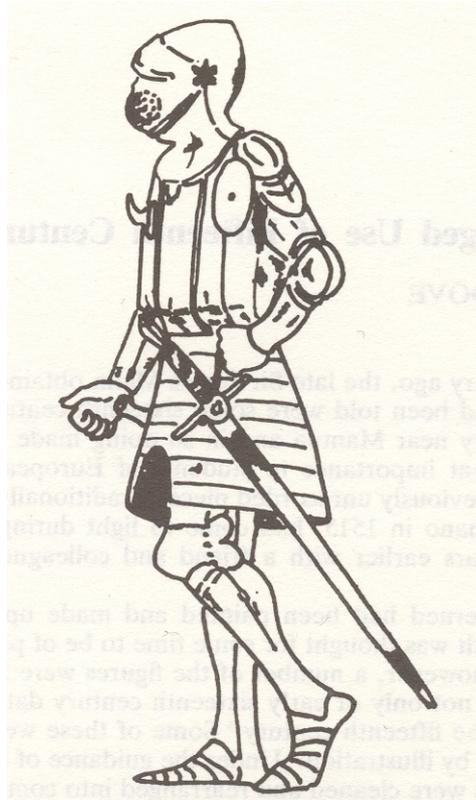
The suggestion has been made that these armours had come out of store, being regarded at the time as obsolete.⁵ Is it not possible that they could in fact have been worn in the battle of Marignano and that tradition for once could be right? Lest it be thought unusual for armour of such age to have been still used in battle, a few relevant points should be borne in mind. Although for the common soldier, armour tended to be 'off the peg',⁶ a harness⁷ for the nobility would have been the work of a skilled armourer, each part being made to measure. Consequently a good armour was not only expensive but also very well made. It is perhaps not fully appreciated that a medieval knight literally entrusted his life to his harness and that no man would have encased himself in a shell of steel unless it had been functional.

Until the general use of hand-firearms in the sixteenth century a well-kept armour could still have served its original purpose for some decades. In the sixteenth-century gallery of the Tower of London Armouries there is a painted wooden panel depicting the battle of Pavia in 1525 in which a number of knights can be seen wearing helmets and armour of the second half of the previous century. The presence of this earlier style of armour could be explained by the artist having copied or worked from outdated models, but could equally well have resulted from an accurate eye witness account of the battle.

In modern representations of battles the artist has invariably taken great pains to ensure that both armour and weapons depicted are of the date of the battle concerned. Thus Bosworth is illustrated by knights clad in armour of the 'High Gothic' style.⁸ While many would have had a complete harness made in this period to be in fashion, a number must also have had helmets and other pieces belonging to their fathers or as spoils of war from decades past. Any minor alterations necessary could easily have been carried out by an experienced armourer.

One can only speculate as to how much of the armour worn at Bosworth was made within five years of the battle and what proportion up to a half century earlier. It should not have been considered remarkable for a kastenbrust⁹ or a great bascinet¹⁰ to have fulfilled their protective purpose at any of the wars between the white rose and the red.

A comparable instance in modern warfare is that of the Lee-Enfield rifle. This was used extensively by the British army in the Great War of 1914-1918 and to no small degree thirty years later in the Second World War. This is surely adopting the same principle that would have applied in the fifteenth century, namely that as long as efficiency is unimpaired (and this must obviously be paramount whether for offence or defence), there is no reason for incurring considerable expense simply in acquiring a more recent model.¹¹



Knight wearing kistenbrust and form of great bascinet (based on an alter painting of c. 1440)

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. J.G. Mann, 'The Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie', *Archaeologia*, Vol. LXXX, (1930), pp. 117-42.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 117.
3. J.G. Mann, 'A Further Account of the Armour preserved in the Sanctuary of the Madonna delle Grazie', *Archaeologia*, Vol. LXXXVII, (1938), pp. 311-52 (details on p. 312).
4. *Ibid.*, cf. Plates CI, CIV where the leg harness of armour No.3 possesses the only known example of both mail fringes at the knee and the mail shoes (see also pp. 316-7). 5. *Archaeologia*, Vol. LXXX, *op. cit.*, p. 122.
6. A.R. Dufty, *European Armour in the Tower of London*, (H.M.S.O. 1968), Plate CXXII, illustrating a pair of splints (overlapping articulated plates protecting the outer arm from the shoulder downwards, worn c. 1480-1520) with adjustable arm lengths.
7. This was the contemporary term for a complete armour. Hence the expression 'To die in harness', *vide* Macbeth, Act V, Scene 5: 'At least we'll die with harness on our back.' 8. C. Blair, *European Armour*, (1958, reprinted 1972), p. 94 and Fig. 35, characterised by flutes and cusps.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 93 and Fig. 33, a curious box-like form of breastplate worn in Germany c. 1430-50. 10. *Ibid.*, pp. 102, 105, Figs. 75,76. A development of the bascinet which was originally worn under the great helm. The great bascinet was worn from c. 1420-1450 mainly in England, Burgundy and Germany until replaced by the sallet or armet. After c. 1450 its use was restricted to the tournament.
11. Until well into the present century certain tribesmen on the Indian borders have used flintlock and matchlock muskets of at least a century previous.

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