Armed to the Teeth

Dirk H. Breiding, Assistant Curator, Department of Arms and Armor; and Michelle Jubin, Intern, Department of Arms and Armor
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Knight (left) and Warder (right), ca. 1150–1200. Scandinavian, probably Norway, found on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland, 1831. Walrus ivory. The British Museum, London (1831,1101.113..124) © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

Knights from the Lewis group embody the visual ideal of a knight on horseback: a mounted warrior, protected by armor and shield, and armed with a sword and a spear, or lance. The Rooks (also known as Warders), rendered as battle-ready infantry, show very similar equipment (excluding the lance). As in the example above right, a few Rooks in the group curiously bite the top of their shields. Known as berserkers, these characters held a special place in twelfth- and thirteenth-century Scandinavian sagas. According to legend, berserkers went into battle either bare-skinned, or covered only by a bear skin (depending on translation), and were impervious to pain—possibly anesthetized by hallucinogenic mushrooms. The biting of the shield, terrible noise, and a wild gaze were intended to frighten the enemy (hence the expression "to go berserk"). As fearsome and loyal warriors, berserkers were ideal protectors of the King in a game of chess. Their long flowing gowns, or surcoats—typical for the period—could be worn either above or below a mail shirt of similar length. The hatched surface on one of the Rooks probably represents either stylized mail armor or a heavily quilted body defense.

The open-face helmets of iron or steel depicted in the group are particularly interesting. One type is of conical shape fitted with extensions over the ears and the neck. Side extensions, or cheek-pieces, are unusual at such a late date, while the rear extension is probably a specifically Scandinavian feature. The second type is known variously as a war hat, kettle hat, or chapel-de-fer ("hat of iron"); within this type, one variety has the shape of a bowler hat.
another is more angular and has a decorative cross-pattern encircling the center. The Lewis figures feature some of the earliest depictions of this helmet, but variations of the type continued to be used for centuries to come.

Knight (left) and Warder (center), ca. 1150–1200. Scandinavian, probably Norway, found on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland, 1831. Walrus ivory. The British Museum, London (1831.1101.102, .121) © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved. Right: War Hat, 15th century. European. Steel; Wt. 2 lbs. 13 oz. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Rogers Fund, 1904 (04.3.234)

Not a single example of the large almond-shaped shields carried by the Lewis warriors survives, probably because at the time of their use they were exposed to extreme "wear and tear" and the material from which they were made—wood covered with rawhide or leather—disintegrated over the centuries. Crosses and geometric figures decorate the Lewis examples.

Knight, ca. 1150–1200. Scandinavian, probably Norway, found on the Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides, Scotland, 1831. Walrus ivory. The British Museum, London (1831,1101.102) © The Trustees of the British Museum. All rights reserved.

The drawn swords reveal cross-guards, or quillons, that are relatively short (and would have been more fashionable during previous centuries), and blades with long central grooves, or fullers, often erroneously referred to as "blood-grooves." Extant swords from the Viking age give a good indication of the extent to which some weapons were decorated, and how highly esteemed such arms were in medieval society. The sheathed swords held across the knees by the Kings are symbols of political power, including the right to exercise judicial authority.
Three Knights from the Museum’s collection illustrate further developments of arms and armor. The first, riding an unarmored horse and battling a dragon-like creature, is thought to be English and to date to the mid-thirteenth century. He wears a hooded mail shirt, covered by a sleeveless surcoat, and mail defenses for the legs.


By this period, knights were often employed in a maneuver referred to as "mounted shock combat," a modern term that describes a tight
rank of men-at-arms on horseback who charged at the enemy with a lance couched under the arm. As the face was particularly vulnerable during such attacks, helmets were fitted with face defenses made from steel plates, which came to be extended to encircle the entire head (as here). Resembling a turned-over bucket, these helmets offered good protection but reduced the wearer’s vision (see example).

The shield used in this type of attack was triangular, straight and wide at the top, terminating in a point that still covers the knee. Since a knight’s face—and, therefore, his identity—was obscured, his shield, surcoat, and helmet would usually be painted or fitted with signs to make identification easier on the battlefield. To record and know all the different signs, symbols, and figures required specialists known as heralds, and this system of recognition became known as heraldry. (For more about heraldry, see The Cloisters’ blog The Medieval Garden Enclosed). Among the best pictorial sources for the arms and armor of this period are Old Testament scenes from a French illuminated manuscript known as the Morgan Picture Bible (see, for example, Folio 3v, Folio 9r, Folio 21r, and Folio 34v).

The Metropolitan’s second Knight, probably also English but dating to about 1350–60, provides a rare and detailed representation of a complete armor for man and horse. In addition to a mail shirt, the man wears a deep conical helmet with moveable visor and a neck-protection made from mail, gauntlets for the hands, and further plate armor for the knees and lower legs.

Chess Piece (Knight), ca. 1510–30. Western European, possibly German or English. Ivory. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Pfeiffer Fund, 1968 (68.95)

The shield is an early form of a particular type known as a targe, which is usually more rectangular in outline and concave (rather than convex) to better “catch” an opponent’s weapon. A “great sword” or “war sword” is suspended at his left side, while his right hand formerly held a lance resting in front of the saddle bow.
The horse is extensively armored as well, including a large head defense with additional plates to protect the upper neck and throat, and a full covering of mail down to the animal's knees and hocks respectively (see "Horse Armor in Europe" on the Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History). Four additional panels, suspended by straps and presumably made from textile or hardened leather, serve both as additional protection and adornment: they probably would have been painted or embroidered with the rider's coat-of-arms.

Manuscript of the Apocalypse (Folio 18), ca. 1330. Made in Normandy, France. Paint, gold, silver and brown ink on vellum. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, The Cloisters Collection, 1968 (68.174)
The last Knight, probably German and dating to around 1510–30, is armed only with a lance, which formerly rested on the side of the saddle, and likely represents a tournament participant. As part of a complete armor, the rider wears a visored helmet, shoulder defenses with large upright flanges for additional protection of the neck, and a textile skirt. Made from elaborately woven or embroidered textiles, skirts of this type were worn with armor in Italy from at least the mid-fifteenth century and became popular throughout Europe shortly after 1500. The horse armor comprises a light head defense reinforced with a small central shield, and plate defenses for the back of the neck, the chest, and the rump.

Left: **Chess Piece (Knight)**, ca. 1510–30. Western European, possibly German or English. Ivory. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Pfeiffer Fund, 1968 (68.183); Right: Wolfgang Grosschedel (German, Landshut, recorded 1517–62). **Armor**, about 1535. Etched steel. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, Fletcher Fund, 1923 (23.261)

As a metaphor for the real world, chess reflected social relations and moral etiquette, power and political order, and—last but not least—appropriate attire. Contemporaries certainly noticed the moral implications of these similarities. In his poem "That One Should Flee the World," the fourteenth-century German author Heinrich Kaufringer observes that chess has kings, knights, and pawns, but at the end of the game all figures—without distinction—are put into the same deep bag, their grave:

*Thus is the way of the world,*  
*And no different is the game of chess*  
*Therein are kings, knights, and pawns.*  
*Great and small, crooked and just,*  
*Nobles and peasants, poor and rich.*

Today works of art as diverse and yet inextricably linked as tiny chess pieces and arms and armor help us trace the lives of those who played the "game of kings" in the Middle Ages.

Department(s): Medieval Art and The Cloisters  
Tag(s): armor, arms, Bible, chess, chessmen, medieval, ivory

Newer: Horsing Around  
Older: From Tusk to Treasure:
Part II