Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THE MIDDLE AGES H7/A





Replica Basinet

At the top end of the medieval social scale were knights - men who had enough land to allow them to buy and maintain a horse and armour. Such items were very expensive. In return for the grant of land knights were expected to provide military service to their lord. Medieval society was said to be divided into three groups - knights, clerics (priests and monks) and peasants. These three groups are illustrated in the image on the left. The vast majority of society was made up of peasants.



This helmet is of the basinet type. This type of helmet was popular in Europe at the end of the fourteenth century. Helmet styles changed throughout the Middle Ages. Some changes were due to improving technologies, others were simply due to changing fashions. The Anglo-Saxons and Normans, for example, wore conical helmets with a nasal bar protecting the nose (right). This was worn over a coif or mail hood that protected the rest of the head and neck.

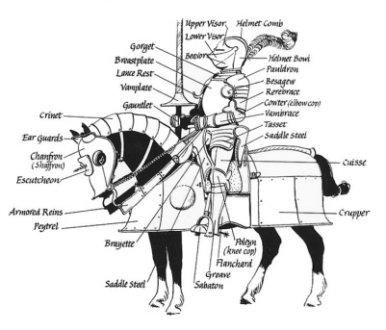


By 1200 the Great Helm (left) was the fashionable helmet. This helmet became popular with European knights after the Crusades. The Great Helm had advantages over the conical helmet as it covered all of the face. However, padding was essential to make it comfortable.

READING MUSEUM SERVICE
Reading BOROUGH COUNCIL
Heritage Lottery Fund

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THE MIDDLE AGES H7/A



The basinet was a little more practical on the battlefield than the **g**reat **h**elm. Some examples, like this one, did not have a visor, but many others did. Helmets without a visor enabled the knight to so see (and breathe) much more clearly. On the other hand, visors helped to protect the face. Many basinets were fitted with a pointy nose and head of the helmet, which could divert glancing blows from swords. The pointy nose led to such helmets being called 'hounskull' (dog-faced) helmets. There would have been a padded liner inside the helmet to ensure the basinet fitted snuggly onto the wearer's head. Unlike this fibre-glass replica, a real helmet would have weighed five or six pounds.

Such a helmet would have taken many hours to forge and assemble. Even so, it would only have been one part of a suit of armour. The knight's horse, too, would have been provided with armour. The photograph on the right shows a fine basinet with a visor from Milan. Unlike the example in this box, it is highly decorated - making an impressive appearance was as important to many knights as protecting the body!



Replica Chess Pieces

People in the Middle Ages liked to enjoy themselves and chess was a popular leisure activity. These two pieces - a queen and a rook - are a copy of ones found on the Isle of Lewis, Scotland. They are believed to have been made in Trondheim, Norway, where similar pieces have been found, sometime during the twelfth century.





Most all of the Lewis pieces in the collection are carved from walrus ivory, although a few are made from whale teeth. Ninety-three pieces were found, forming parts of four or five sets, two of them complete. More examples can be seen on the left. All the pieces are sculptures of human figures, except the pawns (which are smaller, simple sculptures resembling carved gravestones) and most of the human figures have decidedly glum expressions! Some were stained red when found, indicating that red and white were used to distinguish the two sides.

Floor Tile



Tiles like this were widely used in church buildings during the Middle Ages. Many examples have been found in excavations of Reading Abbey. The photograph below left shows such a tile, found near the Forbury Gardens in 2001.

Clay for tiles was dug up in the autumn and left in the open air to weather for a few months, perhaps being dug over once or twice. To make an individual tile the tiler then threw a lump of clay into a square mould. Surplus clay was scraped off the top and bottom with a wire and the surfaces were smoothed with a piece of wood. The blank tiles were then left to dry before being decorated.



There were then two ways of decorating them. Inlay tiles were made by stamping the leather-hard clay with an embossed wooden stamp and then filling the impressions with soft white clay. Surplus white clay was scraped off the top with wire.

The other method was printing the design on the tile. This example is a printed tile. In such cases the embossed stamp itself was coated with white clay and then pressed onto the surface of the blank tile, rather like printing with ink on a piece of paper. With this technique the white clay was not as deeply embedded into the underlying clay, as can be seen with this example. The tiles were then glazed to prevent wear and tear.

This tile also has a slight inward slope to the edges so that mortar could be put between the tiles, without preventing the top surface of adjacent tiles meeting tightly together.

Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THE MIDDLE AGES H7/A

Seal Impression



A seal is a piece of wax attached to documents and letters as a guarantee of authenticity. It shows that the document is not a fake and can be trusted.

Seals were used instead of signatures as not many medieval people could write, so they could not sign documents and letters. The design of each seal was different so it was possible to tell who had sent the document or letter.

Seals were attached to many different types of medieval letter, including documents produced by the government and royal family, town councils and monasteries.

A medieval seal was made by pressing a die matrix into softened beeswax to make the impression. The die matrix is the stamp used to impress the design of the seal into the wax. They were commonly made of bronze but some people had gold or silver matrices.



The seal impression in this box is not medieval but was made from the original medieval die matrix in the picture on the left. We can tell this from the colour of the wax used. Medieval seals were not made from a red wax but from beeswax that looks a dirty yellow colour or brown. Some medieval waxes were coloured green but red is a colour only recently used.



The seal impression in this box belonged to Isabella de la Beche. We can tell this from the inscription, which has Isabella's name on it. The de la Beche family were powerful landowners and knights in the fourteenth century. Their manor stood on the site of the Beche farm in Aldworth, Berkshire. The seal was found in 1871 when a field next to the site of this manor was being ploughed. Her husband John died in 1329 and left his estate to Isabella, so she needed a seal to sign letters and documents about the estate. Members of the de la Beche family are buried in a small church in Aldworth. Several tombs and monuments belonging to the family can be seen here, including that of Sir John and Lady Isabella (right).

Three Silver Pennies



Coinage enables trade to take place. After the Roman army was withdrawn from Britain the supply of coinage dried up and commercial life must have been very difficult. However, by the late seventh century Anglo-Saxon rulers had begun to produce silver *peningas* (pennies). Silver pennies were to remain the main unit of English currency until the eighteenth century. When small change was needed a penny would be cut in half or quarters.

In England the production of coins was a highly organised business, far more carefully regulated than in most of Europe. In France and the Holy Roman Empire barons and bishops produced their own coinage. In England, by way of contrast, the public were regularly required to take their old pennies to the mint and exchange them for new coins of the correct weight and quality. This exchange also served as a form of taxation as moneyers were required to charge a fee for the service.

The silver pennies in this box have been used so much that it is unclear who made the coin and where. However, all of them have a 'long cross' on the back. This cross, which extended right to the edge of the coin, made it obvious when people clipped bits of silver from around the edge of the coin, reducing its value. It was a crime to do this, punishable by death, but many were tempted because silver coins really were made out of silver. The long cross also made it easy to cut the coin into halves or quarters to give as change!



The front and back of a silver penny produced for Edward I.

Brick



Most of the houses in medieval Reading would have been made from wood and wattle-and-daub. The churches in Reading were built from flint, as it is plentiful in the area, although it is not the easiest stone to make a wall with. Reading Abbey had walls faced with expensive sandstone brought from many miles away, most of which was looted when the abbey was closed down in the sixteenth century. Bricks and tiles have been made near Reading at Tilehurst since the Medieval Period. Tilehurst gets its name from the brick and tile kilns there.



Brick is a useful building material in areas where good building stone is unavailable, but there is clay which can be used as a raw material. In some places houses of wealthy merchants and guild buildings were made from brick. The finest brick buildings were the early Tudor palaces such as Hampton Court Palace or institutions such as St John's College, Cambridge (left). Brick buildings could be decorated with different coloured bricks laid in a pattern.

Medieval people understood the fire resistance of brick so they used bricks to build chimneys, fireplaces and kilns in buildings that were otherwise made of wood.

Bricks were shaped in a wooden mould to make sure the brick was the right size. Imprints of the wooden grain can be seen on some medieval bricks. Are there any imprints on the side of this brick?

Medieval bricks were smaller than the bricks used to build our houses today. This example has the remains of the mortar used to hold the bricks together on the sides. The mortar used would have been made from limestone and other materials.

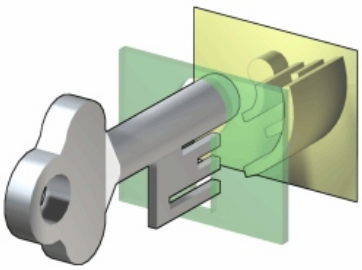
Hands On Learning
with Reading Museum Service

THE MIDDLE AGES H7/A

Key

A key like this is used to open a ward lock - a type of lock that uses a set of obstructions (wards) to prevent the key from turning unless the slots in it correspond with the obstructions inside the lock. A simple modern version of such a key/lock can be seen below left.





Medieval keys were often larger and simpler than the keys and locks we use today. The majority of medieval keys and locks were made from cast iron. It is probable that this key fitted a lock on a door. Medieval locks could also be found on cupboards and chests, but those keys would have been smaller than this one. How large is your front door key next to it? Imagine carrying this key around in your pocket!

Jug

Pottery on archaeological sites is usually found in lots of small pieces. It is an exciting find when a jug is found intact. There is a little bit of damage to the rim of this jug but it is in good condition.



Pottery in the Medieval Period was handmade by coiling a length of clay or spinning the clay on a wheel. Medieval potters were skilled and could produce very detailed work by hand. Can you feel the ripple effect on the surface of the jug left by the potter who made it? From looking at the surface of the jug do you think it was made from coiling clay or on a potter's wheel?

Glazes were often used to add colour. The colour of the glaze depended upon the minerals added to the glaze. Copper produced a green glaze and iron produced a reddish brown glaze. This jug, though, has no decoration or glazing. The handle is crooked. Do you think this is a repair, or was it just badly made?!

The words 'Idol Lane EC' are written on the bottom. Idol Lane is an old street in the City of London. This jug was probably found there.

Two Mystery Objects

It is not always clear to archaeologists and historians what an object is or what it was used for. There are different ways of identifying an object that historians and archaeologists use.

Archaeologists use context to help them identify objects. The context is where the object came from, such as the layer of soil in an archaeological trench. Knowing the context of an object can help archaeologists and historians identify the period of time that it came from. If an object was found in a medieval layer in an archaeological trench with other medieval objects then it will be assumed that it is medieval.

Context can also help to identify what the object was used for. If it was found in the remains of a church rather than a house then it may be easier to work out what it is.



Unfortunately these mystery objects have no context. Both of them are made from a copper-alloy, similar to bronze. The object on the right seems to have a decorative purpose, rather than practical. Do you think it could have been attached to an item of clothing, for example a belt or the scabbard of a sword? Another suggestion is that it looks a little like a bishop's mitre. Could it have been attached to an item of furniture in a church?



The object on the left seems more functional than decorative. It is possible that it may not be medieval. Could it have been part of a belt buckle? Could it have been used as a toggle on clothing or as a handle on a drawer?

Have you any other suggestions?