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THE MIDDLE AGES H7B





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 called a basinet. This type of helmet, with its distinctive pointed visor, 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.

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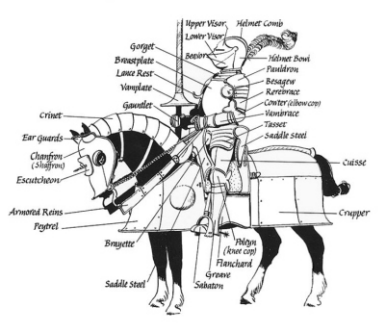

The basinet was a little more practical on the battlefield than the great helm. It had a visor which could be lifted up to provide more vision and ventilation. Some knights fought without a visor, so they could see more. The pointy nose and pointy head of the helmet were also useful in diverting glancing 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.

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. This example is undecorated, but others were patterned in various ways - making an impressive appearance was as important as protecting the body! The photograph on the right shows an identically shaped basinet from Milan with decorative brass panels.



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.

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, although it was probably made from a medieval matrix. We can tell that this impression is modern 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.

Two Floor Tiles





Tiles like these were widely used in church buildings in 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.

These tiles also have 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.

Arrowhead



The bow and arrow was a weapon that all members of medieval society would have known. English governments repeatedly passed laws to compel men to practice their archery skills, so that they would be ready for military service. King Edward I (1272-1307), for example, banned all sports but archery on Sundays. The Butts area of Reading gets its name because it was here that archery was practiced - 'butt' is another name for a barrel and the ends of barrels were used as targets.

The effectiveness of plate armour against arrows and crossbow bolts is debated. Crossbow bolts could be fired with much more force than arrows from a longbow. They were, however, cumbersome to reload (although not more so than early muskets). Longbows could be fired more rapidly, although the impact of their arrows was less.

English archers famously halted armed French knights at the battle of Agincourt. However, the arrows they fired need not have killed to be effective. At the time of Agincourt, a typical suit of armour had a mass of between 30 and 45 kg and was made of wrought iron, which is rather soft. The thickness of the armour varied according to the part of the body being protected. The thickest armour was up to 4 mm thick and the thinnest about 1 mm. Experiments (not using live-targets!) suggest that arrows could easily penetrate 1 mm of armour. They did not penetrate far enough to damage vital organs, but they would still cause agonising pain and disable their wearer. A blast of arrows, even if it couldn't be maintained for more than a few minutes, was clearly very effective. It is thought that Henry V's 5,000 archers fired about 400,000 arrows in eight minutes. Incapacitated knights could be finished off by poking knives through gaps in the armour or hitting them with spiked hammers.



An illustration of the Battle of Crecy, 1346, in which English longbowmen slaughtered French knights. Italian crossbowmen can be seen on the left.

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Billhook



A billhook is a heavy, thick knife or chopper with a hooked end, used for pruning hedges. The curved side of the blade was used for general and heavy cutting whereas the straight side was reserved for fine pruning. The length of the handle could vary.

They are also known by several other names. In some English counties they were known as handbills and as hedging-bills in others. Smaller versions of the billhook are known as pruning hooks.

Billhooks were also used as a weapon; it was the most common weapon of the English infantry forces. They were capable of slicing through the armour and mail of the enemy. Horses could also be killed with billhooks, which was useful when facing cavalry forces.

A maker's mark can be seen on the blade of the billhook in the shape of a cross. The blacksmith who made the billhook would have made this mark. He would have stamped his mark on everything he made.

Metal Badge



It is not known where this badge was found. It is difficult to be certain what it was used for. It may have been a pilgrim's badge. Pilgrim badges were souvenirs given to people who went on pilgrimages to religious places such as Jerusalem or Canterbury Cathedral. A pilgrimage was often the only chance ordinary medieval people had to get away from work. It was a holiday that was also good for the soul.

Medieval illustrations show pilgrims wearing these badges on their hats. The majority of pilgrim badges were made of lead and tin-alloy, as it was a cheap material that could easily be mass-produced. This badge is made from bronze, a more expensive material than lead and tin-alloy. It is possible to attach the badge to clothing through the holes on the back. As the eagle is a symbol of St John, it possible that it is from a pilgrimage site associated with this saint.

Another possibility is that it was a livery badge. These badges were given to knights and other followers of a lord.

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Two Pottery Fragments

Pottery on archaeological sites is usually found in lots of small pieces. It is an exciting find when a jug is found intact. Both of these sherds are from the base of a bowl. From the base do you think you can tell what size the bowl was?



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. You can see the ring marks made by the potter's wheel on the sherd with green glaze (left).

Glazes were added to waterproof the pot and to make it attractive. 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. Many medieval pots have a similar green colour.



Decoration could be added to jugs and other pottery vessels. Shapes could be added before the piece went into the kiln. Thumbing was often used to strengthen the base of jugs. The second of the fragments (right) has such marks around the edge of the base. Is your thumb the same size as the potters?

Both of these fragments were found in Broad Street, Reading.