

Knights in Shining Armor

With all the gruesome weapons we just learned about in the last section, you can imagine that the warriors were anxious to have armor! They needed protection very badly! But, because metal was rare and expensive in the earliest part of the Middle Ages, when Europe was still in chaos after the corruption of Roman rule, few men had any type of strong metal protection. Thus, they depended on leather and wood for some time. In fact, I've read that some squires did not want to graduate to knighthood because they could not afford the armor! Of course, the Romans had used both leather and metal for their armor, and these early folks must have had memories of facing them. All they could do was hope for the best from their leather, and the crisscrossed straps on their leggings. (These x-shaped straps later became the basis for argyle socks, according to Mr. Tunis!)

A few early fighters were able to have *chain mail* made for them, a flexible shirt (called a *hauberk*) made of linked metal rings. Each ring had to be hand-forged, so it was very costly. Gradually, as the situation improved, the hauberks got longer, had hoods added to them, and got full sleeves. The longer hauberks were split in the lower portion, so the knight could sit astride a horse.

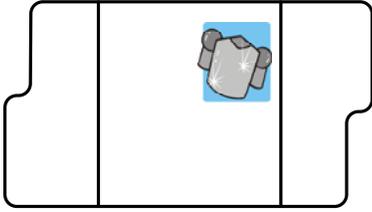
Did you ever think about this chain mail getting rusty? It surely did, for it was not usually made of the best metal. Pages would put the pieces of it into barrels filled with sand and small rocks. Then they would roll the barrels to give the mail (and armor) a good scrubbing! Also, the knights later wore a long tunic (called a *surcoat*) over the mail to protect it from rust-causing rain. This is probably the picture you have of a mail-clad knight in your mind, with his dramatic surcoat blowing in the wind. Even their horses were draped with mail...and cloth coverings (*caparisons*), for the very same reason!

A knight whose horse went down beneath him was in trouble, for a knight on foot had a very difficult time moving in his heavy metal coverings. Yes, as thick armor was added to the chain mail (later in the Middle Ages), the weight carried by knights came to be very great. But as the weapons became more powerful, they needed thicker metal to stop them. Eventually, knights couldn't even stand up if they fell over! That's where the squires and pages were crucial!

Even their head coverings—called *helms*—were quite heavy. One author said they could each be about 13 to 14 pounds! Eventually, they extended the sides of the helm so that it would rest some of the weight on the shoulders. But with only little slits for eye holes and breathing holes, it was very difficult for the knights. You won't be surprised, then, that they gradually developed lighter versions and called them a word which meant *little helms*; you know them as *helmets*.

The armor eventually came to be so astonishingly heavy, and the horses they bred to carry them (the ancestors of today's draft horses) so enormous, that the knights were increasingly beaten by men wearing lighter coverings and riding faster horses. Also, the eventual invention of firearms made armor obsolete. Change was in the wind!

Folder 1



Read *Knights in Shining Armor*.

Cut out the booklet as one piece. Fold in half. Glue into lapbook.

Directions: Inside of the booklet, write what you have learned.

