ARM DEFENCES

The knight's shoulders were a main target for his opponent, and they were especially vulnerable to sword blows that skidded off the helmet. The arms were more difficult to hit because the left arm was protected by a shield, and the right arm was constantly moving as the knight wielded his weapon. All the same, a broken arm or elbow would disable a knight in combat, and did not always heal properly, which could wreck his career. Early knights protected their arms with mail sleeves that reached to the elbow. By the twelfth century they came down to the wrist. It seems that solid plates were not used until about 1300, beginning with plates on the outside of the arm and simple discs at the shoulder and elbow. This protection for the whole arm was called a vambrace. By 1350 the knight's arms were completely protected and even the elbow defence developed a 'wing', which helped protect the elbow from sharp weapons.

The Three-Part Vambrace

Some fifteenth-century German knights preferred an older style of three-piece arm defence. Here the squire is about to lace and buckle on the cup-shaped plate for the elbow, called a couver. The upper cannon has already been laced to the upper arm and the lower cannon slid over the forearm.

An Italian Vambrace

This mid-fifteenth-century vambrace was fastened to the shoulder by laces tied through holes in the leather tab at the top of the upper cannon. The hinged plates of the lower cannon were closed around the knight's forearm and held in place by a strap and buckle. The small plates above and below the couver stopped any gaps appearing when the knight bent his arms. The lowest plate was attached to the lower cannon by rivets, each sliding in a slot cut in the upper end of the cannon, so that the knight could twist his forearm. The pictures on the right each show (left) a sliding rivet and (right) how two plates pivot on a single rivet.

Shoulder Defences

The shoulder defence, called a pauldron, was made up of several plates that moved over each other so that the knight could raise his arm. The pauldron overlapped the upper cannon, and was held by laces at the shoulder and a strap and buckle around the arm. Italian armour often had special reinforcing plates for the knight's left shoulder and elbow to help guard the side most exposed to an opponent, and so a shield was no longer necessary. The right pauldron was cut out under the armpit to allow the knight to tuck his lance under his arm.