

16-A Early Weapons and Defenses

For many centuries, the sword was the chief weapon of war. Defenses against it were gradually invented. The best defense was another sword. Next, a stout shield was found to be a great help. Early shields were made of heavy leather over a wood framework. Later came metal shields. A defender used the shield to parry the blow of an opponent's sword while driving home his own weapon. The shield eventually grew larger and longer. A warrior could hide almost completely behind it. But this type of shield proved too heavy and unwieldy. With it, a battler could move only slowly and with great difficulty.

To use a three-foot (1-meter) sword effectively, a fighter had to be within three feet of the enemy. At such short distances, however, the fighter was in turn easily within reach of the opponent's sword. Being able to fight at greater distances would protect the fighters. They gained this distance by using spears, javelins, lances, and similar weapons with sharp points on long shafts. Spears were lightweight and well balanced so that they could be thrown with great accuracy.

Longer and heavier spears were used for thrusting rather than throwing. They were especially deadly when held firmly in the grip of a horse rider moving at full tilt. With the horse, warriors gained the advantage of speed and movement in battle.

During the Middle **A**ges, **a**rmed and **a**rmored knights on horseback **b**ecame the heroic figures of warfare. The spears they used were so long and heavy that the knights rested them on saddle braces. At this time, **pl**aying at war **b**ecame more popular than war itself. Great jousting tournaments were held at the principal courts of Europe. At these celebrated events, special jousting spears were used. They were blunt-ended, and the opponents were well covered with armor so that little blood was spilled.

Suits of armor were cleverly made so that overlapping steel plates allowed bending of joints and easier movement than one might suspect. **E**ven horses were armored. **A** knight in heavy armor was at great risk, however, when thrown from a horse. On the ground, the knight could easily be surrounded by serfs armed with pikes. Pikes were spears up to twenty-four feet (7 meters) in length. They were carried by the lowly infantry, which made up most of the fighting force. **O**nly the rich and lordly rode out to battle in shining armor.