

The history of chain mail



Many archeologists have come to believe that chainmail was invented by the Celts because rusty masses were found in some Celtic graves, dating as far back as 400 BC, and they were identified as being remains of old chain mails. However, the earliest known record of chain mail armor is of a Persian soldier who was wearing a chain mail shirt in battle around 359 BC.

Also, some samples of Mail go as far back as to the Etruscans; however, it seems that the Etruscan mail is constructed in a pattern closely related to that of the Japanese and some Italian patterns, rather than the common European 4 in 1 pattern.

Then, around the 2nd Century BC after the Celts had defeated the Romans, they had demanded a large ransom for leaving the Romans occupied territories. Despite their defeat in battle, the Romans found that the Gauls wore the first known examples of European Pattern chainmail shirts and found they were impressed by the Celts and their armor, and soon adopted the oval shield, chainmail, and helmets for their secondary troops. The Roman chainmail shirts were referred to as Lorica Hamata.

The Roman Lorica Hamata is interesting in the sense that half of the links that made up the shirt were solid rings, punched from metal sheets. This technique can even be found in later European chainmail examples, but most European chainmail is made entirely from the drawn-wire links. Another example of chain mail with punched links is called “ Theta” or “ Bar Link” which comes from Persia and India. It is called “ Theta” or “ Bar Link” because the punched links have a bar going across their centre which makes them resemble the Greek letter and mathematical term “ Theta”.

From the 2nd Century of the Common Era, through the fall of the Roman Empire and into the so called Dark Ages, chainmail seems to have been a common armor all over Europe, including further down to what we now call the Middle East, and north into the Viking cultures and even into the far east where the Japanese began to develop their own styles of chainmail. The only culture that didn't develop its own chainmail armor is China, even though they did wear imported chainmail from the Middle East.

The common patterns of the Japanese were lighter and more open than the European patterns, but they were made of a superior quality tempered wire that wasn't riveted. Some links in Japanese mail were double or even triple wrapped for strength. Much like the best European chainmail makers, the Japanese also paid good attention to which parts of the body the armor was supposed to be protecting. Chainmail over ones chest would be thick and strong, but on the elbows, where flexibility is important, the chainmail would be lighter.

However, it is not completely fair to compare the chainmail's from Europe and Japan because the fighting styles evolved on completely different tangents. European armor had to be heavier in order to deal with the crushing weapons which were commonly found in their battles, even though heat exhaustion was common because of the thicker and less breathable armor. Japanese fighting techniques required lighter and faster weapons, therefore making mobility a greater concern.

As some countries were already developing their chain mail armor, the Vikings in northern Europe began to utilize this style of armor as well. A

Viking warrior's attire varied from the very basic to much more comprehensively equipped. The poorer Vikings had to make do with simple protective garments of padded leather; however, reindeer hide was reputedly even more effective than chain mail. Chain mail required a lot of intense labour to make and it was also extremely heavy, but very difficult to penetrate. Chain mail was even used in helmets which took immense skill to make. Some other warriors in the Viking era who used chain mail armor were the Anglo Saxons. Saxon mail was generally more decorative than the plain Viking style but by the 11th century, when warriors across northern Europe all wore similar chain mail, the Anglo Saxon swords and armor were the equipment of wealthy warriors.

As mail evolved in some cultures it became common to use the flexible chainmail to link together larger protective metal plates. This was especially common in Persian examples of Plate and Chainmail armors. Persia also claims to have had some unique mail patterns of its own.

In the Ottoman Empire in the 15th and 16th centuries, the armed forces were very diverse. However, much of the armor and weaponry, such as chain and plate mail coats, curved swords and round shields, were very similar to those found from the same period across a wide area of the Islamic world. A body armor known as a Zirh Gomlek was composed of both riveted and solid mail links with plates engraved with scrolling foliage. In an example found of this mail there was inscription on the plate mail which translated into “ Power is in obedience. Wealth is in contentment. May the end be to the best.” At this point in time, chain mail had been integrated into helmets, plate mail and gloves but the Ottoman had tried it with boots. Although they

were heavy and uncomfortable, the boots made up of four plates fastened to each other with 3 columns of mail at the front, back and sides, with the mail continuing around and under sole, provided great protection for the wearer.

In the early 18th century in Asia, a special armor jacket known as a Zereh Bagtar and an armor coat were the both interesting examples of combining chain and plate mail together. The Zereh Bagtar is a armor jacket which resembles a haubergeon but it has longer sleeves and all around the upper body area there are columns of small plates. The armor coat is an Indian style of combined chain and plate mail with four large plates at the front, two smaller ones at the sides and further plates at the back. This particular style was favored by Mughal emperors despite the fact it did not offer absolute protection. Any missiles and stabbing weapons could potentially penetrate the areas of riveted mail. Chain and plate mail combinations were in general use across the Islamic world from the Ottoman Empire to Central Asia by the 15th Century and they were the predominant armor of Mughal India.

As plate armor began to develop in Europe, it became common to start using chainmail to protect areas that need to flex more than the metal plates would allow. Chainmail became very common in elbow joints, knees and so on. This plate and chain "Transition armor" along with Persian Plate and Chainmail, are some of the Armors the cross classification. It wasn't long before full plate armor became popular and with the invention of the fully articulated joints, chainmail began to lose its popularity. However, it still did hold a place in history as it was used as decoration and armor up until the First World War.

In the present day, one can still find use for chainmail in certain industries. Butchers commonly wear fine mail gloves in order to protect their hands, and shark divers wear entire suits of fine mail. This fine mail is made from strong welded links and is woven on large machines. Other decorative and practical uses for chain mail can also be found, especially in the historical reenactments.