

When the frontiers fell in the Low Empire, the geo-strategic concept changed, imposing a deep, dynamic and flexible defence. Theory stated that the *limitanei* units, on seeing the frontiers attacked should hold their positions and sound the alarm for the mobile armies to beat off the intrusion.

**Cavalry prevails over infantry on the battlefield**

Ancient armies, both Greek and Roman, gave priority to the infantry as the main element of a battle. For the Egyptians, horses were only useful for drawing chariots that carried the leaders to the front and to carry, what could be called moving platforms of archers. The Classical Greeks used chariots, as the Celts did in their time, to transport their warlords to and from the battlefield. The Scythians, Thracians, Samatians and Parthians however, were a useful reference point for the future usage of the horse, without regard to the distances involved. The precursor of cavalry rupture and flanking tactics, as bril-

liantly outlined by José I. Lago, was Alexander the Great, who transformed his royal guard, or Companions, consisting of some 2100 horsemen, into an authentic shock force. His tactic of 'hammer and anvil' was, however, assisted by an elite contingent of Macedonian phalange infantry equipped with long lances that spread out lineally to form the anvil over which the cavalry moved. Once the enemy was outflanked and surrounded, the whole mounted force acted in a hammer action.

Later, the Roman Armies based their force on the heavy infantry. The great High Imperial Legionary Infantry commanded by Emperor Trajan in the 2<sup>nd</sup> Century AD, was unstoppable on the battlefield. Together, the individual soldier, due to effective selection, esprit de corps, training and equipment and the Roman military institution with its organisation, discipline and structure, formed an admirable combination. As rightfully highlighted by Arthur Ferrill, the worst thing about the Low Empire was that it substantially diluted the quality of the Roman infantry, favouring instead the mobile armies, the fastest units to react in times of crisis, meaning the cavalry, which became a real elite force. For a detailed study on the Roman Army, consult the book *IMPERIUM LEGIONIS* by the same author and publisher.

From the 6<sup>th</sup> Century, a new concept replaced the imperial forces: the Lords of War Armies, mainly composed of *bucellarii*, small private armies equipped and paid for by wealthy, influential people. Although they had been previously employed by great characters, such as Stilicho, these private armies of servants proliferated and provided havens of high security amidst the chaos that characterised the Middle Ages. The relationship between these mounted servants and their lord became the seed to what would happen at the birth of feudalism.

The fast, powerful Hun cavalry pushed from the east a large number of Germanic people that, in turn, produced a real domino effect. After the Battle of Adrianople, the Goth pressure was unstoppable. The main groups were the Visigoths (meaning Goths from the west), the Ostrogoths (Goths from the east), the Alemanni (all men) and the Franks (literally, free men). The latter were to play a dominant role in the preceding centuries.

A legionary, from the time of Trajan, ready for combat.



Roman soldiers from the Low Empire. Heavy infantry of *comitatenses* on the right, a *limitanei* on the left.

books for halting the advance of the Saracen at Poitiers in 732 AD. Of Charles Martel it is said that he carried out a new distribution of territory between his vassal lords, more intelligent and effective than that instigated by the Merovingians, thus laying the foundations for the feudal system. His descendents, Pepin III and his son Charles, later to be known under the sobriquet of 'the Great' or Charlemagne, founded the Carolingian Empire, which determined the fate of Central Europe from 771 to 814 AD.

It was these Carolingian Franks who opened the gates to the Age of Chivalry.

From the Franks emerged the Merovingian Dynasty, a line of kings whose power weakened as their territory became divided between their respective heirs and the Church. The region affected by this system covered an area from present day France to the Netherlands, including some areas of Germany.

Far removed from his Merovingian king was Charles Martel, a bastard from an important family, who became the most powerful man de facto in the kingdom and who ended up fleeing at the end of the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. After uniting the principdom dominions, he fought against the Frisians and Saxons in the Germanic conflicts; Martel won his entry in the history

Cavalry from the late Roman Empire was characterized by its Germanic influence. It can be said that, although Romans were unable to conquer all of Germania with their infantry, they could position their cavalry across the Empire.

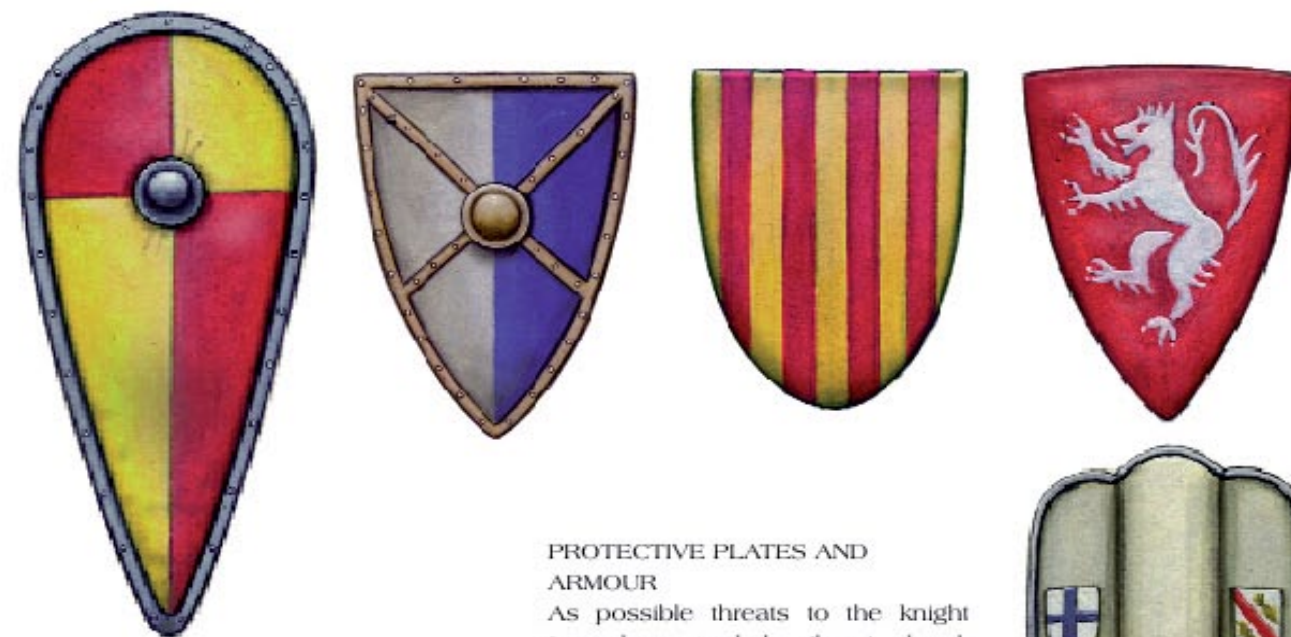






Above: 13<sup>th</sup> Century knight.

Below: 15<sup>th</sup> Century knight.



PROTECTIVE PLATES AND  
ARMOUR

As possible threats to the knight (crossbow and longbow) developed, the development of armour also advanced, in an unstoppable arms race of offense and defense: Simple chain mail was replaced by double woven chain mail, then metal plates were added to the arms, legs and breast until, finally, full suits of armour or white armour were created, where the knight was totally covered in metal. The panoplies became more and more complex, especially from the onset of the One Hundred Years War, when the use of the English longbow necessitated the adoption of more efficient countermeasures. The evolution of the medieval knight's body armour will be examined in more detail later.

SHIELDS AND PAVIS

In contrast to the evolution of armour, shields became smaller and smaller over time, as the knight became increasingly covered and protected with metal. This has a logical explanation, as the first kite-shaped shields fulfilled the obvious function of defending the leg exposed to the enemy (usually the left one). As the leg(s) became protected with chain mail and, later,



pieces superimposed on the inside and attached by means of a series of clinchs that covered the whole item. They occasionally included chest reinforcements or had short sleeves, and the exterior was usually finished with stout leather.

MAIL SHIRT OR HAUBERK

Mail shirt was the most popular item of armour throughout the whole of the medieval period. Various models existed: chain mail shirt with short sleeves; long shirt reaching the knees known as the hauberk; and a complete chain mail suit with long sleeves and mittens for the hands, chausses for the legs and chain mail sabatons for the feet. When complete metal plate armour began to be used, the custom of wearing a short chain mail shirt (haubergeon) over the padded jupon became popular among knights, to protect those parts not covered by the armour. Sometimes, this jupon was a mixture of padding and chain mail.

Evolution of the shield, 10<sup>th</sup> - 15<sup>th</sup>  
Centuries.



## The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa 16<sup>th</sup> July 1212

Once the Christian army had assembled on the battlefield of Las Navas de Tolosa, the Christians totalled 26,950 men, 18,000 from Castile (3000 cavalry and 15,000 infantry), 8500 from Aragon (1500 cavalry and 7000 infantry), and Navarre contributing just 200 knights. There were also around 250 Crusaders who had not deserted, including 150 foreigners, and some Portuguese and Leonese knights who attended of their own volition. In total there were 4950 cavalry and 22,000 infantrymen.

Opposing them was a Muslim army of 51,500 men (6500 cavalry and 45,000 infantrymen), 18,500 were Andalusians with 33,000 Almohads. The Christians deployed in three consecutive lines, each with a central force and two wings on the flanks. The first line, the strongest, with the centre commanded by Diego Lopez de Haro, had an Aragonese wing, under Garcia Romero, on one side, with a Navarre wing on the other. This second one was commanded by Gonzalo Nuñez de Lara, with knights from the Military Orders in the middle and, on the front line, Navarrese and Aragonese wings.

The three kings, escorted by their royal guards, were in the third line. Alfonso VIII in the centre, Sancho VIII of Navarre on the right, and Pedro II of Aragon on the left. Al-Nasir's forces formed up into two lines, also with wings on the flanks, Andalusian volunteers at the front and Almohads behind. This second line had infantry in the centre and cavalry on the flanks. The battle began with a charge by the first line of Christians. The Muslims checked this assault, and the Christian cavalry had to wait for infantry support. The second Christian line was then sent to support its comrades and entered into the melee. The cavalry found itself stationary on the battlefield's ground and the initial inertia was lost. Seeing how desperate the situation had become, with the loss of dynamism and the battle's initiative, Alfonso addressed his two fellow kings, pronouncing, 'Here we are to die!' and charged against the Muslim mass, inspiring the others to follow him. This third charge, led by the three kings, was crucial for the ensuing victory. The Moorish army, along with their caliph, fled the field.



The Battle of Las Navas de Tolosa.  
Oil on canvas by Francisco de Paula Van Halen. Spanish Senate, Madrid.

### Holy War in the East The Crusades

While, in the West, most of the kingdoms were involved in domestic disputes (except the Hispanic kingdoms that were already fighting their own Crusade and, therefore, were acutely aware of the problem) the Middle Eastern Islamic armies continued their religious and territorial expansion. Only the Popes were aware of the danger, especially during the Papacies of Popes Leo IX and Gregory VII. They both realized how the interests of Europe would come under threat by the different Muslim tribes. The outrages committed by the Seleucid Turks threatened not only the pilgrims to the Holy Land and the independence of the Byzantine kingdom, but all of Christendom. Jerusalem was captured in 1070. Although separated from the Catholic Church based on Rome, the emperors of Constantinople asked for help from the Popes. Letters concerning this were exchanged in 1073 between the Byzantine Emperor and Miguel VII and Pope Gregory VII. It was Pope Urban II who followed Gregory VII's plans. A letter from the Emperor of Byzantium, Alexius I Comnenus, to Robert, Earl of Flanders, appeared to be a call for a Crusade, but, in fact, it was merely a request to recruit 500 Flemish knights to reinforce the Imperial army. The Turks, with Antioch falling in 1084, looted Asia Minor and the whole of Syria. In fact, in 1092, the Christians could hold none of the leading Asian metropolises. In 1095, Pope Urban II, the true promoter of the Crusade, under the cry 'Deus vult!' (God wills it), invited the Christian knights to place their swords in the service of God to defend the pilgrims and the Holy places. This exhortation attracted, among others, a deceitful monk called Peter the Hermit, who attracted large crowds of peasants and beggars to the cause. This came to be known as 'the People's Crusade' and it ended in chaos and massacre by the Turks.

#### FIRST CRUSADE (1069-1099)

Jerusalem is relieved!

The most courageous Frankish, German, Italo-Norman knights joined the Crusade the moment it was launched by the Pope. Among these knights were included the likes of

Raymond of Toulouse, Godfrey of Bouillon, Robert of Flanders, Baldwin of Boulogne, Tancred of Hauteville and Bohemond of Taranto. The command of the expeditionary army was given to Raymond of Toulouse, the group's most experienced military commander and who knew the Muslim fighting methods, as he had fought them on the Iberian Peninsula. The Crusader army consisted of 7000 knights and 80,000 infantrymen. The contingent marched to Byzantium, ransacking everything in its path. The agreement signed with the Byzantine Emperor, Alexius, was that the Crusaders would return the re-conquered cities back to Imperial sovereignty and, in exchange, they would get the required logistical support. This happened in the case of the city of Nicaea, but after crossing the Anatolian Peninsula and conquering Antioch, Bohemond disregarded the agreement and proclaimed himself prince. In June 1099, Jerusalem was freed from Muslim control, but only after a long, drawn-out bloody



Godfrey elected as King of Jerusalem.  
Oil on canvas by Madrazo & Kuntz  
National Museum, Versailles, France