



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4

# A Brief History of Japanese Armour

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Japanese armour has a long history. It can be traced almost without a break from the Fourth Century A.D. to 1867, when it was discarded in favor of a uniform of a western character. Most of the armour that is seen today in public and private collections is from the Edo period, which lasted from about 1614 to 1867, and was considered a period of comparative peace. Armour from the earlier parts of the 16th Century are less frequently found and those of the 15th Century are essentially all in Japanese museums. Many of the armours of the Edo period were copies of designs originally from earlier periods with innovations and modifications commissioned by the Daimios or noblemen for whom they were made. Although they were essentially copies, the workmanship and traditional precision was rigidly adhered to, as one can readily see from copies made in the Meiji period after 1868 and later. There remain even today a few armour makers who adhere to the traditional precision workmanship and who are kept busy with conservation and restoration for museums and individuals.

The earliest armours used in Japan come from the 4th (Figure 1) to the 7th Century or the middle tomb periods. They are made of rigid plates bound together by leather or with rivets, and a helmet of similar construction, with a laminated neck guard which projected forward on either side of the face. The shoulders were protected by a laminated guard and the thighs were protected by a wide skirt with laminations similar to the shoulder guards, which was tied around the waist. Tubular vambraces protected the arms and small plates for the hands. All surfaces of the armour were lacquered for protection against the humid climate of Japan.

As horses were introduced into Japan from the Asiatic continent in the late 5th Century, more flexible armours were developed which were of a lamellar pattern, similar to that used in the middle East, Egyptian, and Assyrian civilizations. The Lamellar armour found in burial mounds in Japan during this period (Figure 2) followed the general pattern of the earlier plate armour, except that it consisted of smaller plates laced together with leather. With the discontinuation of the tomb burial and the institution of cremation in the 8th Century, clay figures were available. In the earlier periods the lamellae were lacquered before being laced together. But in the late 11th Century (Figure 3) the lamellae were laced together and then lacquered, thus



making the laminations quite rigid but now much better protected from moisture. The lamellae were hardened leather or alternating leather and metal laced together. The helmet bowl was made of eight to twelve vertically arranged plates held together with projecting rivets and with a hole on top called the *Tehen* through which passed the warriors queue of hair. This *Tehen* has been preserved down through subsequent designs. The neck guard is composed of laminations that were laced together. Initially the upper four were turned backwards and outwards similar to the earlier turned back neck guard. Only later were the first laminations projected past the face and then turned back, producing the ear-like projections, *fukigayeshi*, that were continued into later periods.

The body armour, which initially was opened in the back and then later on the right side, was completed with a skirt of five to seven sections of laminated lamellae strung together with silk or leather (Figure 4). The initial earlier shoulder guards were quite large, more than a foot in length. From early times the armour was tied together with fabric or leather; straps and buckles seen on European armour are almost nonexistent. Until the 9th Century, the ties were of cotton or leather; beginning about the 10th Century woven silk became more popular and this continued until 1867. With the use of woven silk, the addition of brightly colored dyes were used to designate the individuality of the noblemen and their armies. Beginning at the middle of the 14th Century, various additions were made to the full armour (Figure 5) that consisted of guards for the cheeks and chin, eventually leading to the *mempo*, which protect the cheeks, chin and nose. A throat guard was



Figure 5

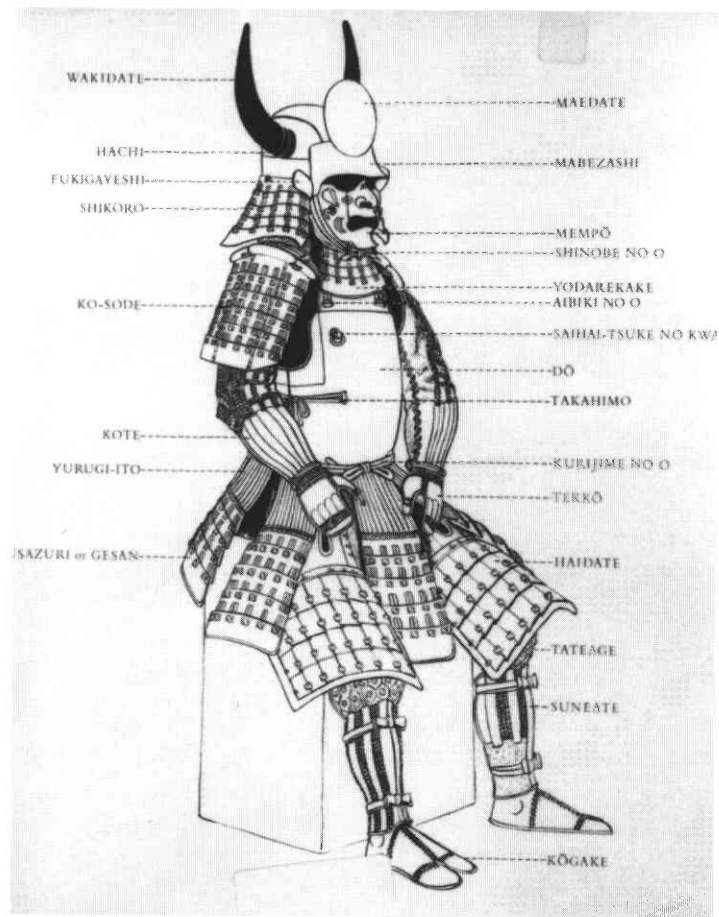


Figure 6

attached to the face mask. The breast plate and back plate were either lamellar or of solid horizontally or vertically riveted plates. Some of these breast plates were decorated with religious symbols, dragons, etc. (Figure 6). Also in the 14th Century the gaps between the defenseless areas began to be filled in with chain mail. The thigh armour (*baidate*) was introduced about this time, consisting of a divided apron of fabric reinforced with segments of chain mail and iron.

In the early days the fighting was done mostly with bows and arrows. In the 14th and 15th Centuries staff weapons consisting of long pole arms with curved blades (*Naginata*) or straight blades (*Yari*) were used. In addition, the sword became more prominent in battles in hand to hand combat. Large numbers of men were carrying matchlock muskets; in addition to these, there were bow men and spear men. This period, called the *Sengokajidai*, was a period of constant civil war, which lasted from 1469 to approximately 1600.

The armourers of this period complied with the requirements of protection from these weapons, and were much more flexible than the European armours of the same period.

During the Momoyama period of the mid- and late-16th Century (Figures 7, 8, 9, 10, 11), helmets of grotesque



Figure 7





**Figure 11**

Tokugawa period, the only imports allowed were iron, Borax (used in the forging of swords), same or rayskin to wrap sword hilts, and silk, which was and is very popular in Japan for kimonos, etc. The Shogun required each Daimyo (or local war lord) to visit him in Tokyo every

other year and stay for a year (his wife remaining in Tokyo while he returned to his home). The visit was a long journey of many footmen and horsemen, with all supplies carried on foot by a retinue of servants and men in armour. The styles of armour were the same in design to that used in the 16th Century, although with more ornate additions being added, in many cases, to demonstrate the wealth of the noblemen in a more obvious manner. This custom continued well into the 19th Century when Admiral Perry and his fleet literally opened the door to Japan after the U.S. Civil War and the pressure from the manufacturers of the northeastern U.S. needing new markets.

The Shogunate was weakened anyway by that time and with the sudden presentation of modern goods from the United States, there was a great deal of pressure to change, beginning with the restoration of the power of the Emperor and the turning away from the power and militaristic attitudes of the shogunate. It was also the end of the use of armour, and the adoption of western style uniforms, and eventually the use of western style dress by the civilians. This was the beginning of the Meiji period.

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**Figure 12**