

Link Details from Articles of Mail in the Wallace Collection

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Several examples of mail from the Wallace Collection, London, have been selected for discussion in order to explore some of the intricacies of this enigmatic form of armour. Although the main focus of this paper will be the differences in link design within this group of items, other areas such as tailoring will also be discussed. Of the twenty mail items in the collection, six will be examined here.¹ This paper is not meant to be an in depth examination of each piece; rather it is a brief overview.

To fully appreciate mail, one must look at the particular garment as a whole. It is very important to pay special attention to the tailoring and to the individual links; each link is a work of art in its own right. No two riveted links in any mail garment are exactly the same. This is because each was made by hand using the simplest tools. Even so, mail-makers were clearly able to create individual links of iron that, for all intents and purposes, are almost identical. This alone is a testament to their skill as expert craftsmen.

The Making of a Link of Mail

Throughout this article individual pieces of mail will be referred to as being of either high or low quality. To explore the differences between the two categories, an explanation of the specific construction techniques that yield certain physical characteristics must be presented.

Mail is thought to have originated in the Celtic areas of Europe sometime around the fifth century b.c.e.² It is essentially a metal fabric made up of interlocking links made either of wrought iron or steel. Links made of gold, latten, or some other yellow metal were sometimes added as decoration, usually forming borders on the sleeve edges, collar and/or hem. Each link is connected to four others (Figure 1). Though there are variations,³ mail made in this fashion is by far the most common.

Wire is used as the base material from which the individual links are made. The most common way to make wire is with a draw-plate, a block of metal or stone having a series of tapered holes, each hole being of a slightly decreasing diameter. A piece of high-quality wrought iron is first hammered into the shape of a rod.⁴ This rod is



1. Reproduction mail made from 0.050" (1.27mm) pure iron wire. (Photo courtesy of the author)