

Armor: Mark of the Samurai

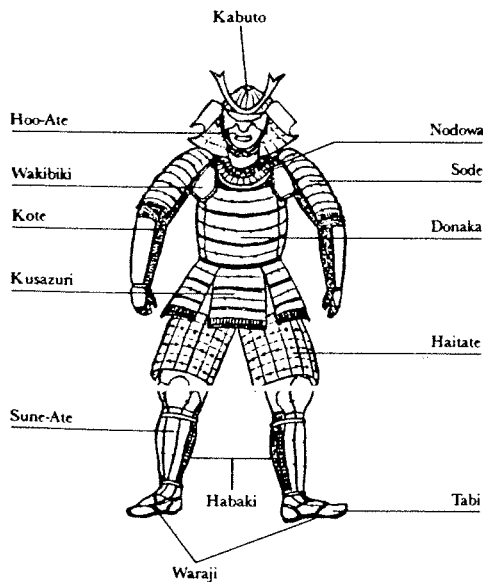
The basis of Japanese military dress during the age of the samurai was the suit of armor. Many specimens have been preserved, giving a very clear idea of what samurai must have looked like on a field of battle. However most of the suits of armor are fairly modern, and were not specifically intended for wearing in battle. These ornate creations from the Tokugawa days were rare at the time they were made, and an important daimyo might commission such a fine piece of work for presentation to the Shogun or some other dignitary.

It is perhaps just as well that the owners of such suits of armor had no need actually to fight in them because the decoration seriously weakens the metal and the more ornate the fittings and gilding, the weaker the armor.

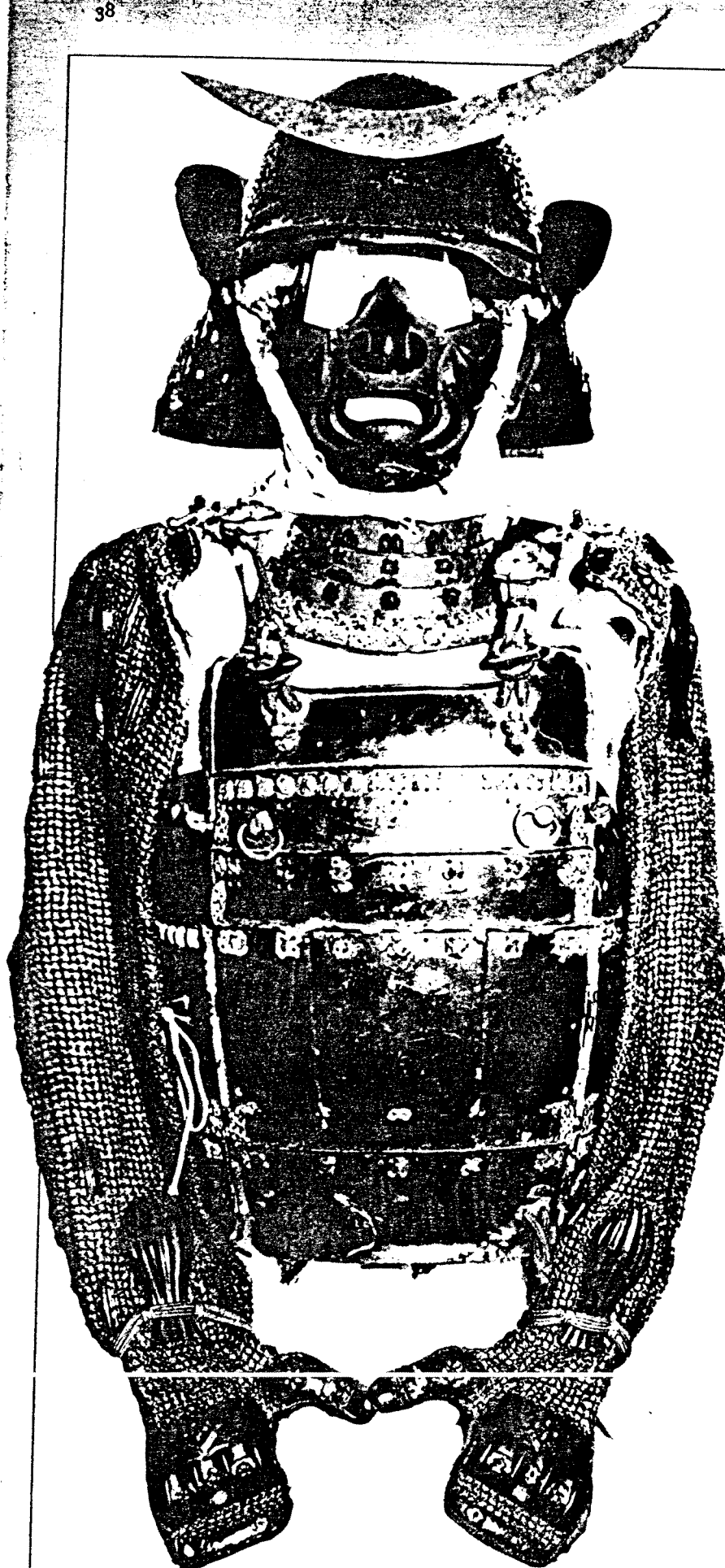
For the majority of samurai during the Age of War, and even into the Tokugawa period, the notion of a suit of armor just did not exist. His pocket, or that of his commanding officer, would dictate what could be bought, and many pieces were 'recycled' after a battle. In fact, selling suits of armor stripped from the bodies of dead samurai was almost a way of life for some peasant farmers.

To trace the evolution of the suit of armor it is necessary to begin with the very few preserved specimens of twelfth-century armor, all of which are kept in Japan. These show the characteristic shape of the 'yoroi' style, eventually to be superseded by more streamlined varieties, which by the seventeenth century look remarkably similar to European armor, apart from the use of lacquer for rustproofing and the facemask. This style, associated with the latter days of the Age of War, is the supreme example of samurai battle dress. It may have been succeeded by less functional styles, but later writers on the subject always considered such armor the best style to buy, offering the samurai maximum protection and allowing easy movement.

Below: *The various parts making up a suit of armor.*



Above: *An ornate suit of armor which was almost certainly not intended for actual fighting.*

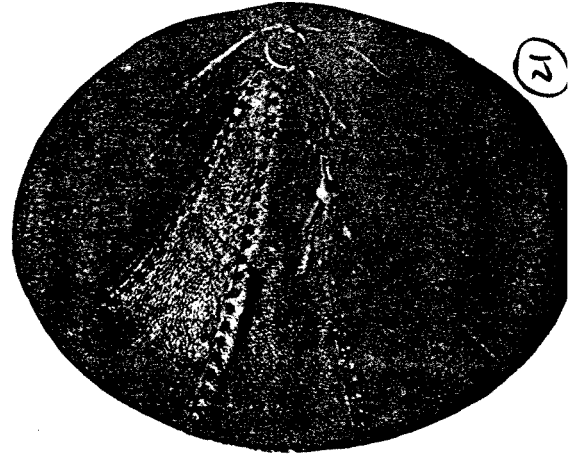
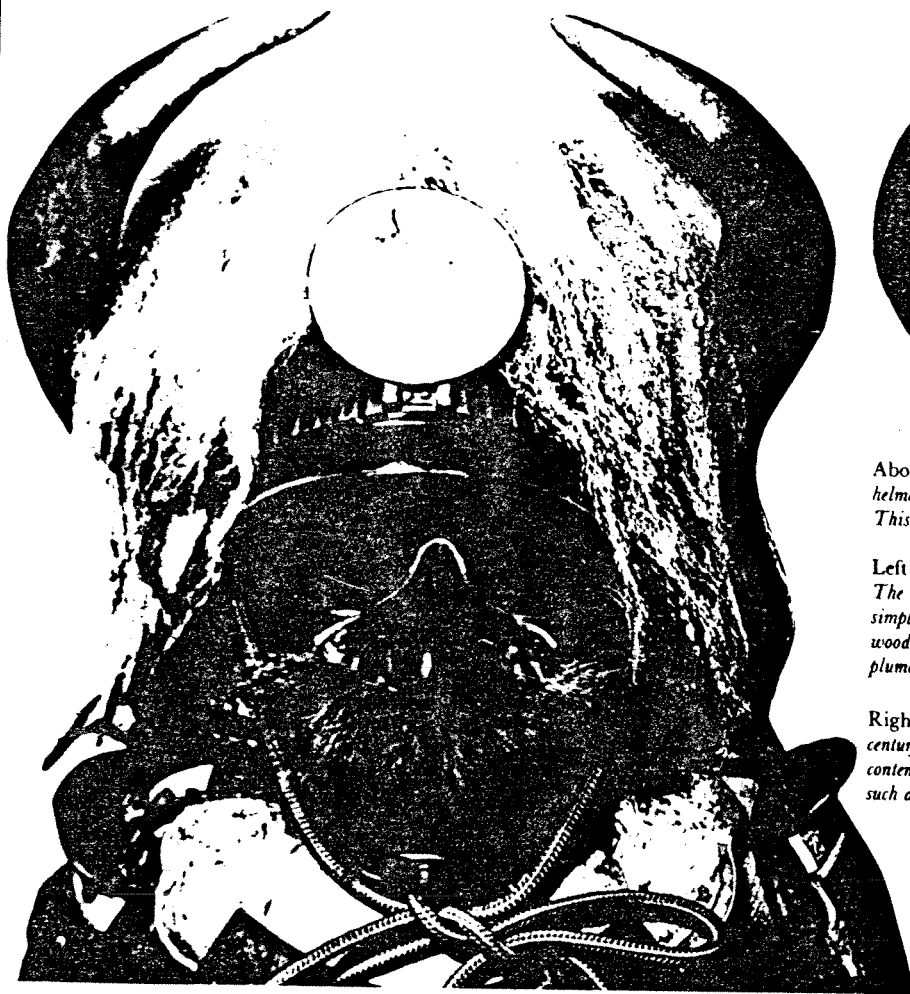


Left: A rather damaged example of a very practical style of armor dating from the Momoyama Period. The do (body armor) is made from solid plates, proof against firearms.

Above and top: An unusual folding helmet. When the catch is released the concentric plates fold flat for storage.

Below: A section of armor plate.





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Above: A jingasa, the light helmet issued to the ashigaru. This one is of leather.

Left: Face mask and helmet. The helmet, of basically simple design, is set off with wooden horns and a horsehair plume.

Right: Until the sixteenth century a footsoldier had to be content with a simple facemask such as this.



Right: An example of a multiplate helmet. Note the numerous rivet heads.

Below: A pair of iron stirrups, inlaid with silver.

