THE ARMOR OF DON ALVARO DE CABRERA

BY STEPHEN V. GRANCSAY
Curator of Arms and Armor

In the Middle Ages Spain, the chosen abode of chivalry and romance, was in no sense backward in military matters. According to the Spanish historians three thousand seven hundred battles were fought before the last of the Moorish kingdoms submitted to Christian arms. Military equipment worn by the Spanish knights in their holy warfare naturally existed in large quantities, but almost none of it has survived; a suit of medieval armor is much rarer than a medieval castle or cathedral. So armor of the early period must be studied mainly from contemporary documents. Fortunately it is represented everywhere in painting and sculpture. Sculpture is particularly useful in giving detailed information about early armor. And the study of armor can often be valuable evidence for dating works of art in which it appears. Material that concerns the date of an important tomb sculpture at The Cloisters is given in this article.

This is the remarkable Spanish sepulchral effigy of Don Alvaró de Cabrera, Viscount of Ager, which was ordered by his brother, Armgelol X, Count of Urgel. To aid me in my studies of this effigy, one of four Urgel monuments from the monastery of Santa María de Bellpuig de las Avellanas at Belaguer (Lérida), I recently made a visit there. The monastery, which dominates the plains of Urgel, was abandoned in 1835 during the Revolution and was reconstructed in 1900 by the Vincentian Fathers. Work is still progressing in the restoration of the monastery church. The four sculptures that eventually found their way to The Cloisters were removed from the church in 1906 and later taken to France. The niches where the effigies were at home for so many centuries are still intact.

Don Alvaró died in 1299. There is no inscription on his tomb, but according to an eighteenth-century manuscript the sarcophagus was opened in 1799, and an old parchment was found inside, sewn to the linen cloth covering the bones. The parchment read: “To Alvarus, Viscount of Ager, son of Alvarus, Count of Urgel, and Cecilia of Foix, on account of his valor and the military glory which, from the age of nine up to his death, he gained for himself everywhere—in Spain often, in Africa once, in Sicily twice—under the Kings of Aragon James, Peter, Alfonso, and James II. When once Fortune, lest she seem always to favor one man among mortals—one who mastered Neptune with ships, the earth by his tread, the stars by his mind—had taught him that he could be vanquished and captured, he, not knowing how to submit, mocked at her, until, putting off mortality, his spirit sought the stars, in the year 1299. Ermengaudus X, Count of Urgel, set up this monument to his very dear and deserving brother.”1 As Armgelol died in 1314 the tomb has been dated between 1300 and 1314.

A fact that will interest many people is that our effigy shows that armor was not wholly of

1. See James J. Rorimer, Four Tombs from Las Avellanas and Other Gothic Sculptures, Metropolitan Museum Bulletin, viii, no. 8, pp. 228 ff.
metal and that much was not of metal at all. Metal armor owing to its costliness was worn less often and by a far smaller percentage of fighting men than is commonly supposed. And in the early Middle Ages linen and other fabrics were used extensively for soft armor as distinguished from plate armor. Thus civil and military dress were not unlike, and we see this in much of the extant medieval sculpture.

Before 1300 metal body armor, as distinct from headpieces, appears to have consisted of mail alone. (Sculptures sometimes show a slit in the side of the surcoat revealing plates beneath, but the extent of the use of plate body defenses in this period remains questionable.) Mail was, with the quilted garments, the chief form of protection in early times. Under the feudal system land held in Normandy was called “fiés de haubert,” from the coat of mail which it entitled and required every tenant to wear. A complete defense of mail is shown on the Museum’s Spanish marble relief of an equestrian figure from the royal monastery at Poblet, which dates from the time of James the Conqueror of Aragon, who died in 1276.

It is not possible to indicate either the place or the time when complete armor of plate was first worn, but monumental effigies and other contemporary sources of information indicate that elements of armor of leather and plate—in addition to the helmet—were already in use after the middle of the thirteenth century. The effigy of Don Alvaró de Cabrera shows several advanced features in the development of plate armor—the high gorget, the long-cuffed fingered gauntlets, and the close, or hinged greaves. Other noteworthy features in the effigy of Don Alvaró are the mail hood, the quilted surcoat patterned with armorial bearings, the sword with its belt, and the method of attaching the spurs. The body armor consists of the surcoat, a hauberk, and a gambeson, the edge of which can be seen below the hem of the surcoat. Under the gambeson was worn a tunic, a loose robe of cloth or leather which was the chief article of civilian clothing. This is naturally not visible, nor is the hauberk. But we know that the usual armor with these accessories was mail.

The only mail that can be seen is the hood, which encircles the entire head, leaving the face, from forehead to mouth, exposed. It is made of concentric rows of rings, is tailored, and has a braided leather strap along its edge to make it rigid and thus prevent it from chafing the face. On the coif, above the forehead, is a small plaque bearing the Urgel arms, simulating an enamel. At the sides the coif is held away from the face by the soft quilted felt or leather capados worn under the mail coif as an essential element of the head defense. The “cuir-bouilli” of which it was often made was widely used for various parts of the armor and was frequently called “cuir de Capadoce.” Thus the name of the material has been given to the article made of it. Body armor sometimes worn in addition to the hauberk was at first made of hardened leather, and in the term cuirass we have etymological record that it was so employed. It was lighter than metal and probably quite as resistant to the weapons then in use.
Effigy of Don Alvaró de Cabrera, Viscount of Ager (died 1299, in Sicily), ordered by his brother Armengol X, Count of Urgel. Spanish, early xiv century. This tomb, now in the Gothic Chapel at The Cloisters, was acquired in 1948 with funds provided by John D. Rockefeller, Jr.

The advantage of mail was its flexibility; but mail by itself, even over a padded coif, was an ineffective protection against a stout blow from lance, sword, or mace, and a metal helmet was usually worn over it. The reason for wearing the mail coif is that mail was the only practical means of protecting the back and sides of the head and the neck. Illustrated documents show that the warrior often went into battle without any helmet over the mail coif. It is probable in such cases that some additional defense, whether of plate or of quilted work, was worn beneath it. But in the present sculpture the mail is shown too high on the forehead to admit a metal cap underneath. It is likely, therefore, that Don Alvaró wore over the coif the typical wide-brimmed Spanish war hat (cabacete), or on occasion a helm. No helmet is shown in the effigy since the sculptor wished to represent the knight’s features as clearly as possible.

During the early period, when mail covered the head, it appears not to have been detached from but to have been one piece with that which covered the body. The hood of mail made separately from the hauberk does not appear until the thirteenth century. In our sculpture we do not see the lower edge of the head defense as it disappears beneath the gorget, but it is apparently a hood since it does not have the side opening and the lacing to secure the flap of mail. The actual hood would descend to the shoulders, and as it was put on after the surcoat it would naturally cover part of it. Such a hood was designed as an improvement on the continuous coif. It was more comfortable, as it eliminated the drag of the hauberker, and it allowed greater freedom of movement and rendered unnecessary the side opening and its lacing. But the
hood had this great disadvantage: that, as it lay on the shoulders of the knight, it permitted the lance of the adversary to pass beneath it and deal a fatal thrust on the unprotected neck. This deficiency was remedied by using a gorget, and such a defense is present in our effigy.

The gorget is a primitive one, not as graceful as the shapely Spanish plates developed in the fifteenth century, which may be seen in this Museum. It took time to develop skilfully articulated and well-fitted plate armor, even in Spain, which was always renowned for its fine ironwork. As the chin plate of the gorget, the greaves, and gauntlets all have the same russet tint as the mail hood, it is reasonable to assume that the original armor of all these elements was of the same material. It was in the progressive northern region of Catalonia that the best type of early forge (Catalan forge) for smelting iron was evolved; it yielded an excellent malleable iron which made possible the great quantity of beautiful medieval ironwork. The plate armor worn by Don Alvaró was probably made in the home of the Catalan forge. The hood could have been made in Murcia, which in the thirteenth century was renowned for its mail.

The gorget is made up of two plates, of which the upper protects the chin and neck and the lower the collarbone area. On the effigy there are no buckles or straps shown for securing the pieces. The collar plate, like the surcoat, is powdered with rosaces in relief, which simulate metal ornaments, and the similarity in the surfaces indicates that it was covered with material; medieval helmets and body armor were often covered with leather or textiles.

Similar high gorgets are frequently represented in Spanish painting and sculpture. A fine example appears in the early fourteenth-century altar frontal of the school of Navarre in the Plandiura collection in the Museo de Bellas Artes de Cataluña in Barcelona (no. inv. 4968). A splendid example is worn by a knight sculptured on the tympanum of the Puerta Preciosa of the cathedral of Pamplona, and the knight also wears the typical Spanish war hat. This sculpture, which I would tentatively date about 1325, also shows two other headpieces—a mail coif and a tall basinet. The effigy in the cathedral at Gerona of Ramon Berenguer II, Count of Barcelona (died about 1092), and the effigy in the monastery of Poblet of Ramón Folch X, Viscount of Cardona (died 1320), also show the high gorget. From the armor worn, these effigies

LEFT: Relief of a Spanish knight completely armed in mail; only the helmet is plate. From Poblet, late XIII century. Dodge Fund, 1913
Effigy of Ramón Folch X de Cardona (1259-1320), showing close, or hinged, greaves and rigid face defense similar to those on Don Alvaró’s effigy. He wears fingered gauntlets of mail, which were the precursors of those made of plate. From the royal monastery at Poblet, about 1325.

could have been made within the first quarter of the fourteenth century. Also from Poblet is an early fourteenth-century sculptured stone mounted knight whose armor includes a rigid face defense. And, of the same period, a soldier wearing a coif of mail and a rigid chin defense is sculptured on the central portico of the cathedral of Santo Mario de Suso.

The high gorget also occasionally appears outside of Spain. With the exchange of culture between the various nations there were of course similarities of equipment. The monastery from which our effigy came belonged to the religious order founded by Saint Norbert at Prémontré, near Laon, France, in 1119. Thus it was natural that the knightly armor worn in the

Gallic portion of the peninsula, the old country of Barcelona, or Catalonia, would be similar to the armor that was worn on the other side of the Pyrenees. For example, a fine high gorget similar to that on Don Alvaró’s effigy appears on the effigy of Thibaud de Pomollain, 1330, in the church at Coulommiers (Seine et Marne). In Italy the high metal gorget goes back to the thirteenth century. The Florentine novelist Franco Sacchetti in one of his stories (Novella cxv) speaks of the poet Dante wearing a gorget.
against the heat of the sun. But the chief reason for its adoption was that it afforded a means for the display of heraldic arms, which distinguished friend from foe. Ultimately the surcoat became an additional defense for the body and was thickly gamboised, or quilted, as in our effigy. The great development of the use of quilted protections for the body came from the East, where the Saracens had long been acquainted with them. One of the forms of the gambeson (the padded leathern undergarment worn beneath the surcoat), the acton (hacquetton), shows its oriental origin by its name, derived from the Arabic al qutn, from which the word cotton also comes. Thus the influence of the Moorish occupation of Spain during seven centuries is seen in these quilted costumes and in the overweighted decoration of the surcoat.

Cavalry was the strongest arm in the Middle Ages, and so leg armor was an essential part of the knight’s equipment. Mail hose (chausses) came into general use about the beginning of the twelfth century. At first they did not enclose the leg entirely, but were left open at the back.

The most showy element in the military wardrobe of Don Alvaró is the surcoat. Above the hips and on the sleeves it is studded with numerous rosaces and heraldic plaques, and it fits the body closely. It reaches to the knees, and below the hip it is loose-fitting and falls in stiff folds, which indicate the thickness of the garment; part of the painted pattern, including bright vermillion in one of the folds, is still present. The knightly surcoat was usually slit up in front and behind for convenience in riding, a detail which the sculptor has omitted.

The surcoat was originally introduced about the beginning of the thirteenth century to preserve the mail from rain, and as protection...
and held secure by laces, as may be seen in the Album (about 1260) of the architect Villard de Honnecourt. About the middle of the thirteenth century the need for increased protection against the progressively improving weapons led to the gradual addition of one piece of plate armor after another. The first reinforcing plates appeared on the knee, for this was a vulnerable spot of the mounted knight. The knee defenses were prolonged downwards in the form of shin guards, and so the evolution of the complete suit of plate began. A further development was the addition of thigh defenses to the knee cops (poleyns), and these permitted the shortening of the hauberks to mid-thigh. The early unreinforced style of mail continued to be worn for a long time after the plate defenses had been introduced. Mail chausses were frequently worn in the early years of the fourteenth century and were worn occasionally till the middle of it.

The earliest greaves of leather or plate protected only the shins, as may be seen in the Maciejowski Bible (about 1260) in the Pierpont Morgan Library and on the marble bas-relief of Guigliemo Berardi (1289) in the cloisters of the Annunziata at Florence. The early leather and plate arm defenses also protected only the outer part of the arm. Close greaves are mentioned in France as early as 1302 in the inventory of Raoul de Nesle, Constable of France, who fell in the disastrous battle of Courtrai. Here is the notation in the inventory: “Harnas de gaumbes fourbis, de col les greves sont closes.” The term “fourbis” clearly implies metal. Close greaves are of rare occurrence in medieval art before the middle of the fourteenth century, and I know of no representations earlier than those cited below. Well modeled close greaves may be seen on the tomb of William de Valence, Earl of Pembroke, erected in Westminster Abbey in 1324, in Simone Martini’s equestrian portrait of Guidoriccio da Fogliana, in the Palazzo Publico, Siena, which is dated 1328, and on the equestrian effigy of Can Grande della Scala (died 1329) at Verona.

The greaves of Don Alvarò’s effigy, which have a mid-vertical ridge on the shin plate, which overlaps the back plate, are not especially shapely. They are apparently represented realistically and were fitted over thick hose, which
acted as a cushion. They are shaped to fit over the ankles and neatly arched for the instep. On the outer side of each greave are shown the joints of three concealed hinges, by means of which the front and back plates were opened and closed. (Actual examples of concealed hinges on medieval armor are in this Museum.) A clasp for holding the greave closed is riveted to the inner side of each greave near the lower border. The upper parts of the greaves touch each other, hence the area of the upper clasps is concealed. The greaves have a smooth finish, but the inner surface of the left one is rough, since it was originally concealed by the lower end of the sword, now missing. On the front plate of the right greave is a fragment of the sword scabbard. This is an important detail, for it is a positive indication that the greaves have not been altered.

Armor for the hand was invented late in the twelfth century, and the mail glove was still in vogue in the early years of the fourteenth century. At that time flexible plate gauntlets had already been in use, as is known from the Ordonnance des Métiers de Paris, 1296: "Que nuls ne face gantelès de plate que les plates ne soient estaimées ou coivrées." The hand was of necessity given much attention by the armorer, who made the gauntlet flexible so that it did not hinder the movements required to wield a weapon. Contemporary works of art show that primitive gauntlets of plate were in use in the late thirteenth century. The gauntlets of Don Alvaró de Cabrera are of advanced construction. They have cuffs that reach to the elbows and to the knuckles. Each finger has four articulated lames, except the right thumb, which has three, and they are embossed for the knuckles. An effigy on a tomb at Villafranca del Panades, of a member of the Castellet family who died in 1323, shows a long-cuffed fingered gauntlet much like the one described here. Another Spanish work of art that shows similar gauntlets is the cantle plate of a saddle in carved ivory of about 1325 in the Louvre Museum. It represents two jousting knights who are believed to be Frederick I, King of Sicily, and his brother James. The knights also wear close greaves, just as Don Alvaró does. Only a few early fingered gauntlets have survived, and these are incomplete and decades later than the time of our effigy—the most noteworthy being the gauntlets of Edward the Black Prince (died 1376) in the cathedral of Canterbury.

The skill expended in making the blade of the sword and the costly materials of the hilt
and accessories was due to the worship of the sword by the Spaniards, who had to compete with their adversaries the Moors. The Spaniards enriched their swords with heraldic arms and figures of saints, while the Moors ornamented theirs with quotations from the Koran and the name of Allah. Their inspiration sprang from the same source—the wish to interest Heaven in the cause for which the weapon was wielded. Don Alvaro holds both gauntlets clasped over the hilt of his sword, which is unbelted, an indication that its glamorous activities have been terminated. The gauntlets almost conceal entirely the straight quillons. The blade, like that of the usual knightly sword of the Middle Ages, was straight, broad, double-edged, and pointed. The lower quarter is lacking, but a fragment of the scabbard is still present on the right greave. The scabbard, the original of which was of leather stiffened with a wooden framing, retains its wide locket and ferrule; there is also a channel edge joining the locket and ferrule to prevent the latter from shifting down the tapering sheath. The sword belt is secured at one end to the locket; it is then entwined diagonally around the scabbard, terminating in a chape near the end of the padded undergarments. The single-looped buckle has a broad shank, engraved and with applied shield of arms; a short strap of leather, also with applied shield of arms, joins the buckle to the locket by two rings, the locket ring being broken. The wheel pommel, locket, ferrule, and sword belt are ornamented with foliate motifs in relief. The loop of the buckle is narrower than the width of the belt, hence the end of the belt is tapered, and it has the usual terminal chape. From its length and the method by which the buckle is secured to the scabbard locket, the belt was apparently suspended diagonally from the right shoulder. This is the method of suspension in the effigies of Armengol VII and Armengol X. It was the method used by the Greeks and Romans, and it is also shown on the painted ceilings in the Hall of Justice in the Alhambra at Granada. In northern countries, from the latter part of the thirteenth century on, the knight’s surcoat is girdled with a narrow cord at the waist, while
the great belt, supported by hooks like the belt of a modern infantry soldier, loops across the hips carrying the heavy sword diagonally over the thighs.

Thirteenth-century swords belonging to important figures in history are extremely rare. We may mention the swords of Saint Ferdinand (1199-1252) in the treasury of the cathedral of Seville (with crystal pommel) and in the Royal Armory, Madrid (G 22). Spanish scholars in recent years have turned up a number of important medieval swords in royal tombs; the dry climate has kept them almost intact. We should mention the sword, with its brocaded belt, of Fernando de la Cerda (1225-1275), son of Alfonso the Wise, from the Panteón Real de la Huelgas de Burgos, and that of Sancho IV, second son of the same ruler, which was found, with his father's crown, in his tomb. Sancho was buried in 1295, wrapped in silk brocades, with a rich cushion under his head. The cushion, incidentally, is often represented in monumental effigies under the knight's head, and it appears in our effigy studded with the Urgel arms.

Spurs, which were the essential emblem of knighthood, complete the knight's equipment. The prick spur continued in use for over a hundred years after the introduction of the rowel spur early in the thirteenth century. In our effigy only the terminal loops of the sides of the spurs are visible, the spurs being hidden under the greaves. However, in all likelihood they were the Moorish type of prick spur (acicate), for it is this type that has been found in the historical Spanish tombs that have been excavated. The spur attachments are clearly shown in the effigy. The sole and instep strap passes through the loops and is fastened by a single loop buckle, with two ornaments and a chape at each strap end. Don Alvaró's pointed shoes of leather are studded with roscas and heraldic plaques.

The military costume, from the military character of the Middle Ages, forms a prominent feature of the study of monumental effigies. Many effigies of knights have come down to us from the province of Catalonia. Fifty-seven of them have been illustrated in Fèlix Doménech i Roura's unpublished manuscript "Indumentaria Sepulcral á Cataluña, Segles XIII a XVI," in the Archivos Históricos, Barcelona. A detailed comparative study of these would help us in our study of Don Alvaró's effigy, although the period to which it belongs is one of much experiment and change in types of armor and it is
difficult to find monuments which are alike. Furthermore, the dating of arms and armor is often difficult, because changes did not occur everywhere at the same time. There are many sepulchral effigies dating after 1300 that do not show any plate armor. Armor represented in sculpture is not necessarily of the period when the person died. Knights in their old age sometimes requested that the armor to be represented in their effigies should be that in which they achieved renown in youth. And sometimes the effigy was made centuries after the decease of the knight, like that of Armengol VII, Count of Urgel (died 1184), which was ordered by the same Armengol X who ordered the tomb that is the subject of this article. But the normal procedure was to execute the effigy soon after the death of the person to be commemorated. This study of the armor in the effigy of Don Alvaró de Cabrera indicates that it could have been made in the second decade of the fourteenth century, if not earlier.

What I have done here is to gather together contemporary documents which describe and show defenses similar to those on the Urgel effigy. In some cases a date is associated with the document, in others a tentative date is assigned. The contemporary written documents cited, and the painting and sculptures illustrated here indicate that the Urgel knight does not wear any military equipment that was not in use in the second decade of the fourteenth century. I think that further research would show that the three advanced features of the armor—the combined high gorget and collarbone defense, the long-cuffed fingered gauntlets, and the close greaves—were in much wider use in the early decades of the century than present information indicates. However, dating our effigy a few years earlier or later does not affect its importance. It is an excellent example of the sculpture that was fostered by the feudal nobility of Catalonia and Languedoc.

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Details from an ivory saddle possibly made for Frederick I, king of Sicily from 1206 to 1257. The tilting knights wear close greaves and long-cuffed gauntlets similar to those of Don Alvaró. Italian workmanship, about 1325. In the Louvre