

Medieval Chivalry

Chivalry is the generic term for the knightly system of the Middle Ages and for virtues and qualities it inspired in its followers. The word evolved from terms such as chevalier (French), caballero (Spanish), and cavaliere (Italian), all meaning a warrior who fought on horseback. The term came to mean so much more during medieval times.

Chivalric orders first appeared with military activities against non-Christian states. During the Middle Ages, Western Europe aggressively sought to expand its area of control. The first orders of chivalry were very similar to the monastic orders of the era. Both sought the sanctification of their members through combat against "infidels" and protection of religious pilgrims, and both had commitments that involved the taking of vows and submitting to a regulation of activities.

13th Century conventions of chivalry directed that men should honor, serve, and do nothing to displease ladies and maidens. Knights were members of the noble class socially as bearers of arms, economically as owners of horse and armor, and officially through religious-oriented ceremony. While some were knighted on the battlefield, most spent long years as a squire, practicing the art of war while serving his master. People during the Middle Ages heard of the exploits of knights both mythical and real in epics like *La Chanson de Roland* and *Le Morte D'Arthur*.

After the Crusades, knights continued to show their prowess and skills in medieval tournaments.

Training a Knight

Knights belonged to the noble class and were part of a military order, but not all soldiers could become knights.

Those lacking the equipment, status or wealth to join an order were usually denied. However, some from the poorer class could elevate their status and be accepted into knighthood through valor on the battlefield. While Orders of female knights were rare, they did exist.

Becoming a page was usually the first step most took in the path to knighthood. Training began at a very young age. At 7, the son of a medieval nobleman or knight would be sent off to serve as a page in a lord's castle. There, he would learn horsemanship, archery and swordsmanship, and perform various other duties around the castle.

Squires would begin training as early as 10 years, but the majority would be attached to a knight for training at age 14. A squire's training concentrated on strength, fitness and skill with various weapons. Individual training was only part of the regimen, as knights also needed to know how to fight as part of a team of skilled horsemen. The squire would care for the knight's horse, clean the stables, polish the knight's armor and maintain his weapons. They would learn the chivalric codes of conduct and listen to epic tales of Roland, Charlemagne, Arthur, Percival and Lancelot.

After years of training, and usually around the age of 21, the squire would go through the dubbing ceremony. In the early Middle Ages, this was simply done with a brief, open-handed blow to the neck followed by an admonition to conduct himself with courage, bravery, skill and loyalty. After the 11th century, the Church expanded this ceremony to incorporate seeds of religious chivalry-needed to fight the Crusades-and promised in return, they would be guaranteed a place in heaven for their loyalty.

The dubbing ceremony became much more elaborate during the 11th and 12th centuries. Some would pray alone in church the night before the ceremony, wearing simple clothes to prove humility before God. The priest would bless his sword, and when presented, the new knight would kiss the hilt, which often contained religious relics.

Crusades

Crusades belong to that most viscous class of warfare-those undertaken in the name of faith. Medieval battles fought from the close of the 11th century through the 13th were engaged for a variety of motives, but they were, for the most part, wars over religion. The Catholic Church sought to harness both the knights' energy and martial skills-and found a role for them in the church's structure of society as protectors. Rules were formulated under which a "just war" could be fought and enlisted the knights to fight for them in the Crusades.

Eight crusades were fought; the first, called by Pope Urban II, taking place between 1096-1100 under the command of Godfrey de Bouillon, Raymond of Toulouse and Bohemund of Tantrum. More than 5,000 knights, joined by thousands of other soliders, peasants, men, women and children, marched eastward with the battle cry Deus Vult (It is God's Will). Few knew anything about the difficult climate awaiting them in the Holy land, and many died along the way from disease, thirst and hunger. The first Crusade was successful for the West, but they would only hold the territory for a century before being repelled by Muslim forces.

Subsequent crusades never had the success of the first, and thousands of people perished on both sides of the battlefields. The victory of the first Crusade may have been a fluke, as the Christian army arrived in the Middle East at a time when Muslim armies were at an all-time weak point.

Later crusades were fought against Turks who were trying to destroy what was left of the Byzantine Empire, but these failed as well. Other battles, fought in Spain, and Germany would prove to be more successful.

One of the positive effects of the crusades were the advances in medicine that knights saw in their Arab and Persian opponents and brought back to Western Europe.

The Ten Commandments of the Code of Chivalry

From *Chivalry* by Leon Gautier

- I. Thou shalt believe all that the Church teaches, and shalt observe all its directions.
- II. Thou shalt defend the Church.
- III. Thou shalt respect all weaknesses, and shalt constitute thyself the defender of them.
- IV. Thou shalt love the country in the which thou wast born.
- V. Thou shalt not recoil before thine enemy.
- VI. Thou shalt make war against the Infidel without cessation, and without mercy.
- VII. Thou shalt perform scrupulously thy feudal duties, if they be not contrary to the laws of God.
- VIII. Thou shalt never lie, and shall remain faithful to thy pledged word.
- IX. Thou shalt be generous, and give largess to everyone.
- X. Thou shalt be everywhere and always the champion of the Right and the Good against Injustice and Evil.

Source: <http://www.astro.umd.edu/~marshall/chivalry.html>

Questions:

1. Who does the Knight serve?
2. In what way does the codes of Chivalry maintain order and control over the warrior class?
3. Simply put, what are the main rules the knights are expected to follow?

The Song of Roland is an anonymous Old French epic, dating perhaps as early as the middle 11th century. It represents a glorification of the ideals of the French nobility in the period. The story refers to a historical incident during Charlemagne's time, a minor skirmish in his Spanish campaigns. In the song *it becomes glorified as the Battle of Roncevalles*

When Rollant sees that now must be combat,

More fierce he's found than lion or leopard;

The Franks he calls, and Oliver commands:

"Now say no more, my friends, nor thou, comrade.

That Emperour, who left us Franks on guard,

1115 A thousand score stout men he set apart,

And well he knows, not one will prove coward.

Man for his lord should suffer with good heart,

Of bitter cold and great heat bear the smart,

His blood let drain, and all his flesh be scarred.

2390 Saint Gabriel from's hand hath taken it.

Over his arm his head bows down and slips,

He joins his hands: and so is life finish'd.

God sent him down His angel cherubin,

And Saint Michael, we worship in peril;

2395 And by their side Saint Gabriel alit;

So the count's soul they bare to Paradis.

Questions:

4. Who was Rollant?
5. How did he die?
6. What happened to him after he died?
7. Who was Rollant serving?