knighthood

The most significant military figure of the European Middle Ages was the knight. Knighthood emerged as a distinct order in around the year 1000, and the knight came to be defined as a warrior mounted on a horse and dressed in a suit of armor. The word knight is derived from the Old English word cniht, the equivalent of the Latin word caballarius, meaning “horseman.” At first a figure of almost humble status, the knight gradually obtained noble rank. In time, elaborate rules of knightly behavior and duties emerged and were enshrined in the literature of the period. (See also feudalism; Middle Ages.)

Knighthood flourished before the time of guns and gunpowder, when battles still were won by hand-to-hand conflicts of heavy-armored cavalymen. Replacing an earlier class of soldiers, the knight appeared during a period of widespread violence and the reorganization of social structures and land ownership. Knights served in the armies and in the garrisons of the castles of high-ranking nobles, who themselves came to assume the designation of knight. A knight often served as a vassal: he received land from his superior, known as his lord, in exchange for his service as a warrior. Knights gradually came to be landowners in their own right. The class of knights also came to merge with the noble class. As a result, a single warrior class, with clear social divisions within it, emerged to lead European society. During the 11th century, Christian thinkers developed an ideology that bestowed a sacred function on the knights.

Training of a Knight

Once the tradition of knighthood reached full bloom, a well-defined routine of education and training developed. These traditions were recorded in the literature of the period and most likely reflected practices that emerged by the 13th century. In his training to become a knight, a young man would serve in the household of a knight who was a high-ranking nobleman, first as a page, or personal attendant, and then as a squire, or armor bearer.

This education usually began at the age of seven, when the young man was taken from his home and sent to the castle of some famous nobleman, perhaps his father’s lord. There he served the lord and lady as a page. It was his duty, and it was considered a privilege, to accompany them at all times. He waited on them at the dinner table and went with them to various affairs. He received Christian religious instruction from the chaplain and training in arms from the squires. He was taught by his mistress and her ladies to honor and protect all women. He also learned to sing and to play the lute, to hunt and to hawk. But above all else he learned to ride a horse.

At the age of 14, he became a squire. He now learned to handle sword and lance and to bear the weight of the heavy armor. In addition to his other duties, he had to carve the meat at the dinner table and to accompany his knight to war. He assisted him in putting on his armor—originally suits of chain mail but by the late Middle Ages suits of plate armor. He saw to it that the knightly sword and other arms were polished until they shone. He stood by to give aid in conflict should his lord be overmatched and to lend his horse should the master lose his own. It was the squire who raised the knight when he fell and who bore his body away if he were wounded or killed in battle.

In the Prologue to Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is the following description of a squire: “His clothes were embroidered red and white, as it were a meadow of fresh flowers. All the day he was singing or playing upon a lute, he was as fresh as the Month of May. His coat was short, with long wide sleeves. Well could he sit a horse and ride, make songs, joust and dance, draw and write. He loved so ardently that at nighttime he slept no more than a nightingale. He was courteous, modest, and helpful, and carved before his master at table.”

The Knighting Ceremony
At the age of 21, if he had acquitted himself well as page and squire, he was made a knight. In its earliest forms, the dubbing, or adoubement, was a relatively simple rite involving the bestowal of arms and rank by a high-ranking noble. As the ideology of knighthood evolved, so did the ceremony. The knighting ceremony became increasingly elaborate, involved solemn vows, and acquired religious sanction.

After a purification bath, the candidate for knighthood knelt or stood all night in prayer before the altar on which lay the precious armor he would put on the next day. In the morning there was a religious ritual, with perhaps a sermon on the knight’s duty to protect the weak, to right wrongs, and to honor women. Then in the courtyard in the presence of the assembled knights and ladies, a knight’s armor was buckled on, piece by piece, a sword was girded about his waist, and spurs were attached to his feet. He then knelt to receive the accolade. This was a blow upon the neck or shoulder, given by the officiating lord or knight with his fist or with the flat of a sword. As he gave it he said, “In the name of God and St. Michael and St. George, I dub thee knight; be brave and loyal.” The ceremony was followed by exhibitions of the young knight’s skill in arms.

Sometimes on the occasion of a knighting, the lord at whose castle the ceremony took place gave a tournament. This was often an extravagant entertainment. Knights for miles around were invited to come and take part, and many persons of distinction came to see the events. Sometimes the visitors came in such numbers that the lodgings of the castle were filled and tents were put up to accommodate the later arrivals.

In the morning, after attending mass, the knights would go to the tournament field, or lists. There the combats between the knights were fought. Sometimes two knights fought alone, in a combat called a joust, and sometimes whole companies met in combat. When all were assembled, the heralds announced the names of the contestants, and the new knight looked upon the most brilliant scene that the times had to offer. As depicted especially in medieval literature, the knights were resplendent in shining armor, with swords and golden spurs giving back the sunlight. Banners fluttered, and here and there gleamed gorgeous cloth of gold.

The combats that took place in this festive setting were not gentle ones. The points of the weapons, to be sure, were usually encased in blocks of wood to make the encounter less dangerous, but the sport was so rough and the knights jousted in such earnest that many were wounded and some were killed. The joust was attended by much excitement, with the blowing of trumpets, the clash of steel, the shouts of heralds, and the applause of the spectators. It continued until one of the knights was forced off his horse. If he was still alive, the defeated knight then yielded his horse and armor to his adversary and was assisted from the field by the squires.

**Into the Great World of Adventure**

After the festivities attending the conferring of knighthood, the young knight was free to go where he pleased. As a knight-errant he appears in the pages of medieval literature seeking a fair maiden in need of a champion or a strange knight with whom to joust. The knight, however, most often returned to his father’s castle or joined the following of some great lord to serve as his vassal. At times as well, the knight fought in the armies of the Crusades in the Holy Land or of those fighting in the Christian reconquest of Spain.

By the later 12th and 13th centuries when the rules of knightly behavior had been worked out, the knight was guided by the watchwords of “Religion, Honor, and Courtesy.” In addition to fighting bravely in battle, he was expected to be pious, to remain loyal to his lord and lady, to preserve his personal honor, and to protect women, the poor, and the weak. The ideal knight is thus described by the poet Chaucer: “And though he was valorous, he was prudent and as meek as a maid of his bearing. In all his life he never yet spake discourteously but was truly a perfect gentle knight.” The gallantry and honor expected of knights came to be called chivalry, from chevalier, the French word for “knight.” In the 14th and 15th centuries, chivalry was associated increasingly with aristocratic display and public ceremony, particularly in jousting tournaments, rather than with service in the field.
With the rise of the longbow and the crossbow, which could be used to wound or kill someone from a distance, and the invention of gunpowder and cannon rendering useless the feudal castle, the knight in armor passed out of existence. Knighthood then came to be merely a title of honor for persons who served the king or country.

**Orders of Knighthood**

During the Middle Ages, several orders of knighthood were founded. The first of these orders arose during the Crusades and had a religious origin. Among these orders were the Knights of the Hospital of St. John of Jerusalem, now called the Knights of Malta, or the Hospitallers; the Poor Knights of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon, known generally as the Knights Templars; the Hospitallers of St. Lazarus of Jerusalem; and the House of the Hospitallers of St. Mary of the Teutons in Jerusalem, known as the Teutonic Knights. Many of these orders became strong political powers in the late Middle Ages. Knights of these orders often lived like monks and took vows of poverty and chastity. They were responsible for protecting Christian pilgrims to the Holy Land and for fighting against the Muslims. (See also Crusading orders.)

There were also a number of secular orders of knights founded by various monarchs in Europe, in the Middle Ages and after. Some of these orders have persisted into the 21st century. The people who belong to them are, of course, not knights in the medieval sense; rather, membership is bestowed as an honor upon men and women who have made outstanding contributions to society in the arts, sciences, politics, and the military.

Perhaps the best-known order is that of the Garter, established by King Edward III of England in about 1348. Other orders of the British Empire are that of the Bath, founded by King George I in 1725; the Order of St. Michael and St. George, founded by prince regent, subsequently King George IV, in 1818; the Scottish Order of the Thistle, thought to have been founded in the 12th century and revived by King James VII of Scotland (James II of England) in 1687; the Royal Victorian Order, founded by Queen Victoria in 1896; and the Order of the British Empire, founded by King George V in 1917. The Irish Order of St. Patrick was founded by King George III in 1783 (and was discontinued in the 1920s with the establishment of a separate Irish state).

Other countries had organizations of knights as well. In France the Order of the Golden Fleece was founded in 1430. It later became the principal knightly order of both Austria and Spain. Portugal had the Order of St. Benedict of Avis. In Germany there were the orders of the Black Eagle and of the Red Eagle. Russia had three orders: St. Andrew, St. George, and St. Nicholas. The Danish Order of the Elephant was founded in the 15th century and revived in 1693. The Norwegian Order of St. Olaf was not founded until 1847. Japan had two orders: the Chrysanthemum and the Rising Sun. In countries that are no longer monarchies, the best-known modern order is the French Legion of Honor, which was established by Napoleon in 1802. Other republics have similar orders of merit to award civilian and military honors.

**Cite**

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