

Knighthood

In the year 1066, the Normans conquered England. These French soldiers who came on horseback were called knights by the English. Later, any man who could fight on horseback came to be known as a knight. When not fighting or going about the business of war, a knight served his master by doing routine service. As time wore on many knights obtained land of their own. They began to outfit themselves with expensive weapons and armor that only the wealthy could afford. At this time only the rich were considered to be knights, but any man could be made a knight for deeds of honor or distinction.

Early medieval knights swore to uphold a code of chivalry. In the code of chivalry a knight promised to uphold Christianity, to defend women and to protect the poor and the weak. A boy started on his way to knighthood at about age seven by becoming a page in the household of a lord. As a page he learned to ride a horse, received religious training, was taught manners, hunting, dancing and possibly learned to read and write if there was someone in the manor who could teach him.

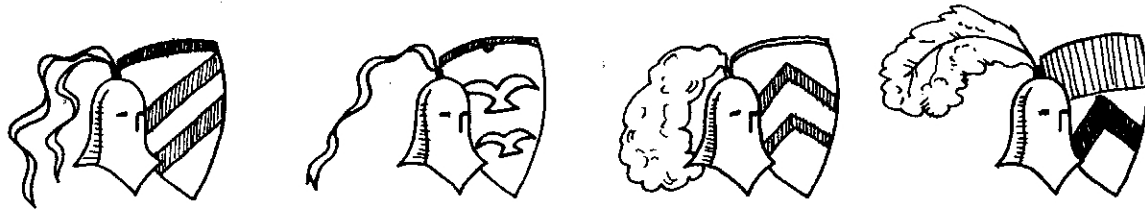
At about age twelve or thirteen the page became a squire. Squires were assistants to the knights. A squire looked after the knight's armor and weapons and became skilled in their use. He served the knight his meals and often followed him into battle. In tournaments he was the only one allowed to help a knight. As he became older he engaged in tournaments himself.

The night before a squire became a knight he confessed his sins to a priest, bathed and fasted. Dressed all in white he prayed the entire night before the ceremony. In the morning the priest blessed him, and he was asked his reasons for becoming a knight. He was then given a new suit of armor; and in a ceremony called an accolade, he was stroked on the shoulder, thus becoming a knight. If a knight broke his vows or was dishonorable, he was stripped of his knighthood in another ceremony which pretended to bury him, for in the Middle Ages, "a knight without honor is no longer alive."

By the year 1200, knights were much aware of the differences between themselves and others, and a definite class of aristocratic knights developed. They owned land and castles, they identified themselves by family crests and passed on their titles to their sons. Distinct lines were drawn between those who had wealth and power and those who did not. These lines became sharper as a result of the exposure of knights to the riches of the East in their travels during the Crusades. Knights now desired luxuries in their castles, silk and jewels to wear, and spices and sugar in their diets. Knighthood had changed. No one will ever know how many medieval men lived to be perfect knights, but the ideal of chivalry—loyalty, courtesy, courage, truth and above all, honor—set the standards for the Middle Ages and for all the Ages that followed.

In modern times knighthood is inherited, or it can be an honor bestowed by a monarch in order to recognize outstanding service to one's country. A knight is referred to by the title of Sir. The wife of a knight is called a Lady. A woman who is knighted is called Dame.

1. Medieval knights took an oath of chivalry. What has the word *chivalry* come to mean in today's world?
2. Are the qualities of loyalty, courtesy, courage, truth and honor still valued? Explain your answer.
3. Write a code for living in modern times.



Armor

Suits of armor used to protect the body in times of war or combat go back thousands of years. It was, however, during the Middle Ages that armor reached its highest point and also its decline. In the early Middle Ages armor consisted of a helmet and hauberk, a kind of shirt made of chain mail, which protected the body from the neck to the knees. The invention of the crossbow made the armor of chain mail ineffective, and a suit of metal plates was added. In time the entire body was encased in a suit of armor. Armor was very expensive and was worn only by knights and sometimes squires. Common soldiers, being horseless, did not wear heavy armor. They wore instead those pieces they found on the battlefield, provided that they were not too heavy. Sometimes foot soldiers wore steel caps and shirts of mail.

In time, armor became so complicated that it took two men to dress a knight. A suit of armor was made up of a number of small steel plates strapped onto the knight's body. The large number of plates was necessary to enable the knight to move as freely as possible. After the main pieces were in place, the smaller pieces were attached by hooks and buckles. Because knights in armor were dressed for combat on horses, the horses too were outfitted with armor, lest they be killed, leaving the knight almost defenseless.

Although armor was used well into the seventeenth century, its use declined rapidly as military tactics changed, demanding rapid movement; and the use of gunpowder became widespread. Today suits of ancient armor can only be seen in museums and such places, but modern day soldiers still wear helmets for protection and policemen sometimes wear bulletproof vests, two items of bodily protection originally invented many centuries ago.