

KNIGHTS IN THE MIDDLE AGES

The greatest weapon of the Middle Ages was not the catapult or the trebuchet. In fact, it was not a machine at all. It was the heavily-armored, mounted warriors called knights. (The word *knight* derives from the French word *chevalier*, which means “horseman.”) When the strength of these powerfully-built men combined with the weight of their armor and the speed of their horses, it produced a force to be reckoned with. The knight, mounted high on his horse, could slash and hack at adversaries on foot, using the “high ground” to his advantage.

Several developments led to the birth of these armored, mounted warriors. One was the invention of chain mail—a mesh-like armor made from iron rings. This protected the warrior’s skin from being cut by sword blows. For a first layer knights wore a cloth coat to cushion their skin against bruises and over this the *hauberk* or knee-length chain-mail shirt. (The plate armor typically associated with knights did not come along until much later.) The horseshoe (invented around 800 A.D.) allowed horses to move further distances at faster rates. It also kept their hooves from deteriorating in the wet conditions of northern Europe. The horse became a valuable part of a warrior’s arsenal. Another important invention was the saddle stirrup, which made for a tighter bond between the rider and his steed. Before the stirrup, a warrior on horseback could easily lose his balance and fall from his horse while trying to slash at an adversary. Rather than clamping the horse with his legs, the warrior could now retain his mount, stand in the saddle, and even lean into his thrusts. Stirrups also allowed warriors to carry longer, heavier weapons—such as the heavy lances knights are often pictured with. All these advancements made the knight a force to be reckoned with.

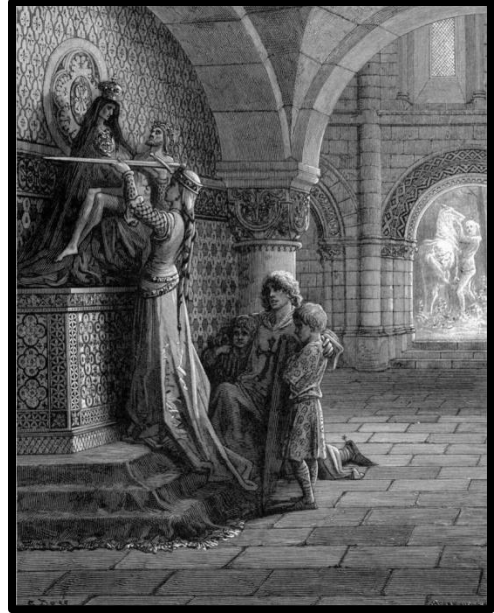


All this fancy equipment (not to mention the cost of a trained warhorse) meant something else, too: Knights could have to be well-off enough to afford it all. This created a new class of warrior. Knights were, therefore, a wealthier breed than the common soldier. Most knights were not wealthy, but they had enough money to fund their profession. Armor, although initially expensive, was virtually indestructible and was passed down from generation to generation.

Typically lands passed from a father to his oldest son. If a lord had more than one son, the older son would inherit the land, becoming a lord like his father, while any younger sons would have to earn their living either by the church or by the sword—that is to say by becoming a clergyman or knight. Feudalism was the predominant system of government

during the Middle Ages. Kings divided their land-holdings among their faithful lords. These lords, in turn, would divvy out their land to their faithful warriors—the knights in their service.

Many knights who were not fortunate enough to get a small estate through allegiance to a lord wandered from tournament to tournament living off the prize money they won in such contests. These tournaments were spectator-sport battles between knights. Later they came to feature jousting, but early tournaments were merely melee skirmishes. Not every tournament used blunted weapons either, so many of them were just as dangerous as actual battles. Lords came to see the show, and ladies came to flirt with their favorite knights. Some tournaments were so involved that they lasted an entire week!



In later centuries, the invention of the crossbow, which could fire arrows with much more force, made chain mail obsolete. In its place, plate armor (the type of armor typically associated with knights) became common. While plate armor was much more effective at combating the crossbow, it made knights much bulkier. (Suits of plate armor often weighed from 55-90 lbs.) If a knight fell to the ground in battle, he would require help in order to stand again. Some suits of plate armor were fashioned to only cover the front portion of the body. This helped insure that the knight did not turn tail and run.

CHIVALRY: HEAVENLY WARRIORS, EARTHLY LOVE

To us knights are the symbol of gentlemanly conduct, but the truth is that the earliest knights were not as noble as we like to remember them. Since they were so much more powerful than a typical warrior, they often abused this power—bullying the weak, abducting women, and even looting churches. The reckless rampaging of these armored thugs began to worry the church leaders in Europe. They needed a way to keep these knights under control—preferably *their* control. What they devised was a scheme to put the power of the knights under the jurisdiction of the church. Knights would no longer only serve their earthly lords; they would become holy warriors for God.

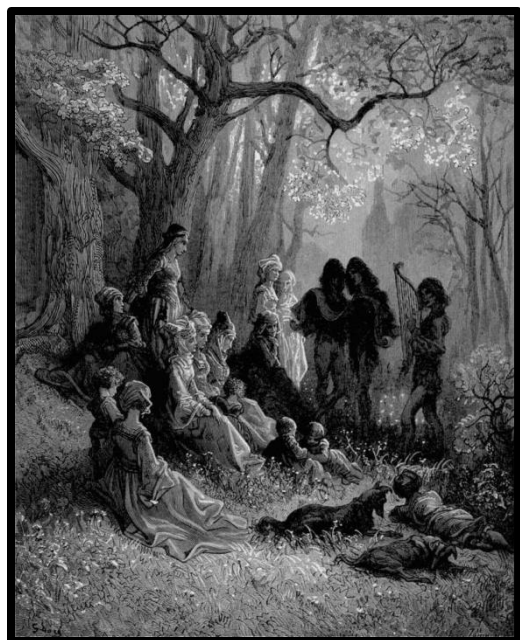
To achieve this, the Church created the concept of *chivalry* or a code of conduct for the ideal knight. Any knight who spilled Christian blood, they said, was actually spilling the blood of Christ. The Church charged knights, as God's knights, with the duty of protecting the weak, upholding a godly life, and battling the enemies of Christianity. Knights would still get to fight, but now they would be serving God with their deadly talents. Needless to say, the idea of chivalry caught on. Some knights were still just armored bullies, but most took their church vows seriously. Some even commissioned swords to be made with a holy relic (from their favorite saint) embedded into the hilt.

Becoming a knight became an official act of the church. Every knight had to undergo a “dubbing” ceremony—complete with symbolic rituals. The night before a young man was knighted he took a ceremonial bath to symbolize his purification. Afterward, he was clothed all in white. Then he spent the entire night in the local church praying, asking for God’s guidance. In the morning he would be dubbed an official knight. He was girded with a belt to remind him to avoid sins of the flesh and human lust. He was presented with gilded spurs to give him the courage to serve God. And finally, he was given a sword, with which to defend the poor against the rich. His sponsor—who must also be a knight—would strike him to help him remember the momentous day. (The tapping of a sword on either shoulder later came to replace this blow.)

The process of becoming a knight was refined as well. Young boys, their hearts set on knighthood, would be sent away from their homes around the age of eight to become a page (or serving boy) in an established knight’s household. Later the boy would become the knight’s squire or attendant. A squire cared for his master’s weapons, as well as his horse. He waited his master’s table, carved his meat, and helped him dress. In his spare time, the squire would train with a lance and sword. Finally, if he proved himself capable, he himself would be knighted around the age of eighteen.

It was not only the church that promoted the ideals of chivalry, but also the popular literature of the day. Troubadours, traveling singers who traveled from one castle to another, told tales about valiant knights. The legendary British king Arthur and his noble Knights of the Round Table were the epitome of chivalric ideals—courteous, well-spoken, brave, loyal, and honorable. Yet in all this piousness, another tradition grew up in the poetry of the troubadours, one that the church did *not* approve of.

Love, not honor or duty to God, became the central idea of troubadour poetry. In the Middle Ages, love had very little to do with marriage. After all, marriages were often arranged by the parents of the couple, not the couple themselves. For this reason, many romances viewed love to be extra-marital. Knights in troubadour poetry always had a lady fair—a noble woman



of higher rank that they worshipped from afar. This woman and often the knight himself were already married to other people, but this did not stop them from loving. The knight’s unrequited love tortured his soul, and he became willing to give up anything—even his knightly honor—in the name of love. This romantic concept is called “courtly love.” (Within the Arthurian romances, the character of Lancelot, King Arthur’s best knight and the secret lover of his queen, is the epitome of courtly love.)

The church—severely annoyed by this “dirty” poetry that romanticized adultery—warned knights to stay away from these lewd stories that tempted them to throw away their purity. Their focus should always be on defending the Kingdom of God—not on earthly pleasures.

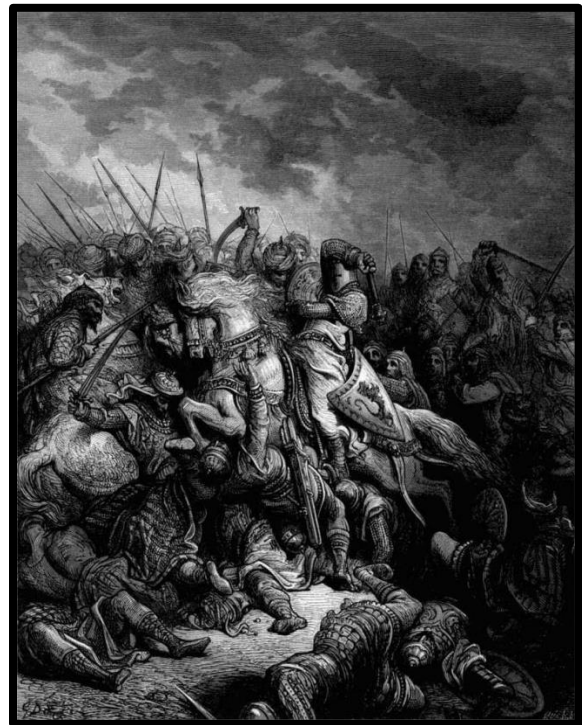
DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- How were the knights the most powerful weapon in medieval warfare? Explain.
- How is the idea of knights as “Christian warriors” somewhat contradictory? Explain.
- In today’s society what actions do we consider to be chivalrous? Explain.
- Read “The Book of the Ordre of Chyvalry.” What does it have to say about the ideal of chivalry?
- What do you think of the concept of chivalry? Explain.
- Read *De Arte Honeste Amandi*. What does it have to say concerning “courtly love”?
- How does this concept over-romanticize love? Explain.
- How were the ideals of chivalry and courtly love contradictory? Explain.

THE CRUSADES: THE HOLY WARS

In 1095 Pope Urban II, the most influential and powerful man in Europe at the time, issued a challenge to all Christian men: “This land which you inhabit, shut in on all sides by the seas and surrounded by mountain peaks, is too narrow for your large population....Hence it is that you murder on another, that you wage war, and that frequently you perish by mutual wounds. Let therefore hatred depart from among you, let your quarrels end, let wars cease, and let all dissensions and controversies slumber. Enter upon the road to the Holy Sepulcher. Wrest that land from the wicked race, and subject it to yourselves. That land which as the scripture says, ‘Floweth with milk and money’ was given by God into the possession of the children of Israel.” The crowd gathered to hear the Pope’s command cheered back with “God wills it!” The land he spoke of was the Holy Land, Jerusalem and its surrounding territories—the place that gave birth to Christianity. The mentioned “wicked race” was various Muslim peoples, lumped together and called *Saracens* by the Europeans, who had been in control of Jerusalem for hundreds of years. The city held special significance to them as well.

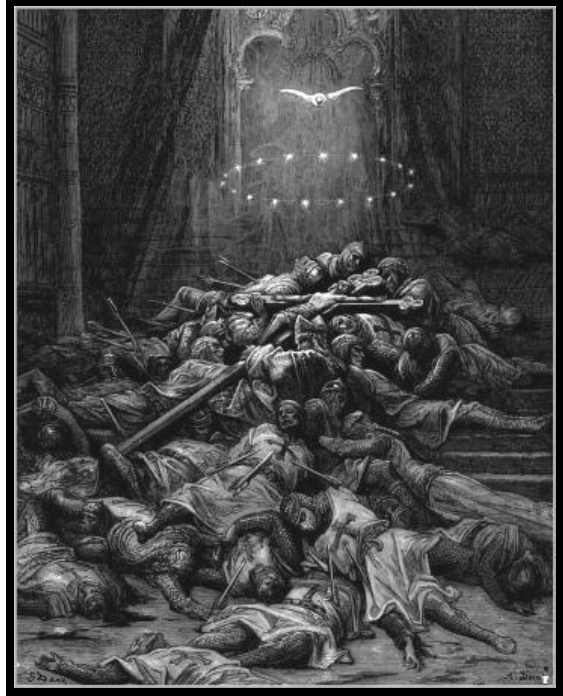
Thousands of knights answered the Pope’s call to war. Knights bound for the Holy Lands placed a cross upon their armor to signal their intentions. Many knights who went on the crusade were not land-owners, so the thought of the wealth and land in the Holy Lands probably spurred them on more than religious devotion. Many Europeans imagined the city of Jerusalem to appear as the holy city in the Book of Revelation with gates of pearl, walls studded



with precious stones, and streets paved with gold. They were in for a disappointment.

When the knights reached the arid wilderness of the Middle East, their enthusiasm was somewhat squelched. The burning sun heated their armor, scalding their skin. Many of their horses died from the conditions of supporting a heavily armed rider. Even though they reached Jerusalem in this pitiful state, the army of God regrouped, conquered the city, and massacred the Saracens they found there.

Raymond of Agiles wrote of the actions of the European knights in Jerusalem: "Some of our men cut off the heads of their enemies. Others shot them with arrows, so that they fell from the towers. Others tortured them longer by casting them into the flames. Piles of heads, hands, and feet were to be seen in the streets of the city. It was necessary to pick one's way over the bodies of men and horses. But these were small matters compared to what happened at the temple of Solomon, a place where religious services are ordinarily chanted. What happened there? If I tell the truth, it will exceed your powers of belief. So let it suffice to say this much at least, that in the temple and portico of Solomon, men rode in blood up to their knees and bridle reins. Indeed, it was a just and splendid judgment of God, that his place should be filled with the blood of the unbelievers, when it had suffered so long from their blasphemies....This day, I say, will be famous in all future ages, for it turned our labors and sorrows into joy and exultation; this day, I say, marks the justification of all Christianity and the humiliation of paganism. Our faith was renewed. 'The Lord made this day, and we rejoiced and exulted in it,' for on this day the Lord revealed Himself to His people and blessed them."



Knights weren't the only ones to answer the Pope's call to crusade. Two near-beggars named Walter the Penniless and Peter the Hermit rallied 10,000 peasants to march on Jerusalem. They made it farther than most expected—all the way to the Holy Land—but were easily massacred by a Saracen army they encountered there. During a later period, a group of children even felt the drive to crusade. Led by a pair of French 12-year-olds, who claimed to have been visited by Jesus himself, led thousands of penniless children toward Jerusalem. When it came time to book passage on a ship bound for the Holy Land, the children were tricked though. The sailors welcomed them aboard and promptly sailed them to Africa, where the children were sold as slaves.

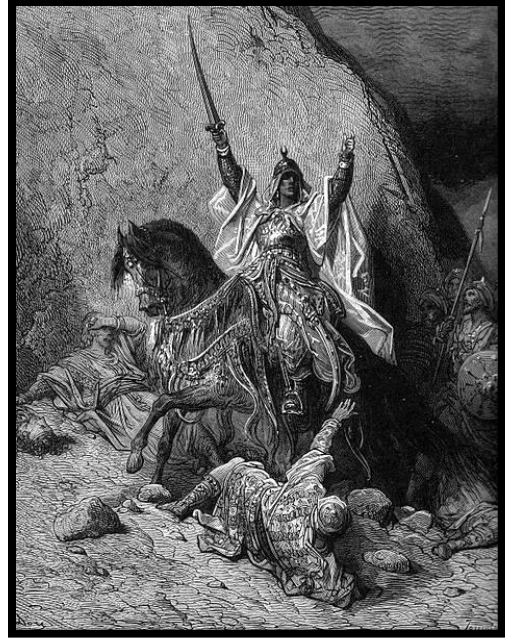
After the city was conquered, word was sent back to Europe that the Holy Land was in Christian hands once again. A flood of devoted Europeans made the pilgrimage to Jerusalem to see the holy city for themselves. In the following years Jerusalem became something of a holy tourist trap, with visitors returning to Europe bearing fake holy relics—such as pieces of the true cross, a hair from the head of John the Baptist, or a piece of the burning bush. A new order

of knights called the Templars was established, created to protect pilgrims on their way to Jerusalem. They were named for the Temple of Solomon in Jerusalem, and they viewed themselves as a blend between knights and monks. They gave battle, but for a very holy cause. The pagan Saracen was their sworn enemy.

Although the European knights viewed the Saracens as barbarians, in many ways they were more advanced. While the ancient learning of Greece and Rome had been lost in Europe, it had been preserved in the Middle East. Medicine was one area where the Saracens were the superior of the Europeans.

In the following account an Arab doctor, called to help with wounded knights, describes an encounter with the “curious medicine” of the Europeans. “They brought before me a knight in whose leg an abscess had grown and a woman afflicted with imbecility. To the knight I applied a small poultice until the abscess opened and became well. And the woman I put on diet....Then a [French] physician came to them and said, ‘This man knows nothing about treating them.’ He then said to the knight, ‘Which wouldst thou prefer, living with one leg or dying with two?’ The latter replied, ‘Living with one leg.’ The physician said, ‘Bring me a strong knight and a sharp axe.’ A knight came with the axe, and I was standing by. Then the physician laid the leg of the patient on a block of wood and bade the knight strike his leg with the axe and chop it off in one blow. Accordingly he struck it—while I was looking on—one blow, but the leg was not severed. He dealt another blow, upon which that marrow of the leg flowed out and the patient died on the spot. He then examined the woman and said, ‘This is a woman in whose head there is a devil, which has possessed her. Shave off her hair.’ Accordingly they shaved it off, and the woman began once more to eat their ordinary diet—garlic and mustard. Her imbecility took a turn for the worse. The physician then said, ‘The devil has penetrated though her head.’ He therefore took a razor, made a deep cruciform incision on it, peeled off the skin at the middle of the incision until the bone of the skull was exposed and rubbed it with salt. The woman also expired instantly. Thereupon I asked them whether my services were needed any longer, and when they replied in the negative, I returned home, having learned of their medicine what I knew not before.”

After many years of Christian rule, Jerusalem fell to the Saracen armies under the command of Saladin. Unlike the crusaders, Saladin did not slaughter his captured enemies. He allowed them to return safely to Europe. As news of Jerusalem’s fall reached Europe, yet another crusade was instigated by Richard the Lionhearted of England. Richard and Saladin engaged in many battles for control of Jerusalem, and during this time, both leaders developed a mutual respect for the other. Saladin, although a Saracen, became a symbol of chivalry among the Europeans. In the end there were five major crusades, but the European knights were never able to retake Jerusalem. The crusades ended with an agreement of tolerance between the two



sides—Jerusalem would stay in Muslim hands, but grant Christian pilgrims the right to visit the holy city.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- Are there any heroes in the story of the Crusades? Who are they? Explain.
- The Crusades led to tensions that are still at large in the world today. Many middle-eastern countries view nations of the West with suspicion. Do they have a right to? Explain.
- How are the concepts of *crusade* and *jihad*, an Islamic holy war, similar? Explain.
- Raymond of Agiles writes about the slaughter in the temple, but what is odd about his account? Explain.
- In the account concerning the Arab doctor and the French physician, who is more knowledgeable? What did this episode make you feel? Explain.
- In the years following the crusades the Templar knights became involved in banking. Europeans could borrow money from their order and deposit money for safe-keeping. Because of this the Templar order grew powerful throughout Europe. When the French king Philip IV became greatly indebted to the Templars, he seized upon the strange rumors concerning the knightly order—accusations of devil worship and other corruption—and had most of the order arrested, tortured, and executed. Those Templars who did not burn at the stake went into hiding. For this reason the Knights Templar gained a mysterious, legendary status, and some think their order—a secret one now—still exists today.