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LORDS, LADIES, PEASANTS,
AND KNIGHTS:
CLASS IN THE
MIDDLE AGES

DON NARDO

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Chapter Two

SOLDIERS: RISKING AND LOSING LIFE AND LIMB

One of the most important elements of the feudal order in medieval Europe was the military service owed by a vassal lord to a king, or by various kinds of soldiers to their local lord. The vassal's commitment to fight was a common obligation and basic part of the oath of fealty he took, swearing allegiance to his king or other superior lord.

When the overlord decided to raise an army, he issued an announcement, called a summons, to the local vassal lords, who prepared themselves for war and issued their own military summons to their retainers and other men who lived and worked on their estates. These subvassals and other followers accordingly gathered their weapons and whatever armor they might own. Then the vassal lord and his men marched off to join the king's army.

That army comprised a number of different kinds of fighters who fell into two broad categories. The first and more prestigious group was made up of knights, elite soldiers who usually fought on horseback. They were elite because they were well-to-do and, with few exceptions, of high social rank. The vassal lords themselves were the chief knights of the realm, for example, and other knights were leading retainers of a vassal lord, men who lived in his castle or to whom he had granted small estates of their own. Knights had to be financially well-off, partly because horses were very expensive to breed and raise. Equipping and training a mounted warrior was also costly and time-consuming, not something a laborer busy in his fields could afford.

The second broad category of medieval fighters consisted of foot soldiers, or infantrymen. Most of these soldiers were

men of lower social status than knights. Some were farmers or other peasants who worked on the king's estates or on the estates of his vassals. As a rule, the foot soldiers were not as well armored as the knights, and many infantrymen had little or no military training. Still, when used together wisely by a talented commander, an integrated army of mounted knights and foot soldiers could be highly effective on the battlefield.

Knights Idolized in Ceremony and Song

The knights who answered a king's military summons were what might be termed the rock stars of their society. Not only were they financially well-off and enjoyed high social status, they lived in or around castles, the hubs of medieval life, and people of all social classes viewed them as formidable, honorable, and at times even heroic. Knights were

A fourteenth-century manuscript shows knights leaving a castle. In medieval Europe, knights were widely respected and at times even feared.

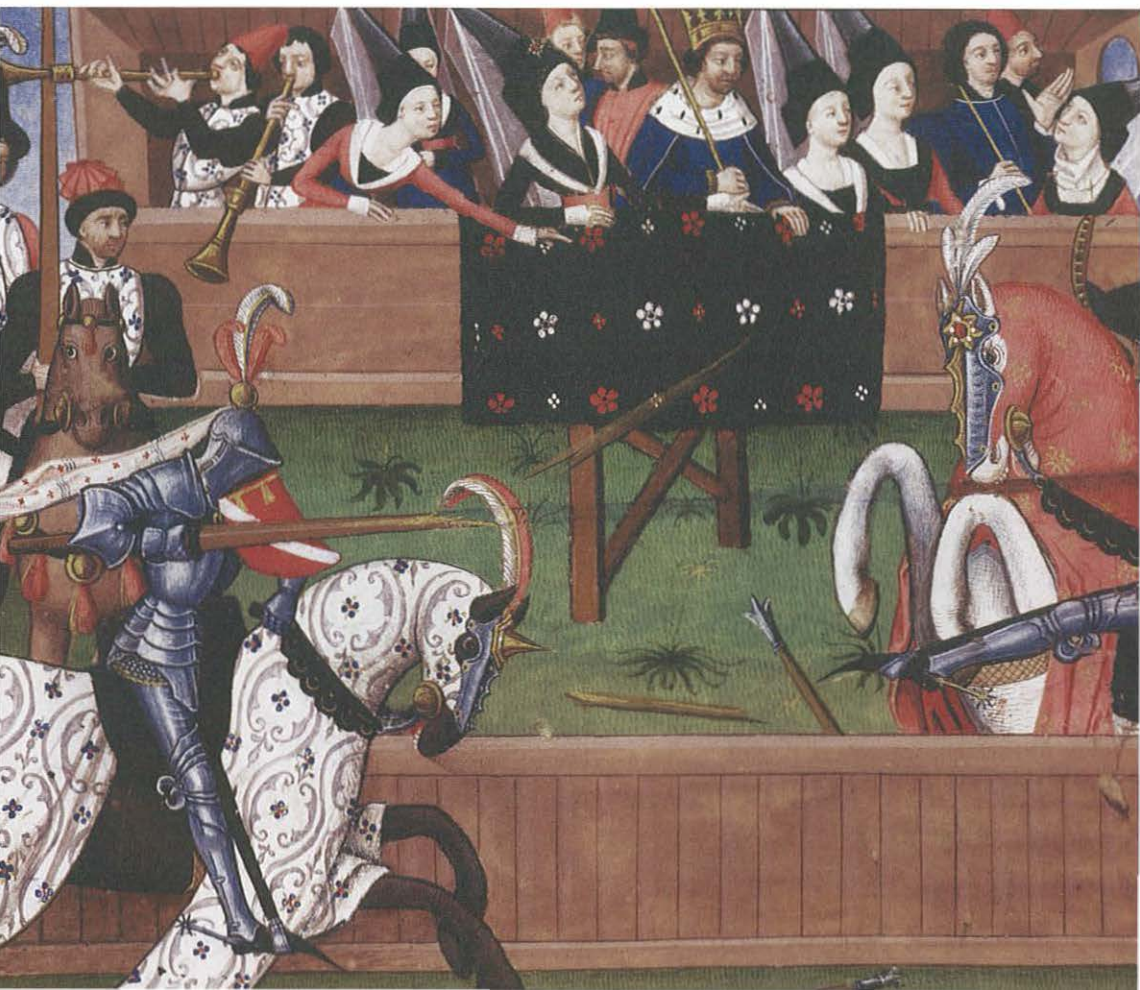


frequently part of the splendid ceremonies held in the royal courts, and they clashed with one another in colorful tournaments, mock battles staged by kings and other nobles. “Prizes were generally offered,” noted scholar Marc Bloch writes, in what became

a distinctive class amusement, which the nobility found more exciting than any other. These meetings . . . could not be organized without consider-

able expense, [so they] usually took place on the occasion of the great “courts” held from time to time by kings or barons. Enthusiasts [of the sport] roamed the world from tournament to tournament. These were not only [ordinary] knights . . . but also very great lords. . . . Wounds were not uncommon, nor even mortal blows, when—to borrow the words of the poet Raoul de Cambrai—the jousting “took an ill turn.”¹⁰

Two knights joust with each other in a tournament held in France in 1470. The object was to use a long lance to knock an opponent off his horse.





A man becomes a knight in an elaborate dubbing ceremony in France in the early 1500s. Typically, clergymen said prayers over the knight's sword.

Knights were also idolized and sought after by upper-class ladies, and troubadours (wandering singers) composed songs about these elite fighters. One minstrel sang:

It gives me great joy to see, drawn up on the field, knights and horses in battle array. . . . And my heart is filled with gladness when I see strong castles besieged [by these knights]. . . . And when the battle is joined, let all men of good lineage think of nothing else but the breaking of heads and arms; for it is better to die than be vanquished and live.¹¹

Part of what made knights so appealing and widely respected was that they took a solemn oath to the king or a vassal lord to defend him with their lives. This act was seen as both courageous and chivalrous. Knights also took part in a special ceremony in which their superior lord “dubbed” them, or granted them the high status of knighthood. These ceremonies gained in complexity and grandeur over time, and by the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they had become major social events involving not only the nobles but also leading churchmen, who blessed the knights and their weapons.

Such ceremonies varied somewhat from place to place and time to time, but

it was fairly typical for the candidate for knighthood to hand his sword to a priest, who placed the weapon on an altar and recited a prayer over it. It was also common for the holy man to call on the young man to be good of heart and use his sword only in just causes sanctioned by God. The candidate also emphasized his respect for God by cutting his hair short, in the style worn by monks. Sometimes the knight-to-be underwent a ritual bath to symbolize his purification before the king and God. Then he donned special robes, shoes, and a helmet. During the ceremony, his king, duke, or other overlord presented him with a spur to wear in battle and a new, ornately decorated sword. The overlord then recited words to this effect: “Knight, God grant you a life of honor, that you may be a man of great trust and worth, in thought, word, and deed.”¹²

Obligations of Knights

Once a man became a knight, he was bound to fulfill set obligations to his overlord. These included not only military service in wartime, but also certain duties in peacetime. For example, if the king was not waging war, it was common for a knight to serve a given number of days, usually about forty, each year guarding the local castle. The following list of military rules for vassals and other knights dates from late-thirteenth-century France:

All vassals of the king are bound to appear before him when he

shall summon them, and to serve him at their own expense for forty days and forty nights, with as many knights as each one owes; and he is able to extract from them these services when he wishes and when he has need of them. And if the king wishes to keep them more than forty days at their own expense, they are not bound to remain if they do not wish it. And if the king wishes to keep them at his expense for the defense of the realm, they are bound to remain.¹³

When on duty in peacetime, knights usually lived in the castles they guarded. In the early medieval centuries, when most castles were still fairly small, they could house only a few soldiers—perhaps no more than half a dozen or so. Later, when castles grew larger, it was not unusual for as many as twenty to fifty knights to find temporary or even permanent quarters in the lord’s residence.

In wartime, by contrast, a knight usually had to serve sixty or more days and to provide horses, arms, and supplies at his own expense. He was also expected to take along servants and even some of his own minor retainers, usually foot soldiers, to help and support him while on campaign. A unit made up of a knight and his retainers and other followers was called a lance. During a campaign, the members of a lance most often lodged in tents.



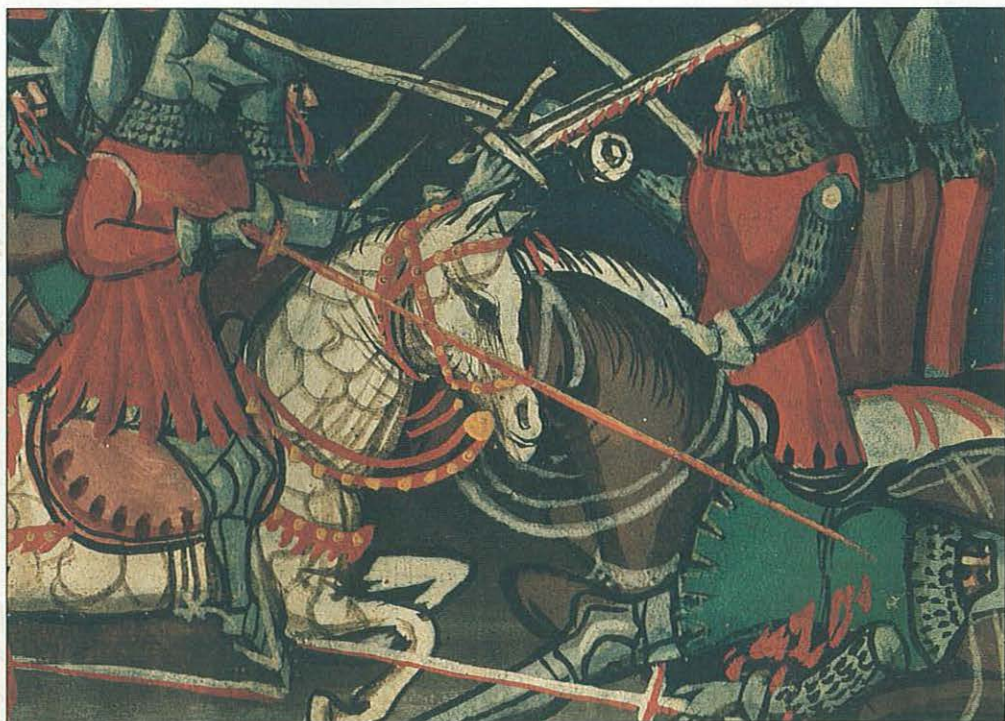
A Remedy for Boredom?

Marc Bloch, a noted scholar of the feudal order, suggests that medieval knights might have been willing to take up arms and fight for their lords in part because their private, privileged lives were otherwise simply boring and bred restlessness.

Accustomed to danger, the knight found in war yet another attraction. It offered a remedy for boredom. For these men . . . were seldom occupied by very

heavy administrative cares, [and] everyday life easily slipped into a gray monotony. Thus was born an appetite for diversions [such as fighting] in distant lands. William the Conqueror . . . said of one of his vassals . . . “I do not think it would be possible to find a better knight in arms; but he is unstable . . . and spends his time gadding about from place to place.”

Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L.A. Manyon. London: Routledge, 1989, p. 295.



Knights clash in battle in fourteenth-century France. Combat was often the high point of a knight's life.



Besieging castles was a common tactic in medieval warfare. Here, soldiers use a variety of weapons, including crude firearms, against an enemy castle.

Weapons and Tactics of Knights

Modern books and films that depict knights on military campaigns usually show them wearing armor made of heavy metal plates, brandishing long lances, and riding horses also decked out in armor.

However, these “heavy cavalrymen” did not appear until the second half of the Middle Ages. Early medieval European knights, who followed the lead of Frankish (early French) cavalrymen, wore light armor made of mail (rows of iron rings or scales either riveted or sewn together to form a heavy protective shirt). Mail armor was

fairly flexible and allowed the rider to maneuver his horse and use his weapons with greater ease than was possible for later heavy cavalymen. The most common weapons wielded by these early knights were swords, throwing spears, and, on occasion, bows. They also sometimes carried shields.

The tactics employed by the early medieval knights also differed from those that came later. Frankish and other light cavalymen did not engage in shock action—direct charges on either cavalry or infantry. Such charges would have caused them to fall from their mounts in the midst of battle, because these horsemen did not have the benefit of the stirrup, which helps

a rider maintain his balance and position atop his horse. When stirrups began to be adopted in western Europe in the early eighth century, they made mounted warriors more formidable. Yet shock action was still seldom used in battle. The earliest knights mainly chased off ambushers, pursued fleeing enemies, raided villages, or harassed the flanks (sides) of enemy troop formations. It was also quite common for these early medieval horsemen to dismount and fight on foot alongside the infantrymen.

As time went on, however, the armor worn by knights became heavier and more protective. Starting in the eleventh

The Evolution of Armor

1200 A.D.

Early knights wore a chain mail suit covered by a cloth tunic and carried a simple spear and heavyweight shield.



1200 A.D.

1300 A.D.

Even later knights wore steel-plated full body armor that covered a chain mail suit, metal bell-shaped gauntlets (gloves) with cloth fingers, a helmet with a cut-out visor, a two-handed sword, and a knife.



1300 A.D.



1400 A.D.



1500 A.D.

1300 A.D.

Later knights added a domed steel-plated helmet with rigid faceplate, a lightweight shield bearing a coat of arms, and a single-handed sword.

1500 A.D.

The latest knights of the Middle Ages had steel-plated full body armor reinforced at the knees, elbows, and feet with thick points that acted as weapons, a helmet with hinged faceplate, and a longer two-handed sword.



Many Knights Lacked Discipline

The knights making up units of heavy cavalry were well protected against the blows of enemy weapons. But their armor was very bulky and inflexible; indeed, if they fell to the ground they had trouble standing up unaided. As scholars James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi explain, their performance in battle was also hindered by a less tangible disadvantage—their conceited attitude.

The basic problem was that every noble (knights and above in social rank) thought he was above obeying orders. A duke or a count had some control over his knights . . . but each such noble was less impressed by the royal official, or king himself, in charge of the entire army. Every noble thought he, and his troops, deserved the post of honor in the first rank. Any army commander would try to line up his various contingents in such a way that each would be used to best effect. Most knights (of whatever rank) simply wanted to get at an enemy and fight it out man to man. This was the mentality of knights through most of the medieval period.

James F. Dunnigan and Albert A. Nofi, "Medieval Warfare," in *Medieval Life & the Hundred Years War*.
www.hyw.com/books/history/Medi0000.htm.

century, mail shirts became longer and heavier and sometimes stretched to the knees. A coif, a mail hood that covered the head, also became common attire for knights. Then mail arm and leg coverings, as well as mail gloves, were added, and by about 1250 many knights wore metal plates over the mail on their knees, elbows, and other joints. The natural culmination of this trend was full plate armor, as well as armor for the horses.

Although these heavy cavalymen were much better protected than earlier knights, their massive suits of armor limited their flexibility. So they could no longer employ the fairly wide array of weapons wielded by early medieval cavalry. The spear and bow were abandoned, and the main weapon was now the sword. The lance, often used in tournament displays, was also introduced into battle. The key to the effectiveness of the lance was the ability of the horseman to absorb a great deal of shock and stay mounted when the weapon hit an opponent. The stirrup provided some stability, but not until the introduction of larger, wrap-around saddles did cavalry charges with leveled lances become an effective offensive tactic.

The heavily armored knights who fought during the 1200s, 1300s, and 1400s in Europe were often highly lethal, especially when used in concert with infantry. But there was always the danger of the knights losing their effectiveness if they became overconfident. Because they were almost always part of the social elite in their native realms, knights were often

proud, vain, and arrogant. This could lead to disaster. One of the classic examples took place in the year 1119 when Louis VI, king of France, led a force of some four hundred knights into English-controlled Normandy (in northwestern France). There he faced off with the English king Henry I, who commanded five hundred knights. Henry ordered four hundred of his horsemen to dismount and form an armored wall of heavy infantry behind the other hundred, who remained mounted. Then Louis unwisely ordered all of his men to lower their lances and charge the enemy. His knights managed to break

through the smaller force of English horsemen, but just as Henry had anticipated, this slowed the French charge almost to a halt. Protected by their heavy armor, the English knights who had dismounted swarmed around the French riders, pulling them from their horses and either killing or capturing them.