

## 2.6 Knights During Feudal Times

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights had to have a good deal of wealth, since a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords.



Before a joust or tournament, knights received gifts, or tokens of support, from the ladies of the manor.

**Becoming a Knight** The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castles and manors. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, pages spent much of their time with the ladies of the castle. They were expected to help the ladies in every way possible. During this period, the ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp. These skills were valued in knights.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the knight who was his lord. He polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He helped care for his horse. He even waited on him at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and

a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-axe and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). They practiced by fighting in make-believe battles. But squires also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, care for his weapons and horses, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if deserving of the honor, a squire became a knight. Becoming a knight could be a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting ceremony in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.



**The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights** Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called **chivalry**. (*Chivalry* comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning "horse.") Knights were expected to be loyal to the Church and to their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.

Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight's life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances extended. The idea was to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts were held as sporting events, for exercise, or as serious battles between rival knights. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle.

Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of linked metal rings, called chain mail. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The medieval style of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective against such weapons.

But knights were only a small group in medieval society. Next, let's turn to daily life for the vast majority of the population: the peasants.

Knights in a joust tried to knock each other off their horses.

**chivalry** the medieval knight's code of ideal behavior, including bravery, loyalty, and respect for women