

Knights To Remember!

Ah, and what knights they were!...At least that's what we'd like to believe, but, as with most things, they've gotten bigger and better with each re-telling over the years. To be sure, there were heroes and great deeds, outrageous courage, pious devotion, and noble goals—but the majority of knights, when held up to such standards, were...somewhat lacking.

Knights were a product of Europe's Age of Feudalism, c. 800-1400, and Feudalism was Europe's answer to the Terrible Centuries (800-1100), when Europe was literally beset on all sides by pagan enemies. From the east came the Magyars, nomadic horsemen from Central Asia; from the South came the hated Saracens, Moslem pirates who attacked the bottom of Europe; and from the north came the worst of all—the Vikings, who attacked the north and the west. When Charlemagne's empire collapsed in the West with his death in 814, there was no strong central authority left to defend Western Europe.

Thus was born Feudalism—basically a contract between the peasants (now called 'serfs') and the local nobles in their respective areas all over Europe. The local noble would use his small band of soldiers to protect the peasants, and they, in turn, would move onto the noble's land and farm it. And so it was that the noble's home was fortified into a castle and the poorest of nobles became professional soldiers (i.e., officers over the grunts). It wasn't long, though, before the position of knight became so glorified that the knights' employers—vassals, lords, kings—went through the ceremony of knighthood, themselves. And, part of that ceremony was every knight's pledge to follow the standards of the Code of Chivalry.

Oath of Knighthood: *I vow to be brave and honorable, to maintain the right, to redress the wrong, to protect women, to give help to those in trouble, and to show mercy to the weak and helpless.* To defend his lord, the Church, widows, orphans and the poor, and to pursue evildoers, those were the standards, and those are the standards we see in such representations as "King Arthur," and we tend to picture knights as "Sir Lancelot," but the vast majority of knights were quite different than this idealized picture that has come down to us.

For example, the average Medieval knight stood 5'4" (people were much shorter then—basically a result of their poor diet). Knights also tended to wear their hair long, so that it could be piled on top of their heads to form a cushion under their helmets. A knight's armor could weigh up to 140 lbs, so, despite what you see in the movies, there was no running jump to mount a horse! In fact, knights often needed a crane-like device to be hoisted into the saddle.

And what was the ultimate symbol of knighthood—the great broadsword? The family crest emblazoned on his shield? His noble war-horse? Nope, his spurs, for only knights rode into battle on horses, and, thus, only knights could wear golden spurs.

Knights worked by contract to their vassals, lords, etc., but they normally owed such service only 40 days of each year, and most knights, alas, were a far cry from the chivalric heights of a Galahad or a Percival. Indeed, the Pope excommunicated the entire Fourth Crusade for sacking the Christian city of Constantinople while on their way down to the Holy Land to fight the Moslems!

