

*Teaching Knights to Joust, from
'Roman du Saint Graal,' 15th century. Vellum.
Bibliothèque Municipale, Dijon, France.*

What Is a Knight?

John Farman

Everyone thinks they know about knights: rich guys in flashy armor tearing around the countryside, killing excess dragons, rescuing damsels¹ trapped in towers, and knocking each other off of horses with long poles at special tournaments! I wanted to find out all the stuff we don't know. Like, where did knights buy their armor? How much did it cost? How easy was it to move, let alone fight, covered from head to foot in metal? What did they get paid fighting for the king? What did they eat? Where—and with whom—did they live? Were they really the brave, noble guys we are led to believe, or were some wimpy, cowardly, and dishonest? I'm going to try to tell you what knights were really like—warts and all—and what it was like to be one.

¹ **Damsels** are young unmarried women of noble birth.

Vocabulary

Author's Purpose After reading the title, what do you predict is Farman's purpose for writing?

Visual Vocabulary

Armor is covering worn to protect the body against weapons and injury.



Career Knights

The first thing to remember is that knights were the very first mercenaries (paid soldiers). They were paid, usually with large plots of land, to fight for their lord or king.

The second thing to remember is that they were supposed to conduct themselves according to a strict code of behavior. This was called **chivalry**.

Last and most important, the knights were part of a way of life, called the feudal system, that existed in Europe. Basically the feudal system helped a king obtain thousands of men for the wars he always fought. His barons and earls, in exchange for vast areas of land, pledged to provide armies on request. These barons and earls gave smaller parcels of their land to knights who, in return, promised to supply men (peasants) to do the fighting. In return for doing this, the knight assigned these peasants much smaller pieces of land to provide food for their families—and the knight's family.

How to Be a Knight

But who got to be a knight? For starters, before you get too excited, you had to be the son of a knight. Around the age of twelve, you went to another knight's house to learn how to knight—so to speak. The knight in question started you off as a page (young attendant) and then as a personal servant, called a squire. This duty involved grooming his horses, polishing his armor, and even serving him his breakfast, lunch, and dinner. In return he taught you how to ride horses and fight at the same time, as well as the code of chivalry as mentioned above.

Knight Time

Eventually, when the knight in charge of you decided you were ready, it was time for the big day. First you took a special bath in holy water and said prayers and stuff. Then you had to put on an outfit of white clothes and pray all

#2

Activate Prior Knowledge
Why wouldn't young men stay in their own homes and learn the skills of knighthood from their fathers?

#3

BQ **BIG Question**
What do you think you'll learn as you read "Knight Time"?

night in front of your nice new armor as it sat on the altar. Just like Christmas, you weren't allowed to touch it until morning. After all of your relatives and friends had arrived at the church, you put on your armor while the priest blessed it and you. That done, another knight gave you a whack on the shoulder with the flat (hopefully) part of his sword and presto, you became a full-fledged knight.

Knights' Rules

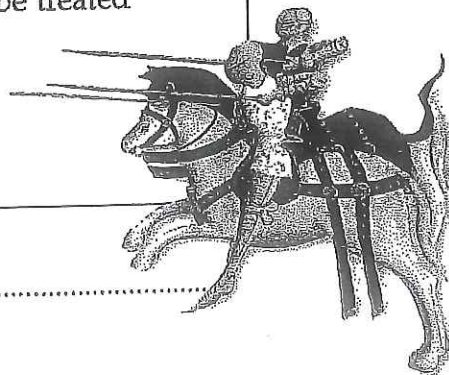
The whole idea of how a knight should behave went under the general term of "chivalry." (Chivalry comes from *chevalerie*, the old French word for soldiers on horses.) Every knight was supposed to be bound by the rules of chivalry, which were as follows:

1. A knight never tells lies.
2. He defends the Catholic Church (headed by the pope).
3. He defends the weak, suppresses the wicked, and honors God with noble acts (juggling? acrobatics?).
4. He is brave and loyal in defense of the knight who knighted him and that knight's lady.
5. Women (read "wealthy women") are held in high regard² (even though they had no legal rights or power).
6. The object in battle is always to capture the enemy, not to kill him.
7. Knights never fight during the pre-Easter period of Lent and even get a couple of days off at Christmas.
8. If a nobleman is captured, he has to be treated according to his rank.

² *Regard* is a feeling of respect.

#4

Author's Purpose Why do you think Farman uses a list to present information in this section?



For Instance

In 1356 the Black Prince (Prince Edward of England) captured the king of France, John II, at Poitiers. The prince actually served the king at his own table and kept him in the most luxurious³ prison that London, the capital of England, could offer.

How to Build a Feudal Army

First of all, knowing that he had to get an army together for a specific battle, a king first decided how many soldiers he needed (give or take a hundred). On the principle that you don't need a sledgehammer to crack a walnut, there was no point calling up 5,000 men to stop a brawl. After sizing up the battle, the king put the word out to all his earls and lords. They, in turn, supplied men in proportion to their quota⁴ (which depended on how much land they'd received in the first place). Clear so far?

The earl then called on the knights to whom he had given land (fiefs) and told them how many men he needed. If there were enough soldiers available, many of these knights opted to pay scutage (tax that allowed them to buy their way out of fighting). With this kind of income, the king could buy the better services of professional soldiers! This was the beginning of armies as we know them today. (Earls, by the way, couldn't buy their way out of their own duty to fight—unless deemed too old, too young, too feeble, or too crazy.) If the battle or siege⁵ went on for more than the free initial forty days, the king paid the knights and soldiers wages. Earls, naturally, were expected to do it for nothing.

The armies often found themselves in interesting situations. In the wars of 1294 between the English king Edward I and the Welsh rebels, the earl of Lancaster, who lorded over 263 knightly fiefs, turned up to fight for the king with only fifty men. The earl of Norfolk, who also had 263 fiefs, pitched in with only twenty-eight men, and

#5

Activate Prior Knowledge

Why do you think some knights paid taxes to avoid fighting?

#6

BQ BIG Question

Why do you think Farman includes this information?

the greatest baron of Devon, Hugh Courtney, with 92 fiefs, only managed twelve men—and so on. This wasn't a problem. The king received a lot of scutage money from those who preferred to pay up rather than go to war. The king could then distribute all the extra cash to the knights who'd showed up with their fair share of soldiers.

In the case of these Welsh wars, the campaign⁶ continued well over the forty days, meaning that the king ran out of the old scutage money fairly quickly. This is where being able to jack up the taxation of the whole population becomes so convenient. Anyway, it all worked out just fine in the end (if you weren't Welsh). *is.*

Three Knights Leaving a Tournament, French School, 14th century.
Vellum. Musée Condé, Chantilly, France. Ms 137/1687 f.144r

