



ST. MARY THE VIRGIN

Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem

Read More About It:
Knighthood

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Table of Contents

Introduction..... 1
Chivalry..... 2
Military Sources 3
Legal Sources..... 4
Social Sources..... 4
Religious Sources..... 5
The Ceremony of Knighthood..... 6

INTRODUCTION



Knighthood

The Sovereign Military Order of the Temple of Jerusalem is an organization reconstituted in the United States to continue the tradition of the Orders in the Crusades. Those traditions are:

- to oppose the symptoms of decadence in our age;
- to defend in an ecumenical spirit the common faith of all, and
- to help in the recovery and perpetuation of the spirit and ideals of chivalry.

This publication explores the concept of chivalry and knighthood.

Chivalry

Chivalry is a personal code of honor based on highly formalized standards evolved by a professional military class, the crusading knights of the middle ages. It seems, however, that knighthood and chivalry have been ridiculed almost as long as the concept has existed. We are all familiar with Mark Twain's view expressed in *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* and Cervantes in *Don Quixote*. More recently, some military historians tell us that nothing can be learned from the period in which knighthood flowered. The Colonels Dupuy in *Military Heritage of America* state,

"Lacking imagination or inquisitiveness to analyze reasons for success in battle, the feudal warrior became unduly obsessed with shock and weight, ignoring the mobility which had enabled the great leaders of antiquity to employ their weapons with maximum effect. So the knight of the Middle Ages not only increased the weight of his weapons, but in turn increased the weight of his armor to deflect these weapons. The loss of mobility thus engendered resulted practically in the disappearance of maneuver from the battlefield. The art of war had reached its nadir."

Perhaps the height of the inability of the mounted horseman can be seen in the battles of Zagonara in 1423 and Castracaro in 1467 when large bodies of *condottieri* horsemen fought all day to a draw without casualties inflicted by blows. Nevertheless, as suggested by *The Columbia Encyclopedia*, the fact remains that the ethical ideals that arose from feudalism represented a fusion of Christian and military ideas, and still form the basis of the ethics of gentlemanly conduct. Chief among them are piety, bravery, loyalty and honor.

It is often asserted that if chivalry is not dead, that it ought to die, for the impersonalization of war has made it more and more difficult for personal encounters to take place between gentlemen. Both John Keegan in *The Face of Battle* and Walter Mills in *Arms and Men* suggest that war can no longer produce decisive results, because it is too large and terrible an enterprise. Chivalry, then, as a military virtue is not seen as necessary or efficacious.

Chivalry likewise has declined as a social or political value for a variety of reasons. But for every doomsayer who has seen the world go to ruin and the values of civility uprooted, there continue to be others who, through transforming perseverance, maintain the value of what are essentially chivalric notions of personal conduct. It is the function of the order of chivalry to be the catalyst for the continuation of such a humane and gentlemanly code.

Ward McAllister in *Society As I Have Found It* set forth the formula and principles for an ordered society. He stated,

"Close association at a small watering place naturally produces jars. People cannot always agree. When you become very rich and powerful, and people pay you court, it follows in many cases that you become exacting and domineering. It soon became evident that people of moderate means, who had no social power to boast of, must need be set aside and crowded out if the one-man power, or even the united power of two or three colossally-rich men, controlled society. One reflected that would not work. The homage we pay to a society leader must come from the esteem and admiration that is felt for him, but must not be exacted or forced. It occurred then to me, that if one in any way got out with the powers that be, his position might



The Monks of War

The Templars, the Hospitallers (later Knights of Malta), the Teutonic Knights, and the Knights of the Spanish and Portuguese orders were 'noblemen vowed to poverty, chastity and obedience, living a monastic life in convents which were at the same time barracks, waging war on the enemies of the Cross'. The first properly disciplined Western troops since Roman times, they played a major role in defending the crusader kingdom of Jerusalem, in the 'Baltic Crusades' which created Prussia, in the long reconquest of Spain from the Moors, and in fighting the 'Infidel' right up to Napoleonic times. This celebrated book tells the whole enthralling story, recreating such epics as the sieges of Rhodes and Malta and the destruction of the Templars by the Inquisition. Acclaimed on publication, it has now been revised and updated, with a concluding chapter to take events into the 1990s.

become critical, and he so forced out of the way as to really lose his social footing. Where then was the remedy for all this? How to avoid this contingency? On reflection I reached this conclusion, that in a country like ours there was always strength in union; that to blend together the solid, respectable element of any community for any project, was to create a power that would carry to success almost any enterprise; therefore, returning to New York for the winter, I looked around society and invoked the aid of the then quite representative men of this city, to help me form an association for the purpose of giving our winter balls."

But can an order of chivalry perpetuate the values thereof? Will there be desirable persons of inclination anxious to join; and what assurance do members have that they have made a meaningful choice?

In his informative work, *The Monks of War* Desmond Seward writes that,

"the strength of these remnants of the military orders has been their ability to attract the ruling class. . . However, this attraction will be weakened by the passing of the 'officer and gentleman' concept. Everywhere the hereditary principle is looked at askance . . . The Orders alone preserve the mystique of rank and birth in a society which finds aristocracy not merely alien but incomprehensible. They constitute the last defensible bastions of hereditary nobility . . . Yet the defenders will have to recruit their knights from socialist meritocracies or managerial elites in that 'ant heap of the future' so much dreaded by St. Exuperius."

What, then, is this knighthood that is so foreign to our lives; and what is the source of the power of its ideal that continues, although beleaguered today? There are four such historical sources: military, legal, religious and social.

Military Sources

From Adrianople in 378 AD, when the Gothic cavalry overwhelmed Valens and the Roman infantry legions, and Chalons in 451 AD, when the cavalry of the Visigoths of King Theodoric routed Attila's subject Ostrogothic cavalry, the mounted warrior reigned supreme on the European battlefield. This lasted until the 15th century—notwithstanding the Colonels Dupuys' statement in *Military Heritage of America* that, at Crecy:

"the fire power of the English long bow ended the millennium of supremacy enjoyed by cavalry since the Battle of Adrianople."

To the Emperor Charlemagne we may trace the economic basis for supporting the mounted warrior, whom we know colloquially as a Knight or a Chevalier (i.e. horseman) under a system that became feudalism. In *War Through the Ages* Lynn Montross explains that Charlemagne:

". . . formed his subjects into small groups, each being required to send one well-armed man instead of several wretchedly equipped peasants. As his next step he made the ownership of land, then virtually the only property, the basis of military duty. Proprietors of estates were deemed wealthy enough to send a warrior clad in a byrnie, or mail shirt. Owners of smaller tracts must at least combine to arm a man with spear and shield. Counts, abbots and bishops, as well as the great landowners, had the duty of supplying their just proportion of retainers protected by a helm as

well as byrnie. In these distinctions we have the germ of the feudal system which was to become the foundation of European arms."

Thus, the armed, mounted warrior became the most important engine of war. The baron led a small unit composed of *bannerets*, knights (the word derives from the word for youth) and men at arms.

Legal Sources

Feudalism became best known for the system of land ownership that developed out of the need to support the professional mounted warrior, the knight. There were five ways in which the tenant could discharge an obligation owed to a higher owner:

- frankalmoign, religious service,
- *knight service* i.e., military service in the field for forty days a year,
- *grand serjeanty*, lesser military service, such as carrying a sword or banner,
- *petty serjeanty*, being a purveyor of military wares, or
- *socage*, by supplying agricultural produce.

The process by which a vassal obtained and confirmed his fief—that is, his rights in the land of the lord—was by acknowledging fealty to his lord in a ceremony known as *homage*. Those who were tenants in chief of the king were known as barons and owed the king certain duties, four of which were to render military service, grant aids, counsel the king and assist the king to give judgment.

Social Sources

The crusades injected the element of extended campaigns to medieval life, which saw the introduction of paid substitutes for the feudal levy. Thus, a mounted warrior partook of two roles, either as a person with a greater amount of wealth to support him, or as a professional soldier of a certain status. The later middle ages saw the widening of the gulf between the great magnates and the landed gentry. With the formation of the House of Lords in England a structure was created that reinforced this social trend.

As feudalism broke down, the military tenant ceased to be a professional warrior and became a landed man. As William A. Shaw states in *The Knights of England*,

"It was a stimulus to this decaying military professionalism that the new dignity [ceremonial knighthood] was introduced. Whilst in matter of theory all the military tenants holding by a knights fee were capable of this new dignity, they did not as a matter assume it except when called upon to do so by the Sovereign or his deputy. Roughly speaking, therefore, we may say that through the earlier medieval period up to the middle of the 13th century the idea of military tenure as constituting knighthood predominated over the ceremonial admission by dubbing, whilst in the later middle ages the idea of ceremonial admission by dubbing prevailed over



Hospitaller and Military Orders

The hospitaller and military religious orders were chivalric orders with humanitarian and military purpose originally established as Catholic religious societies during the medieval Crusades for protection of Christians against violent persecution of the Islamic conquests (623–) in the Holy Land and the Iberian Peninsula, as well as by Baltic paganism in Eastern Europe. Most members, often titled Knights, were and still are laymen, and not prelates, yet cooperating with the clergy, sometimes even taking religious vows such as poverty, chastity, and obedience, according to monastic ideals. As such, it was in the military orders that the medieval concept of chivalry reached its apogee in an exceptional fusion under Just war theory of military discipline and Christian virtues. Prominent examples include the Knights Hospitaller, and the Knights Templar in Outremer, as well as the Teutonic Knights in the Baltics, but there were others. Many military orders were suppressed by the Holy See in Rome around the end of the Middle Ages, with few new recognized establishments afterwards. A few of the institutions survived into honorific and/or charitable organizations, including the papal orders of knighthood. See the publication [The Hospitallers and Military Orders](#) for additional information.

that of military tenure. In modern time the conception of knighthood is purely ceremonial. It is conferred by mere ceremony, and has no relation whatever to military tenure of land from the Crown."

Religious Sources

Religious Sources. The crusades also added a moral tone, for war was now channeled into a clearly virtuous occupation.

In efforts to civilize Western Europe, the Church asserted the authority to dictate morals and to control its own house against the state. Simultaneously church doctrine proclaimed the superiority of love to knowledge and developed the cult of the Blessed Virgin and chivalrous love with which *The Columbia Encyclopedia* suggests was intimately connected as the supreme expression of the glorification of womanhood.

It is therefore not surprising that, within a few years after the First Crusade in 1095, the first Religious Orders of knighthood became established: The Order of the Knights of the Holy Sepulchre in Jerusalem, The Order of Hospitallers of St. John the Baptist in Jerusalem, and The Order of Knights Templar.



Founded by nobles, these orders soon came to require nobility for admission. They were both military and hospitaller, that is they fought Saracens, maintained hospitals, operated functional international banks, and worked for the advancement of Christianity. By thus giving a moral tone to organized warfare, they set the tone for the sovereign's military orders that succeeded them, and by whom the more highly developed concept of chivalry was fostered.

The warrior-knight came from a socially-privileged class, for whom death in battle was a noble conception, and the meeting and beating of an equal was—in the words of John Keegan, from *The Face of Battle* states "the highest form which self-expression could take in the medieval nobleman's way of life." Chivalry was thus born of the injection of a religious element of the glorification of God and self-sacrifice for the defenseless. Desmond Seward, from *The Monks of War*, states that it was,

"an attempt to tame murderous instincts by providing a Christian ideal of the warrior; ultimately knight-hood, originally a reputation for skill in battle, became almost a religious calling, hallowed by quasi-sacramental rites - vigils, weapon blessings and even vows of chastity."

By the time of Crecy in 1346, the importance of the mounted warrior in Europe began to yield to the long bow and later to the pike, making the knight militarily obsolete. Yet it was in this century that the glorification of knighthood and chivalry reached its heights in the founding of the great sovereign house orders. Some of these orders were the Order of the Garter (circa 1348) and its French rivals, the reactivated Knights of Our Lady of the Noble House (Star) (circa 1351) in France, and the Golden Fleece in Flanders (circa 1429).



Figure 1 Accolade by Edmund Blair Leighton

The Ceremony of Knighthood, emulated through the investiture of postulants of this Order, was developed with the grandeur of the military orders of the state. Thomas B. Costain in *The Three Edwards* describes that development by the time of Edward the Third.

"Conferring knighthood had developed into a complicated and rather beautiful ceremony since the beginning when the accolade, a tap on the shoulder with a sword, had sufficed. It began the previous evening when the candidate was shaved and then taken to a special chamber where a bath was prepared with scented water and a covering of linen and rich cloths. While he bathed, two old knights talked to him solemnly about the duties of the order. Later still he was led to the chapel, where he stood throughout the night, keeping watch over his armor and saying prayers and meditating. At break of day he bathed again, confessed, heard mass, and offered a taper with a piece of money stuck in the white tallow. With his future squire riding before him and carrying the sword and the gold spurs that were to be attached to his heels, he made his way to the great hall. Here he knelt on one knee and was given the accolade."

The most important part of the ceremony analogous to homage was the vow:

"To relieve and protect widows, the fatherless, the oppressed and miserable, to defend the church of God, and to propagate and defend the Christian faith and to repel the violence and cruelties of the pagans and war."

In a religious order, the vow included a vow of poverty, chastity, and obedience. For part-time members, the *confrere knights*, who gave money and spent a few months of the year in the order, the vow was amended to conjugal chastity. The badge of the order served as a pledge of remembrance of the sincerity of the love for the faith of the knight and his oath.

While the mounted warrior in the earlier past might be deemed noble from his occupation and wealth in land, chivalric status came to be conferred through knighthood rather than inheritance of titles. Thus, while primogeniture tended to restrict the number of lords, knighthood was available to all sons of genteel birth. Two types of orders became prevalent: military-religious hospitaller, and dynastic-sovereign. Through the passage of time, it became a settled principle that, whereas originally any knight could confer knighthood, only a sovereign could bestow chivalric status. Eventually no order would be recognized in a country without the sovereign's permission. In recent times, this principle has caused difficulty for

international religious military orders that antedate notions of nationality. Since 1823 in the United Kingdom, no one is entitled to the prefix SIR unless it has been bestowed by the ruling king or queen, or an order recognized by the monarch. Hence our *confreres* in Scotland and England use the title of Chevalier (Chev.), not Sir.

Many orders, because of the rigid rules to preserve their aristocratic status, have developed categories of knighthood, such as:

- **Of Justice** – for those with a minimum number of quarterings in their arms;
- **Of Grace** – for those not possessing nobility;
- **Of Merit** – an 18th century solution to the problem, for those not totally eligible under other rules, such as one pertaining to faith, but who otherwise qualify; and
- **Of Honor** – for honorary members. For ladies of nobility the title has been ‘Of Honor and Devotion’, and for those not possessing such ancestry, ‘Of Grace’.

The Order in this country, being autonomous and in a constitutional democracy, does not distinguish its members in this fashion.

In addition to birth, the medieval qualifications were merit and estate. Inasmuch as the Order today is essentially a voluntary organization not dependent upon a sovereign, the Order looks for Christians with character, accomplishments, organizational experience, and commitment to major endeavors. It appropriately recognizes non-Christian men and women with exceptional qualifications for contributions to our Order and its goals by inducting them into the Order of Merit.

In an age of materialism, the Order seeks, by reconstituting an ancient chivalric order, to adopt an organization of proven effectiveness in capturing the allegiance and spirit of dedicated leaders. It also seeks to show that Christian idealism is most certainly relevant and not inconsistent with a sense of pride in achievement. Members of this Order have an obligation to go forward with zeal, faith, camaraderie, and spirit.

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