



A Profile of the Medieval Knight (Originally published in *Broadsword Magazine*)

By Justin Webb

Modern perceptions of the medieval knight range from the stereotypical knight in shining armour, performing great deeds of chivalry for his lady, to the black knight; a dark hearted villain, oppressor of the common man and pompous, arrogant, lover of violence. Truth is the medieval knight was as hard to categorize, as it would be to categorize any select group of individuals today. Medieval knights had diverse motivations, personalities and traits, some of which had included the paragons of chivalry and villainy as mentioned above, but also included such traits as negotiator and diplomat, shrewd tactician, politician, merchant, traveler, courtier, poet and lover- the list could go on and on. Occupations, duties, motivations and personalities aside, the majority of medieval knights were orthodox individuals and as a result we can profile the “average” knight to a certain degree with confidence. Works such as Geoffroi de Charny’s *Book of Chivalry*, Ramon Lull’s *book of chivalry*, surviving chronicles by Froissart and the *Chandos Herald*, the *Canterbury Tales*, *Le Morte d’ Arthur*, the *Song of Roland* and even the famous German *fechtbuchs* or “fight books”, offer us glimpses into what kind of man the medieval knight would have been like during war, tournament and during times of peace.

Becoming a Knight

The potential knight was trained from a very young age or groomed if you will, to accept martial activities and quasi-martial activities as the norm. This of course went hand in hand with the more “courtly” training of etiquette, social activities such as dancing, singing and music, geography, nature, linguistics and culture, just to name a few. Other pastimes such as chess not only served as a social engagement but as an exercise in strategy and tactics. His martial training would have consisted of, but by no means limited to, hunting, *hastiludes* or “lance games”, training in swordsmanship with an array of weapons and tactics and wrestling or grappling, even though unarmed combat or “the laying on of hands” was considered “ungentlemanly”. As a child, 14th century French knight and Marshall of France, Bertrand du Guesclin, took part in many wrestling bouts with local common youths much to the chagrin of his parents, though not for wrestling but for fraternizing with his inferiors! As a child he also used to organize and stage his own “tournaments” designating teams and when needed acting as marshal or referee. Such was the influence and importance of martial training from a very early age for the medieval knight. We can imagine that the knights’ training as a squire would have been a rough and tumble affair wherein he would have to learn to accept injury, humility and other discomforts to his body and psyche.

With all of this physical activity it is easy to perceive that the average knight was in very good health and peak physical condition, much akin to a modern athlete. Effigies, brasses and medieval contemporary art also allude to the fact that the medieval knight was a lean, mean, fighting machine. There were of course exceptions. Geffroi de Charny in his 14th century book of chivalry for example, laments how that some of his fellow knights would seek to girdle themselves for reasons of vanity, instead of displaying the “bellies that god has given them”. He goes on to say how some of these “girdles” would be on so tight that they would impede the wearer to the point of exhaustion and lack of breath. Exceptions aside, being fit was more common than not. Their social rank would have also added to their health in regards to better nutrition, medical services and cleaner environments. Fitness played a very important role in an occupation which, demanded endurance, stamina and physical fortitude. It increased the knight’s chances of survival and also allowed him to perform his duties well and increase his worth and social standing within the ranks of his peers and superiors, all of equal importance to the knight.

Also of great importance to a knight was his horse or horses. So important was this element that a man could never be a knight without having equestrian skills and his own horse or horses or the means to obtain a suitable warhorse if ever -heaven forbid- he should find himself without one. His horsemanship skills would have been developed from a very early age and he was expected to be a competent if not expert rider by the time he became a squire in his early teens. By this age he would have no doubt likely been introduced to falling from a mount at dangerous speeds during training or hunting. In actual fact many squires died during these pursuits and never became knights or fully-grown men for that matter. One of the important symbols of the knight was his spurs. If ever he should lose his title of knight, which would come about if he committed some great dishonour, his spurs would be hacked off with a blow of the sword. The symbology of this act represented the fact that without spurs a knight could not ride and not being able to ride meant not being a knight. Spurs were also symbolic in many formal occasions where a knight needed to display his rank and were worn during such events as well.

By the time he reached his adult age around 15 or 16, he would be participating in war and tournament. Tournaments would have taught him about logistics of battle and the associated duties for a knight and his retinue on the move. It would usually serve as his induction to real war. He was expected to be largely independent by this time though he would still be under the watchful eye of his older peers who played a part in his upbringing and training. Edward the Black Prince of England was 15 years of age when after being knighted he was given command of the vanguard at the Battle of Crecy in 1346, where it would seem he was enthusiastically amidst the thick of battle and hard pressed by his adversaries, though with knights of renown by his side who would later praise his abilities as a knight. Between the ages of perhaps 18-20 the young squire would be a highly skilled warrior on horseback and on foot. In the 13th century, William Marshall at the age of around 19 defended his queen with such prowess that he was awarded a high position within her personal guard. It is a fair assumption that this kind of honour and prestige would not be lightly given in a day and age of insanely brave fighting men whom were all vying for similar rewards.

Being a Knight

Not all squires who lived long enough ever wished to become knighted due to the added expense of the ceremony and ongoing obligations and cost. However, a squire who might survive the rigors of youth and who might also accept the position would finally become a knight. We can expect that the knight was a capable veteran warrior of varying wealth and position in society. He had survived to date the hunting, the tournaments of peace and of war, the skirmishes and battles, long running campaigns or wars as well as disease and illness associated with war and the middle ages. Overall he would be a very prominent figure in the eyes of those beneath him and a peer among his fellow knights. He would have little time for fear of injury, hardship or death itself. Discomfort would be a necessity of life and so we could also imagine that he may not bemoan injury, hardship or death. This would paint a picture of a stoical man at arms or perhaps a carefree bachelor knight. His religious beliefs would also add to his demeanour. There was no life without religion in the Middle Ages and Christianity was accepted and unquestioned throughout feudal society. Religion was so important that entire armies would delay battles or cease hostilities during siege and battle to observe important dates on the Holy calendar. Orthodox in their religious beliefs as well as within the doctrines of society, the medieval knight understood that there was a Heaven and Hell, a life after death and that he would be judged according to his actions in life when he died. He believed that he would gain his just reward in Heaven, just as sure as the sun rose every morning. There was no doubt in his mind. Excommunication was a dire threat to the knight and he feared being denied entry to heaven more than death itself. Of course, there were exceptions to this rule as well, especially when the church used excommunication as a political or personal weapon. Once again if we ignore the exceptions for the purposes of defining an average knight, we can state that the knights' belief in God enhanced his nobleness, fearlessness and divine right to bear arms.

When not taking part wars, hunting, tournament or training the knight would take time to see to his personal household, assets and businesses and during his free time associate with other aristocrats both higher and lower in societal rank and display his skills of peace. These more often than not had a dual purpose in which they would not only seek to make his life a little more pleasant when he was not fighting, but also helped him to maintain his ability to continue supporting himself as knight. This would manifest in various ways including the obvious revenue support from assets, position and business to political and business alliances and relationships and social relationships wherein he could gain more honour, prestige and rank as a well acquitted knight and servant of his liege. War and tournament were never far from the mind of a knight, if ever. It was after all, his very reason for existence, so it was only natural that it would influence his non-war activities. During his social life his conversation might center on war, tournament, past deeds of peers, though perhaps not his own deeds in an act of Humility, geography, flora and fauna, religion and politics. Activities would include riding around his domain or his lord's domain, learning the lay of the land in the process, attending church services, entertainment such as banquets, dance, singing, music, reciting poetry or listening to recitals, visiting friends and family and if he had the money to spare, visiting merchants, the armourer, stables and such purchasing new things.

The Code of Chivalry

The code of chivalry was an ideal that the knight or squire would attempt to live up to. It governed his actions when he was level headed though he may lapse under times of duress, when losing his temper or when he became passionate about something or someone. Weaknesses of character may also cause him to act outside of the boundaries of chivalry, though he might have peers close to him to remind him or set the example for him to follow and thus displaying the knightly virtue of Franchise. History reveals to us over and over the failings of the virtues of chivalry and the victory of the seven deadly sins during the middle ages! It also reveals to us acts of great chivalry. Acts of Largesse, Loyalty, Prowess, Valour, Honour, Faith, Noblesse, Humility and Franchise, just to name the better known virtues, repeat throughout history as performed by Kings, Princes, knights and squires. Quite often these same men performed acts contrary to the code as well. Chivalry served as a guide to correct conduct in the company of peers, in the courts, on the battle or tourney field and occasionally to the common folk as well. Each knight strove to live up to these ideals as often as he could and though more often than not he fell short, it played a major deciding factor in his actions and demeanour.

Who is the “Average Knight”?

Most of the knights we encounter in surviving medieval literature are of course the better-known knights of history because of this surviving literature. It is indeed hard to draw conclusions on the “average” medieval knights from these seemingly above average individuals. We can assume however, that perhaps some of these knights were indeed just average. Even more so are the men whose names are merely mentioned and not elaborated upon by more than a single sentence suggesting that they were knights of the caliber that this article is centered upon. In *The Chandos Herald's Life of the Black Prince* there is made mention of many knights of varying origin; English, French, German and Spanish, whom the Herald states have reputations of “renown” and of “prowess”, but alas we hear no further mention of these men and their deeds. The large, formidable Castillian knight by the name of Fernandez who wounded Sir John Chandos through the visor conjures up an image of a powerful veteran knight, but receives only a brief mention by the Chandos Herald. In the 15th century *Chronicle of the Deeds of Don Pero Nino*, we hear of skilled knights whom Nino encounters during his adventures. For example, the German knight Sique is, in the words of Don Pero Nino's chronicler Gutierre Diaz de Gamez, “a man famed in arms” and “a very good horseman”. In other chronicles we hear of another skilled and veteran knight by the name of Ridolfo, an Italian who had vast experience and many frays during the Franco-Burgundian conflicts of the later 15th century, but with no further elaboration upon his deeds or personality. Before the Battle of Halidon Hill in 1333 we hear of a famed Scottish knight by the name of Turnbull whose deeds are praised by the King of Scotland himself, yet he remains anonymous to us throughout his life prior to that day and the day of the battle. Were these the average knights of history? How many knights of recognized skill and prowess were there who have not yet gained our attention or who never will because of a lack of sources? Perhaps they were just average knights?

The Final Profile

The end of this article paints as vague a picture of a knight as the beginning. Things we can certainly ascertain is that our knight "Sir John Average" was a skilled horseman, much more so than his common contemporaries. He always had a horse close at hand and was rarely seen without one near. He was certainly very fit, hardy and able. His skills as a combatant, combined with his equestrian ability made him a formidable force to be reckoned with, especially when banded with his fellow knights. His talents at taking lives on the field of battle made him feared by lesser men and gave courage and heart to the same lesser men who fought on his side. He was a man of firm belief in his faith, authority and position. He was fearless through these beliefs and possibly because of the chivalric virtues he was expected to attempt to live up to. Peer pressure may have also lent fortitude to his resolve and the goal to be noticed as the bravest of the brave. Although he had a strong sense of justice and fair play, he also welcomed and relished the challenge of overwhelming odds and the chance to gain honour by fighting those who were famed as great knights, though he may take flight if hard pressed and without displaying outright cowardice. He was proud and passionate, humble and tempered. He was kind and loving to those close to his heart and relentless and fierce to his enemies. He was concerned with prestige and rank and thus concerned with income and wealth. Without these things he could not be a successful knight. Ranging in arrogance from mild to outright he was concerned only with the duties entrusted to him by his position and in retaining that position or even furthering it. He was a noble made for war and was thusly concerned for all things warlike and noble.

Recommended Reading:

The Knight Triumphant - Stephen Turnbull

The Knight in History – Frances Gies

Knights - Andrea Hopkins

The Unconquered Knight - Boydell and Brewer

Ramon Lull's Book of Knighthood and Chivalry - Chivalry Bookshelf

The Life of the Black Prince – The Chandos Herald

Tales from Froissart – Penguin Edition

Authors Note: This article has been presented by the author as a personal opinion on some of the many facets of the medieval knight. Opinions have been formed from historical evidence and educated guesses. Generalizations have been made to ensure the brevity of the article and to keep it from becoming too complex. The author welcomes any feedback regarding the article or enquiries regarding sources.

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