

How Knights Work by Craig Freudenrich, Ph.D.

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Armor and Weapons

Throughout the Middle Ages, the armor used by knights varied. Knights in the early Middle Ages, using technology from the Romans, wore leather armor. Leather was very expensive, but it could be easily shaped and hardened by boiling in water or oil. It was effective in stopping sword cuts but was vulnerable to thrusts and arrows.

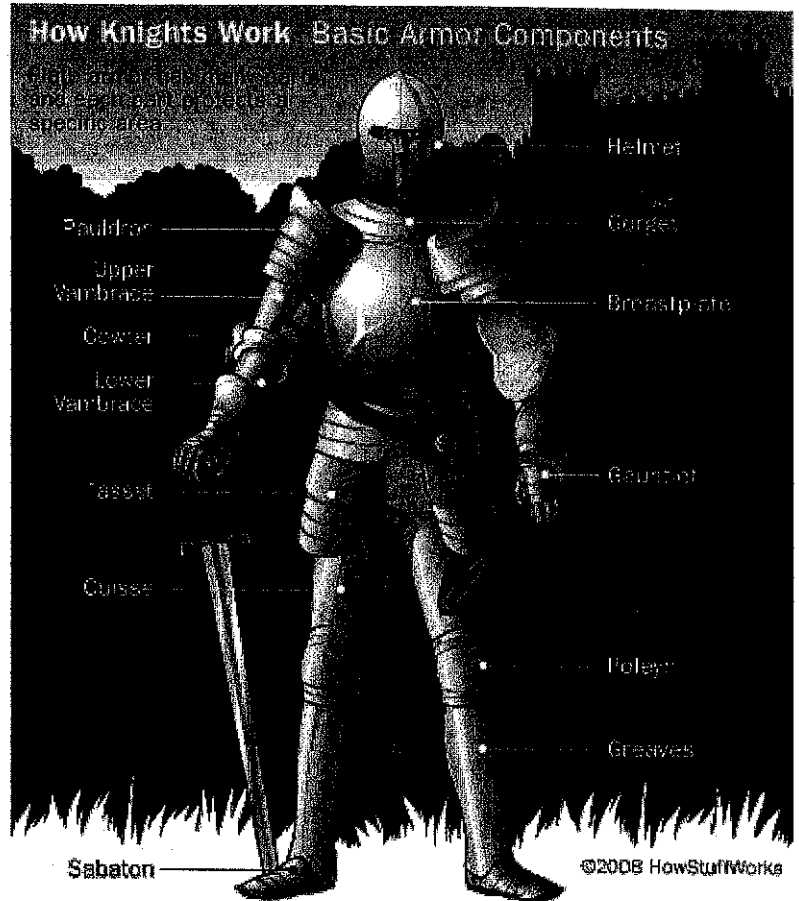
Throughout the Middle Ages, knights wore **chain mail** (again, technology borrowed from the Romans). Chain mail consisted of small, interwoven steel rings. The ends of the rings could be close to one another (**butted mail**) or affixed with a metal rivet (**riveted mail**). Chain mail was relatively easy to make, cheaper than later forms of armor and relatively effective in stopping a slice from a weapon. However, it was vulnerable to pointed weapons.

As blacksmiths and armorers improved their metalworking skills, they developed **plate armor** in the latter half of the Middle Ages. The plates provided protection and ease of movement (knights wore chain mail underneath to protect open areas called **gussets** (in underarms and at joints). Each plate covered a different area and had a specific name, as shown in the drawing. Plate armor was effective against cuts and thrusts, but it was expensive. Also, contrary to popular belief, armored knights could move in plate armor -- they could mount and dismount from a horse and get up if knocked down. But eventually, when firearms came into use, plate armor became ineffective.

Knights do exist today, even though they don't wear chain mail or fight on horseback.

Becoming a Knight

The boys who trained to be knights were generally the sons of knights or lords. (In some cases, the sons of commoners could train for knighthood -- as in the movie "A Knight's Tale.") These children were cared for by the women of the castle until they turned 7, when they were placed in the house of another lord or knight. There, they were bestowed with the title of **page**. Huntsmen and falconers taught them how to hunt, and priests or chaplains taught them



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religion, reading and writing. Pages learned to fight by imitating knights and practiced combat with each other using wooden swords and lances.

When a page turned 14, he could become an **esquire** (or, more simply, **squire**). In a religious ceremony, the new squire took a consecrated sword from a bishop or priest and swore to use it for religious and honorable purposes. After this ceremony, the squire took his place in his lord's household and attended to his duties. There were different squires for specific duties.

- The squire of the body was the personal servant of a knight or his lady.
- The squire of the chamber, or chamberlain, attended to the rooms of the castle.
- The carving squire, or table squire, carved the meat and attended to the banquet tables.
- The squire of the wines managed the wine cellar.
- The squire of the pantry stocked and kept track of household goods in the pantry.
- The squire of arms cleaned and maintained the armor and swords.
- The squire of honor assisted the lord in all ceremonies and feasts.

During this period of squiring, the would-be knight learned to serve and mastered the intricacies of social behavior and chivalry.

Besides carrying out their duties in the lord's household, squires learned the martial arts of being a knight. They learned how to handle horses and continued practicing with wooden swords and lances -- sometimes with the knights themselves. They wore chain-mail armor to get used to its weight (and sometimes even danced in **hauberks**, or chain-mail shirts). As they got older, they exercised and trained in full armor. Squires would also assist the knights in combat, at tournaments and in travel to foreign lands (carrying and cleaning armor, taking care of the knight's horses, packing baggage).

Upon turning 21, a squire was ready to be knighted.



Female Knights

In the Middle Ages, women didn't usually have the opportunity to become knights. However, there were a few exceptions:

- In 1149, women who had helped defend the Spanish town of Tortosa from the Moors were inducted into an order of knights called the **Order of the Hatchet** (which didn't survive beyond its original membership).
- The **Order of St. John the Hospitaller** inducted warrior "nuns."
- The **Knights Templar** also had a class of warrior nuns shortly before all the Templars were accused of heresy and burned.
- Women, usually wives of knights and nobles, were inducted into the **Order of the Garter** in England between 1358 and 1488. There were no further appointments until modern times.
- Today, women can be granted knighthood in British orders. The proper salutation for a female knight is "dame" (think of Dame Judi Dench, the actress).

Steps to Knighthood

Becoming a knight was a great honor. Only boys could become knights, and most came from families of nobility. Knights believed in the code of chivalry, which meant they promised to defend the weak, be courteous to all women, be loyal to their king, and serve God at all times.

When a boy was eight years old, he was sent to a neighboring castle where he was trained as a page. He spent much of his time strengthening his body by wrestling and riding horses. He also learned how to fight with a spear and a sword. The lady of the castle taught the page to sing and dance and how to behave in the king's court.

At the age of fifteen or sixteen, a boy became a squire in service to a knight. His duties included dressing the knight in the morning, serving all of the knight's meals, caring for the knight's horse, and cleaning the knight's armor and weapons. He followed the knight to tournaments and assisted his lord on the battlefield. A squire also prepared for battle himself and learned how to handle a sword and lance while wearing forty pounds of armor and riding a horse.

When he was about twenty, a squire could become a knight after proving himself worthy. A lord would agree to knight him in a dubbing ceremony. The night before the ceremony, the squire would fast and pray all night. When morning came, he took a bath to show that he was pure, and he dressed in a white tunic. The outdoor ceremony took place in front of family, friends, and nobility. The squire knelt in front of the lord, who tapped the squire lightly on each shoulder with his sword and proclaimed him a knight. A great feast followed with music and dancing.



**Mr. Anderson's Questions on
*The Steps to Knighthood***

1. Tell me three rules of chivalry Knights had to follow: _____

2. How old was a boy when he started his training to become a knight? _____
3. Before he could become a knight, a boy must be a _____ (at age 8) and a _____ (at age 15-16).
4. What would the squire do to show he was pure and ready to become a knight?

5. In battle, knights were called "cavalry." Men on foot would see knights charging across the battlefield and just run! Why were knights so scary to infantry (men on foot)? _____

6. How much did the armor usually weigh? _____
Add to that the weight of a sword and lance, and a shield, a dagger, and a helmet. Guess how much all that would weigh: _____
7. Only certain people in the Middle Ages could become knights. Who were not allowed to be knights? _____

8. Besides a sword and lance, name at least two weapons a knight might use in battle: _____

9. How were knights supposed to treat women? _____



Knights in

Shining Armor

Around the eighth century, the nobility began to see the need for an army made up of cavalry (horsemen) and wearing armor.

These were called *knights*. For these men to afford the equipment and horses they needed, the lord would grant them lands (in other words, make them vassals). Charles Martel used this system to raise a national army with which to fight the Moslems, and local nobles began using the same system.

Becoming a knight was the result of a long process. A boy from a good family offered to serve a baron or warrior, followed him into combat, and carry his shield and spear. It required much exercise, learning to ride, practicing with the weapons of the time, and coping with the fatigue. It also involved learning proper manners around ladies: politeness, courtesy, and helpfulness. When he reached manhood, he prepared to receive knighthood. Wearing robes with colors signifying purity and devotion, he prayed and fasted. He was instructed by a priest on the true meaning of knighthood. He then took the vow of chivalry (which included purity, valor, compassion, defense of the church, and loyalty to the king). He knelt before a prince or a warrior who struck him lightly on the shoulder with the flat of his sword and said "In the name of God, St. Michael, and St. George, make thee a knight; be valiant, bold, and loyal."

The high point for knighthood was the Crusade, and many knights bound themselves together in orders (like religious orders) dedicated to fight the Moslems. French knights formed the Knights Hospitallers. The Knights Templars was an order composed of knights from many nations. The autonic Knights were German. A group dedicated to freeing Spain from the Moslems was the knights of the Santiago de Compostella.

The purpose of the knight was to fight, and much of his life was spent in warfare. In the earlier days of knighthood, a charge by men on horseback was more than enough to scatter men on foot. In time, however, new weapons came along that lessened the shock of a knight's attack. In the 13th century, the crossbow was developed. Firing a metal bolt, a footsoldier could use the crossbow to penetrate a knight's armor. However, it had major limitations. The crossbow was cumbersome, had to be loaded mechanically, and had a short range. The longbow was another useful weapon; it could not pierce armor, but when fired in volleys, it broke up charges on horseback. Anything that caused the horseman to fall off his horse was effective, because with the weight and bulk of his armor, he was defenseless on foot.

In the earlier years of the feudal system, becoming a knight was a way to improve one's position in life, but eventually that door of opportunity shut. People born into the upper class believed it was unimply, not service, that should fix a person's status. The process of becoming a knight then became more ritualistic with a boy from an upper-class family automatically becoming a page at the age of 7, a squire at about 14 or 15, and then going through the ritual ceremony of becoming a knight. Fewer and fewer boys from poor backgrounds were let into the knighthood.



Name _____

Class _____

Directions: Circle underline or highlight where you find your answers on the front page, and write the circled number of the question beside it.

1. Who used knights to fight the Moslems?

2. What was the main purpose for having knights?

3. What did a student knight do in his first days of training?

4. What lessons in manners were part of the training?

5. What two saints were important to the image of a knight?

6. What order of knights during the Crusades was made up of Frenchmen?

7. What was the most international order of knights during the Crusades?

8. What was the advantage of a crossbow against a knight on horseback?

9. What was the best strategy in fighting a knight?

10. What happened to the use of knighthood as a way to improve a poor boy's status in life?

CODE OF CHIVALRY

of the Knight

- ♣ Live to defend Crown and Country and all it holds dear.
- ♣ Live one's life so that it is worthy of respect and honor.
- ♣ Live for freedom, justice and all that is good.
- ♣ Never attack an unarmed foe.
- ♣ Never use a weapon on an opponent not equal to the attack.
- ♣ Never attack from behind.
- ♣ Avoid lying to your fellow man.
- ♣ Always keep one's word of honor.
- ♣ Always maintain one's principles.
- ♣ Never betray a confidence or comrade.
- ♣ Avoid cheating.
- ♣ Avoid torture.
- ♣ Obey the law of king, country, and chivalry.
- ♣ Administer justice.
- ♣ Show self control.
- ♣ Show respect to authority.
- ♣ Respect women.
- ♣ Exhibit Courage in word and deed.
- ♣ Defend the weak and innocent.
- ♣ Destroy evil in all of its monstrous forms.
- ♣ Crush the monsters that steal our land and rob our people.
- ♣ Fight with honor.
- ♣ Die with valor.
- ♣ Avenge the wronged.
- ♣ Never abandon a friend, ally, or noble cause.
- ♣ Respect life and freedom.
- ♣ Exhibit manners.
- ♣ Be polite and attentive.
- ♣ Be respectful of host, women, and honor.
- ♣ Loyalty to one's friends and those who lay their trust in thee.

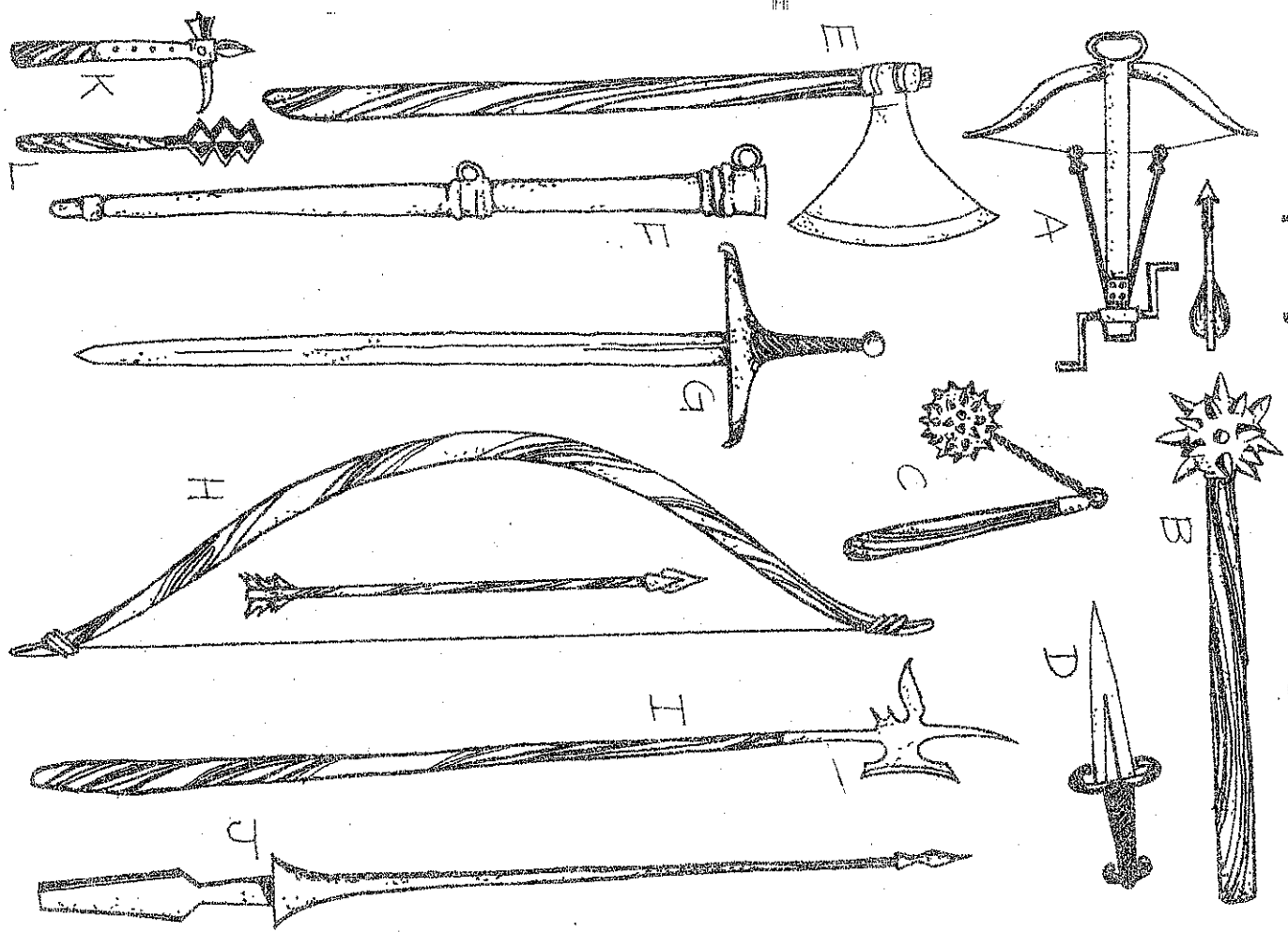
Weaponry of the Middle Ages

Weaponry of the Middle Ages

The weapons of the Middle Ages are very different from those used by today's soldiers. Wars were often scenes of brutal, hand-to-hand fighting. The knights did their fighting protected by heavy suits of armor and riding on horseback, while foot soldiers used bows and arrows or fought hand to hand with crude weapons and wore little protection from the blows of their enemies.

Weapons of the Middle Ages are drawn on the following page. How many of them can you match to their names below?

1. _____ a lance, which was a type of spear carried by knights.
2. _____ a long bow and arrow, used by foot soldiers.
3. _____ a mace was used for clubbing. It was usually carried by foot soldiers. It had a ball with spikes attached to a wooden handle.
4. _____ a dagger.
5. _____ a battle-axe, a weapon of foot soldiers.
6. _____ a crossbow and arrow, a powerful and accurate weapon.
7. _____ a sword, usually carried by a knight, sometimes by foot soldiers.
8. _____ a scabbard, the cover or shield for the sword.
9. _____ a halberd, a combination of a battle-axe and a pike. It was about six feet long and was usually the weapon of a knight.
10. _____ a bludgeon, a type of mace, carried by foot soldiers. It was used like a club with the ball attached to the club by a chain.
11. _____ a war hammer or hawk's beak, so named for its shape. It was used to pierce mail.
12. _____ a mace, made with bars of spikes attached to a handle. Used by foot soldiers for clubbing.

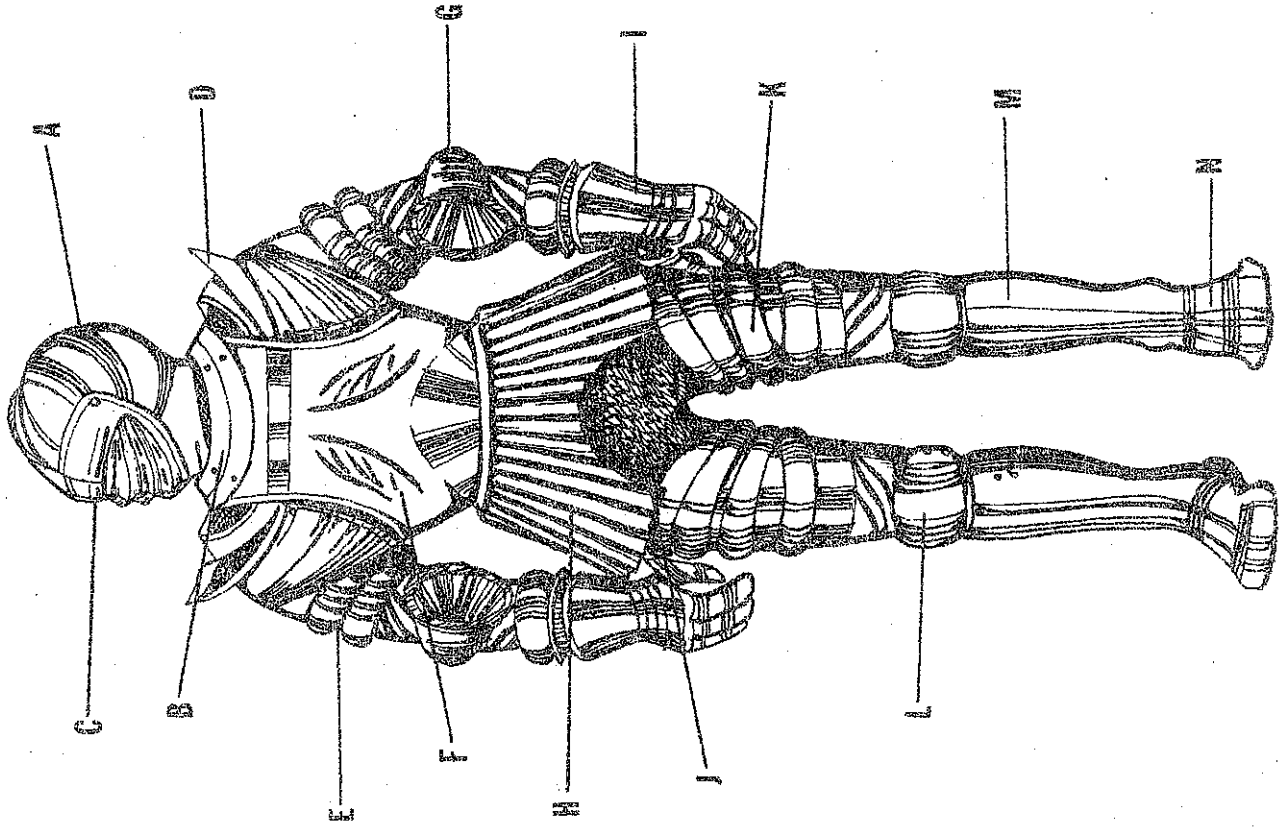


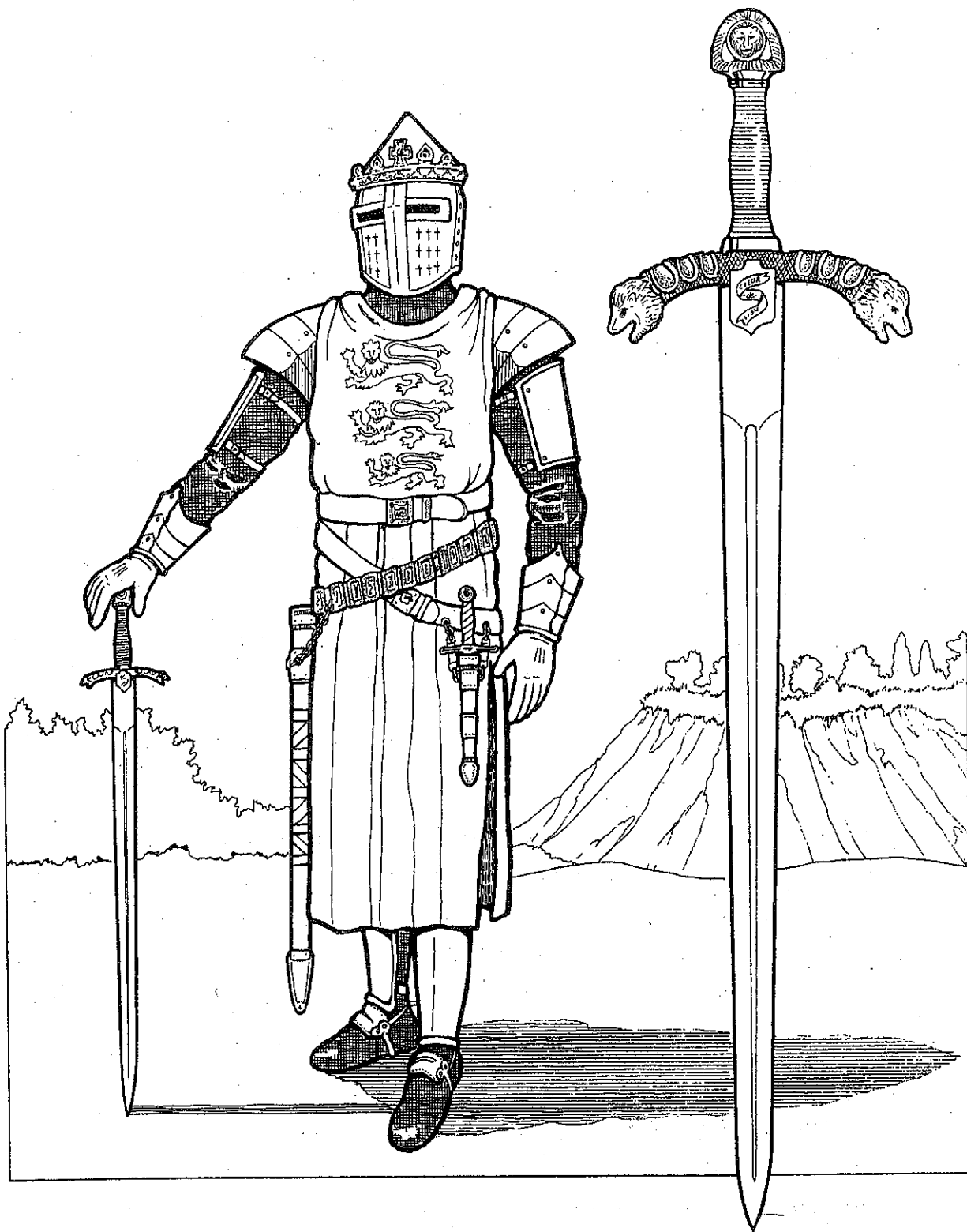
Armor

Match the parts of a suit of armor on the following page to the descriptions below by placing the correct letters in the numbered spaces.

1. _____ *Helmet* (heli-met). The headpiece or head covering in a suit of armor.
2. _____ *Cuisse* (kwis). This word is taken from the Latin word *coxa*, meaning *hip*. It is the piece of armor that covers the thigh.
3. _____ *Greave* (greeve). This term comes from the Old French word *greve*, which refers to the part in the hair. It is the part of the armor that protects the leg from the ankle to the knee.
4. _____ *Gauntlet* (gont-let). This word comes from the Old French word *gant*, which means *glove*. Gauntlets were the armor gloves that protected the hands.
5. _____ *Coat of mail* (male). Taken from the Latin word *maculata*, which means *spotty, mesh* or *net*, it refers to a coat made of metal rings or links which was worn under the armor.
6. _____ *Visor* (vi-zer). The moveable part of the helmet in front of the eyes. It comes from the French word for *face, vis*.
7. _____ *Shoulder piece*.
8. _____ *Elbow piece*.
9. _____ *Knee piece*.
10. _____ *Gorget* (gor-jet). A piece of armor that protects the throat. It comes from an Old French word *gorge*, meaning *throat*.
11. _____ *Tasse* (tass). This term comes from the Old French word *tasse*, which means *pocket*. It is a series of overlapping plates which together form a short skirt.
12. _____ *Cuirass* (kwi-ras). A breast plate from the neck to the waist. It was originally made of leather and comes from a Latin word *corium*, which means *leather*.
13. _____ *Sabaton* (sab-a-ton). Taken from the French word *sabot*, a wooden shoe. It is the part of a suit of armor that covers the foot.
14. _____ *Brassard* (bras-sard). This is the armor that protects the arm. Brassard comes from the Latin word *bracchium*, which means *arm*.

Armor





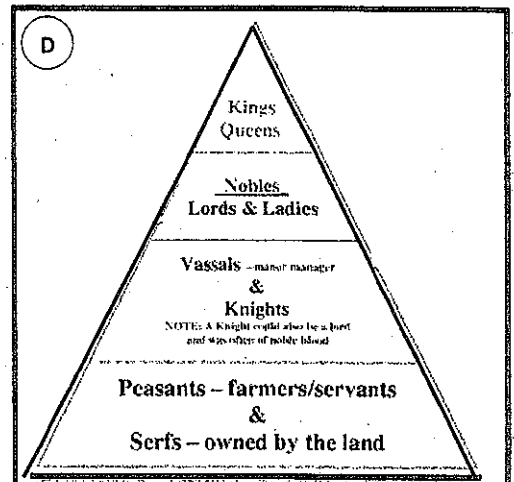
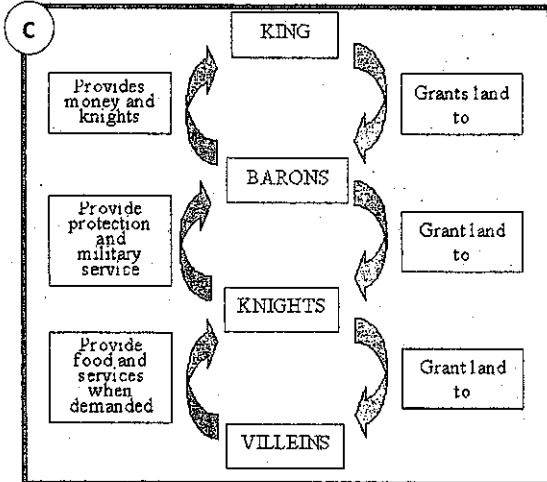
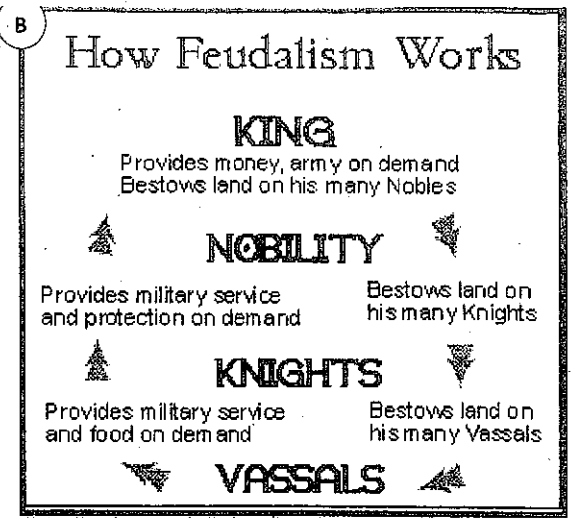
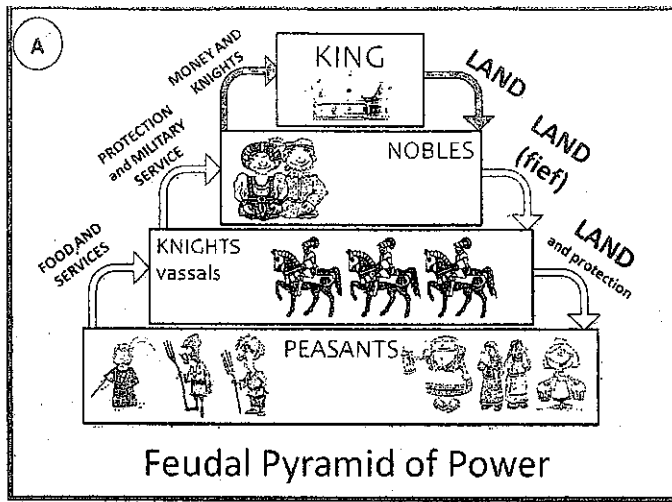
SWORD OF KING RICHARD I, COEUR DE LION (A.D. 1187)

King Richard Coeur de Lion (Lion Heart) was the first of the great crusading kings of England. He was the third son of King Henry II and Princess Eleanor of Aquitaine (a province in France). Henry II was the founder of the Plantagenet dynasty, which ruled as kings of England until 1485, when the house of Tudor claimed the monarchy.

Richard earned his nickname from his well-earned reputation as a fierce and formidable warrior. He actually spent most of his lifetime outside of England, fighting in the Third Crusade and in wars in France. During Richard's return from the Crusades, he was captured by Duke Leopold of Austria and held for ransom. His treacherous brother, Prince John, seized the English crown during Richard's captivity. After being released and returning to England, Richard finally regained the throne and forgave Prince John, nam-

ing him his successor on his deathbed. King Richard died in 1199 from wounds received in battle while in France.

King Richard is shown wearing a combination of chain mail and steel plate armor. His shoulders are protected by steel *pauldrons*. Strapped to his upper arms are steel plates called *verrebraces*, and on his forearms, armor called *vambraces*. His lower legs are covered by armor called *schynbalds*. This combination of plate armor and chain mail was prevalent in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. It was finally supplanted by a full suit of armor during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries. King Richard wears a "great helm" crown and helmet. His chain mail hauberk is covered by a scarlet surcoat with three golden lions, the English king's coat of arms.



Directions – Examine the four diagrams on the other side of this page and answer the following questions.

- List three things that all diagrams have in common - _____

- List two significant differences between the diagrams:

- Use the information in the diagrams to come up with a definition of feudalism - _____

- Write one or two questions you still have about feudalism - _____

- List two sets of words that probably mean the same thing, based on the way they are used in the diagrams - _____ and _____ and _____
- If you could only look at one diagram of feudalism, which of the four would be most useful? A B C D
Why? _____
- If you could only look at one diagram of feudalism, which of the four would be least useful? A B C D
Why? _____
- On a separate sheet, create your own diagram that includes the main classes of people under feudalism and explains how feudalism worked. You may "borrow" ideas from the four diagrams, but you may not simply copy one of them.