

## TIME LINE

1066 THE BATTLE OF HASTINGS

1097 THE FIRST CRUSADE BEGINS

1327 THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR BEGINS

1347 THE BLACK DEATH STRIKES EUROPE

1358 THE JACQUERIE IN FRANCE

1381 THE PEASANTS REVOLT IN ENGLAND

1400 GEOFFREY CHAUCER COMPLETES THE CANTERBURY TALES

1415 THE BATTLE OF AGINCOURT

1429 JOAN OF ARC BEGINS HER CAMPAIGN AGAINST THE ENGLISH

1492 COLUMBUS SAILS ACROSS THE ATLANTIC

*The said French were so loaded with armour that they could not support themselves or move forward. In the first place they were armed with long coats of steel, reaching to the knees or lower, and very heavy.... The softness of the wet ground kept them as if **immovable**, so that they could raise their clubs only with difficulty.... The plain was so narrow that there was no room except for the men-at-arms.*

*The said archers were for the most part in their doublets, without armour, their stockings rolled up to their knees, and having hatchets and battle-axes or great swords hanging at their girdles, some were bare-footed and bare-headed, others had caps of boiled leather.*

—JEHAN DE WAVRIN

Jehan de Wavrin, a French knight who fought in the battle of Agincourt, describes the difference in the clothing of the French knights and the English archers. What advantage did the light dress of the archers give them over the heavily armoured French? What was the difference in social class between the two groups? What do you think the triumph of the archers over the knights might mean for the feudal system?

# INTRODUCTION

The Middle Ages of Europe seems a romantic period, very different from the world we live in today. We dream of a time when knights and ladies lived in castles and attended colourful tournaments. To some extent, the Middle Ages were as we imagine them. A great many knights lived in castles all over Europe. There were more than 10 000 castles in Germany alone, and many thousands more throughout Europe.

Yet only about 10 percent of the people belonged to the knightly, or noble, class; far more were serfs, many of whom lived in dreadful conditions. Only in the late Middle Ages did some serfs escape the life into which they were born. Their opportunities came with the beginnings of trade.

The late Middle Ages was a time of great change and upheaval, a time when a series of terrible events shook the foundations of Western society. In religion, the unity of the Catholic Church was rocked by the appearance

of new heresies. In society, the Black Death killed perhaps a third of all the people in Europe, and peasants' revolts spread rapidly, only to be savagely suppressed. In politics, the Hundred Years' War ruined northern France and wasted the energies of England. All these developments were sources of great suffering.

Yet this period was also a time of positive change. Trade developed across the continent, and the nations of modern Europe began to emerge in a recognizable form. Agriculture gradually improved, and so did the wages of the farmers who worked the land. People could now earn money at a trade instead of scraping by as a serf on a farm. Cities grew in importance and size, and beautiful cathedrals were built. New ideas grew in the universities and spread to influence rulers and their advisors. All these developments, both bad and good, worked together to bring an end to feudalism and prepare western Europe for the Renaissance and the Protestant Reformation.

immovable: unable to move

doublet: vest

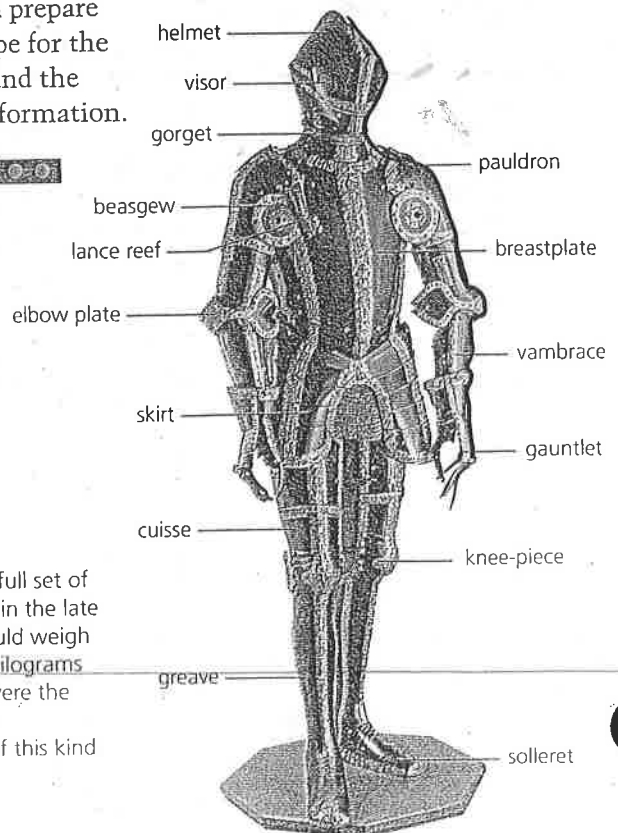
girdle: belt

heresy: a teaching that is contrary to that of the Church

cathedral: the home church of a bishop

# KNIGHTHOOD AND CHIVALRY

In the late Middle Ages, knighthood reached its highest state of development before a quick decline. Eventually, two new technologies of war, the longbow and firearms, made heavy plate armour useless. When monarchs could keep their power by using armies of archers, the knight's days were numbered. Before that happened, however, the late Middle Ages was a time when the ideal of the mounted knight, fighting for his



**Figure 5-1** A full set of armour popular in the late Middle Ages could weigh as much as 35 kilograms (77 lb.). What were the advantages and disadvantages of this kind of armour?

**jousting:** two knights on horseback, each trying to knock the other off with his lance

**social status:** level in society

**courtesy:** good manners

**spur:** a device worn on the heel, used for urging a horse on

#### DID YOU KNOW?

The word "chivalry" comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning horse, and refers to the fact that knights almost always fought on horseback.

lord and dedicating his life to his lady, was more a reality than it ever would be again.

The code of honour that every knight swore to uphold was known as chivalry. The code of chivalry was based on personal honour. Ideally, all knights were brave, generous, and truthful. They were also supposed to protect women and children and to love and strengthen the Church. In practice, of course, few knights were truly chivalrous. For instance, knights seldom extended their code of chivalry to the serfs who worked on manors to support them. Mistreatment of serfs by knights—including beatings—was so common that laws had to be passed forbidding assaults on peasants.

Virtually all knights admired and practised fighting and war, which they saw as their trade. Even their amusements, **jousting** and hunting, were ways of practising for war. By perfecting their physical abilities, knights increased their value to their lord and so kept their valued **social status** and lands. They also increased

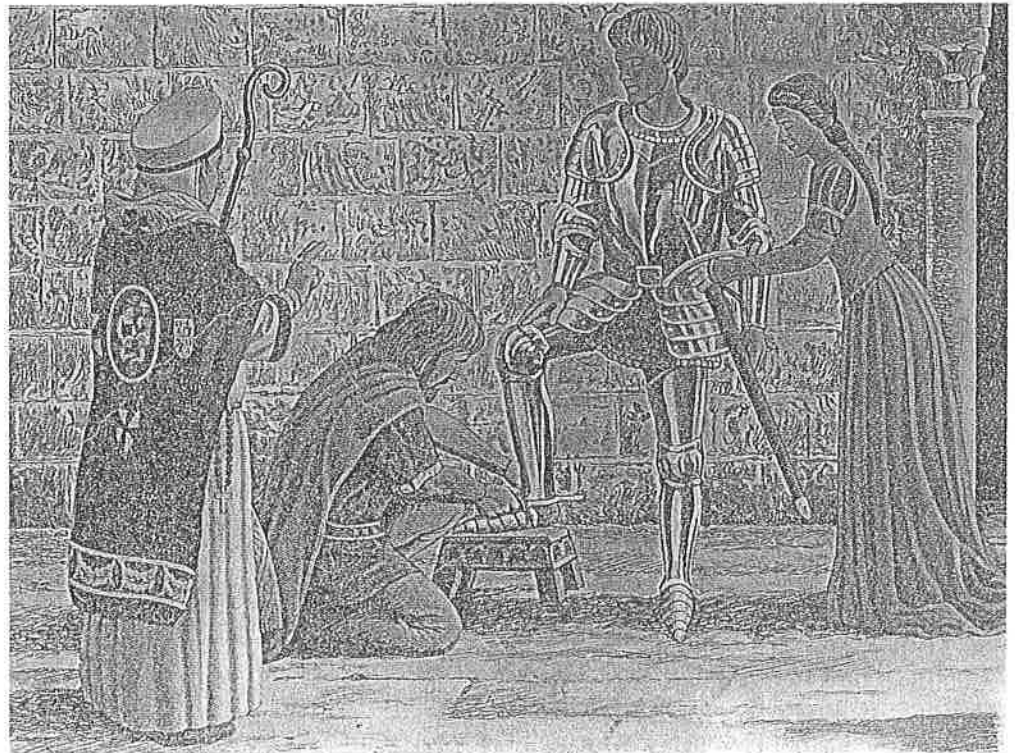
their chances of staying alive on the battlefield.

## THE EDUCATION OF A KNIGHT

The education of a young knight took many years. At the age of seven or eight, a noble's son would be sent to live in the household of another knight to get his education. There he would serve as a page, waiting at table, learning to ride and fight, and also learning to play music and sing. The lady of the household and her female attendants usually took a keen interest in the education of the page, teaching him about literature and music and knightly **courtesy**. The warriors of the household taught the page how to hunt and use weapons.

At the age of fourteen or fifteen, the page was usually accepted by an experienced knight as a squire. The young man would serve as the knight's assistant and bodyguard, attending the knight at tournaments

**Figure 5-2** Although knighthood was sometimes granted on the battlefield, many knights received "their **spurs**" in a formal ceremony. As part of the ceremony, the lord fixed spurs to the knight's heels. What might this ritual symbolize?



and fighting by his side in battle. The knight shared his knowledge with the squire, instructing him in the use and care of weapons, in heraldry, and in siege warfare. Tournaments, combat training, and hunting with dogs or hawks took up more and more of the squire's time.

Most squires expected to be knighted, but some could not afford the necessary armour and other equipment and so remained squires for life. In modern terms, a suit of good plate armour, like the one used

in the fifteenth century when the story of Sir Percival takes place, would cost as much as a modern luxury car.

Those who did advance usually became knights at about the age of twenty-one. Before the formal ceremony, the squire fasted and kept vigil over his armour overnight, often in a chapel. In the morning, freshly bathed and purified, the new knight was **dubbed**, robed, and armed by his lord.

to keep vigil: staying awake and praying

to dub: to make a person a knight by touching the shoulder with a sword

## LINK-UP

# The Page

The medieval term "page" has not disappeared. Many young Canadians serve brief terms as pages in the House of Commons, the Senate, or a provincial legislative assembly. Pages for the House of Commons must be attending a local university during their term. Their duties are as follows.

- ◆ to collect and distribute official documents
- ◆ to link members to their Hill offices
- ◆ to serve House officials in various ways
- ◆ to act as messengers for the Speaker, chair occupants,

members of Parliament, and table officers.

- ◆ to provide professional, impartial, and efficient service

Does this sound like a good part-time job for your first year of university? Find out more about the page programs by writing to your provincial or federal representatives or the Public Information Office, House of Commons, Ottawa, ON, Canada, K1A 0A9. You could also try your school's career counsellor or a government site on the Internet.



Figure 5-3 Two students, one from Prince Albert, Saskatchewan, and another from Iqaluit, Northwest Territories, serve as pages in the House of Commons in Ottawa.

## WHAT DO YOU THINK?

1. Compare the duties of the pages of medieval society and those of the pages who serve in a modern Canadian parliament. Compare the education each gains.
2. What do you think you could gain from a year as a page? Besides the duties, think about whom you would work with and the environment you would work in every day.
3. Conduct some research with the sources listed above to find out what criteria a student must meet to be eligible for the program.