

# Characteristics of Medieval Western European Knightly Tournaments

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**Abstract:** Knightly tournaments emerged in the mid-11th to mid-12th centuries in France. Their origin is closely tied to combat exercises and military training, but with the increasing participation of knights and nobles, tournaments evolved beyond mere military practice. A sophisticated system of competition gradually took shape, giving rise to distinct characteristics of tournaments. During this process, the involvement of the church in knighthood ceremonies lent authority to knights through their prowess. Tournaments provided feudal lords with opportunities to display wealth and strength. For knights, tournaments became not only a part of their daily lives but also a means to display their martial skills and courage, earning both honor and material benefits.

**Keywords:** Knight; Tournaments; Church; Feudal Lords

## 1. Introduction

Knight emerged as a distinct social class during the medieval period in Western Europe, serving as a significant pillar of strength in the European medieval society. Jousting, a form of knightly combat, was a crucial form of entertainment for them. With the increasing participation of knights and nobles, tournaments began to flourish. The establishment of the tournament's scheduling, locations, formats, content, and reward systems marked the gradual formation of a comprehensive competitive framework. The tournament formats in Western Europe varied widely, encompassing events of different scales. While there are no explicit textual records specifying their regulations, organizers employed diverse methods. These ranged from one-on-one duels to larger-scale competitions akin to contemporary regional or intercity tournaments. Participants could engage in

individual combat or group battles, and these events sometimes evolved into all-out melees. The timing of the tournaments depended on practical circumstances, without strict stipulations. However, medieval tournaments possessed their own distinctive characteristics.

## 2. Serving Warfare through Vital Military Training

Military training for knights began from a young age. Boys from noble families in the medieval era started their training at the age of 7[1], engaging in activities such as fencing, hunting, and equestrian skills. Within the societal and cultural context of the Middle Ages, Christian theological thought held a dominant position, influencing the standards of knighthood and its alignment with the cultural aspects of medieval chivalric orders and scholastic philosophical ideas. These principles were reflected in the Seven Knightly Arts and the Seven Virtues that knights were required to uphold[2].

The founder of the first knightly order in the 9th century, Geoffrey de Preuilly from the province of Tours in France, formulated the seven essential skills as a fundamental requirement for his members, drawing from the mysterious teachings associated with numbers[2]. Accordingly, those of noble birth had to master the following disciplines: a. Horsemanship:b. Swimming:c. Hunting:d. Archery:e. Combat:f. Table games and ball games for courtly service; g. Poetic arts and basic dance moves required for the refined skills of courtly attendants.

Although later regulations about knighthood emerged, the Seven Knightly Arts continued to serve as the foundation of knightly education. These skills were designed to prepare knights for military service and equip them with a diverse range of abilities that would contribute to their effectiveness in warfare and their roles within courtly environments. Due to the

Catholic Church's control over people's thoughts, especially the prevalence of asceticism and ignorance, sports competitions were inevitably restricted and even prohibited in the medieval period. Consequently, the military function of sports gained unprecedented prominence. The origins and role of knightly tournaments were primarily as crucial military training methods in service of warfare. The medieval era was marked by political fragmentation and the dominance of feudal lords, leading to frequent conflicts. Feudal nobility, driven by their individual interests, engaged in recurrent wars. Knights, as the core members of these armies, bore the responsibility of fighting on the battlefield to secure their lords' power and benefits.

Knights were exempted from agricultural labor, which allowed them to focus primarily on activities related to warfare. Hunting and tournaments served as forms of war exercises and simulated training. Knightly tournaments fulfilled the vital role of simulated training. With diverse formats, these tournaments involved various skills and combat contests, sometimes closely resembling actual battlefields. As a result, they significantly enhanced knights' capabilities and provided them with an early sense of the battlefield atmosphere. The multifaceted nature of knightly tournaments encompassed a wide range of combat techniques and assessments, often approaching the conditions of real warfare, thus contributing to the comprehensive improvement of knights' abilities.

Medieval Western Europe was marked by political fragmentation and a weakening of royal authority. The concept of nation-states was nearly absent, and society existed in a state of near-anarchy, with feudal lords enjoying significant independence. In fact, there were no clear boundaries between nations or territories. Changes like marriages, wars, and inheritance could alter the scope of power for each entity. In the broader context of Western Europe, threats came from the Arabs in the south of the Mediterranean and from the Byzantine Empire in the east. Wars were frequent due to struggles for succession, territorial disputes, division of interests, and efforts to combat paganism. The society was characterized by turmoil and constant conflicts.

Knights were the professional soldiers of the time and held decisive power on the battlefield. Given the relative technological and tactical backwardness of the medieval period, the outcome of battles heavily relied on the physical fitness, martial skills, and bravery of knights. Sporting activities served as effective means for knights to engage in physical exercises and military training, offering a way to enhance physical fitness and improve combat skills. Therefore, the primary reason for the existence and development of knightly sports was the military necessity. Knights needed to be well-prepared for the battlefield, and physical training through sports provided them with the means to achieve that readiness.

### 3. Church's Ideological Control

In its early stages, the Church staunchly opposed knightly tournaments due to the perceived negative effects they brought, such as fostering aggression, indulgence, greed, and vanity. Knightly tournaments often resulted in violence, bloodshed, and animosity, fueling jealousy among individuals caught up in the fervor of material gains[3]. In light of these concerns, successive popes and religious councils consistently condemned and prohibited knightly tournaments. For instance, in 1130, Pope Innocent II at the Second Council of Clermont labeled knights who participated in jousts as abhorrent and issued a ban, strictly forbidding knights from all nations to organize any form of tournaments. The council also established laws to punish participants[4].

Despite the Church's condemnation of knightly tournaments during this religious council, subsequent popes followed suit in issuing bans to prevent the tournaments' occurrence. Nevertheless, these events continued to thrive and even evolved further. This was related to the Church's own vested interests. The medieval Church belonged to the wealthy class, owning extensive lands and considerable wealth. Consequently, they were often targets of envy and covetousness. The Church, lacking military forces to protect its assets from violent infringement, naturally turned to knights as a means of safeguarding itself.

Furthermore, the Church required protectors to aid their endeavors against heresy, paganism, and those who violated the Church's authority. They relied on the might of knights to exert

influence and deter others. As a result, the Church incorporated Christian theological thought into knightly education, infiltrating it with their ideology. The Church even participated in the knighthood ceremony, asserting that individuals seeking knighthood needed the Church's permission and involvement to acquire their title.

In the late 13th century, the attitude of the Catholic Church towards knightly tournaments began to change, shifting away from outright prohibition and gradually becoming more lenient. By the mid-14th century, the Church lifted the ban on knightly tournaments, transforming them into tools for the Papal Court to engage in social activities, though clergy members were still barred from participation[5]. This shift signifies a victory for tournaments in the struggle between knightly competitions and the Church. While the Church had its reasons to permit knights to hold tournaments, knights also saw the legalization of their tournaments as a means of leveraging the Church's authority. This mutually beneficial situation was welcomed by all parties involved. Therefore, it can be said that tournaments experienced development, closely intertwined with the evolving role of the Church.

#### **4. Opportunity for Feudal Lords to Showcase Wealth and Power**

During the medieval period, feudal lords were eager to enhance their abilities and prestige, and the number of knights they possessed became a symbol of their wealth. To bolster their strength, they integrated themselves into the lives of knights, not just by selecting them but by actively seeking to cultivate their own knights. They brought in individuals skilled in various areas to instruct and educate knights, treating them with strictness and dedication, akin to nurturing their own disciples. This approach served as a method of recruiting talent.

In order to train in the mastery of weapons, organized archery associations and fencing schools were established. These associations and schools initially appeared in various cities in the Netherlands, northern Italy, England, France, and Germany. Subsequently, they emerged in Krakow, Kiev, and Novgorod as well[5]. Feudal lords were willing to host knightly tournaments, as it allowed them to not

only display their identity, status, and wealth, thereby enhancing social prestige, but also to use the tournaments to identify knights of their liking and incorporate them into their territories to augment their power. Consequently, this objectively promoted the development of knightly tournaments.

As mentioned earlier, the original purpose of knightly tournaments was for feudal lords and their knights to engage in military training, thereby enhancing the quality of knights. However, over time, knightly tournaments gradually lost this meaning and transformed into opportunities for larger feudal lords to showcase their wealth and power, thus elevating their social status. Organizing a tournament required significant financial investment, as well as manpower and resources. In addition to the actual competitions, a series of events were associated with tournaments, including preparations for banquets before the tournament, hospitality for guests during the tournament, and arrangements for post-tournament entertainment activities. Inviting prestigious individuals to the event also incurred substantial expenses. Small to medium-sized feudal lords lacked the capacity to host grand tournaments. Consequently, major feudal lords and monarchs became enthusiastic organizers of these tournaments.

For instance, the French king hosted a grand tournament when his son was knighted. Later, in December 1312, he issued a ban to prevent other nobles from organizing tournaments larger in scale than the one he had hosted. By the 16th century, extravagant tournaments reached their pinnacle, transforming into occasions for European monarchs to hold large-scale social events and demonstrate royal wealth in a luxurious manner.

#### **5. Needs of the Knightly Class**

##### **5.1 Opportunity to Showcase Martial Skills and Honor**

The primary identity of a knight is that of a warrior, a defender of feudal lords' territories. Proficiency in combat skills is a fundamental requirement for a knight. Knightly tournaments provide an advantageous platform for knights to showcase their martial skills and courage, as well as to attain honor[6]. Prior to engaging in combat at a tournament, knights

would swear oaths in the name of God, their own lives, and their honor. Their combat was solely driven by the pursuit of honor and a positive reputation; animosity towards opponents was not part of the equation.

During knightly tournaments, individuals from various social strata would gather to observe, paying attention to their favored or exceptional knights. Knights with outstanding combat prowess and exceptional courage often became the subjects of conversation. Many poets and literary figures would compose poems and short stories to extol their heroic images. As professional military personnel, knights riding on horseback, their value resided in their exceptional martial skills and courageous spirit. These attributes determined whether they earned society's respect and the favor of kings, powerful nobles, and lords. Additionally, these attributes served as their capital for ascending the ranks of high society.

Clearly, in contrast to the brutality of warfare, knightly tournaments offered the easiest, most convenient, and direct opportunity for knights to showcase themselves and attain honor. Therefore, every knight was enthusiastic about participating. After the 13th century, only individuals with knightly status could partake in these tournaments. Being eligible for participation became a mark of honor in itself. Some tournaments required a certain fee, rendering impoverished knights ineligible. At this point, participating in tournaments became the finest means of displaying one's status, position, wealth, and family honor.

### **5.2 A Path for Knights to Attain Material Benefits**

Through knightly tournaments, victorious knights had the opportunity to acquire substantial material benefits. During the medieval period in Western Europe, tournaments simulated warfare, and similar to actual battles, the defeated knights were required to surrender their warhorses, armor, and weapons to the victors, as well as pay a certain ransom. In the medieval context, these possessions held significant value. While only a minority of knights emerged as victors in tournaments, the allure of substantial economic gains, along with the human inclinations for risk-taking and a refusal to accept defeat, often compelled knights to participate.

Many knights even saw participation in tournaments as a means to amass considerable wealth. Hence, participants are not merely showing their strength, but they are after the spoils[7]. Furthermore, tournaments were generally organized by kings or major nobles, as others lacked the financial means and societal prestige to host them. In the tumultuous medieval era, prominent feudal lords aimed to expand their territories and increase their influence. They often achieved this by hosting knightly tournaments, where they could identify and attract talented individuals. Offering generous rewards, they would recruit exceptional knights into their ranks. Knights who excelled in tournaments could thus gain substantial material benefits through such sponsorships.

### **5.3 Knights Ideal Venue for Pursuing Love**

In the ethos of knighthood as we know it, the respect knights hold for women forms a crucial component. Their upbringing underscores the importance of honoring women, reflecting an intrinsic part of their education. Numerous literary works focusing on knights often place their emotional lives in the spotlight. Consequently, the quest for love and the admiration of noble ladies become defining traits of knightly tournaments. A poem poignantly attests, Tournaments endow men with dignity, attracting the admiration of noble ladies. Tournaments are a realm suited for knights[8].

Within much of this literature, the love of knights is termed "courtly love." This notion is epitomized by their veneration and pursuit of noble ladies. Knights, in pursuit of a noble lady's affection, demonstrate an unwavering devotion that often leads them to make significant sacrifices. This spiritualized romantic pursuit is reminiscent of Platonic ideals. In order to satisfy this devotion, knights feel compelled to exhibit their prowess. Tournaments, given their congregations and the presence of the ladies they seek to impress, offer a splendid platform for such demonstrations.

A poem narrates the story of a knight who steadfastly wears a shirt gifted by the lady he admires during a tournament, forsaking any protective armor. Despite the wounds he endures, his victory captures the affection of the noble lady. Similarly, the renowned knight

Lancelot devoted his life to participating in tournaments, showcasing his valor and acquiring honors, all with the ultimate goal of winning the love of Queen Guinevere. Pursuing the favor of noble ladies emerged as a prevalent trend among the medieval knightly class, making it an integral part of participation in tournaments and a distinctive characteristic.

#### 5.4 An Essential Component of Knightly Entertainment Activities

Medieval life was marked by monotony, with little amusement outside of festive occasions[9]. Ni Shiguang's *Knighthood in Medieval Western Europe* also records, "Life within medieval castles was tedious and monotonous, particularly in winter. Castle lords would often gather by the grand hearth for warmth... or engage in combat training with fellow knights[9] ". Knights were no exception, which is why their participation in tournaments held significance beyond merely showcasing valor, seeking rewards, or pursuing romantic endeavors. Following tournament competitions, organizers would orchestrate an array of entertainment activities and lavish banquets, open for the knights to partake in.

Tournaments, governed by their distinct regulations, generally extended over days or even weeks. Throughout this duration, a variety of engaging events unfolded. Minstrels performed their original verses, concerts were staged, and diverse shows provided refreshing diversions for spectators. Knights reveled in attending and participating in events such as masquerade balls, acrobatic exhibitions, and magic displays – all offering an outlet for leisure and entertainment beyond the combat arena. In Mark Bloch's *Feudal Society*, he illuminates the leisure pursuits of knights within aristocratic circles. Besides equestrian combat, knights exhibited a fervent interest in hunting. He underscores how the noble class's favored recreations often bore a martial undertone [10].

#### 6. Conclusion

The emergence of knightly tournaments was initially driven by feudal lords seeking to enhance military training, enabling knights to secure greater advantages on the battlefield

while minimizing casualties. As time progressed, tournaments underwent transformations influenced by both external and internal factors. They showcased their unique essence on the historical stage of Europe, with the Church, feudal lords, and knights themselves assuming central roles in this grand spectacle. Their diverse objectives lent distinctive characteristics to tournaments, fostering the development of various regulations and systems governing these events. This evolution captures the tournaments' significance and positive impact.

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