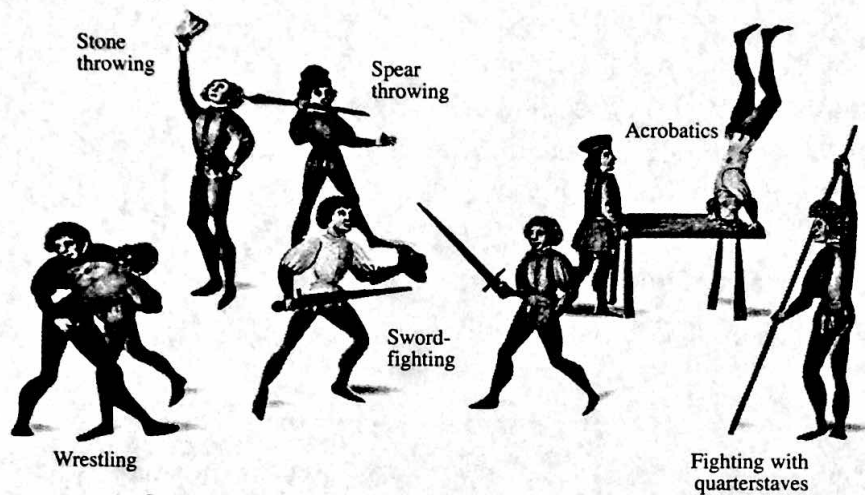


Becoming a knight

This picture shows a group of squires learning soldierly skills, like sword fighting, fighting with quarterstaves, throwing spears and wrestling.



Mediaeval society was essentially organized around war. The feudal structure was set up in response to the need for mounted knights to fight wars for the king. To become a knight, a boy had to serve a long apprenticeship. Sons of the nobility were sent to become pages in a knight's household. As teenagers, they would become squires, and would look after their knight's horse and armour. They practised all the skills necessary to be a soldier and would gain actual experience in war. After performing a heroic deed on the battlefield, or more usually, simply by coming of age, the squire would be made a knight, being dubbed with a sword or slapped in the face by his lord. He also would be given his fief, or grant of land.



A helmet with mail collar from the end of the 1300s

Arms and armour

In the early Middle Ages, the most common weapons were lances and swords, and for protection the knight wore a helmet, and a tunic called a hauberk made of leather or quilted cloth. Later the hauberks were made of mail, metal rings that were joined together to form a fabric that almost looked as if it were knitted. A cloth tunic carrying the knight's coat of arms was worn over the mail, and he also had a shield to protect against battle axes. Having his coat of arms emblazoned on his tunic and shield helped identify a helmeted knight in battle. In the early 1300s, crossbows became so much improved that they could easily shoot through the mail hauberk, so plate armour was invented. Steel plates were fastened to the mail to cover the chest and back, shoulders, and the outside surface of the arms and legs.



This knight is wearing mail all over, topped by a surcoat with his arms.



A full suit of plate armour

War games

In the early Middle Ages, tournaments were a way of training knights for battle. Later, when kings were employing trained mercenaries, tournaments became a form of entertainment for the court and a way for knights to demonstrate their skills, the way athletes do today. There were different kinds of combat. The *mêlée* pitted teams of knights against each other in a simulated battle. Jousting was single combat, where two knights rode at each other and tried to unhorse their opponent with a lance. Sometimes they continued to fight on foot, with swords.



These two knights are jousting at a tournament held by King Edward III of England in honour of the Countess of Salisbury.

The code of chivalry

The code of chivalry began with the expectation that a knight would be brave and loyal to his lord. Over time, the notion came to include religious piety, under the influence of the crusades. Knights were not supposed to attack unarmed people nor fight for monetary gain. They should treat their fellow knights and social inferiors respectfully. The notion of courtly love also affected the code of chivalry. A knight was expected to dedicate himself to a noble woman, one who was betrothed or married to another, and he fought in her name and tried to win her favour in tournaments. The arts were an important part of courtly love; knights had to write poetry, sing love songs and play musical instruments as a way of pleasing their lady. By the end of the Middle Ages, when nation-states were becoming more important than feudal relationships, and kings were more likely to hire mercenary soldiers, the knights' role became less practical and more symbolic. The values of chivalry became more a mark of nobility and social distinction.



These illustrations of knights jousting show the heraldic devices on their tunics, shields and horses.



This shield is decorated with a knight kneeling before his lady. The scroll reads "You or death," and behind the knight stands the figure of death.

How the peasants lived

Obtaining water is a problem not obvious to modern city dwellers but in mediaeval times, it could be very difficult. Running water in houses did not exist. People who lived in the country could get clean water from streams, and well-to-do people had wells, but poorer people in the city had to go and collect water from the fountain in their neighbourhood and carry it home.

These two peasants are separating out the fibre that made linen thread from dried flax.



This picture shows a carpenter using a brace and bit to drill holes in a piece of wood.

Peasants were either farmers or craftsmen. The farmers worked the land of their lord and also had to pay rent to the lord in crops from the harvest of their own land. They usually had two harvests a year. In the spring they would grow barley, oats, hay, peas and beans, and in the fall wheat and rye. The wheat and rye were ground into flour to make bread, the barley was used for beer and the hay and oats were used for animals. Peas and beans were dried and used for food. Farmers would join forces for plowing because few of them had enough oxen to do it themselves. They also learned from experience to rotate their crops and allow fields to lie fallow once every three years so that the soil would not be drained of all its nutrients.

Craftsmen were very important people in a mediaeval town. Millers ground grains into flour, bakers baked bread, blacksmiths made tools and shod horses, shoemakers and seamstresses provided footwear and clothes, candlemakers provided the possibility of light after the sun went down. Craftspeople generally learned their trade from their families or by being apprenticed to another skilled craftsperson for seven years.

Most peasants lived in rough, thatched-roof cottages and slept in their work clothes on straw-filled mattresses on the floor, with an

animal skin for a blanket. Furniture would consist of benches, and a wooden chest in which they could store their possessions. They ate with wooden bowls, cups and spoons. Often their livestock lived in the house with them. Only better-off peasants would have woolen blankets and linen towels.



Here craftsmen are cutting stone, mixing mortar and building a church.