

# Spheres of Medieval Life

## Castles and Knights

The first stone castles were built in the 11th and 12th century. Those before were simpler defences, as described here in a medieval document: “The [...] nobles [...] much given to feuds\* and bloodshed\* fortify themselves. ... These strongholds helped them to intimidate and suppress the lower ranks of people. They heap up a mound\*, and dig around it [...] a ditch [...]; round the summit of the mound they put up a palisade of timber\* as a wall. Inside the palisade they erect a house.” [*Life of St John, Bishop of Terouanne*]

These first fortifications were a slow response to the invasion of Western Europe by various tribes and peoples which had begun in the 3rd and 4th century. More attacks followed in the next centuries. Castles offered protection not just to the Lord and his family, but also to the people from the surrounding countryside.

A well-known example of a stone castle in Germany is Eltz Castle (*Burg Eltz*), first mentioned in 1137. Located in a wooded area near the river Mosel, it has escaped destruction in contrast to many others in Germany. It was erected on an ancient trade route connecting the Mosel with the Eifel area. But in spite of its elevated location on a hill, seventy metres above the river Eltz, the castle is actually on lower ground than the hills around it, which would have caused problems in the case of a siege\*. Therefore Eltz Castle served more as a fortified residence than as a fortress\*.



Image 1: Eltz Castle / Burg Eltz Photo: Sarah Adams

Most castles were strongly fortified. They often had two rings of heavy walls in a concentric form, massive fortified towers, and a drawbridge\* over a deep moat\* at the gateway, which could be blocked by a heavy metal grating\*. The strongest part of the building was usually

the keep, the main commanding tower.

Building substantial castles took many years and a large workforce. Beaumaris Castle in North Wales, for example, required 200 quarrymen\*, 400 stonemasons\* and about 2000 minor workmen. Work started in 1295 and continued for 35 years. Workers and materials were expensive. A huge amount of money was spent, but even then the castle was never really completed.

The centre of activity in a castle was the Great Hall where the lord and the lady and most of their household ate and worked. The Great Hall was also a huge common bedroom, where only the lord and the lady would have some kind of privacy in an area at the back, separated from the main space by a curtain. Apart from them everyone had to make do with a floor covering of rushes\* or straw. Everything that fell on the floor – bits of food, bones, or spilled beer, as well as the droppings of dogs and cats and other pets – might be left to rot away creating an unpleasant smell. From time to time the servants replaced the soiled reeds\*.

The open fire in the centre of the room was eventually replaced by fireplaces built into the walls. Proper chimneys were rarely provided, making the room(s) very smoky especially if the wind blew from the wrong direction. There was often a ‘garderobe’ built into the thick outer wall, which was actually a lavatory without plumbing\*. This was just a hole going down through the wall to the outside of the castle, and usually into the moat.

Water is essential for life, so arguably the most important feature of a castle was a water well or cistern.

A normal day's activity began soon after dawn when first Mass would be heard in the chapel. Then after breakfast the lord would attend to business matters in relation to his land (crops, harvests, supplies) and finances (taxes, dues\*). The lord also had to act as arbiter\* of any disputes that might arise and exercise his power as the local judge. This kind of business would usually have been concluded before midday, when it was time for the main meal of the day. Though knives were provided at the table, solid food, such as meat was cut up and eaten with 'God's forks', the fingers.

For the rest of the day, the lord could then turn to his favourite activities – hunting and hawking\*.

Later, after supper, there might be some sort of entertainment – music, dancing, jugglers\*, or jesters\*. As night fell candles were lit. A portable lantern would likely be used to walk up or down the dark and narrow, winding staircases and along gloomy and draughty corridors.

The lady of the castle was obliged to stand in for her husband if he was called away to war, or perhaps on a crusade\*, or to defend some part of his own estates. Legally women had a very low status. Their husbands were usually older, sometimes much older, although they were rather more likely to die earlier too. Widows\* as young as 17 or 18 years of age were not unknown. Girls were married at the age of 13 or 14, usually in a marriage by arrangement.

When a boy born into a knight's family turned seven he was sent to another castle where he trained to become a knight. He first became a page and played warlike games such as wrestling, and practiced his swordsmanship with blunt\* weapons. The ladies taught him good manners, especially for when he had to wait on his own lord and lady. By the time he was 14 he was expected to be a practiced swordsman and hunter, skilled at hawking, horsemanship and at fighting in the *lists*, or tournaments. Soon he would become a squire\* and play



Image 2: Two knights jousting [image in public domain]

games with real weapons. He would also become a knight's personal servant in battle bringing fresh horses, lances or swords as necessary.

He might then expect to be made a knight around the age of 21. In a solemn ceremony he was dubbed\*, and formally made a knight.

The following advice is given those who longed to become knights: "You should lead a new life: devoutly keeping watch in prayer, fleeing from sin [...]; the Church defending, the widows and orphans helping [...] taking nothing from others [...]. Above all (you) should support the weak." (from a 14th century French poem)

Not everybody could become a Knight. The German Emperor Frederic I (Friedrich I.) laid down in 1187 that the sons of priests and peasants were not allowed leading the life of a knight.



Image 3: Joust of Betanzos in 1387 [image in public domain]

The German word '*Ritter*' emphasises the function of a mounted warrior whereas the English term '*knight*' (related to German '*Knecht*') suggests the original social importance. In return for the lands (small estates or manors) that his Lord would let to him the Knight had to promise to fight for his Lord when asked.

From the chronicler Gislebert von Mons we hear about the '*Festival at Pentecost\* at Mainz*' (*Hoffest zu Mainz*) in 1184. He tells us that because of the huge crowds that had come together the Emperor had tents pitched up. Nobles from all parts of the empire assembled, and according to Gislebert about 70,000 knights attended the festival. This is an impressive figure for those days, but the number is most likely exaggerated. On this occasion the

Emperor's two sons were dubbed knights. A tournament was arranged by the sons, in which about 20,000

knights were supposed to have taken part, but with blunt weapons, as tournaments with real weapons were somewhat dangerous.



Image 4: Bataille de Crécy 1346. Chroniques de Jean Froissard [image in public domain]

At a tournament in Cologne in 1240, sixty knights were killed. Rulers became worried therefore, not just about the loss of the lives of warriors, but also about the potential danger of plotting and planning rebellions on such occasions. The Church tried to ban tournaments but without much success. Gradually the 'free-for-all' mock\* battles gave way to single combat and safety precautions were introduced.

As warfare changed between 1200 and 1400 mounted knights gradually came to be increasingly out of date. Among other reasons the introduction of gunpowder, brought the age of castles and knights to an end. The ideals of chivalry, however, lived on as for example the German word 'ritterlich' suggests.

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