

chapter 4

The Rise of Latin Christendom

We have seen how the Middle Ages got its name from historians in Western Europe. These historians thought that when the Roman Empire fell, civilization died out in Western Europe.

They were only partly right. During the early part of the Middle Ages, civilization *did* ebb in Western Europe. There were many barbarian invasions. There was continual fighting. Cities and towns were destroyed. Farms became battlefields. Learning and trade almost stopped. During these centuries, the light of civilization in Western Europe very nearly went out. That is why these early centuries of the Middle Ages are called the **Dark Ages**.

The Dark Ages lasted until about 1000. Then a new branch of civilization began to develop in Western Europe. In many ways, this branch of civilization is very close to us. It gave us many of our laws, our ideas, and our customs.

Many different groups of people helped to form this new civilization. There were kings and queens and lords and ladies who lived in stone castles. There were knights who rode to battle in shining suits of armor. There were churchmen who taught the people about Christianity. There were merchants and artisans who helped to restore trade and to rebuild towns and cities. At the bottom of society, there were the peasants. They farmed the land.

The culture formed by the people of the Middle Ages was a mixture. In it, the ideas and traditions of Greece and Rome were blended with those of the Jews and Christians. Something else was added to this blend of ideas and traditions. That was the fighting spirit of the barbarians. The people of the Middle Ages loved to fight. They loved to have games of war. They loved to hear about heroes of the battlefield. Yet they loved beauty and peace. They wanted unity and order in their world.

Above all, most of these people were faithful Christians. They built hundreds of beautiful churches. They gave much of their surplus for church projects and for works of charity. Sometimes they even went to war for their religion. In fact, they did not think of themselves as Europeans. To them, Europe was **Christendom** — the lands of Christ. They hoped that some day all of Christendom would come under one church and one emperor. This dream never came true. Yet the idea and the name lasted for a long time.

The Dark Ages and the Problem of Defense

During the time of the Roman Empire, civilization had spread far into Western Europe. The Roman Empire had sent its armies and laws to many lands. Then, slowly, the Roman Empire in the West began to break down. Rome itself fell in A.D. 476. The Roman armies could no longer protect Western Europe from invasion. From about A.D. 500 to 1000, barbarians swept over Western Europe.

The barbarians came into Western Europe from many directions. From the east and north came the Huns, the Goths, and the Vandals. From the area now called Germany came the Franks, the Angles, and the Saxons. The Franks gave their name to the country now called France. The Angles gave their name to England, or "Angle-land."

Centuries of barbarian invasions might not seem like a good beginning for a great civilization. However, the barbarians really admired civilization. Once they had conquered an area, they wanted to set up a secure way of life. They wanted the conquered people to serve them and to grow their food.

Even then, however, the barbarians could not be sure of having a secure way of life. Different groups kept attacking each other's lands. Besides, there were always more barbarians on the outside. They just waited for a chance to come in. Bands of armed men kept raiding the fields and villages. The peasants could not grow their crops in safety.

In short, there was no safe law and order in Western Europe. No strong governments were left. There were only armed gangs. These gangs took anything they had the power to take. Only one organization was left to carry on the lessons of civilization. That was the Christian church in the West. This was later called the Roman Catholic Church. We will call it the Latin Church because it was the church of Latin Christendom.

The Latin Church became powerful because many people joined it. Except for the Jews throughout Europe and the Muslims in Spain, settlers in all parts of Europe became Christians. The Latin Church kept the Christian faith alive in the West. It also kept alive some ideas from Greco-Roman culture.

The Latin Church was powerful, but it could not provide law and order. It could not defend the Europeans against barbarian attacks. The church had religious authority, but it had no armies or police. Besides, the heads of the church did not want to use force. If they tried to use force the church might lose its authority.

In Western Europe, law and order were badly needed. So were some means of defense against barbarian attacks. In time, the problems of defense were solved. Along with a new kind of defender came a new kind of society. Let us see how this happened.

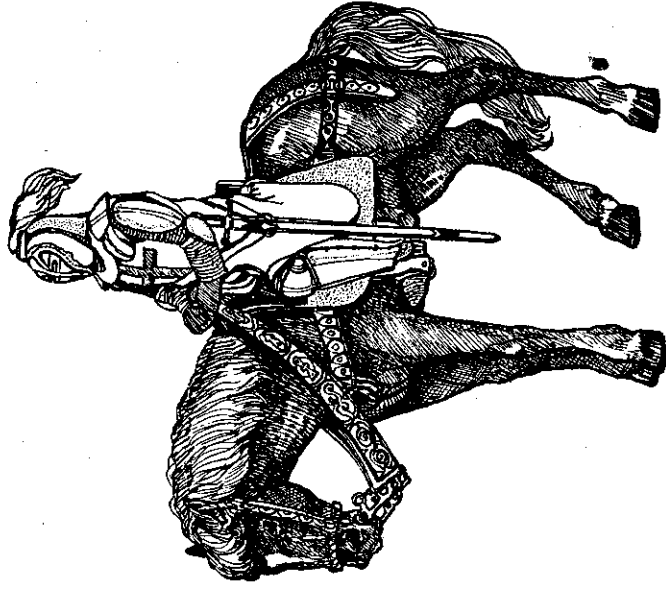
The Knight—A New Kind of Defender

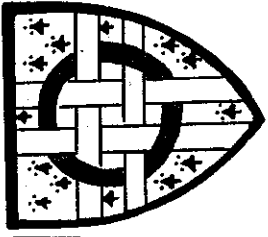
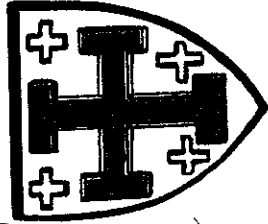
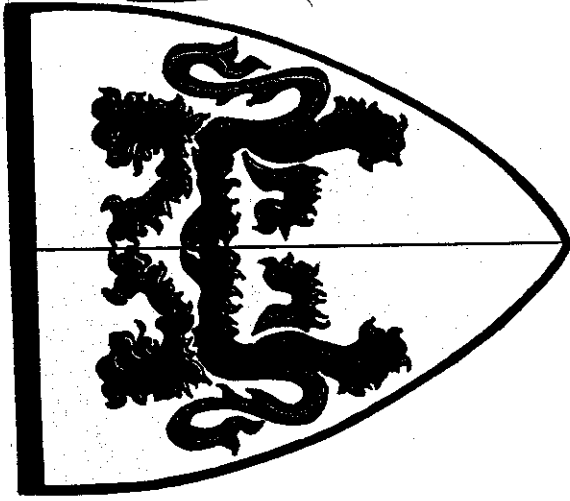
When we think of the Middle Ages, we think of *knights-in-armor*. These knights were soldiers on horseback. They began as barbarian warriors.

Since ancient civilization, horses and mounted soldiers had been used in battle. Before the Middle Ages, however, the soldier on horseback was not a very effective fighter. He lacked two important inventions: *stirrups* and the *horseshoe*.

Barbarians from Central Asia first brought stirrups into Western Europe. Stirrups are attached to a horse's saddle to hold the rider's feet. Once a soldier had stirrups, he could sit firmly on a horse's back. Then he could charge against a strong line of foot soldiers. Without stirrups, a soldier on horseback could not make this sort of charge. As soon as he bumped into the line, he might fall off. Foot soldiers might knock him off with long spears.

After the stirrup came the horseshoe. Horseshoes are iron shoes made to be nailed to a horse's hoofs. They enable the horse to keep its footing in soft ground and to gallop over hard ground. With them, the horse can carry a heavy load and not damage its hoofs.

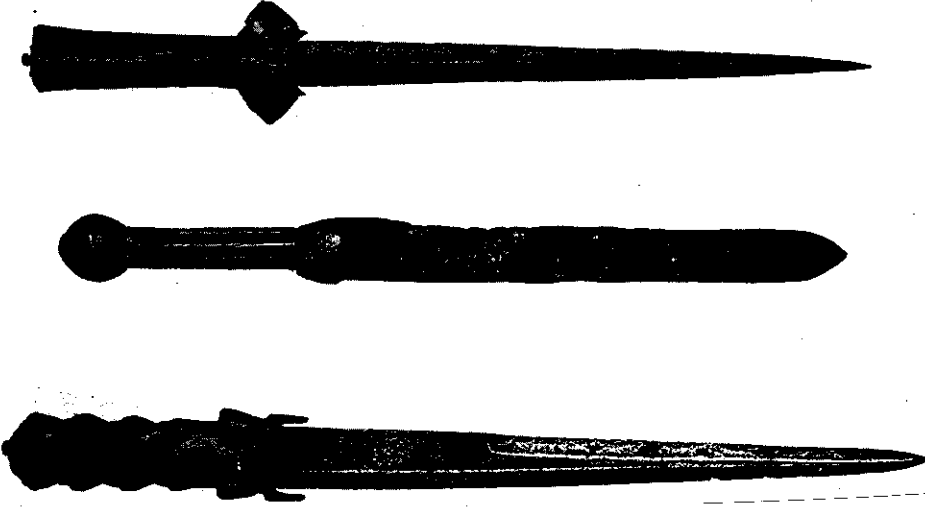




These designs are from shields that belonged to knights who took part in the early crusades.

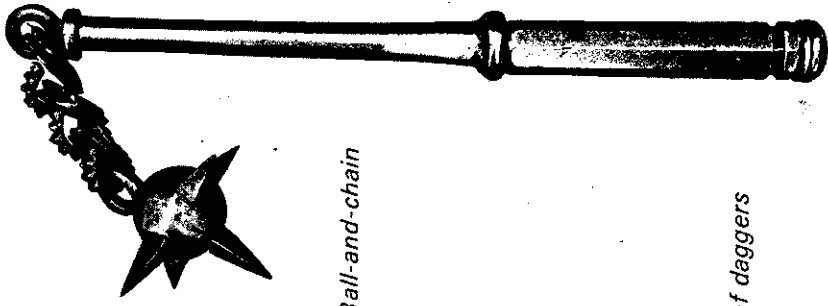
With these two important inventions, the fighting men of Western Europe could control the battlefield. This was especially true when they began to wear armor. The spears and arrows of the foot soldiers could seldom break through a knight's armor. Blows from foot soldiers could seldom make a knight fall from his horse. There were only two ways to make him fall. The saddle could be cut from his horse, or his horse could be killed. For protection, the knight's horse soon wore armor, too.

Early in the Middle Ages, each knight-in-armor wore a coat made of heavy links of iron. Later, knights wore iron or steel plates that protected the shoulders, chest, arms, and legs. A knight's head was covered by an iron or steel helmet. The helmet had a movable facepiece. Even the knight's hands were protected. He wore strong, iron gloves. When a knight put on all of his armor, it was hard to tell who he was. For identification, he carried a battle shield. His "coat-of-arms" was painted on this shield. The coat-of-arms told what family he came from.



Three types of daggers

Ball-and-chain



A knight-in-armor knew how to use several weapons. To smash the armor of an enemy knight, he could use a battle-axe or a ball-and-chain. To kill his enemy, he could use a sharp dagger and a two-handed sword. His most important weapon was a long, heavy spear called a lance. In battle, many knights would line up together on their horses. Then, pointing their lances forward, they would rush toward their enemies. The line of knights would rush forward like a thundering wall of iron. From fighters like these, Western Europe gained the defense it needed so badly.

With the knights providing defense, the peasants could grow and harvest crops. There were economic and political problems, however. Supporting a large force of knights required the work of many people. That is how the need for defense gave rise to a new society and a new economy. A whole new way of life developed. We call this way of life the **feudal** (fū'dl) system.

The Feudal System – A Way of Organizing Society

The feudal system was based on the ownership of land. As the feudal system developed, most of the land in Western Europe came under the control of **lords**. During the early years of the feudal system, nearly all the lords had once been knights. They became lords simply by becoming more powerful than other knights. They used their power to claim land and the title of lord. Then, as time went on, most lords were lords by birth. They gained their lands and titles through their families.

When a lord had become powerful enough, he set up his own government. All over Western Europe, there were hundreds of such governments. Each lord had his own army of knights. The lord and his knights defended the land against raiders.

The highest duty of a knight was to his lord. He swore that he would be loyal to his lord. He swore that he would help him whenever he was needed. In return, the knight usually received a piece of land from his lord. This land was called a **fief** (fēf).

The lords and the ladies lived in stone castles. Most often, a lord built his castle for defense. He had to be able to protect himself against attacks from his enemies. That is why he would build his castle with towers and thick stone walls. Many of his knights lived at the castle and helped to defend it.

The peasants lived in villages close to the castle. Their homes were small, crude huts. The peasants farmed the land and were very poor. Sometimes enemy knights would come to rob their villages. When that happened, the peasants would hurry to their lord's castle. There, behind the stone walls, they were better protected. They had to pay for protection from the lord and his knights, however. The peasants had to obey their knight or lord. Since they had very little money, they paid in goods and services.

The peasants were not the only ones to give goods and services for protection. The same thing happened at other levels of the feudal system. Any landholder under the protection of someone else was called a **vassal** (vas'ŭl). Therefore, a knight was a vassal to his lord. A lesser lord was a vassal to a greater lord.

Look at the diagram of the feudal system on the next page. The actual feudal system was much more complex than this simple

THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

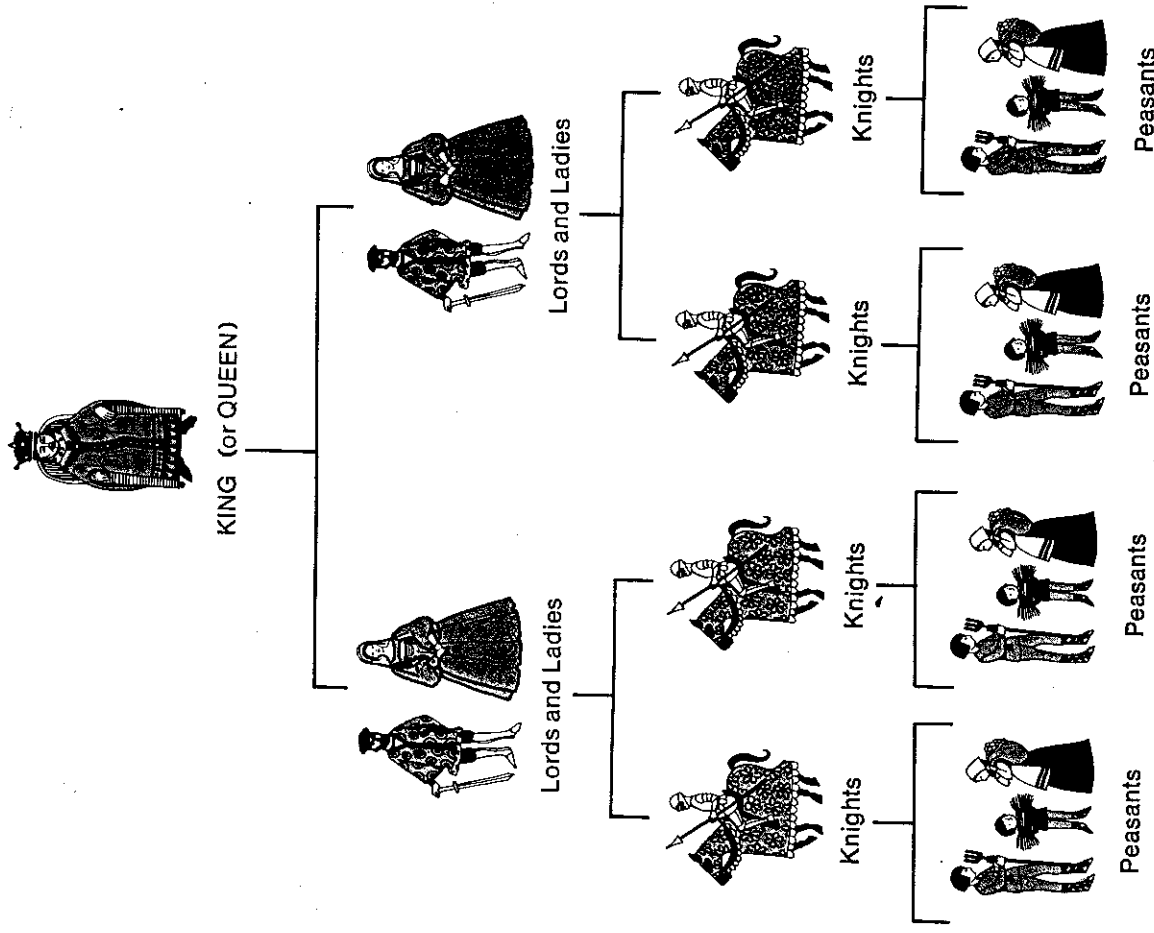


diagram. Often there was a monarch—a king or a queen. Next came the great lords and ladies. There were lesser lords and ladies beneath the great lords and ladies, and then even lesser lords and ladies beneath them. Next in importance to the lords and ladies were the knights and their servants. At the bottom of society were the farmers, or peasants.

As time went on, several lords would join together under some great lord or king. This gave them even greater protection. Still, kings did not become powerful for a long time. Until they did, the lords were the most powerful leaders in the feudal system. A great lord could be under the king's rule. Yet he might own more land than the king. He might have a larger army of knights. The great lords did not want a strong king. They knew that a strong king would take away much of their power.

A feudal king had only a small army of his own. When he needed a larger army, he asked the great lords to bring their knights to help him. The lords had to pledge allegiance to the king, but the knights did not. Each knight pledged loyalty only to his lord. If his lord was killed in battle, a knight did not have to keep on fighting for the king.

The New Agriculture

Before the people of Latin Christendom could get on with the work of building a civilization, they had to grow a large surplus of food.

To grow a large surplus, they had to overcome a new problem. The problem was especially difficult in the northwestern part of Europe. The climate of northwestern Europe is very humid. A great deal of rain and mist is brought by the west winds from the Atlantic. The soil is good for growing crops. However, it is wet and heavy.

At first, the farmers in northwestern Europe used a light plow. It was like the plow used by the Greeks and Romans. This kind of plow was fine for turning the dry, light soil of the Mediterranean region. In northwestern Europe, however, this plow was not strong enough. It could not break up the wet, heavy soil of the valleys and plains. People were forced to farm the poorer soil on the hills.

Then a new plow came into use. This plow was heavy. It had wheels. It had an iron knife to cut the soil. Behind the knife was a plowshare. The plowshare was a blade that dug into the soil. Attached to the plowshare was a moldboard. The moldboard turned the soil over. The design was much like the design of plows used today in northwestern Europe and North America.

With this new plow, farmers in Western Europe could cultivate the rich soils of the valleys and plains. The new plow had another advantage, too. As the moldboard turned the soil, it left a ridge and a furrow. Each ridge was like a long, tiny hill running



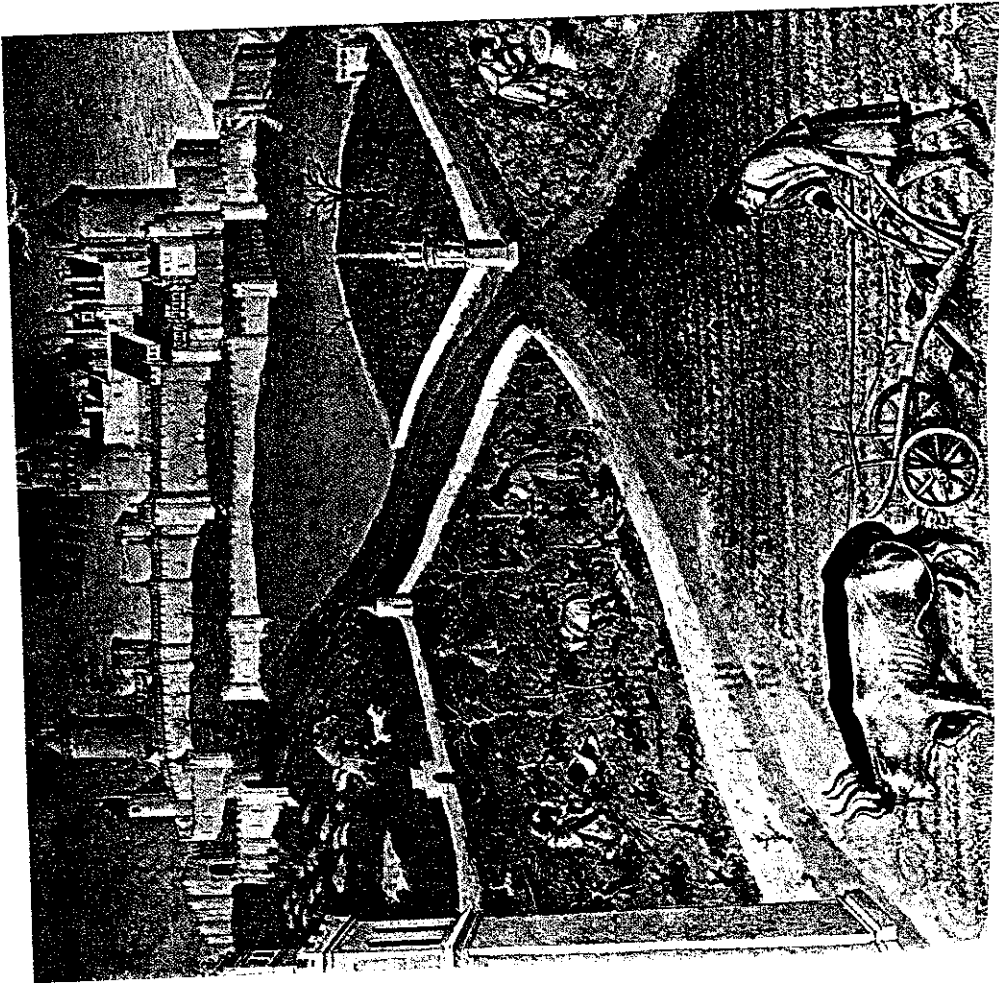
The Manor

In many parts of Western Europe, the feudal system plus the new way of farming led to something else new. They led to a different kind of farming community. This new community was called a **manor** (man'ər).

We have read how land was divided under the feudal system. Each lord divided his land among his lesser lords and knights. The smallest division of land was the manor, which was the *unit of agricultural production*. Each manor had one or more villages where a number of peasant families lived. It also had a manor house or small castle where the lord of the manor lived. There was also a church with a priest.

The lord of the manor defended the villages. He owned the mill and some workshops. He ruled the peasants. The peasants did the farming. An interesting thing about the manor is how the land and work were shared. Each peasant family did not have a farm. Instead, all the land of the manor was divided into long strips. Every year the strips were distributed. Some strips were the lord's. Some were the priest's. And the rest were divided among the peasants.

The peasants worked on their own strips. They also worked on the strips of the lord and the priest. The plan of work was made up by the whole community. At first, each manor was *self-contained*: it produced and consumed its own goods. Soon, however, it produced a surplus — and trade began.



through the field. Each furrow was like a long, tiny valley. Extra water would ooze down into the furrows. Then it could flow off the field. This kept young plants from being drowned by extra water.

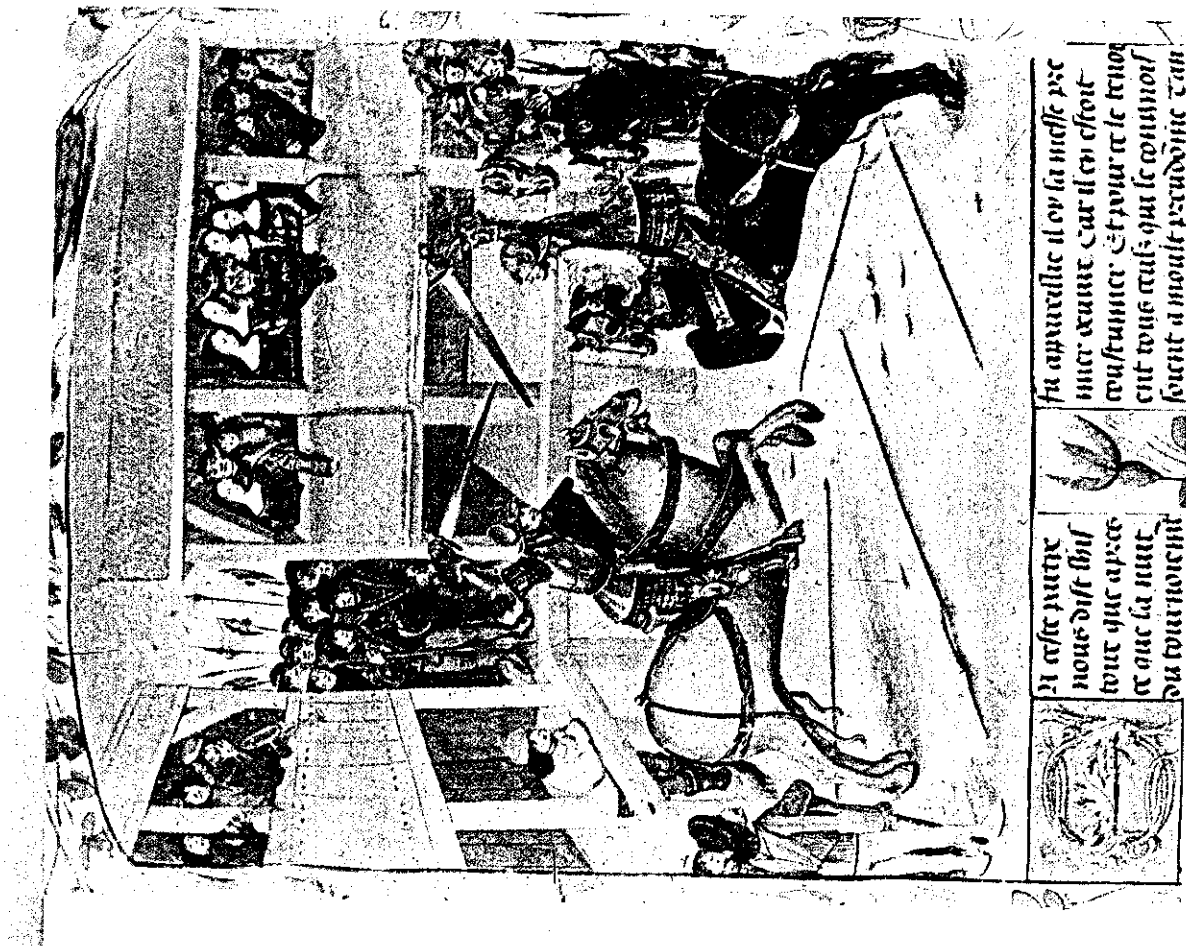
From four to eight oxen were needed to pull the heavy plow. It was best used for plowing long, narrow strips. First the oxen would pull the plow one way along a strip of land. Then they would rest while the plow was turned around. Then the oxen would pull the plow back. They would make another furrow right beside the first one.

The invention of the heavy plow is another example of how humans make progress. Once again, humans experimented. Once again, they found a new way to develop a new civilization.

The Age of Chivalry

Life in the great castles was quite different from life in the manor house and village. During the Middle Ages, the great lords and ladies and their knights set up a new style of behavior. It was called chivalry (shiv'əl rē). Chivalry means the way of life of knights.

To become a knight, a boy had to be from a noble family—a family of lords and ladies. Usually a boy would begin his training for knighthood when he was about seven. First he became a *page* and helped the ladies of a lord's castle. As a page, he would serve at the feasts held for the knights. Next he became a *squire* and learned to fight and hunt. When he was about 20, he could become a knight. As a knight, he was ready to fight whenever there was need for him to fight. A knight had to be tough. He had to know all the skills of battle. One way of practicing these skills was by mock battles called **tourneys** (tūr'nə ments).



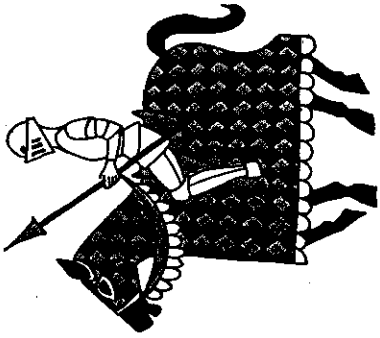
Et ceste joute
nous dist bien
tout que apes
ce que la joute
du tournoient



fu appareille il or la messe pce
muer ceunt. Car il en effoit
roy fuisse. Et pour ce le triou
ent touz ceus qui le cournois
foient a moult peudine Tan.

Knights jousting at King Arthur's court. The tournaments were marked by color and pageantry. The knight who succeeded in unseating the other knight was the winner. He was presented with a keepsake by a lady.

THE CODE OF CHIVALRY



Chivalry required
a knight to be -

1. loyal to his lord
2. faithful to the lady he loved
3. loyal to the church
4. a protector of the weak, the poor, the helpless, and all women and children
5. a brave and well-trained fighter who could bear great suffering and hardship
6. fair, just, kind, and truthful

As time went on, this rough soldier's code developed into something quite different. It was the beginning of our own Western ideas of good manners. How did this happen? As Latin Christendom grew more civilized, the meaning of chivalry changed. A good knight had to be more than a brave fighter. He had to be polite as well. He had to show the highest loyalty to the persons he served. He could never break a promise. He could never shrink from his duty—even if it meant giving up his life!

A good knight was loyal to the church. He was kind and gentle to the weak and the wounded. It was his duty to protect

any lady from danger. Of course, few knights lived up to all these ideals. Still, the pattern was set. To this day, a "gentleman" is judged, in part, by standards of chivalry.

Christianity was also a great influence in changing manners. Jesus had taught that people should be loving. In the eyes of God, he said, women are equal to men. The Catholic Church taught people to love and honor Mary, the mother of Jesus. Lessons such as these helped to bring new respect for women. It was different from the codes of most earlier cultures.

Of course, the change in behavior did not take place quickly. It did not affect everyone. All knights did not keep their promises. Nor were most women treated as equals to men. Still, a new set of ideas did come into being. The ideas are still with us.