

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 80: KNIGHT LIFE**

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## EPISODE 80: KNIGHT LIFE

Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 80: Knight Life. In this episode, we're going to examine the evolution of the Medieval knight. Our modern image of knights is shaped by novels and movies and television shows. We tend to think of shining armor, jousting contests, and chivalry, but all of that was a relatively late development. For most of its history, the reality of knighthood was quite different. As civil war and anarchy raged in England, much of the torture and kidnapping and extortion was carried out by knights. In fact, for several centuries, knights had often acted as thugs and bullies. They were the henchmen of powerful barons, but a new type of knighthood was gradually emerging around the current point in our story. This new type of knighthood was less focused on the brutality of warfare. It was more aristocratic, more connected to the Church, and more focused on courtly life. So this time, we'll look at the evolution of knights from brutal warriors on horseback to Christian crusaders and noble landholders. And along the way, we'll see how the institution of knighthood shaped the English language,

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can always reach me directly by email at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com). I'm also on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

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So let's jump right into it and pick up where we left off last time. In the last episode, we looked at the period of civil war in England known as the Anarchy. As supporters of Stephen and Matilda fought for control of the country, centralized power collapsed, and law and order broke down in the countryside. Local barons not only fought each other, they also kidnapped, tortured and killed many peasants. They collected ransoms and protection money. And they robbed anyone who had anything of value. They destroyed crops and killed livestock. And their brutality and extortion wasn't limited to peasants. The attacked churches and monasteries as well.

Much of this destruction was ordered by the barons and other prominent nobles. But they relied on their knights and mercenaries to do the dirty work. They were the ones who carried out the barons' orders. And this was consistent with the general role of knights up to this point in history. Knights were mounted warriors – highly trained fighters – and they did the bidding of the lord who employed them or the lord who granted them land. The concept of chivalry didn't really exist yet, but all of this was gradually starting to change. And in order to understand how knighthood was changing, we need to go back to the beginning – to the origin of knights.

Back in Episode 64, I looked at the origin of knights in the feudal system as it developed in France. After the Franks adopted the stirrup as a technology, it created a new type of warrior who fought on horseback. They wore chain mail, and carried swords and shields. In later centuries, they added lances to their equipment. These mounted warriors were like medieval tanks. A small group of those warriors could be as effective as hundreds of men fighting on foot.

Now as I've noted before, the word *knight* is an Old English word, so those Frankish warriors were not called *knights*. Their word for those warriors was based on the Vulgar Latin word for horse, which was *caballus*.

As I've noted before, Latin words that began with a 'ca' often experienced a sound change in early French. The sound shifted to a 'ch' sound, then later shifted to an 'sh' sound. So in earlier episodes, we saw how the word *caput* meaning 'head' produced the word *chief*, and then produced the word *chef*. Both words passed from French into English. Well, this same sound change also worked its magic on the word *caballus*.

In French, *caballus* – meaning 'horse' – produced the word *cheval* (/cheh-val/), which later became /sheh-val/. And a warrior on horseback was called a *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/), which later became /sheh-val-ee-ay/.

A group of horsemen was called a *chevalerie* (/cheh-valerie/), which again later became /sheh-valerie/, and that word eventually passed into English as *chivalry*. Now when that word first entered English, it still had its original meaning as 'a group of horsemen or knights.' But the meaning shifted over time to refer to the ideal code of conduct of the knights. But more on that later.

So during the period of Old French, the word for a knight was *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/), and the word for a group of knights was *chevalerie* (/cheh-valerie/).

Now that same Latin root *caballus* also passed into Italian. And within Italian, there was a parallel development of the word, but it didn't experience those French sound changes at the beginning. So whereas a French horseman was a *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/), an Italian horseman was a *cavaliere* (/cæ-væ-lear-ee/). And whereas a group of French horsemen was a *chevalerie* (/cheh-valerie/), a group of Italian horsemen was *cavalleria*. (/cæ-væ-lear-ee-ah/). So the French words has the 'ch' sound change at the beginning, and the Italian words retained the original Latin 'ca' at the beginning. Now those Italian words later passed into French and then into English. The Italian word for a horseman – *cavaliere* (/cæ-væ-lear-ee/) – gave us the word *cavalier*. And the Italian word for a group of horsemen – *cavalleria* (/cæ-væ-lear-ee-ah/) – gave us the word *cavalry*.

So *cavalry* and *chivalry* both meant 'a group of horsemen,' and both survive in Modern English, even though the meaning of *chivalry* has changed over time.

And *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/) and *cavalier* both meant 'an individual horseman,' but notice that only *cavalier* survives, and it wasn't borrowed until the 1500s. Meanwhile, the word *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/) has disappeared. So what happened to that word? Well, it got replaced with the Old English word *knight*. And to understand why that happened, we need to follow the history of those mounted warriors after they were introduced to Britain.

In the year 1066, William the Conqueror arrived from Normandy to make his claim to the English throne. And as we saw in earlier episodes, he brought his cavalry with him. The Anglo-Saxons still fought on foot. So William's horsemen had an advantage at Hastings. After William's victory, the Normans continued to rely on their cavalry.

And there was another important factor at work – the feudal system. When William doled out the land to his major barons, they agreed to provide certain services in return. And part of those services included an obligation to fight for William and help him defend his claims. After all, if William lost his claims to the land, so would the vassals who received their lands from him. So everyone agreed that the receipt of a land from the king came with an obligation to provide the king with a certain number of mounted warriors. And that obligation was passed down the line. As we know, many of those barons turned around and passed out part of their land to their own vassals, and those vassals had an obligation to provide knights to the baron in return. And the baron used those knights to satisfy his obligation to the king. So this is part of the reason why the feudal system is often described as a pyramid, with the king at the top, and a small group of prominent barons under him, and much larger group of vassals under them. Everyone's obligations flowed upwards for the ultimate benefit of the king.

So when a vassal received land, he had to make a certain number of warriors available to the lord who granted him the land. But that obligation imposed a heavy burden on the vassal because, as we've seen before, knights were very expensive to equip and maintain.

So how did barons and vassals come up with all of those knights that they were required to provide? Well, one option was to treat them as mercenaries. Just hire warriors to do the job. But mounted warriors required a lot of equipment – a horse, chain mail, helmet, shield, sword, lance, and so on. And it required a lot of training for both the warrior and the horse. You couldn't just go hire that type of warrior. You had to equip them and train them. And if they were mercenaries, they could just up and leave at any time. So these type of horsemen were really an investment. If you were going to put that much time and money into them, you had to make sure that you got a return on your investment. You couldn't just let the warrior leave and fight for someone who paid them a little more.

So it became common practice for a baron or other noble to bring those warriors into the household. They were equipped and trained, and they became part of the noble's court. So they had an elevated position compared to mercenaries. An even better arrangement was to give the warrior a small piece of land in exchange for his service. So the warrior actually became a vassal in the process. He became tied to the noble who granted him the land. And again, he became ingrained in the court of that noble.

Now these types of arrangements were common on both sides of the English Channel, and over time, this process fundamentally changed the role of the knights. They went from being warriors on horseback to actually being a part of the court itself – to becoming nobles in their own right. But before we explore those developments, let's see how this process changed the world for those warriors.

As we saw, the Old French word was *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/), and it simply meant ‘a fighter on horseback.’ But in England after the Conquest, those warriors were routinely living in the household of the noble who employed them. And in some cases, the warriors had been granted their own lands.

But in the wake of the Conquest, they were called to action to put down rebellions and secure the new Norman regime. So they didn’t have time to settle down and build a manor house. That meant that most of these mounted warriors continued to live with the nobles who employed them, even when the warriors were granted land as vassals.

And this helps to explain why the word *chevalier* (/cheh-val-ee-ay/) was dropped in favor of another word – *cniht*, or as we know it today, *knight*.

In Old English, the word *cniht* meant ‘a boy or household servant.’ It didn’t really have any military connotations. In its sense as a household servant, it could refer to any male member of the household. Of course, those young horsemen were living in the household with the lord, so in that sense, one of these warriors was also a *cniht*.

Soon after the Conquest, this word started to become restricted to these horsemen. And the native English word eventually pushed out the French word *chevalier*.

Now obviously – from *cniht* to *knight* – that word has undergone a lot of changes over the centuries. And I thought it might be interesting to look a little closer at that word because it reveals a lot about the evolution of English over time.

The first thing that stands out about the word *knight* is that there appears to be a lot of unnecessary letters in that word. The modern version of the word only has three basic sounds or phonemes. The ‘n’ sound, the long ‘i’ sound, and the ‘t’ sound – /nait/. Theoretically, we could spell the word with just three letters – [nit]. But the modern word has twice that many letters. And as we know by now, those letters represent sounds that were once pronounced, but have changed or gone silent over time.

If we go back to Old English, we find that the word was originally spelled [cnihht]. And words were spelled phonetically at that time. So each letter represented a specific sound.

The word began with the letter combination [cn], and that was actually quite common in Old English. Lots of words began with that sound combination. Words like *knife*, *knit*, *knock*, *knee* and many others began with that sound. That initial sound was also common in other Germanic languages. In earlier episodes, we saw that the Danish king Cnut also became king of England. His name also began with that sound.

Now as we know, the Anglo-Saxons didn’t use the letter [k], so they spelled all of those words and names with an initial [cn] in Old English. But French did use the letter [k] in certain situations, and by the 1200s, the French-influenced scribes in England had started to replace the

initial [c] with a [k], and that produced the [kn] spelling that we have today. So words like *knight*, *knife*, *knit* and *knock* all got new spellings in Middle English.

But notice that the Middle English scribes replaced the letter [c] with a new letter instead of dropping it altogether. And that suggests that they still needed a letter there to represent that ‘k’ sound which was still being pronounced before the [n]. If that initial ‘k’ sound had been silent at that point, the scribes would have probably dropped the letter altogether, and they would have started the word with the letter [n]. But the fact that the scribes chose to put that letter [k] in there tells us that it was still being pronounced at that time.

Most modern linguists think the initial ‘k’ sound was pronounced for most of the Middle English period, and it didn’t become silent until the late Middle English or early Modern English period. And so words like *knight*, *knife*, *knit*, *knock*, and *knee* all had their modern pronunciations by the time of Shakespeare. Linguists are generally comfortable with that time frame, but they still aren’t entirely sure why that initial ‘k’ sound disappeared. When that sound disappeared, it left English with quite a few words with a silent [k] at the beginning, including *knight*.

So that explains the [kn] at the beginning. What about the [gh] in the middle? Well, we’ve also seen that letter combination before. And you may recall that it represents a /x/ sound pronounced either near the palate or the back of the throat. That was once a common sound in Old English and Middle English. So again, that letter combination is a remnant of a sound that was once pronounced, but has gone silent over time.

Now the Anglo-Saxons didn’t actually use the [gh] letter combination. Instead, they used either [g] or [h], but not both. So remember that the original spelling of *knight* was [cniht]. So they just used the letter [h] for that word.

After the Conquest, the French-influenced scribes encountered these Old English words, and they didn’t like the way the Anglo-Saxon scribes represented that sound. The problem is that both [g] and [h] represented several different sounds. The [g] could be a ‘hard G’ as in *garden* or a ‘soft G’ as in *general*. It could also represent a ‘y’ sound in Old English. You might remember that the ‘g’ sound had shifted to a ‘y’ sound in certain words. So, for example, the word *year* was spelled [gear] in Old English. So that was another sound for the letter [g]. And as I noted, the [g] could also represent the /x/ sound. So when the letter [g] appeared in a word, the Norman scribes weren’t always sure what sound the letter represented.

The letter [h] also represented at least two different sounds. It could represent the modern ‘h’ sound in words like *house* and *hair*, as well as this /x/ sound. And in Latin, the ‘h’ sound had gone silent in many words in Late Latin, so it was also a silent letter in many French words – in words like *honest* and *honor*. So again, the Norman scribes weren’t always sure what sound this letter represented in a particular word. So to represent the guttural /x/ sound, some scribes decided to put the [g] and the [h] together, thereby creating a new letter combination. It was similar to the way [t] and [h] were put together to represent the /th/ sound. And [c] and [h] were put together to represent the /ch/ sound. And [s] and [h] were put together to represent the /sh/ sound. And here, the [g] and [h] were put together to represent the /x/ sound.

We know this [gh] letter combination was a brand new innovation around the current point in our story because it appears for the first time in the Peterborough Chronicle in the entry for the year 1138. The Peterborough scribe was writing about King David of Scotland invading northern England during the Anarchy. And he writes that David was defeated at a battle called the Battle of the Standard. He writes that the English forces ‘slew’ many of David’s men, but he used the Old English version of *slew*, which was *sloghen*. In traditional Old English, the word was *sloh* – sometimes spelled [sloh] and sometimes spelled [slog]. But the Peterborough scribe renders it as *sloghen* – [sloghen].

Again, this is one of the first known uses of the combined [gh] to represent that sound. And it was being applied to the word *knight* by the mid-1300s. But again, this sound disappeared from standard English over time, though it still exists in some regional dialects. The end result was a silent [gh] in the middle of the word *knight*.

So in a word like *knight*, both the [k] at the beginning and the [gh] in the middle represent sounds that were once there, but have disappeared. And note something about those two sounds. They’re both pronounced in the palate or the back of the throat. So in the original word *cniht*, you had to start at the back of the throat with the ‘k’ sound, then immediately shift forward to get to the ‘n’ sound. And the vowel [i] – pronounced /ee/ at the time, so it was a front vowel pronounced in the front of the mouth. But then you had to go a little further back to the palate to get the /x/ sound. And then you had to immediately move forward to get the ‘t’ sound at the front of the mouth. So in a simple one-syllable word like *cniht*, you had to go from the throat to the front of the mouth, back to the palate, and then back to the front of the mouth – *cniht*. That’s a lot of action for a simple little word. And notice that over time, the word has lost those sounds in the palate and the back of the throat. All of the action today is in the front of the mouth – /nait/. So that might give us a clue about the evolution of English. As a general rule, English has gotten softer and smoother over the past 1,500 years, and it’s pronounced more toward the front the mouth.

So as we’ve seen, the [k] at the front of words like *knight*, *knife*, and *knot* has disappeared. And words like *gnat* and *gnaw* have a [g] that was once pronounced at the front. But it has also disappeared. The guttural /x/ sound and palatal /x/ sound have largely disappeared.

In earlier episodes, we also saw the ‘k’ sound and ‘g’ sound shifted forward to sibilant sounds before the front vowels – what is called assibilation or palatalization. The ‘k’ sound shifted forward and became a /ch/ sound in Old English. So German has *reich* where English has *rich*. In French, that same ‘k’ sound shifted forward and became an ‘s’ sound, so *centum* became *cent*. As I noted a few moments ago, the ‘hard G’ sound sometimes softened to a ‘y’ sound in Old English. So *gear* became *year*.

When we looked at Viking influence, I noted that Old English had lost the ‘sk’ sound (/sk/), and replaced it with an ‘sh’ sound (/sh/), again pronounced in the front of the mouth. And when the Vikings arrived, Old Norse reintroduced that ‘sk’ sound (/sk/). So English had the word *shirt* pronounced in the front of the mouth, whereas the Vikings had the word *skirt* pronounced more in the back of the throat.

In French, the ‘hard G’ tended to shifted forward to a ‘soft G’ before the front vowels. So *Germania* became *Germany*. And those pronunciations passed into English with the Norman Conquest.

Also, I began this episode by reminding you that the Latin ‘ca’ sound (/ka/) had shifted forward in French to become a ‘ch’ sound (/ch/), and then an ‘sh’ sound (/sh/). Again, this is another example of assibilation or palatalization. So Latin had *caput* where French had *chapel*. And as we saw earlier, Latin *caballus* produced French *chivalry*. And again, these influences and sound changes passed into English with the tens of thousands of words that were borrowed from French.

So the trend should be clear by this point. Over the past 1,500 years, English has shown a tendency to abandon sounds in the back of the mouth in favor of sounds in the front of the mouth. As a result, English tends to be pronounced more toward the front of the mouth today. And no word represents that change better than the word *knight*. From *cniht* to *knight*, we can hear the evolution of English.

So that’s how the word *knight* came to mean ‘a warrior who fought on horseback.’ And that’s also how the word evolved over time.

I should also note that the Peterborough Chronicle sometimes used another term for a knight, and that was the word *ridere*, literally a ‘rider.’ That term also survived into Middle English.

As the feudal system was introduced to England after the Norman Conquest, knights became more and more common, but they were still primarily warriors. They weren’t really considered nobles yet.

As barons granted lands to their young knights in exchange for their services, more and more knights became landholders. And they started to acquire their own servants and peasants. They were starting to resemble nobles and aristocrats. The personal servant or attendant of the knight was called an *esquier* (/es-kee-ay/) in French, but after that word passed into English, it became Anglicized as *esquire* and then just *squire*. The word *squire* was derived from the Latin word *scutum*, which meant ‘shield.’ A *squire* was literally a ‘shield carrier.’ So a squire assisted the knight, and as his name suggests, he carried the knight’s shield.

Now that shield could be called a *shield*, which is an Old English word, or it could be called by that Latin word *scutum* or the Old French version of that word, which was *escut*. But there was also another word for a shield – a *targa*. And that was a very common Germanic word for a shield. As we know, there was a lot of warfare among the Germanic tribes, so this word is well-attested throughout the Germanic languages. Old English had it. Old Norse had it. And the Franks had it. And from the Franks, the word passed into French. And French, took that word and made a variation of it.

They sometimes used a small, round shield in battle. And French sometimes used the suffix ‘-ette’ to indicate a smaller version of something. So you might have a *statue* or a *statuette* – ‘a



little statue.’ And you might give a *sermon* or a *sermonette* – ‘a short sermon.’ So to describe these smaller circular shields, French converted *targa* into *targette*. It meant a light round shield, and it passed into Middle English. And for about 400 years, the word *target* meant just that – a round shield. But in the 1700s, the word started to take on its current meaning. Archers practiced and tested their skill by shooting at a round object at a distance. Those objects resembled those small round shields, so they started to call them *targets*. They had ‘target practice.’ And the word *target* took on its current meaning.

So we now have knights accompanied by squires, who carried the knight’s shield or target. By the time of Stephen’s reign and the outbreak of civil war and anarchy, the knights were well-entrenched. Every baron has numerous knights at his disposal. And when civil war broke out, it was every baron for himself, and those knights basically served as the baron’s private army.

Many of those barons used the breakdown of law and order to extort and exploit the countryside. And so those knights were put into service to do the bidding of the barons. Much of the kidnapping, and robbery, and torture and murder, was carried out by those knights.

We got a sense of their brutality in the passages from the Peterborough Chronicle which I read last time. I also have another story from the Anarchy to illustrate how ruthless the knights could be. The story concerns a prominent noble who was supporting Matilda. His name was John FitzGilbert, and he had held the title of Marshal during the reign of Matilda’s father Henry I. The *Marshal* was a high official of the royal court, and the word originally meant the ‘horse servant’ – the person in charge of the horses. It is a French word, but it was borrowed from the Franks. And in fact, the ‘mar’ part of *Marshal* is cognate with the English word *mare* meaning ‘a female horse.’

In fact, there was another position in the royal court with a similar etymology. It was the *comes stabuli* using two Latin words. It literally meant the ‘count of the stable.’ And over time, the ‘count of the stable’ became the *constable*. So the ultimately etymology of *marshal* and *constable* indicate that they both originally referred to the officers who were responsible for the king’s horses.

Anyway, the Marshal under Henry I was this guy, John FitzGilbert. And by this point, that was a hereditary title. He received it from his father. When King Henry died, and Stephen claimed the throne, John the Marshal decided to support Stephen. But he later changed sides and threw his support to Matilda. So Stephen besieged John’s castle. After a protracted siege, John the Marshall requested a truce. He agreed to turn over the castle if Stephen would stop the siege. As was customary, Stephen demanded a hostage to ensure that John actually lived up to his word and turned over the castle. So John delivered his young son William to Stephen as a hostage. William was about 8 years old at the time.

Now here’s the thing. John the Marshall had no intention of turning over that castle to Stephen. He used the truce and the break in the action to reinforce the castle and alert Matilda’s forces. When Stephen realized what was going on, he sent word to John to surrender the castle immediately. If he didn’t, Stephen would have the young boy hanged. Supposedly, John the

Marshall told Stephen to go ahead and do it. He said, “I still have the hammer and the anvil with which to forge still more and better sons!” But Stephen didn’t go through with his threat. He didn’t want to hang the young boy. This is when Stephen’s knights stepped in and suggested that they teach John a lesson. They offered to put the boy in a catapult and launch him into the castle. So as we can see, the life of young child wasn’t very important to the knights.

Ultimately, this story has a happy ending. Stephen couldn’t bring himself to harm the young boy. So he kept young William as a hostage for several months. He eventually released the boy in a settlement with the other side. Now there’s a reason I’m telling you this story about young William. It is because he grew up to become the most famous knight in English history.

As an adult, William became known as William the Marshall – or simply William Marshall based on his father’s title. He actually became such a major figure that he played a prominent role in the court of the next few kings of England. And we’ll look a little closer at his later life when we get to those kings. But for now, I want to focus on how he became such a famous knight.

William’s rise to fame and riches was based on his mastery of the biggest public spectacle of the day – the knight’s tournament. The tournament was a way for knights to practice warfare without actually engaging in warfare, though sometimes it was hard to tell the difference. Tournaments often involved day-long mock battles between dozens of knights – sometimes over a hundred knights. It was opportunity for knights to display their skills, and make money. But in the process, many knights were seriously injured and killed.

Today, when we think of contests between knights, I think we tend to think of jousting contests between heavily armored knights, but that type of contest didn’t really become common until the very end of the Middle Ages. For most of the history of knighthood, tournaments were very different.

They involved two or more groups of knights. And the groups would attack each other for sport over a wide range of countryside. The object was to knock other knights off their horses and take them captive. The successful knight would demand a ransom to release the captured knight. He would often take the prisoner’s horse and equipment as well. Successful knights could make a fortune. And that’s how William Marshall become the most famous knight in England. He captured so many opposing knights, and collected so many ransoms, that he became rich and famous, and he also became a very powerful noble. Of course, while some knights became rich and famous, others had the opposite experience. Knights who got captured risked losing everything, and many of them did. And as I noted, it was often such a brutal affair, that many knights were injured and even killed. So it was a ‘high risk and high reward’ game.

The tournament often began by having the two groups of knights charge at each other and try to knock the opposing knights off of their horses. After the initial charge, they would then swing around and mark a sharp turn to head back for a second charge. This process of turning back again and again produced the name for this type of contest. The *tournament*. The same Latin root

word that gave us the word *turn* also gave us the words *tourney* [tourney] and this related word *tournament*. Both *tourney* and *tournament* were in use in Old French.

If you imagine yourself as a spectator at a tournament, you might see a connection to another English word – the word *tornado*. From a distance, the swirling and spinning motion of the knights resembled particles of dust or debris blowing in the wind. And that is the same type of motion you might see in a tornado. The ultimate etymology of *tornado* is a little unclear. Some scholars think it is derived from a Latin root word that meant ‘thunder.’ Others attribute it to this Latin root word that meant ‘to turn.’ Both Latin words were almost identical, and there seems to be a general agreement that both root words influenced the development of the word *tornado*. But ultimately, *tournament* and *tornado* may share the same root meaning ‘to turn or twist.’

The knights’ tournaments also gave us another English word to describe this chaotic scene of knights attacking each other. With so many knights charging and turning back – and charging and turning back – the entire contest was a whirling group of knights charging back and forth and mixing together. So a new word was also coined to describe this process. From the same Latin root that gave us words like *mix* and *medley*, this type of contest started to be called a *melee*. This was a common Old French term for these contests, but the word *melee* didn’t enter English until the 1600s. Today, we think of a *melee* as any kind of out-of-control fight or skirmish.

These tournaments were massive events. They could range over several square miles, including villages and woods. Over time, they attracted large crowds, including ladies who watched as spectators and even sometimes served as judges for certain contests. They also attracted minstrels, entertainers, merchants and various other people. They were the biggest sporting events of the day.

The origin of these tournaments is a little unclear, but it appears that they originated in northern France. It also appears that the first tournaments took place in the early 1100s or shortly before. The first mention of a tournament was during the reign of Henry I. And those initial tournaments were held in France. The first known tournament held in England took place during Stephen’s reign. So at the current point in our story, these tournaments were still relatively new. They probably started out as a type of war game or training for combat. But they quickly evolved into something different. It was part sport and part battle. And sometimes, they got completely out of control and became actual battles with knights actively killing each other. That was why these types of tournaments started to fall out of favor over time.

I mentioned that the first known tournament in England took place during Stephen’s reign. It occurred in the year 1142, and the reason we know about it is because Stephen broke it up. The chronicles report that he broke up a tournament in York as part of his attempt to restore order to the kingdom. In fact, his successor – Henry II – completely banned tournaments in England. They were later reinstated by Richard the Lionheart. And it wasn’t just kings who were concerned about these tournaments. The Church also tried to reign them in. A papal council at Clermont in France the year 1130 tried to prohibit tournaments altogether, but the contests continued on anyway.

Over the next couple of centuries, these type of tournaments did fall out of favor. They were gradually replaced with the one-on-one combat of the joust. And by that point, heavy plated armor was more common. So we end up with the type of jousting contest that we think of today. But again, it took a couple of centuries to get to that point. In the meantime, these rough and brutal *melées* were the norm.

Now I noted that the Church got involved and tried to outlaw these tournaments. And this brings us another very important development in the evolution of the medieval knights – the role of the Church. Church officials had become frustrated with the rise of the knights and their propensity for violence.

We've been focused on events in England and the civil war and anarchy that was taking place there, but it is important to keep in mind that France had been experiencing similar problems for a couple of centuries. As we know, France was highly fractured, and it was governed by regional counts and dukes. The king of France only had direct control of the region around Paris. And those local barons and counts had been fighting each other for years. There was a seemingly endless series of petty wars. Castle sieges were commonplace. And it was common for villages to be destroyed and peasants to be extorted. And just like in England, much of that violence was carried out by knights.

The victims of that violence weren't just the peasants. It was also the Church. Churches and monasteries were routinely robbed and plundered. And Clerics were kidnapped and abused and ransomed. So in the late 900s, bishops in France tried to reign in that violence.

The first step was a series of rules called the Peace of God. It began with a council of bishops held in France in 989. That council ordered that no one was to rob a church or attack a member of the clergy. It also ordered that no one was to rob a peasant. The orders were soon extended to protect merchants, as well as anyone going to or coming from a church. Anyone who violated those rules was threatened with excommunication. Theoretically, those restrictions applied to everybody, but they were clearly aimed at the knights. Of course, many knights ignored those rules, but it was an important first step.

About fifty years later, there was another push by the Church to reign in this violence. This second movement was called the Truce of God. And it was designed to prevent fighting and violence on certain holy days, and it was specifically aimed at knights.

The initial restrictions were announced at a council in Nice in the year 1041. There was to be no fighting or plundering on Sundays, Easter and other feast days. This restricted period was gradually expanded to include Thursdays, Fridays, Saturdays and Sundays. It also included the entire 40-day period of Lent leading up to Easter, and the month-long period of Advent leading up to Christmas. So the Church was trying to restrict the fighting season as much as it could.

These were bold steps by the Church. Until these reforms, the Church didn't tend to get involved in the business of the knights, and the knights didn't really want the bishops telling them what to do. And even though these reforms had limited results, it started to change the mindset of many

knights. Before, they could pretty much do as they pleased, but now they had to consider that there might be consequences for their actions. Excommunication was a serious threat in the Middle Ages. Nobody, not even knights and kings, wanted to be threatened with eternal damnation. So some of the traditional barriers between the clergy and the knights was starting to break down. And shortly after these restrictions were handed down, there was the big event – the Crusades.

About fifty years after the Truce of God was announced, the Pope called European knights to come to the Near East to take back the Holy Land from the Muslim Turks. This meant that the knights were being put into service to fight for the church, and they were promised eternal salvation for their efforts. For knights who had robbed, and plundered and killed, the Crusades gave them an opportunity for redemption. Specific Christian military orders like the Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaller started to pop up. And many knights joined those orders. So a new ideal form of knighthood started to emerge – the ‘soldier of Christ’ or the ‘holy Crusader.’

So by the time we get to the current point in our story in the mid-1100s, the Crusades were still raging. And the Peace of God and the Truce of God reforms were still in effect. And all of these influences were starting to change the way some people thought about knights and the way some knights thought about themselves, but we have to keep in mind that these changes were still relatively new. They were lingering in the background. And in northern France and England, they hadn’t permeated the knightly culture yet, so many knights ignored these developments and carried on just as they always had. But over the next few decades, things started to change, and those changes generally spread northward through France and then into England.

What was really happening at this point was that the old traditional class of knights was starting to disappear. Up to this point, knights were simply warriors on horseback. They weren’t peasants and they weren’t nobles. And they weren’t clerics. They were a small elite class of warriors who loved to fight and often acted as thugs and bullies. And it was an open class. Any man could theoretically become a knight with the right support and patronage and equipment. And a knight who lost everything in war or in a tournament could cease to be a knight altogether.

But by the early and mid-1100s, all of that was starting to change. The line between the Church and the knights had become blurred. And the line between, the line between the knights and the nobles was also starting to erode.

Knights were continuing to acquire land. They were also a permanent fixture at the courts of the king and barons. Since knighthood was an expensive profession, it was difficult for peasants and other freemen to become knights, so it became a skilled profession – typically handed down from father to son. A knight would train his sons to ride and fight. He had the means to provide them with the necessary horses and equipment. So the sons of knights often became knights themselves. So knighthood started to become hereditary. Those sons also tended to inherit their father’s landholdings. So there was a new perpetual class of landholding knights. Also, by this point, it was common for knights to marry within that same class. They married the daughters of other knights or the daughters of nobles.

So by the time we get to the 1100s – to the current point in our story – knighthood was starting to look a lot like nobility. It was starting to become a closed class of small landholders. Most knights were born into that class, and they married within that class. And not only were knights starting to resemble nobles, it worked the other way as well. Nobles were also starting to imitate knights.

The title of ‘knight’ was acquiring a new prestige. It became common for the sons of nobles to become knights first, and then when they were older, they could assume a higher title – baron, or duke, or count, or king. So knighthood was a prelude to a higher class of nobility. Again the barriers between knighthood and nobility were breaking down. By the end of the century, virtually all nobles were taking the title of ‘knight’ – even kings.

Regardless of background, most knights went through the same basic levels of training. But there was still one basic difference between traditional warrior knights and the noble knights – and that was what happened at the end of that process. When nobles became knights, they had an elaborate ceremony to mark their passage into knighthood. Traditional knights had a much less formal ceremony or no ceremony at all.

So let’s look a little closer at that process from young boy to knight. When a young boy’s parents decided to train the boy as a knight, they would send the boy to live in the household of a knight. This happened when the boy was around seven years old. At that point, the young boy was called a *page*. He was basically a servant for the knight. He would serve his meals, clean his clothes, and retrieve and deliver messages. Other members of the household would also send the young boy to run errands. In the process of serving as a page, the boy learned good manners and the proper way to behave. He also did some basic training to learn how to fight with shields and swords and to learn how to ride a horse.

Now the word *page* still survives in Modern English. Sometimes, an intern or low level employee of a company or organization is still called a *page*. One of the primary functions of a modern page is to run errands and perform basic tasks just like a knight’s page. Modern pages also tend to retrieve and deliver messages just like their Medieval counterparts. *Page* has also become a verb. If you trying to contact someone, you might ‘page’ them. This comes from the original sense of sending a page to contact someone. In the 1960s, that sense of the word *page* produced another word for a new type of technology – a *pager*. Before cell phones became popular, you might have carried around a pager that signaled when someone was trying to call you. Again, all of those words came from the original sense of a page as a young boy in training for knighthood.

Around the age of fifteen, the page would move to the next stage of development. At that point, he would become a squire. We saw that word earlier in the episode. You might recall that the word *squire* – or *esquire* as it was originally called in Old French – was derived from a Latin word for shield. The *squire* was originally ‘the shield carrier.’ So he was the knight’s primary assistant even in battles and in tournaments. By this point, the position of squire had developed a very specific set of rights and responsibilities.

He would take care of the knight's horses. He would clean the knight's armor and weapons. And he would accompany the knight to the battlefield. Squires had to be ready to fight, so they were given advanced training in fighting on horseback, and using weapons in combat. The knight usually provided that personal instruction. Squires were also taught how to carve meat, and how to serve his lord at the table. They were also taught how to exercise proper manners at court. Most young men served as squires for five or six years before becoming eligible for knighthood.

Over the next century or so as knights and nobles blended together, squires also acquired a specific social rank. They occupied the rank just below that of knight. And it came to refer to a young man from a knightly family that had not officially become a knight. Many young men trained as knights, but never actually became knights for one reason or another. So they remained squires for their entire lives.

In Britain, the term *esquire* still survives as a very general term for men who are considered gentlemen by birth, or position or education. The term also survives in the United States, but here it has become limited to a title for lawyers and some other public officials.

The term *squire* also survives as a verb. Today, it usually refers to a situation where a man accompanies or escorts a woman. So a man might 'squire' a woman around town. Again, this sense of the word goes back to a time when the squire accompanied and escorted the knight into battle or into tournaments.

Now after several years of training, a squire could become a knight. This typically happened when the knight turned 21. Traditionally, there was no fancy ceremony at this point. The knight was simply given a ceremonial sword, and sometimes he was given other equipment. He was then declared a knight by the knights who trained him. Sometimes, this designation was made on the battlefield. But this relatively informal process was undergoing a lot of changes by the current point in our story.

First of all, as we now know, the Church had taken a more active role in knightly activities. Over the prior century or so, it had become common for a bishop or other cleric to bless the ceremonial sword before it was given to the knight. That symbolized the knight as a Christian warrior. It was also intended to give the knight the protection of God.

The next development was the introduction of a formal ceremony for noble sons who entered knighthood. This ceremony was called *knighting*, and it also came to be called *dubbing*. This ceremony first appeared around the current point in our story in the late 11<sup>th</sup> century and early 12<sup>th</sup> century. And it is a clear indicator that there was still a distinction being made between traditional warrior knights and noble knights. The ceremony mixed in elements of other noble ceremonies similar to the type of ceremony used when a vassal accepted land from a lord and swore an oath of fealty in return. Here, the knight accepted the sword and other equipment associated with knighthood, and he often swore an oath in return. It was an oath to honor and protect his king and the Church. In some forms of the oath, the knight swore not to make a false judgment or be a party to treason. In later versions, the knight agreed to honor women and protect

the poor. So in these oaths, we can see the early elements of what later became known as *chivalry*. Again, at this point, this type of ceremony was primarily limited to the sons of nobles.

One of the first written accounts of this type of ceremony takes us back to our overall historical narrative. As we know, Matilda was in England fighting for the English crown. Meanwhile, her husband Geoffrey of Anjou was back in France trying to claim Normandy on Matilda's behalf. As I've noted before, Geoffrey was also known as Geoffrey Plantagenet for the yellow sprig of broom blossom that he wore. It was called the *planta genista* in Latin or *planta genet* in French.

In the year that he married Matilda in 1128, he was also knighted with one of these formal ceremonies. You might remember that he was much younger than Matilda; he was only 15 years old at the time. And his knighting ceremony was described in a later history of Anjou compiled by an Angevin monk named John of Marmoutier. Anyway, that description is the first known description of the formal knighting ceremony. There are a few passing references to such a ceremony before that, but Geoffrey's ceremony is the first detailed account that we have. And that suggests that it was a relatively new type of ceremony.

The description indicates that Geoffrey took a ritual bath before the ceremony. He was then dressed in cloaks. From there, he entered the hall of the royal palace in Anjou. His father – the Count – and most of the other prominent nobles were present. He was then provided with a special coat of mail, iron boots, a shield, a helmet covered with precious stones and a sword. The sword and other equipment were placed on Geoffrey. This was part of a ritual dressing and arming of the knight.

Now this ceremony was an early version of the ceremony that would become standard in the next couple of centuries. And more elements would be added to it. The description of Geoffrey's ceremony doesn't mention an oath, even though that was a standard part of the ceremony as it became more popular.

There is also something else missing from this description – the 'dubbing' of the knight. The dubbing was the part where the lord or bishop who was conducting the ceremony took the sword and tapped the young man on the side of the neck or on the shoulder, and then declared that the young man was a knight by saying "I dub thee Sir Knight" or words to that effect.

It appears that some basic type of dubbing had been around for a while. It was probably a part of the ceremonies used for warrior knights in earlier decades. In fact, the word *dub* has an obscure history. Some argue that it has Germanic origins, others argue that it came from Old French, but it isn't very well-attested in either language family until the Norman Conquest. It was first used in the Peterborough Chronicle during the time of William the Conqueror. The Chronicle says that William held his court at Westminster, and 'dubbade his sunu Henric to ridere þær' – literally 'dubbed his son Henry to rider there.' So this passage uses that word *ridere* for 'knight.' But it also says that Henry – who later became Henry I – was 'dubbed' as a knight. So that suggests that dubbing was a common practice shortly after the Conquest, and so some type of tapping of the sword may have taken place even at that point. By the time we get to the end of the 1100s, it was a standard part of every knighting ceremony.



That word **dub** has survived into Modern English. When a young man was ‘dubbed,’ it meant that he became a knight. And that was confirmed with the words. “I dub thee Sir Knight.” So in later English, the word **dub** came to mean the process by which someone was given a title or name. So today, if you perform a brave and selfless act, you might be ‘dubbed’ a hero. So we still have that word. By the way, if you ‘dub’ someone’s voice in a recording, that is a completely different word. That word **dub** was coined in the 20<sup>th</sup> century as a shortened form of **double**. If you ‘double’ someone’s voice, you are recording over their voice. And **double** was shortened to **dub**. So that version of the word **dub** is unrelated to the Medieval sense of the word **dub**.

Now, as I noted, dubbing became a standard part of the knighting ceremony. Usually, the young knight would kneel before the person conducting the ceremony. Early on, that person was usually a lord, sometimes even a king. But in later centuries, as the Church influence continued to grow, the ceremony was usually conducted by a bishop or other church official. And the ceremony was usually held in a church instead of a castle or royal palace. The Church influence also influenced the dubbing ceremony itself. The bishop would take the sword, lay it on an altar, bless it, and then put the sword in the knight’s right hand. The bishop would then take it back, and the knight would kneel before him. The bishop would then tap the knight on the neck, and then place the sword around the knight’s waist. Over time, it became more common to tap the knight on the shoulder, but initially, he was tapped on the side of the neck.

The tapping on the neck was called the **colée** in Old French. It comes from the Latin word **collum** meaning neck. It’s the same root word that gave us the word **collar**. So whereas English tended to call this part of the ceremony the **dubbing**, French called it the **colée**. And based on that word **colée**, it produced a new name for the knighting ceremony – the **accolade**. Of course, the word **accolade** has survived into Modern English. Today, it means any kind of honor bestowed upon someone. But originally, it referred to the honor of knighthood. It also means that the words **accolade** and **collar** are cognate, coming from the same Latin root word meaning ‘neck.’

Once the young man had been dubbed a knight, he acquired the title of **sire**, which about a century later was shortened to **sir**. **Sire** and **sir** were derived from the Latin word **senior**. And the word **senior** also came into English around this time.

A common term for a young knight who had just entered knighthood was a **knight bachelor**. The word **bachelor** was derived from a Latin word which apparently meant ‘a young man’ or ‘a young warrior.’ Now a brand new knight often lacked any significant wealth. Most of them didn’t have any landholdings yet. And since marriages were often arranged between knightly families, a young knight needed some land or wealth in order to find a suitable bride. So a young knight – or a knight bachelor – was often unmarried. And since he was usually unmarried, the word **bachelor** came to be associated with a young, single man. And that is the sense of the word **bachelor** in Modern English.

As I noted earlier, the elaborate knighting ceremony was initially reserved from the sons of nobles. When a young noble son became a knight, he was sometimes called by the French term **gentils hom** – literally ‘noble man.’ **Gentils** meant ‘noble’ or ‘high born’ in French. When that term passed into English, the English word **man** was substituted for the French word **hom**. And

that produced the term *gentil man*. And over time, that became *gentleman*. It was a wonderful combination of French and English. But it still meant a ‘noble man’ in early Middle English, specifically a lesser noble – usually a young knight. But as we know, that word *gentleman* has evolved over time. It eventually came to refer to any kind of civilized and cultured man. And of course, that word *gentle* has evolved as well from its original sense as ‘noble’ to its modern sense of ‘kind’ and ‘soft’ and ‘pleasant.’

The evolution of those words tells us a lot about the changing nature of knighthood over the next couple of centuries. In the mid-1100s, the brutal knights who were carrying out the atrocities of the Anarchy could be rightly called *gentlemen* because, in the original sense of that word, many of them were in fact ‘noble men’ raised and trained to be knights. But within a couple of generations, no one would have called those types of knights *gentlemen* anymore. And that’s because knighthood in western Europe was about to encounter a new concept – a new ideal. And that was the concept of chivalry. Several factors were coming together to produce this idea of chivalry. We explored two of those factors in this episode. The first was the growing influence of the Church and the attempt to turn knights in to Christian warriors. The second was the gradual transition of knights into lesser nobles. But there was also a third factor. And that will be the focus of the next episode. That third factor came from Aquitaine in southern France.

By the current point in our story, a cultural revolution was underway in Aquitaine. That revolution produced a new type of literate, cultured, civilized knight. These were knights who sang about love and the beauty of women. These were the first people called *troubadours*. And this new culture was about to be introduced to northern France and England. It was introduced thanks to one of the most famous women of the entire Middle Ages – Eleanor of Aquitaine. She has the unique distinction of being the only person married to both the King of France and the King of England. And by the way, that future King of England was Matilda’s son – Henry.

So next time, we’ll see how all of these pieces came together in the middle of the 1100s. We’ll see how this new culture – and this new type of literature – spread north. And we’ll explore how Henry and Eleanor emerged as the power couple of the Middle Ages. That couple – and the culture associated with their court – came to England in the year 1154. And their arrival brought an end to nearly 20 years of Anarchy. Civil War was about to be replaced with a new era of law and order. Illiterate and violent knights were expected to honor the new code of chivalry and courtesy. And epic poems of war and bravery and loyalty in battle were soon replaced with a new type of literature – the romance. So England was about to experience both a political revolution and a cultural revolution.

So next time we’ll explore those events, and we’ll make the transition from the Normans to the Plantagenets. And as always, we’ll see how those developments changed the English language. So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.