

## **Knights, Knighthood, Chivalry & Freemasonry**

*Sir Knights Benjamin F. Hill, Knight Templar Cross of Honor  
Grand Commander, Grand Commandery Knights Templar of Virginia 2020*

I was reading a history book, *God's War: A New History of the Crusades* by Christopher Tyerman, the other day and the book's rather long *Introduction: Europe and the Mediterranean*, some twenty-four pages in length setting the eleventh century stage, made me think about Knights, Knighthood, Chivalry, and Freemasonry as both the York Rite and Scottish Rite rituals make allusions to knighthood although there is little emphasis placed upon knighthood as a reality.

The concept we call "knighthood" was developed during the 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries. During this time Europe was a difficult place in which to live. Invasions from the east by Muslim and Asiatic tribes, invasion from the south by Arabs and Muslims, invasions from the North coupled with the disintegration of the Roman system. From the last of these invasions arose European systems and institutions, culture, and the way of life we call the medieval ages.

### *Emergence of Knights*

Medieval social and economy was based on local manors which were large self-sufficient farm communities. This dangerous atmosphere provided the perfect environment for the emergence of a class of protectors—knights as professional soldiers. They had their origins in the appearance in the 8<sup>th</sup> century of the stirrup and Charlemagne's Frankish heavy cavalry in the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Mounted men were more powerful than before and turned cavalry into the most important element of medieval armies. They were spear-bearing mounted warriors drawn from society's elite. They were quite successful because they charged enemies in close formation, broke their ranks, and finished survivors with swords. As military technology improved, better weapons and armor meant more effective protectors and increasing influence of the growing warrior class. The transformation of these warriors into medieval knights would occur as the social and political climate of Europe began to change drastically in the 11<sup>th</sup> century.

But being a mounted soldier was expensive, since it required enough income to buy and sustain horses, armor, and various weapons of war; those who were too poor to provide this service became mere peasants, attached to the land. A feudal society emerged in the 10<sup>th</sup> century, in which there were three classes of men: the nobles who were the members of the great land-owning families; those who were attached to the land were provided a portion of their crops and labor services; and those who were free to peruse interests other than farming (clergy, small land-holders, craftsmen) were provided military service, either personally or buying others' services.

### *History of Knighthood and Chivalry*

Knighthood was not just a means for achieving wealth. It was a professional association, a brotherhood with a culture of its own. It included those men who could afford to make and maintain the heavy capital investment required by mounted warfare. Originally its members

were from the noble and free man classes, but in feudal times, boundaries of knighthood were quite fluid. Anyone who, by luck or effort, managed to obtain the training and equipment to be a knight could eventually enter that class.

In the course of the 12th century, a social and ethical dimension was added to the professional aspect of knighthood. The strong influence of Benedictine monks, who tried to give an ethos to savage warfare, eventually led to the definition of the true *miles Christi*, soldiers of the Crusades, who followed a certain code of behavior, which we now call chivalric.

There are four distinct periods in the history of chivalry:

**The Crusades:** The Crusades introduced the golden age of chivalry and the crusader was the perfect knight. The deliverance of the Holy Land from Moslem domination and the defense of pilgrims became the new object of his vow. In return, the Church took him under her protection in a special way, and conferred upon him exceptional temporal and spiritual privileges, and a tenth of all church revenues from the Holy Lands. The vow of the crusader was limited to a specified period, usually two or three years.

**The Military Orders:** After the conquest of Jerusalem, the necessity of a standing army became preeminent, in order to prevent the loss of the Holy City to surrounding hostile nations. Out of this necessity arose the military orders.

- *Order of the Hospital of St. John* [The Hospitallers]
- *Poor Knights of Christ and the Temple of Solomon* [Knights Templar]
- *Knights of St Lazarus*
- *Order of Montjoie*
- *Teutonic Knights of the Hospital of St Mary of Jerusalem* [Teutonic Knights]
- *Hospitallers of St Thomas of Canterbury at Acre* [Knights of St Thomas Acon]

and a fourth monastic vow that of perpetual warfare against the infidels. In these orders, wherein was realized the perfect fusion of the religious and the military spirit, chivalry reached its highest point. The knight's vows in a Monastic Order also bound him with common ties to warriors of every nation and condition, and enrolled him in a vast brotherhood of manners, ideals, and aims. The secular aspect of the brotherhood also imposed on its member's fidelity to their lords, their word, fair play on the battlefield, and the observance of the maxims of honor and courtesy.

**Secular Chivalry:** After the Crusades chivalry gradually lost its religious aspect but the honor of knighthood remained. This spirit was manifested in the many knightly exploits which fill the annals of the long contest between England and France during the Hundred Years War. Jean Froissart's *Chronicles* and *Meliador*, chivalrous romance poetry, provided vivid pictures where bloody English and French battles alternated with tournaments and gorgeous pageants. Under the influence of the romances love now became the mainspring of chivalry. As a consequence, there arose a new type of chevalier, vowed to the service of some noble lady, even if she be another man's wife and to be worshipped at a distance. Unfortunately, notwithstanding the obligations imposed upon the parties, these extravagant fancies often led to lamentable results.

**Court Chivalry:** In its last stages, chivalry became a mere court service. The Order of the Garter (founded in 1348 by Edward III of England's highest order of chivalry) and the Order of the Golden Fleece (founded in 1430 by Philip III of Burgundy is one of Europe's most prestigious orders of chivalry) were formed as a brotherhood of courtiers with the aim of contributing to the splendor of the sovereign. Their business was the sport of jousts and tournaments. Their vows made in banquet halls not in chapels, and not on the cross but on some emblematic bird. More celebrated was the "vow of the Pheasant," made in 1454 at the court of Philip of Burgundy. The motive was the weighty topic—to promote a crusade against the Turks and the rescue of Constantinople. The solemnity of the motive did not lessen the frivolity of the occasion. A solemn vow was taken before God and the pheasant at a gorgeous banquet, the extravagant event cost the bird his life. No less than one hundred and fifty knights, the flower of the European nobility, repeated the vow, but the enterprise came to naught for the crusade never took place. Chivalry had degenerated to a futile pastime and an empty promise.

Literature, which had in the past so greatly contributed to the exaltation of chivalry, began to react against its extravagances. The English poet Geoffrey Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales* mildly derided the manners of "Sir Thopas" and Spanish poet Miguel de Cervantes' *Don Quixote* of the exploits of "Sir Knight Thopas" aroused laughter all around Europe.

During the 14<sup>th</sup> century, the infantry began to be an effective force on the battlefield. During the Hundred Years War King Edward III's English army annihilated the French heavy cavalry at the Battle of Crecy in Normandy, France, in 1386. Again, at the Battle of Agincourt in northern France in 1415, King Henry V's English forces decimated the French knights, weighed by their heavy armor and slow advance across a muddy battlefield. In both engagements, the English longbows proved to be a powerful weapon against mounted knights.

In 1386, at the Battle of Sempach, Switzerland, a Confederation of Swiss infantry, entrenched in the wooded area on the high ground, defeated the Austrian forces as the battlefield was not suitable for cavalry maneuvers and knights were too slow on foot. Again in 1476, at the Battle of Morat, Switzerland, the Swiss Confederation Army defeated the French cavalry by attacking from the forested hillside in the rain.

It was the advent of gunpowder and the general use of firearms in battle that led to chivalry's rapidly disintegrated and finally disappeared altogether. Most orders created since the late 17th century were no longer brotherhoods of knights who followed a common purpose but were established by monarchs or governments with the specific purpose of bestowing honors of merit on deserving individuals. While Orders of Merit which still confer privileges of knighthood on its members are sometimes referred to as Orders of Knighthood, they are in fact decorations for merit.

## *Masonic Knighthood and Chivalry*

The Crusade period marked a new era in the life of the world—it brought the Eastern and Western worlds together. The evils and virtues of the East were brought to the West and vice versa. But the greatest thing which emerged through these conflicts of Christians and Saracens was the virtue of Charity. The *Poor Fellow-Soldiers of Christ and of the Temple of Solomon*, or Knights of the Temple, and the *Order of the Hospital of St. John*, of Knights Hospitaller, were the Red Cross Organizations of their day. For the first time in the history of war; men began to think of aiding others. There were many deeds of Charity recounted, not only between those of the faith, but extending from Christian to Moslem—thus did this era usher in those homely virtues of Charity, Hospitality and Universal Benevolence.

Rarely does one connect knighthood and chivalry with Freemasonry, but a review of ritual of Masonic degrees and orders you will find both the York Rite and Scottish Rite places great stress on Chivalry and those virtues which go to make up chivalric character.

### **In the York Rite** you will find the:

- Order of the Red Cross, Knights Templar
- Order of Malta, Knights Templar
- Order of the Temple, Knights Templar
- Sovereign Order Knight Preceptor, Knights Templar
- Knight Crusader of the Cross, Knights Templar
- Commemorative Order of St. Thomas of Acon USA
- Order of Scotland
- Knight of the York Cross of Honor,
- Knight of York, York Rite College
- Order of the Purple Cross, York Rite College
- Knight Red Cross of Constantine
- Order of Knight Masons
- Royal Order of the Red Branch of Eri, Allied Masonic Degrees
- Order of the Bath

The York Rite is a fraternal association of men, engaged in a system of moral conduct and religious in its character. The Knights Templar, St. Thomas of Acon, York Rite College, Knights Red Cross of Constantine, and Knight Masons are Christian-oriented organizations that places stress on Christian values of Chivalry, conveys the essence of Masonic teachings with the Christian interpretation of the Symbols of ancient Craft Masonry, and the Immortality of the Soul.

### **In the Scottish Rite** you will find the:

- Knight of the East, Knight of the Sword, Knight of the Eagle (15<sup>th</sup> Degree)
- Knight of the East and West (17<sup>th</sup> Degree)
- Knight of Rose Croix (18<sup>th</sup> Degree)
- Noachite or Prussian Knight (21<sup>st</sup> Degree)
- Knight of the Royal Axe (22<sup>nd</sup> Degree)
- Chief or the Tabernacle or Knight of Valor (23<sup>rd</sup> Degree)

Knight of the Brazen Serpent	(25 <sup>th</sup> Degree)
Knight of the Sun or Knight of Jerusalem	(27 <sup>th</sup> Degree)
Knight of the Temple or Knight of the Sun	(28 <sup>th</sup> Degree)
Knight of St. Andrew	(29 <sup>th</sup> Degree)
Knight Kadosh	(30 <sup>th</sup> Degree)
Inspector Inquisitor or Knight Aspirant	(31 <sup>st</sup> Degree)
Knight Commander of the Court of Honor	(32 <sup>o</sup> KCCH)

The Scottish Rite is more than a fraternity of good men, engaged in benevolent practices of friendship and relief. It is an aggressively active or militant order, a knighthood devoted to the cause of Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity. To establish righteousness and ordain mercy, to protect all the weak and combat all dogmas or doctrines that would imprison the human spirit. The Scottish Rite seeks to cultivate, in the hearts of men, personal morality and the sentiments of tolerance and fraternity.

In the 29th Degree, Knight of St. Andrew, are found many lessons teaching us reverence and obedience to the Deity, the service of Truth, the practice of Virtue and Innocence and to battle for Truth and Right, Free Speech, and Free Thought, and in this to defend against tyranny. The Knight of Saint Andrew takes these lessons to heart, and thus the qualities of Charity, Clemency, and Generosity prevail—all of this is brought by Humanity, Patience, and Self-Denial. In the Scottish Rite Knights of Saint Andrew we find Honor and Chivalry.

### *Conclusion*

Today the warlike character of yesterday's Knights has disappeared; no more is it thought necessary to engage in useless struggle over holy sites and places; no more is it believed necessary to fight men of other nations in order to convert them to our way of thinking. But the same feelings of Love, Truth, Charity, Hospitality, and Universal Benevolence still remain in the human heart, and the world at large is benefited by any group which encourages such essential needs of mankind.

Masonic Knights of today claim no direct legal descent from those ancient knights of old, yet they do claim to carry on the virtues for which they fought, bled and died. No longer is it necessary to fight with material weapons, for today "the pen is mightier than the sword", and the weapon of a knight is the influence of a good life carried out as set forth in the New Dispensation - that we love one another.

That is the Legacy of York Rite and Scottish Rite *Knights, Knighthood, and Chivalry*.

**So Mote It Be!**

