The Power of Knighthood Under Medieval Feudalism

“Knighthood lies above eternity; it doesn’t live off fame, but rather deeds,” Dejan Stojanovic so eloquently wrote in his novel, The Sun Watches the Sun (Stojanovic). Here, Stojanovic is describing the lasting impact that knights had on all those they encountered. Members of this order were duty-bound, courageous men who fought for what they believed was right. Knights followed a code of conduct so sound that many revere it as the proper way to live today. Being a knight was more than a title; it was status and influence that lasted an eternity. This status and influence led their order to experience an immense increase in power throughout the Middle Ages.

Being a knight during the Medieval Era, though no simple task, granted a person countless opportunities to provide themselves with an unbelievably wealthy and successful life. With land grants and monetary rewards for loyalty, a knight could quickly increase his wealth should he prove himself worthy. Respected by the most powerful and encouraged by the Medieval Church, it is obvious how knights gained and sustained their reputation throughout history. Although some could argue that kings, lords, or the lower class controlled Medieval Feudalism, knights held the most power during the Middle Ages because of their social status and position under the Medieval Feudal System and their association with the Medieval Church.
Status Under Feudalism

The foundation of Feudalism gave birth to the formation of the order of knighthood. William the Conqueror established the Medieval Feudal System in 1066 after the Battle of Hastings. He desired a class system that would benefit the wealthy the most but also allow for movement amongst its clearly defined levels of power (Achlin 3). During this time, knights gained and maintained power thanks to their social status under the feudal system. The vast majority of these men were born into noble families with enough money to pay for the many years of training their child would undergo (Roberts). Much like today, the extremely rich controlled the majority of power in the Medieval Feudal System. Because of their money and status, knights were in prime position to hold power and be the most influential members of society. However, even with this inherited wealth backing them up, becoming a knight was no simple task.

Training to be a knight was difficult and expensive, but a select few were able to achieve this title and prove their worth to the rest of the world. From the ripe age of only seven years old, these young men would begin their intense training to join some of the most feared warriors and renowned gentlemen of their time in knighthood (Achlin 3). Starting as a lowly page, or apprentice to a knight, training began with swordsmanship. As the page’s skills with a sword progressed, new ones were developed, including horsemanship and expertise with other weapons, including maces and daggers (Jones). These apprentices then became servants to a knight, also known as squires, around the age of fourteen (Roberts). After a squire displayed his skills and prowess in battle, usually through mock duels, and also expressed his ability to follow the Code of Chivalry, the moral code which went beyond the rules of combat and introduced the
code of chivalrous conduct, he was granted permission from his master to be knighted (Achlin 3). The lord or king of the land administered this ceremony. Knightings were rare and often attracted much attention from across the kingdom. A new member was born into the society of combat and courtesy known only as knighthood. Having completed the arduous task of training, knights had the wisdom to know how to control themselves and their property, granting them a sizeable head start on gaining power during this time.

Knights exhibited their power by supplying kings and lords with military and monetary services. Medieval Feudalism mandated that a knight was expected to fight for the lord to which he had given his allegiance. “This rendering of military services was called the Feudal Levy” (Roberts 1). This relationship between knights and their lords became the backbone of the medieval feudal system for many centuries. In return for these services, the knight was granted land from the lords (Roberts 2). The image (right) illustrates this relationship and others that constructed the Medieval Feudal System (Roberts). Without the
support from his knights, a Lord was sure to lose his grip over his land. This necessity of
protection and an almost managerial role from a knight gave them an amount of power over the
lord they served, for they could choose to revoke these services at any time.

Knights used their land to increase their power and influence. This territory owned by a
knight was known as a manor (Achlin 3). From his keep in the center of his property, the knight
could oversee the many villages under his reign. These were home to peasants, serfs, and
criminals (Achlin 3). A knight could hold several manors at once, depending on the generosity of
his lord, though it was unlikely that he would be granted vast amounts of land (Roberts 2). An
intelligent lord would know the value of said property and the power that it bestowed upon its
owner. As these knights accumulated more land, their power only increased.

Eventually, knights could gain enough influence over the villages under his rule that they
might betray and overthrow their Lord. This is evident in the Peasant Revolt of 1381, an event
caused in majority by the cutting of wages of workers in the lord’s keep after the Black Death
had taken its toll (Milone 4). These lords needed work done and knew that the peasants of nearby
villages would do it for nearly nothing. The knights under these lords saw this betrayal and,
following their moral code, ignited the peasants into revolt (Milone 4). Led by the knights, the
village folk swiftly overthrew the lord and appointed their knight as the new ruler of the land.
This dramatically increased the power of these knights and showed that “without the help and
support of the knights, the power and favor of a lord is greatly diminished” (Roberts 3). With
this, knights had shown kings and lords everywhere that their support was not something to be
taken for granted. However, these nobles were not the only members of medieval society whose
power and favor was supported by knighthood.
Association with the Church

Knights used their association with the Church to bolster their power and gain influence over others. “During the Middle Ages, the only globally recognized religion was Christianity, in the form of the Roman Catholic Church” (Wathen). At that time early every citizen, from the lowliest peasant to the most powerful king, were well verse in their religion. Because of this, it was not unusual for people to attend mass every day, or stop to pray five times a day (Wathen). With this large a following, it is no wonder many people believe the Catholic Church to be the most powerful institution during the Medieval Era. As the Church’s power increased, its leaders deemed it necessary to amass a force with which it could defend itself. This began the formation of religious orders of knights (Moeller 1). Knights began shifting their allegiance from the secular kings of which they were accustomed to the dominant superpower of the Catholic Church.

From birth to death, no matter the class or social status, “the lives of the medieval people during the Middle Ages were dominated by the Church” (Wathen). Various religious institutions sprung up everywhere, including monasteries and convents, which became important, rich, and powerful. Knights wished to obtain a portion of this wealth and power, so some of them would become monks themselves. However, in addition to the three vows taken by a traditional monk (chastity, poverty, and obedience), a member of the order of religious knights would take an additional vow which bonded them to protect pilgrims and fight infidels (Wathen). It was with this order of religious knights that Pope Urban II launched the first Crusade upon the Holy Land (Moeller 1). The crusades gave a knight an incredible opportunity to prove himself in battle and climb the ranks of power among his peers. If he was deemed worthy, he may even be granted
land by the corrupt leaders of the Church at that time (Wathen). To risk death in battle for such wealth and power available from the Church was an opportunity too splendid to pass up, and volunteers for Urban II’s “people’s war” came in droves, seeking a better life.

After the Turks seized control of Jerusalem in 1065, they granted guaranteed safety to any religious pilgrim from Europe. However, Christians were treated so badly that throughout Christendom in Jerusalem that the Knights Templar was formed to ensure the safety of these pilgrims who flocked towards their holy city (Moeller 1). “With the addition of these specialized religious knights to Pope Urban II’s crusade army, he was able to retake Jerusalem in 1099” (Moeller 1). These elite holy warriors became powerful beyond measure. Eventually, the order had kings and lords competing with each other for the gifts and benefits associated with the order (Moeller 2). People of importance would often leave something to the Templars when they died, dramatically increasing the wealth and power of the order. After decades of growth, the Knights Templar was able to develop into its own state, self governing and owning land much like other countries at the time (Moeller 2). The order’s power only grew until it overtook that of the kings and lords of Medieval Europe, where they were then seen as a threat. Pope Clement V and King Philip IV of France began the execution of the Templar’s leaders on Friday October 13, 1307, causing the decline of the order, as well as inspiring a series of horror films (Wathen). The rise to power of this order has not been replicated to date, and only further shows how knights used their resources to become the most powerful walk of life during their time.

**Opposition**

Knights were obviously not the only important members of medieval society. However, because of their position and social status under the feudal system, they held more power than
any other profession. Kings and lords, commonly thought of to have the most power, were hugely supported by the knights that were aligned to them. “This support came in many forms, including military aid, tax money, and loyalty” (Achlin 3). Because these kings often had to rely on their underlings to provide them with safety and protection in times of war, the power truly rested with those who were trusted by the king to provide those essentials. This was often the knight, who pledged allegiance by swearing fealty to a king or lord (Roberts 2). In return for his loyalty, a knight was given land and money, only boosting his social status and power. These gifts showed others that a knight could be trusted, and many peasants would feel more comfortable with a knight as a leader than a king or lord.

However, a knight could decide to break his allegiance with his lord, if he so desired, causing a shift in power. The lord’s source of protection would be lost, and the knight could then lead an army to overthrow and capture his land and power. To do this, a knight would need the support of those beneath him (Achlin 3). The Peasant Revolt of 1381 is an excellent example of such a series of events occurring. Soon after the horrifying death toll of the Bubonic Plague, lords and kings needed more workers in their cities in order to maintain them. They offered jobs at ridiculously low pay to peasants living in nearby villages (Trueman 2). These workers would then have to leave their homes to live in the lord’s city. “Because so many made this transition, a large portion of these villages became impoverished beyond repair and simply disappeared” (Milone 2). Knights who owned these villages began to notice the poor treatment of the peasants by their lords. The call to follow their chivalrous code of conduct would lead them revolution.

After rallying a force, Wat Tyler, the leader of the peasant army, marched to Canterbury and demanded that the wages of those working be raised and that taxes be lowered (Milone 5).
The Archbishop of Canterbury, along with King Henry IV and Robert Hale, the treasurer of London, (Milone 6) began concocting a bill that would appease the seemingly insurmountable force that threatened to attack. On June 16, 1381 the Mile End negotiations ended, and the peasants had gotten what they wanted (Milone 7). This revolution was only made possible by the support that the peasants received from the knights that had seen their suffering and been so moved to act in support.

Conclusion

Knighthood became the most powerful walk of life during the Middle Ages. Because of the influence they had on those around them, knights were able to climb the ladder of social status under Medieval Feudalism. Their power was supplemented by that of their kings and lords, supported by the peasants they ruled, and augmented by the Medieval Church. Their reputation preceded them and, as Dejan Stojanovic said, lasted an eternity.

Annotated Bibliography

Achlin, Linda. “Medieval Life and Times.” Medieval Life and Times, Sistine Ltd., Jan. 2017, www.medieval-life-and-times.info. Accessed 8 Mar. 2017. This website offers a lot of information about how people became knights and how they lived, as well as some information on several medieval kings and the livelihood of these people. This source will be useful in supporting all of my topics with examples (people, events, and dates) and shedding light on the kings in my opposition body point. It also touches on the role of the Church in Medieval society, which can help in my second body point.

Jones, Terry. Terry Jones’ Medieval Lives Episode 5: Knights. Oxford Film and Television
Production, 2004, Accessed Feb. 2017. In this series of documentaries, Terry Jones, famous comedic member of Monty Python and renowned historian reveals that what many people believe about history is incorrect. He shows that knights were not the not the fairy tale people we normally expect. Quotes from Jones can be used to show how he feels knights climbed the social ladder and gained power.

Milone, Kim. “The English Peasants' Revolt of 1381.” *Loyola University Student Historical Journal 1986-1987*, vol. 18, 1986. This issue of the yearly journal from Loyola University includes an entry over the peasant revolt of 1381. Information from this article will prove useful in describing how a knights influence over the lower class can increase his power and surpass that of a king or lord.


Roberts, Mike “Medieval Knights Feudalism.” *Medieval Chronicles*, Medieval Chronicles, 2015, www.medievalchronicles.com/medieval-knights-feudalism. Accessed 25 Feb. 2017. This website gives a basic understanding of the role that knights played in medieval society. It explains who they worked for and what they did, as well as what they received as payment. This source will be useful in explaining a knight’s place among medieval feudalism. This source also provided the image used to illustrate relationships among Medieval Feudalism.
Stojanovic, Dejan. The Sun Watches the Sun. New Avenue Books, 2012. In this book, Stojanovic uses a very profound quote that shows the intense impact that knights had on every other person of that time period and how their legacy is still revered today.


Wathen, Dave. “Mr. Dave Wathen on the Medieval Church and Knights.” 18 Mar. 2017. Mr. Wathen was able to provide an abundance of information on the power and influence of the Catholic Church during the Middle Ages, along with some facts about the Knights Templar and other religious knight orders. This information will be imperative in my second body point, explaining the relationship between the Church and these knights.