

Chivalry is Dead

Chivalry was a peculiar aspect of the practice of war in medieval Europe. The code of chivalry requires of every knight that he be brave, honest, courteous, generous, gracious, and above all, completely loyal to his lord. Knights were seen as the core of an army, since they could break enemy lines and carry swift victories. However, increasingly more powerful archery and the use of pike men and stakes meant that the use of massive cavalry charges could not be relied upon and thus the use of knights and the ideals of chivalry came to an end. If any battle summed up this change, it was the battle of Agincourt in 1415. There were numerous examples of truly chivalrous conduct during the Hundred Years' War. Many French, and several English, defeats in war can be traced to a bit too much concern for knightly honor. At Agincourt this was certainly the case.

At Agincourt, charging French knights, compressed by the terrain and the English arrows into a fragmented line of attack, reached the English line without any room to maneuver, and it only took a few fallen horses to prevent all other knights from moving in any direction. This allowed the English longbow men to slaughter the stagnant French knights. Thus in half an hour, the battle was decided, and thousands of French knights lay prisoners. The fear of a second attack prompted the English to kill them on the spot, and the French nobility was horribly decimated in a single day. The battle crushed the French resistance to Henry's renewed claim to the French throne, resulting in the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, in which Henry was engaged to Catherine and thus the heir of France.

The English success in the battle of Agincourt demonstrated the obsolescence of the methods of the age of chivalry. Knights were no longer a threat to armies that had the proper means to counter their attacks. The use of stakes, along with the sea of arrows that the French knights had to charge through, changed the face of medieval warfare to a standing army. The removal of knights from European armies was a huge shift, not only on a military level but also on an ideological level for many armies.

Knights were nobles that belonged to an extraordinary religious international brotherhood. They were so important that the church carried out many of the rituals associated with knighthood, including the blessing of weapons. The influence of the Church was such that knights and even war itself were considered instruments of God. The ideals of chivalry had been long in use, so it was very hard for many people to accept that chivalry was dead.

There were many events that preceded the battle of Agincourt that contributed to the fall of chivalry. During the late 13th and early 14th centuries, warfare moved away from the earlier model of mounted knights battling with a few infantry for support. The crossbow and the longbow were effective against chain mail, which knights wore for protection. The availability of cheaper weapons such as the spear, pike and axe allowed soldiers who were not noble to take a far greater part in battles.

The ongoing wars in Europe required countries to have ready access to soldiers. Some hired mercenaries, others raised local troops, but one could not hire any ordinary man to become a knight. The mass attack of infantry became a serious threat to mounted men at arms, although the nobility still saw themselves as the core of the army and social standing was still crucial. All of these events merely suggested what the battle of Agincourt demonstrated; chivalry and knights were now useless.

The ideals of chivalry, mainly the ones involving the notion that a knight is not only fighting for his country, but for God himself, were lost along with the knights themselves. I believe that many of the principles of chivalry are poorly suited for war. Before participating in a battle, many knights probably saw themselves as a part of a select group of courageous, noble warriors willing to kill the evil that awaited them and to sacrifice their lives, if need be, for right and justice.

While in combat however, the screams of dying comrades replace the tenets of divine mythology set forth in the code of chivalry. Consequently, as the warrior's mythology begins to crumble and the lofty and abstract ideals of chivalry become less relevant, war becomes a struggle for personal survival. As a result, I have serious doubts regarding the necessity and justness of the practice and the knight's involvement in it. I see most of the ideals of chivalry as silly, especially in a war context. Knights were expected to kill and be willing to die for ideology, issues of justice and ultimately God. However I believe that these are not the reasons that motivate a soldier to kill and die in battle. Soldiers will fight and die for personal honor, self respect and their loyalty to their comrades, not some Godly justice that is only limited to nobles.

Overall, I would say that the end of chivalry was beneficial to the standing armies that formed after the battle of Agincourt. No longer were armies divided by class and no longer were there any religious ideals to get in the way of what was really important in battles.