Text 2:
Nobles, Knights, and Warfare

Topic 7: Medieval Christian Europe (330 - 1450)
Lesson 2: Feudalism and the Manor Economy
Why do you think that "few real knights could live up to the ideals of chivalry"?
OBJECTIVES
During the Middle Ages, warfare was constant.

For medieval lords and vassals, it was a way of life.

Rival lords battled constantly for power.

Both greater and lesser nobles trained from boyhood for a future occupation as a knight, or mounted war.
At the age of seven, a boy was sent away to the castle of his father’s lord.

He learned to ride and fight, how to keep his armor and weapons in good condition.

Training was difficult and discipline was strict and laziness was punished with an angry blow or even a severe beating.
With his training finished, the youth was named a knight, often in a public ceremony.

An older knight or the boy’s future lord said words like these: “In the name of God, Saint Michael, and Saint George, I dub thee knight; be brave and loyal”

Then the young knight took his place beside other warriors.
Knights usually fought on horseback using swords, axes, and lances, which were long poles. They wore armor and carried shields for protection. Other soldiers fought on foot using daggers, spears, crossbows, and longbows.
As the fierce fighting of the early Middle Ages lessened in the 1100s, tournaments, or mock battles, came into fashion.

A powerful lord would invite knights from the area to a tournament to enter contests of fighting skill.

At first, tournaments were as dangerous as real battles.

In time, they acquired more ceremonies and ritual.
During the early Middle Ages, powerful lords fortified their homes to withstand attack. The strongholds gradually became larger and grander. By the 1100s, monarchs and nobles owned sprawling stone castles with high walls, towers, and drawbridges over wide moats.
Castles were fortresses and wars often centered on seizing castles that commanded strategic river crossings, harbors, or mountain passes.

Castle dwellers stored up food and water so they could withstand a long siege.

In time of war, peasants from nearby villages might take refuge within the castle walls.
Noblewomen played active roles in this warrior society.

While her husband or father was off fighting, the “lady of the manor” took over his duties.

She supervised vassals, managed the household, and performed necessary agricultural and medical tasks.

Sometimes she might even have to go to war to defend her estate.
Some medieval noblewomen, like Eleanor of Aquitaine, took an active hand in politics.

Eleanor inherited vast lands in southwestern France.

Through two marriages, she became queen of France and, later, queen of England.

For more than 50 years, Eleanor was a leading force in European affairs.
A woman's right to inheritance was severely restricted although women did sometimes inherit fiefs. Land usually passed to the eldest son in a family. A woman frequently received land as part of her dowry, and fierce marriage negotiations swirled around an unmarried or widowed heiress. If her husband died before her, a woman gained her rights to her land.
The daughters of nobles were sent to friends or relatives for training. Before her parents arranged her marriage, she was expected to know how to spin and weave and how to supervise servants. A few learned to read and write. In her role as wife, a noblewoman was expected to bear many children and be dutiful to her husband.
A Code of Chivalry

In the later Middle Ages, knights adopted a code of conduct called chivalry.

Required knights to be brave, loyal, and true to their word.

In warfare, they had to fight fairly.

Warriors also had to treat a captured knight well or even release him if he promised to pay his ransom.
Its elaborate rules applied to nobles only, not to commoners.

Chivalry also dictated that knights protect the weak, and that included both peasants and noblewomen.

Few real knights could live up to the ideals of chivalry, but they did provide a standard against which a knight’s behavior could be measured.
Chivalry raised women to a new status.

In theory, if not always in practice, chivalry placed women on a pedestal.

Troubadours, or wandering musician-poets, composed their love songs, praising the beauty and wit of women throughout the ages.

In epic stories and poems, they told stories of brave knights and their devotion to a beloved woman.

The ideas of chivalry would shape our modern ideas of romantic love.