

Artful Adventures

# Medieval Europe

An interactive guide for families



Your  
Medieval  
Adventure  
Awaits You!

*See inside for details*



## Courtly Life in Medieval Europe

Today we are going to explore what life was like for noble men and women in the **Middle Ages**, or medieval period, in Western Europe. The Middle Ages usually refers to the years between the fall of the Western Roman Empire, in 476 C.E., and 1500 C.E. We will focus on objects that were made between 1100 and 1500 C.E. in England, France, Spain, and Germany.

In many stories from the Middle Ages, people go on **quests**, or adventures, to search for something important, such as lost treasure. Today, we will go on a quest to search for our own type of treasure: objects in the Museum that depict noble men and women of the court in medieval Europe. All of the objects are located in the gallery of Medieval, Byzantine, and Islamic Art, which is on the upper level of the Art Museum. Walk up the stairs, turn right, and walk through the galleries of thirteenth- through eighteenth-century European art.

### Life at Court

The **court** was the household of a king, or other noble person, in medieval society. A medieval king often traveled from castle to castle, and his court would travel with him. The court included ladies (such as the queen, the king's daughters, and female attendants), other members of the nobility, officials, servants, and other people who would help the king and his family.

Life in a castle was not always comfortable—castles could be cold and drafty, especially in the winter. Various forms of entertainment—including storytelling, songs, great feasts, tournaments, and games—made life more pleasant for the members of the court.

### Medieval Stories: Sir Gawain and the Magic Bed

Telling stories was a popular form of entertainment at court. Scenes from some of the more popular stories were depicted on small, expensive art objects that would have been owned by the nobility.

Find the case in the center of the gallery with this small ivory panel, shaped like a square. Ivory comes from elephant tusks and in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries was a popular material for precious objects such as boxes, mirror cases, and knife handles. This panel depicts a scene from the story of Sir Gawain, one of King Arthur's Knights of the Round Table:



French, possibly Paris: *Panel from a Casket: Sir Gawain on the Marvelous Bed*, 1300–50. Ivory, 10.7 x 12 x 0.5 cm. Museum purchase, Carl Otto von Kienbusch Jr. Memorial Collection Fund and Fowler McCormick, Class of 1921, Fund (2009-23). Photo: Bruce M. White.

According to legend, Arthur was the king of the Britons in the late fifth and early sixth centuries. The knights who had sworn to assist him were known as the Knights of the Round Table, named after the round table where the men gathered for meetings. Sir Gawain was Arthur's nephew, and there are many stories about him and the various quests that he undertook.

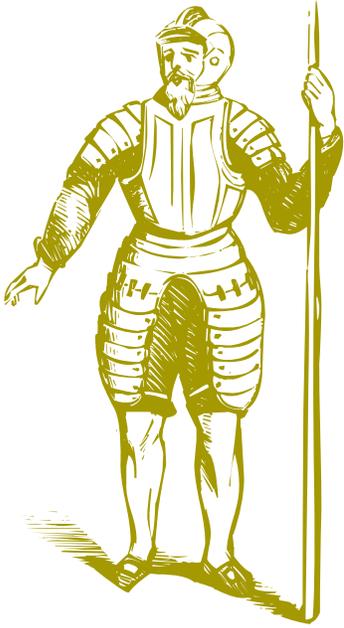
In one story, Gawain is on a quest to find the Holy Grail, a special cup believed to have magical powers. Gawain and his assistant come upon an enchanted castle where a group of noble ladies and their queen are being held captive. The ladies can see Gawain but he cannot see them. **Can you find them in this scene?**

*Gawain and his guide walk into the main hall of the castle, where they discover a large bed on wheels, with little bells along the bottom. The guide tells Gawain that this is a magical bed, and that no one who has sat down on it has ever survived. Gawain does not obey his guide's warning and decides to lie down on the bed to go to sleep. Immediately, the ceiling opens up and arrows and crossbows start to rain down on him. Fortunately, he is still wearing his armor and is protected from danger. As he starts to remove the arrows from his shield, a lion enters the room and attacks him. The lion's claws become stuck in his wooden shield, and Gawain is able to cut off its paws and again avoid danger. Because Gawain has successfully passed the two tests of the enchanted castle, he breaks the spell and frees the women from captivity.*

**Which part of the story do you think the artist represented on the panel?**

The artist who created this panel decided to combine many elements from the story into one scene and has made some changes to the story as well. For example, Gawain is shown lying down on the bed before he is attacked by the lion, but there is already a lion's paw on his shield. By including the lion's paw, the artist has given us an easy way to identify this man as Gawain. Also, instead of crossbows, the artist has depicted swords coming out of the ceiling. Finally, although the story says that Gawain was attacked by one lion, there are two lions in this image, one on each side of Gawain's bed. Perhaps the artist liked the way that two lions created a sense of symmetry in the scene.





This panel came from a **casket**, or box, that might have been given by a noble man to the woman he was going to marry. She might have put her jewelry or important documents in it. The Museum owns one other piece from this casket: the front panel.

We'll look at this panel next.

## Medieval Games and Courtly Love

Find this panel to the left of the one we just looked at. It depicts men and women courting and playing games:



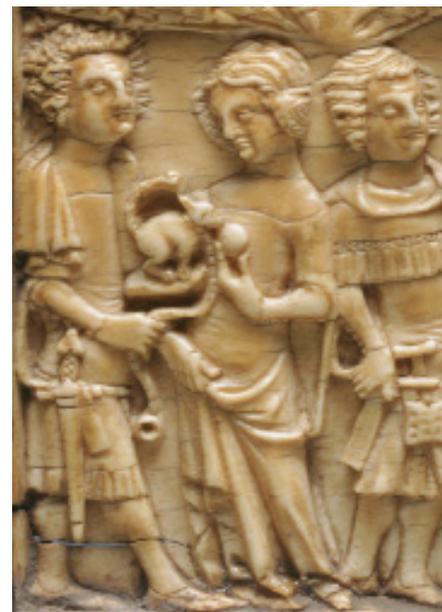
French, Paris or Northern France: *Relief from a Casket: Scenes of Lovers and Game-Playing*, 1340–60. Ivory, h. 10.5 cm., w. 25.0 cm., d. 4.0 cm. Museum purchase, John Maclean Magie, Class of 1892, and Gertrude Magie Fund (1996-153). Photo: Bruce M. White.

The panel is separated into four rectangles, each with a scene at the top and at the bottom. At the left of the panel are four courting couples, or couples declaring their love for each other. In one scene (a detail of which is shown below right), a man gives a lady a present:

### Can you tell what it is?

It's a squirrel, which the lady will keep as a pet! A squirrel as a pet was a sign of the woman's ability to tame wild nature.

Next, look at the third picture from the left: (a detail of which is shown to the left). Men and women are playing a game called "frog in the middle." A man sits in the middle of a circle and tries to catch the people around him. The game is like our modern game of "monkey in the middle," during which a person stands in the middle of a group and tries to catch a ball that is being thrown back and forth.





German, Rhineland: Draughtsman: *Delilah Accusing the Freed Samson of Mockery (Judges XVI, 73)*, 12th century. Bone, diam. 7.9 cm. Museum purchase, Caroline G. Mather Fund (y1948-10). Photo: Bruce M. White.

In addition to group games, men and women at court enjoyed playing board games, such as draughts (checkers). Find this draughtsman (checker piece) in the case next to the one with the ivory casket panels:

This draughtsman depicts a scene from the biblical story of Samson and Delilah. Unlike the two panels we just looked at, which were carved from ivory, this piece was carved from bone, probably from a cow. **How is this draughtsman similar to or different from game pieces you've used to play checkers?**

Like our modern checker pieces, this game piece is round, but it is also very large. In fact, it is one of the largest medieval draughtsmen in existence! It is also the only one that survives from its set, so we do not know which images were on the other pieces. The story of Samson and Delilah was one of the most common subjects found on medieval draughtsmen.

*Samson was an unusually strong man who performed heroic deeds, such as wrestling a lion. The secret to his strength was his long hair, which he had never cut. Samson fell in love with a beautiful woman named Delilah, who was paid by Samson's enemies, the Philistines, to discover the secret to his strength. Samson teased Delilah, telling her that he would lose his strength if he was bound (tied up) with fresh bowstrings. Delilah did this, but he was able to break the strings.*

In the scene depicted on the draughtsman, Samson has just freed his bonds, and Delilah accuses him of mocking her.

Draughtsmen and other game pieces were often kept in carved wooden boxes, such as this one:



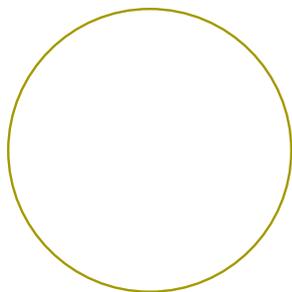
French (Alsace) or German (Black Forest): Game box, 1440–70. Bone, tortoiseshell, and wood, h. 9.7 cm., w. 14 cm., d. 15.7 cm. Museum purchase, gift of the National Forge Foundation at the behest of Duane Wilder, Class of 1951 (y1959-11). Photo: Bruce M. White.





The small panels on the sides of the box depict musicians, dancers, wild men, and hunters, all common figures in courtly entertainment. Musicians and dancers would have entertained the noble man or woman who owned the box, which has a checkerboard on the bottom. Noble men and women also enjoyed going on hunts, and the “wild man” was a mythical figure that was particularly popular in German stories and art. This box was probably made in the region of Alsace, which lies on the modern border between France and Germany, or in the region of the Black Forest, which is in southwestern Germany.

**If you were making game pieces and a box to keep them in, how would you decorate them? Would you use a theme, like a favorite story, sports team, or hobby you enjoy, or would you use a decorative pattern? Use the game piece and box below to give it a try.**



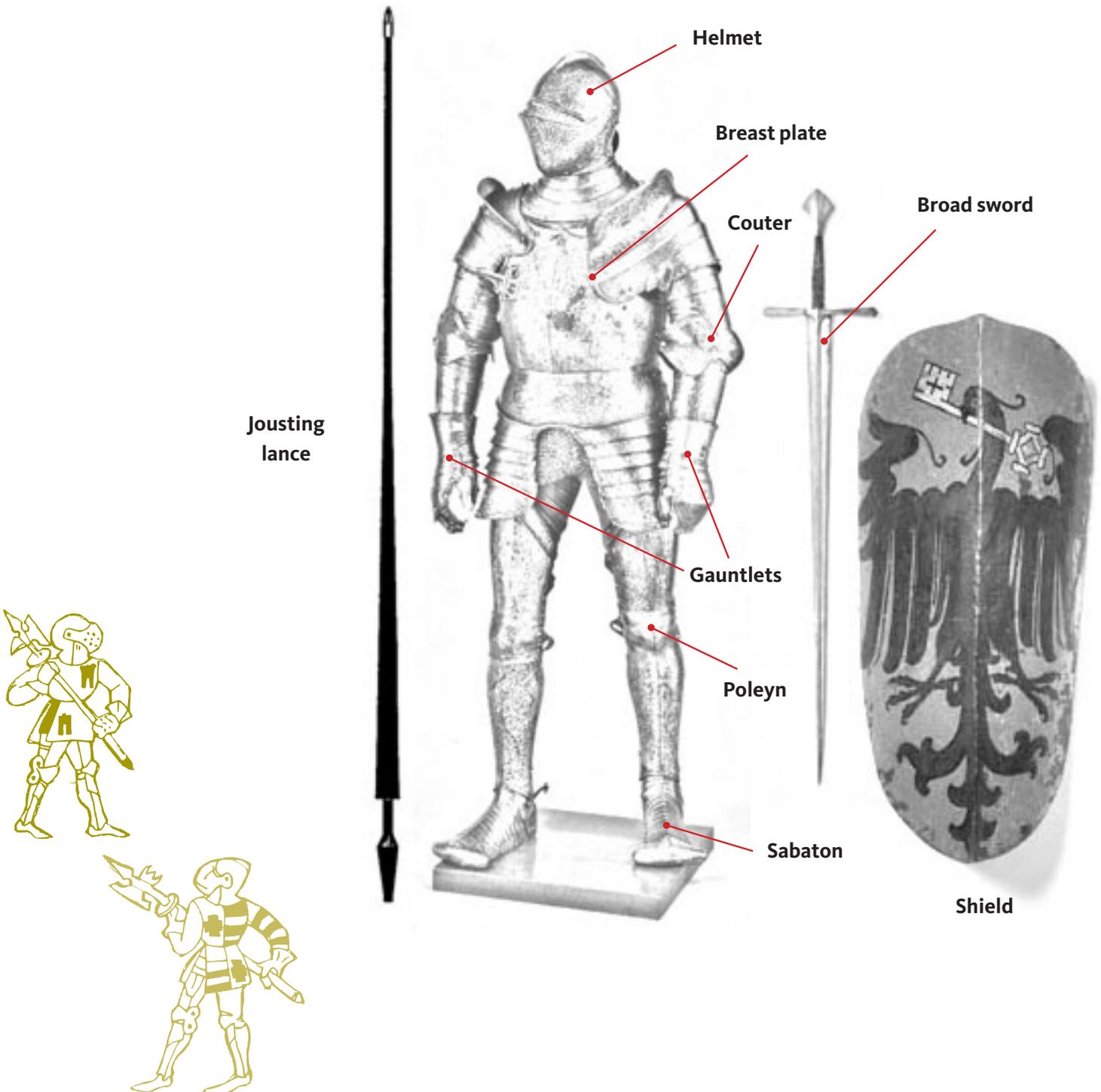
We now turn from our exploration of stories and games to another aspect of medieval life: warfare and crusade.

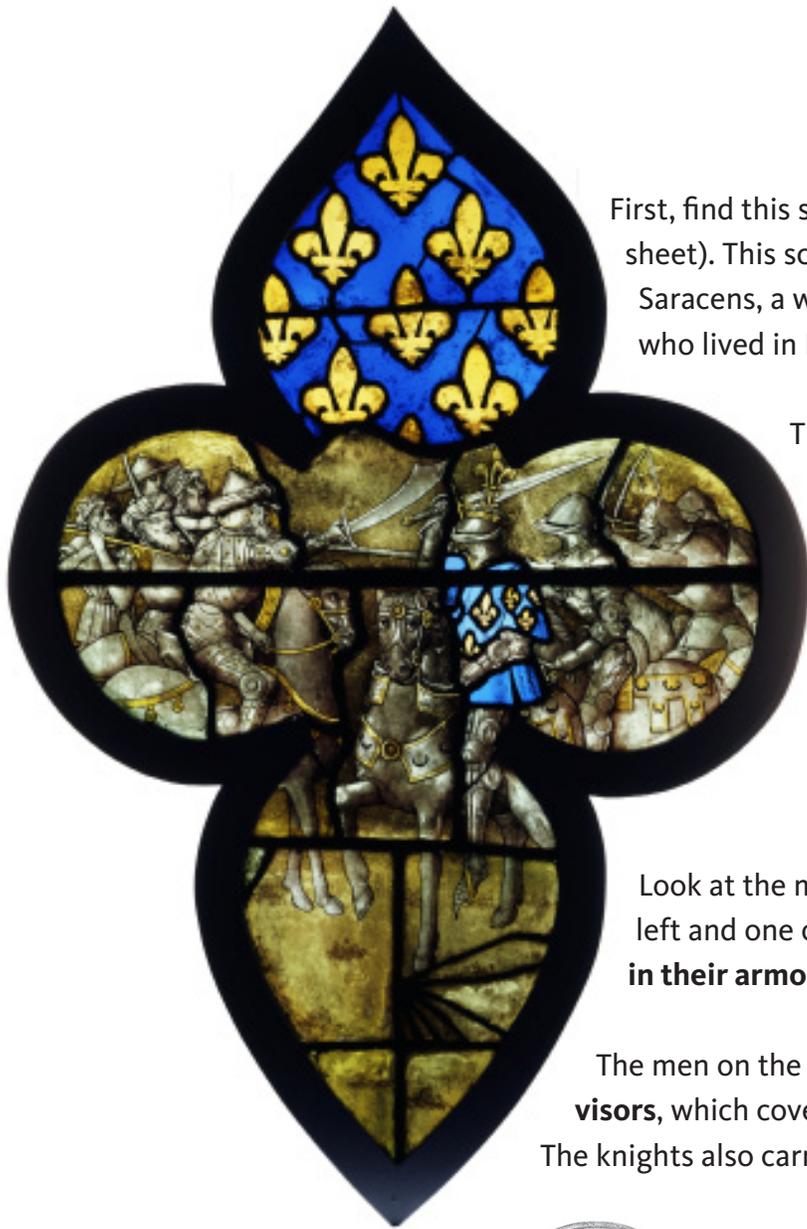
## **Warfare and Crusade**

Life at court often revolved around war. Kings and other high-ranking members of the nobility fought for control of land. Some kings also went on crusade, or religious war. The men who assisted the king as he waged war or went on crusade were known as **knights**.

What would a knight need for battle? Most importantly, he would need a horse to ride. He would also need to protect his body with **armor** (special clothing made out of metal or leather) and a **helmet**. He also needed a **shield** and weapons, such as a **lance** (a long pole with a sharp blade at the end) and a **sword**.

For the next two objects, keep track of the different kinds of armor and weapons you see. Use the pictures below to help you.





First, find this stained glass window (shown to the left on this sheet). This scene depicts King Louis IX of France fighting the Saracens, a word that medieval Europeans used for Muslims who lived in Egypt.

The top of the window is filled with gold **fleurs-de-lis**, or lily flowers, the symbol of the French king. The fleur-de-lis looks like this:



Look at the men fighting. There are two groups, one on the left and one on the right. **What are some of the differences in their armor and weapons?**

The men on the right are French knights. Their helmets have **visors**, which cover the knights' faces and can be flipped up. The knights also carry swords and **bows and arrows**.

French, Auvergne: *Saint Louis of France fighting the Saracens*, 1465–75. Pot metal and white glass with silver stain, h. 101.9 cm., w. 68.9 cm. Gift of Susan D. Bliss (1950–26). Photo: Bruce M. White.



**Visor**



The men on the left are Saracens. They wear pointed helmets over turbans (fabric that is wound around the head) and carry javelins or scimitars. A javelin is a pointed throwing spear, and a scimitar is a sword that has a curved and pointed blade.

**Based on the clues above, can you tell which man is King Louis IX of France? In the photograph above, circle which person you think he is. (Hint: look for the fleurs-de-lis!)**

**ABOVE:** A pointed "turban" helmet and a scimitar

Spanish, probably Castille, Toledo: *Gisant: knight in armour*, ca. 1500. Stone, h. 63.5 cm., l. 189.9 cm. Gift of Baroness Cassel van Doorn (y1955-3277). Photo: Bruce M. White.

We continue our quest in the same gallery. Find this sculpture of a Spanish knight:



This sculpture was made for the top of a knight's tomb. It includes many details of the man's armor. Instead of a helmet, the man wears a soft hat. Underneath his armor he wears a **hauberk**, or mail shirt. A hauberk was made out of tiny rings of metal that were woven together. He also wears **gauntlets** (metal gloves) and holds a sword. You can still see the handle of the sword, but the blade is now gone.

This figure would have been on top of the knight's sarcophagus, a stone container that held his body after he died. The knight's family coat of arms would have been on the side of the sarcophagus. A coat of arms was a unique combination of pictures and colors that had different meanings. In the Middle Ages, a knight would have also had his coat of arms depicted on his shield. The coat of arms helped others to recognize who the knight was when he was in his armor, especially since his face was covered with the visor of his helmet!

Unfortunately, the sarcophagus is now lost and therefore we have no clues to tell us who this man was. However, we can guess that he must have been very fond of his armor, since the sculptor who carved this figure provided a very detailed portrait of the armor, including areas that had been repaired!

Thank you for joining us today to explore courtly life in medieval Europe. Don't forget to stop by the information desk to collect a sticker for your Artful Adventures Passport. We hope you enjoyed your visit to the Princeton University Art Museum and that you will come back soon for another Artful Adventure!



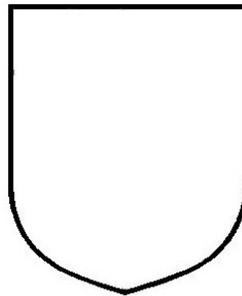


Here are some suggestions for continuing your medieval adventure at home.

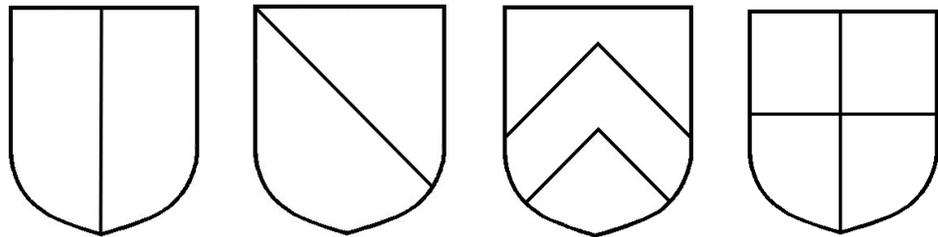
## Art project: Design your own shield!

**You will need:** a large piece of cardboard or tag board; scissors; glue or tape; colored pencils, crayons, or markers.

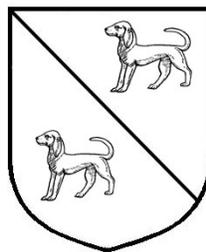
To make your shield, cut out a large piece of cardboard or tag board in this shape:



You can draw lines across the shield to divide it into two or four parts, like this:



Next, draw pictures of things that you like or like to do in the different sections. For example, if you have a pet dog, you could draw a dog.



Or, you can use some of the traditional symbols from the Middle Ages. On the next page you will find a list of colors to get you started:

## Colors

<b>Silver or white:</b>	peace
<b>Red:</b>	strength
<b>Blue:</b>	truth and loyalty
<b>Green:</b>	hope and joy
<b>Purple:</b>	royal majesty (king)

## Pictures

<b>Anchor:</b> hope	<b>Griffin (head and wings of an eagle, body of a lion):</b> bravery; defies death
<b>Apple (or other fruit):</b> peace	<b>Helmet:</b> wisdom and protection
<b>Bear:</b> strength	<b>Hunting horn:</b> someone who is fond of the chase
<b>Bee:</b> hard-working	<b>Ivy leaves:</b> strong and lasting friendship
<b>Boar:</b> bravery	<b>Lion:</b> courage
<b>Deer:</b> peace and harmony	<b>Ox:</b> generosity
<b>Bull:</b> bravery and generosity	<b>Palm tree:</b> victory
<b>Castle or tower:</b> safety	<b>Rose (or other flower):</b> hope and joy
<b>Cat:</b> courage	<b>Scallop shell:</b> travel to far places
<b>Crescent:</b> honor and glory	<b>Ship:</b> ancient sea voyages
<b>Crown:</b> king	<b>Sun:</b> glory and life
<b>Dog:</b> loyalty	<b>Unicorn:</b> courage and strength
<b>Dragon:</b> defender of treasure	
<b>Eagle:</b> strength, bravery, and protection	

## Suggested Reading

### ***Magic In The Margin: A Medieval Tale of Bookmaking,***

by Nikola-Lisa; illustrated by Bonnie Christensen

In this picture book set in a medieval monastery, orphaned Simon, who is apprenticing in illumination, dreams of the day he can create his own pictures, but must first complete a strange and unusual assignment that Father Anselm has given him. (Gr 1-4)

### ***A Medieval Feast,*** by Aliko

This story describes the preparation and celebration of a medieval feast, with royal guests, held at an English manor house. (Gr 2-6)



## Suggested Reading

***Medieval Tales for Kids to Tell***, by Lorna MacDonald Czarnota

This book presents traditional stories about the Middle Ages, along with tips for storytellers. (Gr 3-6)

***Knights @ Castles: 50 Hands-On Activities to Experience the Middle Ages***, by Avery Hart and Paul Mantell

This book introduces the history and culture of the Middle Ages through activities and crafts that are representative of medieval life: for example, creating an hourglass, a catapult, a coat of arms, and a code of honor. (Gr 3-6)

***Archers, Alchemists, and 98 Other Medieval Jobs You Might Have Loved or Loathed***, by Priscilla Galloway; illustrated by Martha Newbigging

This book describes some of the jobs performed by people living in Europe during the Middle Ages. (Gr 3-6)

***Chaucer's Canterbury Tales***, by Marcia Williams

A retelling in comic strip form of Geoffrey Chaucer's famous work, in which a group of pilgrims in fourteenth-century England tell each other stories as they travel on a pilgrimage to the cathedral at Canterbury. (Gr 4-8)

