

Knights of the Bathtub

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The use of water as a form of purification for the body and the soul has been with western civilization for the vast majority of its recorded history. Water has been used in the Christian religion since its inception. John the Baptist immersed his converts in a stream in order to cleanse their souls and to make them ready for a new religious beginning. Pontius Pilate cleansed himself of the blame for the death of Christ by washing his hands and saying "I am innocent of the blood of this just person." To this day the Catholic Church uses holy water in its rituals and ceremonies.

Based upon the long standing symbolism of spiritual cleansing associated with water, it is not surprising that an order of Knighthood sprang up around the tradition of bathing. For while many people believe that **Knights of Bath (KB)** are associated with the town of the same name the reality of the situation is that they are actually **Knights of the Bathtub!**

The ceremony associated with elevation to the Order is believed to have been established by King Henry IV of England at his coronation in the year 1399. When a squire was chosen for elevation to this order, he was placed in the care of a pair of "esquires of honour grave well seen in courtship and nurture and also in feats of chivalry."⁴ His hair was cut, he was shaved by a barber and then taken to the bath that was surrounded with "linen and rich cloths."⁵ While he sat in the water, two "ancient and grave knights"⁶ instructed him in the ways of chivalry and the duties of the Order. More water was poured on him and he was led to a bed to dry. He was then dressed by the squires in a white shirt and a robe of russet "with long sleeves and a hood thereto like unto that of a hermit"⁷ The knights then returned and conducted him to the chapel with the squires "sporting, dancing, with the minstrels making melody"⁸ He was served spiced wine and the knights retired. The priest, the squires, the chandler and the watch stayed with him while he contemplated and prayed all night. When dawn came he was taken from the chapel and dubbed **Knight of the Bath.**

⁴Lawrence Wright, *Clean and Decent*. (New York: Viking, 1960) 57

⁵Wright 57

⁶Wright 57

⁷Wright 57

⁸Wright 57