

Prizes in Medieval Tournaments

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There are very few records of what the winners of various tourneys received. Romantic tradition has it that the victor of a joust received a kiss from the most beautiful lady at the lists or some such intangible reward. While this may have been the case in some medieval tourneys, surviving records do not support this assertion.

One such reward that can be supported was the vow of the peacock. The victor of the days lists was granted the honor of carving a peacock that had been cleverly fitted back in its raiment of feathers after roasting. While doing so he was expected to make a boastful vow. To do this he might have "placed his hand upon the bird and swore he would be the first to plant his standard upon the walls of a besieged city"¹ or something of the like. Other feasters would then attempt to out-boast him during the course of the feast.

Other prizes seem to have been the direct result of an individual victory or defeat (yes, defeat!) In a late 14th and early 15th century **pas d'armes** an individual or team declared that they would defend a spot against all comers for a specified period of time. If the challengers were defeated they would give their opponents a token of the victory. If however, the challengers were victorious then one of two courses of action was commonly taken. The first of these was that the losers should also surrender a token of their defeat. Both prizes "put up" for the competition would have been quite valuable and it is through this means that a knight with great prowess could make a good living by "doing the tourney circuit" or by hosting a tourney. Although not all of the prizes received by victorious knights were for themselves. The rules of a pas d'armes might stipulate that the lady of the knight was to receive the prize. An example of this occurred when, in 1398, seven French knights challenged seven English knights to a hold tournament. The French each wore a diamond about their necks for three years prior to the event as a symbol of their membership in the group who had made this challenge. Anyone who challenged these knights could win the diamond by defeating the French knight. The price however for being beaten by the French knight was to provide a golden rod (not the flower) for each of the ladies of the French knights.

The second course of action that could be taken if a challenger was defeated seems to have been most popular in Burgundy. The defeated knight would be given a token of the quest upon which they would be sent. The most famous example of a challenge of this sort was the pas d'armes of the fountain of tears, held by Jaques de Lalaing, chamberlain of Philip the Good of Burgundy, beginning on November 1st, 1449.

Three shields [were hung up], each strewn with tears, were of different colours to indicate the type of combat offered. Anyone striking the white shield fought with an axe; if defeated, he had to wear a golden bracelet for a year unless he could find the damsel who held the key; once released, he had to present her with the bracelet. The violet shield indicated a sword combat on foot; If one of the combatants was forced to the ground he had to present a ruby to the most beautiful lady in the realm. The black shield indicated a wish to fight twenty-five courses with lances in war saddles; a knight who was unhorsed had to send a lance to the sovereign lord of the victor. In each case, the prize for the best performance was a golden replica of the weapon with which the challenger had fought.²

¹W. E. Mead, *The English Medieval Feast*. (London: George Allen and Unwin, 1967.) p.105

²Richard Barber and Juliet Barker. *Tournaments*. (New York: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1989)

This idea probably stems from or at least was popularized by the formation on January 1st 1415 of the order of the "Prisoner's Iron". Members of this order vowed to wear a gold chain with a badge dependant from it in the form of a collar. These knights professed that they were prisoners of their devotion to all women. "They were to wear this badge every Sunday for two years until they had found sixteen opponents who would fight them on foot, with weapons of war; the losers were to yield themselves as prisoners."³

As we can see, prizes being given to the victors of a tourney were a very real part of "the tourney experience." While the specifics of this article refer primarily to French, English, and Brugundian tournaments in the late 14th and 15th centuries, the general ideas hold true for most of the middle ages and throughout all of Europe.

Bibliography

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pp. 117-118.

³Richard Barber and Juliet Barker. *Tournaments*. (New York: Wiedenfeld and Nicholson, 1989) P. 111.