

The Pas d'Armes

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The pas d'armes was a form of tournament that is normally associated with France and Burgundy in the 15th century. The reason that we normally associate the pas d'armes with France is that, although it was popular elsewhere, the greatest amount of writing about these tournaments survives from this area. Two important sources of information about the pas d'armes are King Rene d'Anjou's book of the tournament, and the records of the Order of the Golden Fleece. (It was the duty of the king of arms of the Order of the Golden Fleece to record the deeds of its members.)

In order to describe the actual happenings of a pas d'armes it is first necessary to understand the other popular tournament style of the day. This was the **joust**. The joust is what most people normally think of when they picture a medieval tournament. It was a tournament on a grand scale, hugely expensive to host, and spectacular beyond compare. The joust was so expensive to hold that it would usually be held in conjunction with a great state occasion such as a coronation or a royal wedding. Only the richest of men could afford to host a tournament of this style.

By contrast the **pas d'armes** was significantly less expensive to host, and yet it was not without its share of spectacle and combat. In its simplest form the pas d'armes would have been held by a group of knights, setting up a pavilion, and challenging all comers to a fight. Three shields would be hung up, each signifying the types of combat being offered. Typical weapons used at a pas d'armes included axes, swords, maces and, of course, lances. Knights would usually let it be known that they would hold a piece of ground for a particular period of time.

More often than not however, the pas d'armes would have been much more spectacular than a simple challenge. The theme of the tournament usually revolved around a fanciful plot. Felix Brassart's account of the **Pas du Perron Fée** of April 1463, is described by Barber and Barker in their book *Tournaments*, thusly:

A young squire is lost in a strange country at nightfall, and finds a brazen horn hanging from a pillar, far from any habitation. Hoping that he might summon help, he sounds it three times, and is taken prisoner by a dwarf, servant of the lady of the magic pillar or perron fée. When he is brought before her, he is granted his freedom on condition that he holds a pas d'armes at the Duke of Burgundy's court. The scenario was kept up in the lists themselves: at one end stood the perron fée with the usual three shields hung on it for the different kinds of combat; but when jousting began four griffins drew the perron apart to reveal the knight, still imprisoned by the lady's dwarf, and released only in order to fight. At the end of each combat he returned to his prison, which closed behind him. The proceedings lasted for almost three weeks, and the different types of combat were performed in turn: swordplay for four days, jousting for four days in war armour, and jousting for four days in tournament armour. It was a highly popular occasion, with 42 challengers.

(pp. 119-120)

The pas d'armes offered all of the best aspects of the joust, combat, chivalry and spectacle, but with significantly less trouble and expense. It is no wonder that it became as popular as it did.