

Feudalism: Establishing Order



By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. Feudalism provided people with protection and safety by establishing a stable social order. Under this system, people were bound to one another by promises of loyalty. In theory, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the monarch (usually a king, but sometimes a queen). A great deal of land was also owned by the Church.

The king kept some land for himself and gave **fiefs** (FEEFS), or land grants, to his most important lords, who became his vassals. In return, each lord promised to supply the king with knights in times of war. A lord then enlisted lesser lords and knights as his vassals. Often, these arrangements were written down. Many of these contracts **survive** to this day in museums.

At the bottom of the social system were peasants. Lords rented some of their land to the peasants who worked for them. However, some peasants, called **serfs**, were “tied” to the land they worked. They could not leave the lord’s land without permission, and they had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of their own.

Most lords and wealthier knights lived on manors, or large estates. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were in the country, far from towns. That meant the peasants had to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat and iron for making tools.

During the Middle Ages, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents. Let’s take a closer look at the social classes in feudal society.

Section 4: Monarchs During Feudal Times

At the very top of feudal society were the monarchs, or kings and queens. As you have learned, medieval monarchs were also feudal lords. They were expected to keep order and to provide protection for their vassals. Most medieval monarchs believed in the divine

right of kings, the idea that God had given them the right to rule. In reality, the power of monarchs varied greatly. Some had to work hard to maintain control of their kingdoms. Few had enough wealth to keep their own armies. They had to rely on their vassals, especially nobles, to provide enough knights and soldiers. In some places, especially during the Early Middle Ages, great lords grew very powerful and governed their fiefs as independent states. In these cases, the monarch was little more than a figurehead, a symbolic ruler who had little real power.

In England, monarchs became quite strong during the Middle Ages. Since the Roman period, a number of groups from the continent, including Vikings, had invaded and settled England. By the mid-11th century, it was ruled by a Germanic tribe called the Saxons. The king at that time was descended from both Saxon and Norman (French) families. When he died without an adult heir, there was confusion over who should become king.

William, the powerful Duke of Normandy (a part of present-day France), believed he had the right to the English throne. However, the English crowned his cousin, Harold. In 1066, William and his army invaded England. William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and established a line of Norman kings in England. His triumph earned him the nickname “William the Conqueror.”

When William of Normandy conquered England, he brought feudal institutions from Europe with him. Supported by feudalism, strong rulers brought order to England. In fact, by the start of the High Middle Ages, around 1000 C.E., the feudal system had brought stability to much of Europe.



Section 5. Lords and Ladies During Feudal Times

Like monarchs, lords and ladies were members of the nobility, the highest-ranking class in medieval society. Most of them lived on manors. Some lords had one manor, while others had several. Those who had more than one manor usually lived in one for a few months and then traveled with their families to another.

Manor Houses and Castles Many of the people on a manor lived with the lord’s family in the manor house. Built of wood or stone, manor houses were surrounded by gardens and outbuildings, such as kitchens and stables. They were protected by high walls.

The manor house was the center of the community. In times of trouble, villagers entered its walls for protection. Its great hall served as the lord's court. It was also a place for special celebrations and feasts, such as those given at Christmas or after a harvest.

Kings and queens, high-ranking nobles, and wealthy lords lived in even grander structures: castles. Castles were built for many purposes. One of a castle's main **functions** was to serve as a home. Castles were also one of the most important forms of military technology. With their moats, strong walls, and gates, they were built for defense. Finally, their large size and central locations made castles visual reminders of the social hierarchy and the power of the ruling classes.

The earliest medieval castles were built of wood and surrounded by high wooden fences. The strongest part, the *motte*, was built on a hilltop. A walled path linked the motte to a lower enclosed court, the *bailey*, where most people lived. After about 1100 C.E., most castles were built of stone to resist attacks by more powerful siege weapons.

Castles gradually became more elaborate. Many had tall towers for looking out across the land. The main castle building had a variety of rooms, including storerooms, kitchens, a library, a dining hall, sleeping quarters for distinguished guests, and the lord and lady's quarters.



The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Lords and Ladies It was the lord's responsibility to manage and defend his land and the people who worked it. The lord appointed officials to make sure villagers carried out their duties, which included farming the lord's land and paying rent in the form of crops, meat, and other foods. Lords also acted as judges in manor courts and had the power to fine and punish those who broke the law. Some lords held posts in the king's government. In times of war, lords fought for their own higher-ranking lords, or at least supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

In theory, only men were part of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. However, it was quite common in the Middle Ages for noblewomen to hold fiefs and inherit land. Except for fighting, these women had all the duties that lords had. They ran their estates, sat as judges in manor courts, and sent their knights to serve in times of war.

Noblewomen who were not landowners were still extremely busy. They were responsible for raising and training their own children and, often, the children of other noble families. Ladies were also responsible for overseeing their household or households. Some households had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunters, and knights-in-training called *pages* and *squires*, who assisted the knights. There were also cooks, servants, artists, craftspeople, and grooms. Entertainment was provided by musicians and jesters who performed amusing jokes and stunts.

When they weren't hard at work, lords and ladies enjoyed hunting and hawking (hunting with birds), feasting and dancing, board games such as chess, and reading. Ladies also did fine stitching and embroidery, or decorative sewing.

Although nobles and monarchs had the most privileged lives in medieval times, they were not always easy or comfortable by modern standards. Lit only by candles and warmed only by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings. People generally bathed only once a week, if that. Clothes were not washed daily either. Diseases affected the rich as well as the poor. And, of course, warfare was a great and ever-present danger.



Section 6. Knights During Feudal Times

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights had to have a good deal of wealth, since a full suit of armor and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords. **Becoming a Knight** The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord,

who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castles and manors. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, pages spent much of their time with the ladies of the castle. They were expected to help the ladies in every way possible. During this period, the ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp. These skills were valued in knights.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the knight who was his lord. He polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He helped care for his horse. He even waited on him at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-axe and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). They practiced by fighting in make-believe battles. But squires also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, care for his weapons and horses, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if deserving of the honor, a squire became a knight. Becoming a knight could be a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting ceremony in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called [chivalry](#). (*Chivalry* comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning "horse.") Knights were expected to be loyal to the Church and to their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of

gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.

Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight's life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances extended. The idea was to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts were held as sporting events, for exercise, or as serious battles between rival knights. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle.

Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of linked metal rings, called chain mail. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The medieval style of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective against such weapons.

But knights were only a small group in medieval society. Next, let's turn to daily life for the vast majority of the population: the peasants.

Section 7: Peasants During Feudal Times

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. They were not part of the feudal relationship of vassal and lord, but they supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Their labor freed lords and knights to spend their time preparing for war or fighting.

During medieval times, peasants were legally classified as free or unfree. These categories had to do with the amount of service owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord. Unfree peasants, or serfs, farmed the lord's fields and could not leave the lord's manor. In return for their labor, they received their own small plot of land to farm.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock (farm animals). But every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths

(metalworkers), and other skilled workers. Peasant women worked in the fields when they were needed.

They also cared for their children, their homes, and livestock.

Along with the work they performed, peasants and serfs might owe the lord numerous taxes. There was a yearly payment called “head money,” at a fixed amount per person. The lord could demand a tax, known as *tallage*, whenever he needed money. When a woman married, she, her father, or her husband had to pay a fee called a *merchet*.

Peasants were also required to grind their grain at the lord’s mill (the only mill on the manor). As payment, the miller kept portions of the grain for the lord and for himself. Lords could keep any amount they wanted. Peasants found this practice so hateful that some of them hid small handmills in their houses. Most peasants lived in small, simple houses of one or two rooms. A typical house was made of woven strips of wood covered with straw or mud. Peasants had little furniture or other possessions. There was a hearth fire in the middle of the main room, but often there was no chimney, so it was dark and smoky inside. An entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals.

Peasants ate vegetables, meat such as pork, and dark, coarse bread made of wheat mixed with rye or oatmeal. Almost no one ate beef or chicken. During the winter, they ate pork, mutton, or fish that had been preserved in salt. Herbs were used widely, to improve flavor and reduce saltiness, or to disguise the taste of meat that was no longer fresh.