

Feudalism

Feudalism is the general term used to describe the political and military system of western Europe during the Middle Ages. At that time, there was no strong central government and little security, but feudalism fulfilled the basic need for justice and protection.

Feudalism is often confused with *manorialism*. Manorialism was the system of organizing agricultural labor. It refers to the economic relationship between the lord of a manor and his peasant tenants. Feudalism, on the other hand, was mainly a political and military system. Both the lord and his subjects, called *vassals*, were aristocrats. The lord gave vassals land in return for military and other services. The lord and the vassals were bound through ceremonies and oaths to be faithful to each other and to observe their obligations. The peasants had no part in such arrangements.

The word *feudal* comes from a Latin term for *fief*. The fief was the estate or land granted by a lord in return for a vassal's loyalty and service. Some fiefs were large enough to support one knight. Others were great provinces of a kingdom, such as the province of Normandy in France. The church, which owned large fiefs, was also part of the feudal system.

Feudalism developed to meet the needs of its time. In the A.D. 400's, Germanic tribes conquered the West Roman Empire and divided it into many kingdoms. The Germanic peoples—called *barbarians* by the Romans—were loyal only to their tribal chiefs or to their families. Thus, the strong central and local governments of the Romans disappeared. In addition, barbarian customs replaced many Roman laws. Such changes and further invasions resulted in general disorder and constant warfare in the years following the barbarian conquest of the West Roman Empire. Feudalism helped establish order in Europe under these conditions.

Feudalism began to appear in the 700's. By the 1100's, it had spread from France into England, Spain, and other parts of the Christian world. The crusaders organized their states in the Near East according to the feudal system. Feudalism reached its height between the 800's and 1200's. By the 1400's, it was disappearing or becoming an outdated system.

The beginnings of feudalism. Feudalism had two main roots. One was the relationship of honor that existed among the Germanic war bands that wandered over much of Europe in the early Middle Ages. The leader and warriors of these bands pledged their loyalty to each other. The warriors fought for the honor of their leader and were expected to remain with him even to death. In turn, the leader was responsible for his men and rewarded them with treasures and glory.

The second main root of feudalism was the system of *tenure* (landholding). Under this system, a lord would grant land to a person on certain conditions or in return for services other than rent or payment. People who owned land might turn it over to a lord in return for protection. The lord allowed the people to stay on the land as tenants. These tenants became the peasants of the manorial system. Although they lost their independence, having the protection of a powerful local lord was more important to them. The system of tenure was already in use in the former provinces of the Roman Empire when the Germanic invaders settled there in the A.D. 400's.

By the 700's, the Muslims had spread from Africa to Spain, and their new empire threatened all of western Europe. Kings and important nobles began giving fiefs to free and noble warriors in return for military service. These fiefs included land, the buildings on it, and the peasants who lived and worked on it. The warriors who received the fiefs were called *vassals*, from a Latin word meaning *military retainer*. By the 800's, the relationship of honor and loyalty that existed between leader and

warrior in the Germanic war bands was combined with a system for holding land and providing services in exchange. This combination was feudalism.

The principles of feudalism. Only noblemen or aristocratic warriors could take part in feudal practices. A saying of the time stated, "No land without a lord, and no lord without land." A man became a vassal of the lord in a ceremony called *homage*. The future vassal promised to be loyal, fight for the lord, and become his *man* (*homo* in Latin). The lord promised to treat the vassal with honor. See Homage.



After performing homage, the new vassal was *invested with* (given the rights to) his fief. This was done in an *investiture* ceremony. At the ceremony, the lord often gave his vassal a clod of dirt, a stick, or some other such object as a symbol of the fief.

The vassal received only the use or possession of the fief, not ownership of it. He held the fief in return for services he had promised. As long as the vassal held the fief, he received what the land—and the peasants—produced, collected taxes, held court, administered justice, and managed the peasants' labor. When the vassal died, his son usually took over the fief. The son provided the same services as his father.

By 1100, it had become the custom for a man's oldest son to inherit the fief. This custom was called *primogeniture* (the right of the first-born). Primogeniture ensured that the fief would not be broken up among many sons and that one heir would assume responsibility for the services to the lord. See Primogeniture.

If a vassal died without heirs, the fief *escheated* (went back) to the lord. The lord could then grant it to another person as he wished. If the dead vassal's heir was a young child, the lord had the right of *wardship* and became the protector of the *ward* (child). The lord could grant the wardship to another vassal, who held the fief and its profits until the young heir came of age. In many cases, the lord also had a right to choose marriage partners for his wards and for the daughters or widows of his vassal. If a woman inherited a fief, her husband performed homage and became the lord's vassal. Such rights of the lord were called feudal *incidents*. They were sources of power and profit for the lord.

The lord had other rights called *aids*. All vassals had to make a special payment when the lord's oldest son was knighted and when his oldest daughter married. If the lord was captured and held for ransom, the vassals had to pay the ransom. But feudal aids and rights were limited. For example, a lord could not require new conditions or levy higher taxes on his vassals. The lord also was supposed to consult his vassals before making major decisions, such as whether or not to go to war.

Knighthood under feudalism. A vassal's main service to his lord was military. By the 700's, vassals had to supply a certain number of knights to serve the lord for a certain number of days, usually 40. Knights were armored warriors on war horses. The larger the fief held by a vassal, the more knights the vassal had to provide.

It became the custom for a vassal to divide his own fief and distribute parts of it to his knights. The knights then became his vassals. This practice of dividing fiefs was called *subinfeudation*. By the 1200's, it had developed so far that several layers of feudal relations might separate a knight at the bottom from a baron or a king. At each level, a noble was both lord and vassal.

Justice under feudalism. Quarrels among vassals were settled at the lord's *court*, which consisted of all the vassals. Many of the legal customs developed at the feudal court have become part of the legal systems of the United Kingdom and the United States. For example, the lord presided over feudal courts. In courts today, a judge presides. A vassal received judgment from other vassals who were his *peers* (social equals). Today, citizens receive judgment from their peers on a jury. Other judicial customs of feudal days have disappeared. One such custom was *trial by combat*, which involved a fight between the vassals involved in a dispute. The winner of the fight was also declared the winner of the case. It was accepted that God gave victory to the honest vassal or correct side. See [Trial by combat](#).

A vassal had to answer the *summons* (order to appear) of a feudal court. If the vassal failed to appear or did not obey the court's decision, the lord could take back the vassal's fief. A rebellious vassal was declared a *felon*.

The lord was expected to seek the advice and consent of his vassals before making laws. In time, this practice led to the idea that no ruler can make laws without the consent of the people being governed. Modern parliaments in Europe developed from the meetings of vassals summoned by a lord or a king.

The decline of feudalism. By the 1200's, several events in Europe led to the decline of feudalism. An economic revival put more money back into use. Because soldiers could be paid, fewer lords relied on vassals to provide the services of knights. The invention of gunpowder and of such weapons as the longbow and the cannon lessened the dominance of knights. Foot soldiers from Flemish cities defeated French knights at the battle of Courtrai in 1302. English longbowmen beat the French cavalry in battles at Crecy in 1346, Poitiers in 1356, and Agincourt in 1415. Stone castles occupied by feudal lords no longer could stand against cannons. Cities grew wealthier and became more important, and rulers had less need of the aristocracy. People trained in government service took over the functions that vassals had performed on their fiefs.

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How to cite this article:

To cite this article, World Book recommends the following format:

Rosenthal, Joel T. "Feudalism." [World Book Online Reference Center](#). 2008. [Place of access.] 24 Aug. 2008 <<http://www.worldbookonline.com/wb/Article?id=ar195240>>.