

Europe 2: Feudalism

A New System

What political system arose in Europe after the fall of the Western Roman Empire?

Around the end of Charlemagne's life, a political and military system called **feudalism** developed. This system was based on the use of land. Within this system, individuals named lords owned huge amounts of land. A lord could be any nobleman, member of a high-ranking class, or church official who owned a fief and allowed a person to use part of it, usually for agriculture, in return for services. Therefore, a lord could be a king, a prince, a knight, or a clergyman.

Individuals who agreed to use a portion of a lord's land were known as **vassals**. Ownership of the land remained with the lord, but he allowed the vassal to tax the peasants on the land and keep the proceeds. Also, the vassals received a portion of the crops that these peasants produced. In return, the vassal promised to be loyal to and fight for his lord. Because of this, vassals often kept an army composed of professional soldiers called **knights**.

To ensure a knight's loyalty, a vassal would sometimes grant part of his **fief** to his knights. By doing this, the vassal would

become the lord of his knights, who would become his vassals. Indeed, a nobleman could be both a lord and a vassal. He could be a lord by granting land to knights, clergy, and other nobles. However, he could also be a vassal to a more powerful lord had granted land to him.

Lords and vassals often fought each other over land or other disputes. Some of these disputes were settled in the lord's court. In medieval England, some courts used a judicial system in which vassals called peers would judge a vassal suspected of wrongdoing. Over time, this practice became a key feature of English law and, eventually, the laws of the United States of America.

*Watch Video: Feudalism (Weak Kings, Strong Rulers) TechBook Ch 17.1 Explore 2) OR Crash Course <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xt9DwTvkWhY>

The feudal system was based on a pyramid of vassals

A vassal someone who serves/pledges loyalty

DID YOU KNOW?

A fief was more than just a piece of land. A fief had to include at least one village with huts for the serfs, a manor house or castle for the noble, and land to grow or catch food.

A fief was not ownership. A fief was actually a loan from the king and the king could take it back.

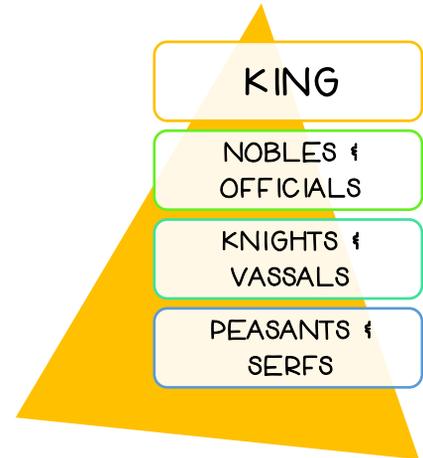
Sometimes fiefs were given as reward for bravery in battle. To get a fief you had to promise the king several things. First, you would give your loyalty to the king; second, you would fight or send men to fight if the king needed them; third, you would provide money to ransom the king if he was captured; finally, you would take care of the serfs working the land.

Feudalism

A Feudal Society

What was feudal society like in the Middle Ages?

Feudalism gave rise to a **hierarchical** social system that consisted of four classes: kings, nobles, knights, & peasants (**serfs**).



Kings

A king was the ruler of a kingdom and, because of this, sat at the top of the social structure. However, in reality, kings did not have a lot of power, and only ruled over their royal lands. The lords who ruled over fiefs had direct control over that land. In the Early Middle Ages, some lords who ruled large fiefs could amass as much or more power than their king. However, as the feudal system moved into the High and Late Middle Ages, the kings gradually gained more power.

Nobles and Officials

Many members of the nobility (such as dukes and barons) and church officials (such as bishops) were lords who controlled fiefs. The nobility spent much of their time trying to gain new lands or defending their land against the attacks of enemies. Although the clergy devoted their lives to the Church, they still had a large amount of wealth and power in the feudal system.

Knights & Vassals

Knights were professional soldiers who were loyal to their lord. They went through years of hard training in order to prepare for battle. If a knight excelled in serving his lord, the lord sometimes granted land to the knight. In this way, a knight could become a vassal. Knights were also expected to follow a code of behavior called chivalry. According to this code, a knight should be courageous in combat, be loyal to his lord, defend the Church, and be gallant toward women. However, in reality, many knights did not always live up to this code.

Peasants (Serfs)

Peasants worked the land for their lord and had few rights. In addition, peasants performed other tasks required by their lord, such as cutting wood and repairing roads. They often lived in crude huts, slept on straw, and ate simple food.

Feudalism

Let's Review

During the Middle Ages in Europe, the military and political system of feudalism developed. The economic system of manorialism also arose.

- ✓ In the feudal system, a lord granted land to a vassal in return for services.
- ✓ Lords and vassals offered land to professional soldiers called knights, who in return pledged to defend the lords.
- ✓ Feudalism produced a social system divided into four classes: kings, nobles and church officials, knights, and peasants.
- ✓ Knights followed a code of behavior called chivalry.
- ✓ Peasants worked the land for their lord and had few rights.
- ✓ Manorialism was a self-sufficient economic system in which the lord of an estate lived in a manor house and peasants worked his land.
- ✓ Many peasants were serfs. They were bound to their lord's estate and had to farm their lord's land in addition to their own land.

Why Does It Matter?

Feudalism and manorialism helped improve the economic condition of Europe in the Middle Ages. They both helped to set the scene for the rise of powerful kingdoms. Feudalism also developed a judicial system. This system strongly affected modern jury systems.