

FEUDALISM IN MEDIEVAL LIFE

The institution known as **feudalism** appeared in early medieval Europe. The continent witnessed a setting of **collapsing central authority, civil wars, invasions, and overall economic stagnation**. The term feudalism refers to that social, political, and economic system that emerged from the experience of 9th century Europe.

Feudalism highlighted the fact that only men who could guarantee protection and security from a war, invasion, and famine, were the true lords of those times. In other words, **feudal society was a society dominated by warriors**. Indeed, during the early years of the Medieval Age, what people needed most was the assurance that they could depend on others when needed. As a result, powerful individuals were recognized as superiors by lesser men. These latter pledged themselves to former, promising them service and loyalty.

Feudal society, then, was a **society that consisted of a vast network of mutual relationships based almost entirely on personal loyalty and service**. This practice grew out of two primary causes:

- the fall of Rome and its aftermath led to a general weakening of one's loyalty to the state, which had been characteristic of the later years of the Roman Empire.
- the tribal bonds characteristic of the invading tribes began to decline due to their Christianization.

However, that feudal society was not only based on security and protection. **Feudalism was also a political, economic, military, and social arrangement**.

In the sixth and seventh centuries there involved the custom of individual freemen. These freemen did not belong to any protecting group but placed themselves under the protection of a more powerful freeman. In this way stronger men were able to build up armies and become local political and judicial powers, and the lesser men were able to solve the problem of security and protection. The men who pledged themselves to stronger ones were "**freemen in a contractual relation of dependence**." Those who gave themselves to the king were called **antrustiones**. All men of this type came to be described collectively as **vassals** (barons & knights).

The landed nobility, like kings, made every effort to acquire as many vassals as they could for the obvious reason that military strength during this period lay in numbers. Of course, it was absolutely impossible to maintain these growing armies on what was provided by the king's household alone, or to support them by payment. Consequently, kings granted lands to vassals as a benefice or **fief**. The vassals were expected to live on the land, maintain their horses, and supply themselves with weapons of war. The *fief* was inhabited by peasants, and the crops that they raised provided the *vassal* with his means of support.

The Feudal System was introduced to England following the invasion and conquest of the country by William I (The Conqueror). The system had been used in France by the Normans from the time they first settled there in about 900 AD. It was a simple, but effective system, where all land was owned by the King. One quarter was kept by the King as his personal property, some was given to the church and the rest was leased out under strict controls.

The Feudal system rested on a strict relationship of mutual assistance and service. There was a hierarchy:

The King

The King was almighty and had absolute authority under the Feudal System. **He owned all the land in the country** and decided who he would lease land to. He therefore only allowed men he could trust to lease land from him. However, before they were given any land **they had to swear an oath to remain faithful to the King at all times**. The men who leased land from the King were known as Barons; they were wealthy, powerful and had complete control of the land they leased from the King.

The Barons

Barons leased land from the King. It was known as a **manor**. They were known as the **Lord of the Manor** and were in complete control of this land. **They established their own system of justice, minted their own money and set their own taxes. In return for the land they had been given by the King, the Barons had to serve on the royal council, pay rent and provide the King with Knights for military service when he demanded it. They also had to provide lodging and food for the King and his court when they travelled around the country. The Barons kept as much of their land as they wished for their own use, then divided the rest among their Knights. Barons were very rich.**

The Knights

Knights were given land by a Baron (or sometimes directly from the king) **in return for military service when demanded by the King. They also had to protect the Baron and his family, as well as the Manor, from attack. The Knights kept as much of the land as they wished for their own personal use and distributed the rest to serfs. Although not as rich as the Barons, Knights were quite wealthy.**

The Serfs

Serfs lived on the land of the Knight or the baron. **They had to provide the Knight/baron with free labour, food and service whenever it was demanded. Serfs were very poor and had no rights. For example, they were not allowed to leave the Manor but with authorization and had to ask their Lord's permission before they could marry.**