

Feudalism: A System for Living

SECTION

1

**BEFORE
YOU
READ**

Teach Into Your Background

Have you ever ridden a local bus? Have you used public parks? If so, you have used services provided by your

local government. Do you think your community does a good job providing services that people need? Why or why not?

Questions to Explore

1. How did feudalism protect people during the dangerous times of the early Middle Ages?
2. What was life like on a medieval manor?

Key Terms

Middle Ages
medieval
feudalism
vassal
manor
self-sufficient
serf

Key People and Places

Charlemagne
Gaul

As darkness fell, a young man prepared for a special ceremony. The next day he would stop being a squire, or knight-in-training, and become a real knight. It was a big step up in life.

The squire put on a white tunic and red and black cloaks. Then he walked to the church, where he spent the night alone, praying. The next morning he entered the castle courtyard, where knights and ladies had gathered. His lord presented him with his sword, spurs, and shield. The squire knelt. Then he felt the lord's sword lightly tap him on each shoulder. "In the name of God, Saint Michael, and Saint George, I call you a knight," declared the lord. "Be loyal, brave, and true."

The young man had become a knight, an important person in European society. Before all else, a knight was expected to be loyal and true to the lord who knighted him. His lord, in turn, was loyal to a more powerful lord. That lord might be loyal to a king. A thousand years ago, governments in Europe depended on each person's loyalty to those who had more land and wealth. Each knight and lord was also supposed to watch over the people in his care, who were less powerful.

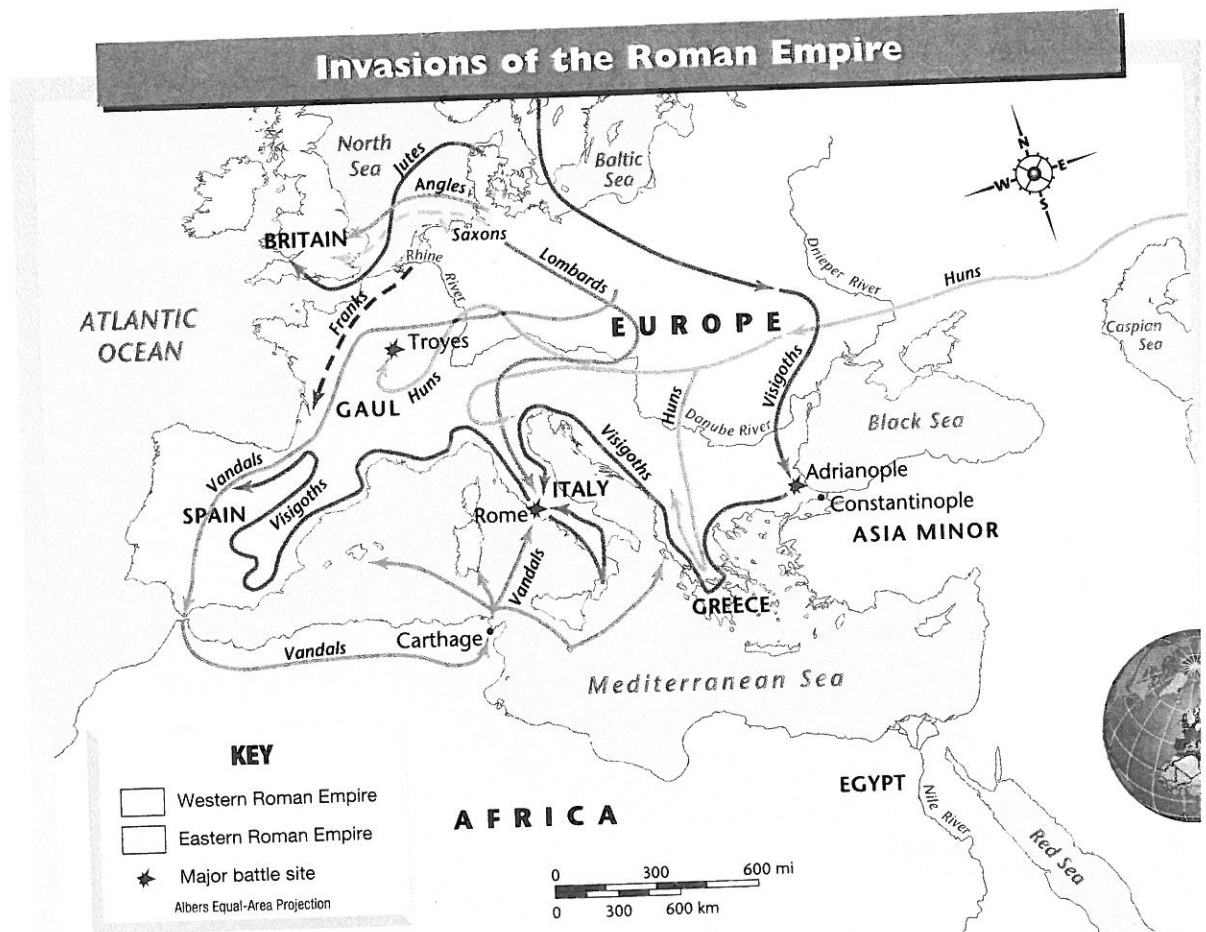
▼ This picture shows a squire being knighted. He receives his broadsword and other weapons from his lord.



Medieval Times

This kind of government came about because it filled the needs of communities for protection during the Middle Ages. What are the Middle Ages? Historians usually say that ancient times lasted until about A.D. 500. They say that modern times actually started about A.D. 1500. The years in the middle, between ancient times and modern times, are called the **Middle Ages**. This part of history is sometimes called **medieval** (mee dee EE vul) times. *Medieval* means "from the Middle Ages."

The Collapse of the Roman Empire In ancient times, the Roman Empire protected much of Western Europe. When it no longer had an army strong enough to defend its borders, the empire became weaker. In wave after wave, invaders claimed parts of the empire. They destroyed towns and cut off trade routes. They kept their own languages and laws. By doing this, the invaders broke the bonds that



Map Study At the height of its power, the Roman Empire included the lands around the Mediterranean Sea and much of western Europe. In the late A.D. 200s, an emperor divided it to make it easier to rule. The western part

went into decline. From the 300s to the 500s, peoples from northern and eastern Europe invaded and took control of much of the eastern empire. **Movement** Which groups of invaders attacked Rome?

The Crowning of Charlemagne

me des hautes oeuvres du noble Charlemagne roy de fra



De plusieurs batailles que Charlemagne eut alencont

Charlemagne brought the rule of law back to a large area of what had been the western Roman Empire. He also supported the Catholic

Church. In return for this support, Pope Leo III crowned Charlemagne emperor on Christmas Day in 800.

had held the Roman Empire together. Even reading and writing were in danger of vanishing, because many invading groups could not do either.

Charlemagne's Empire As time went on, the invading groups set up small kingdoms throughout Europe. One group, the Franks, claimed the area called Gaul, which is now the country of France. In 768, a skilled military leader named Charlemagne (SHAR luh mayn) became king of the Franks. He soon expanded his kingdom into an empire by conquering much of Western Europe.

During his rule of more than 45 years, Charlemagne worked to keep Western Europe united. He also established schools to promote learning and culture. The rulers who came after Charlemagne were weak. They could not defend his empire against new waves of invasions. By the end of the 800s, Charlemagne's empire had fallen apart.

Feudalism: A Basis for Government

Perhaps the fiercest attacks against Charlemagne's empire were made by the Vikings. These tough warriors came from northern Europe, where Denmark, Sweden, and Norway are now. Their attacks began around 800 and continued for about 300 years. Relying on



▲ Some people believe this gold crown set with jewels was worn by Charlemagne.

LINKS ACROSS THE WORLD

Vikings in America Vikings looked beyond Europe for conquest. They went into North Africa. They traveled westward to Greenland and beyond. *The Tales of the Greenlanders*, a Norwegian saga, describes a journey to lands west of Greenland. The storyteller gives clues about the location of Vinland, a settlement founded in this new land. Historians who have worked with these clues think that Vinland was probably somewhere in what is now New England, the northeast region of the United States.

▼ Knights carried colorful coats of arms into battle. They knew the coats of arms so well, they could identify each other at a glance.



surprise, the Vikings looted towns and murdered the people living there. The people of Europe had to find a way to defend themselves against the Vikings. Slowly they worked out a new system of government that could protect small towns and entire kingdoms.

Creating Order The medieval power system was constructed like a pyramid. The people at the top of the system had the most power. They were kings and queens. Next in power were nobles, then knights and finally peasants. This system is called **feudalism**.

In medieval Europe, power belonged to those who controlled land. A landowner gave a share of land, called a *fief* (feef), to another man who promised to be loyal to the landowner, to follow his laws, and to fight for him. In this system, the landowner was called a lord, and a man who promised to be loyal to him was his vassal. A vassal could be a lord. However, he had much less power than the great lord whom he swore loyalty.

The agreement between lord and vassal was begun in a solemn ceremony. Like a new knight, the vassal knelt before the lord and swore to be loyal. The lord, in turn, promised to treat the vassal with honor. Then the lord gave the vassal a handful of dirt or some other symbol of the fief he was to receive.

Feudal Duties A lord's chief duty was to protect his vassals and their lands. If a vassal with young children died, the lord became the children's protector. The lord also asked his vassals' advice before making laws or going to war.

Vassals had other duties besides serving in the lord's army. The lord called them, they had to appear at a special gathering called the lord's court. They also had to make special payments of money or goods to the lord when his oldest daughter married or when his oldest son became a knight.

Women of noble class also played an important part in feudal society. Like the men in her family, a noblewoman was often sent to friends or relatives for training. After her training was finished, she took her place as lady of the household. She managed the household, performed necessary medical tasks, and supervised servants. When her husband or father was off fighting, she often served as "lord of the manor."

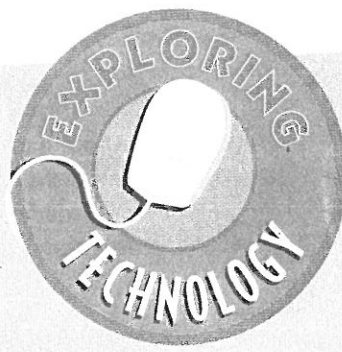
Peasants and Manors

A lord might rule over one manor or many. A manor was a large estate that often included a village as well as farmlands inhabited by peasants. The village was very important in the feudal system, since it depended on the wealth his manor provided.

A Medieval Manor

most important building on a manor was the lord's house, or the manor house. It was surrounded by a wall or fence for protection. Beyond the manor house lay the village. It consisted of a church, peasants' homes, a blacksmith's shop, a mill for grinding

grain into flour, and other workplaces. The fields outside the village where crops were grown were part of the manor, too. **Critical Thinking** Why could a manor be called self-sufficient?



Fields A manor usually had three fields for growing crops. Two fields were planted with crops and one field lay fallow, or unplanted. Fields were divided into long, narrow strips. Some belonged to the lord, some were owned by the Church, and the rest were divided among the peasants.

Manor House The manor house was set off from the rest of the village and surrounded by a wall or fence. In times of trouble, villagers took shelter behind the manor-house defenses.

VILLAGE

Peasant homes

Pasture

Church

Well

Priest's home

Blacksmith shop

Manor house

Grain mill

Grain Mill The mill was driven by a wheel turned by the flowing water of a stream. Sometimes, the mill housed the village oven, where all the villagers baked their bread.

Stream

A Complete Community The illustration above shows the layout of a typical manor. The manor was governed by the lord. He made the rules and acted as judge. He also chose officials to manage the farming and other daily work. Since the manor was often far from towns and villages, its residents had to be **self-sufficient**, or able to supply their own needs, including food, shelter, and clothing. While most peasants were farm laborers, the manor would also have a carpenter, a shoemaker, a metalworker called a smith, and other skilled workers.

► This illustration, made in France during the 1400s, shows the kinds of work peasants had to do on a manor. These tasks included plowing, sowing seeds, pruning trees, and tending sheep.



Visualize Picture in your mind the inside of a peasant's hut.

The Lives of the Peasants and Serfs The peasants did the labor on the manor. They farmed the lord's fields to raise food for his household. In return, each peasant family could farm a small strip of land for itself. However, the family still owed the lord a part of the harvest.

Peasants lived in one-room huts with just a single window. For lighting and cooking, they built a fire on the dirt floor. Without a chimney, smoke filled the dark, cramped interior before drifting out of a hole in the roof.

In most cases, peasants were **serfs**. This means that they belonged to the land. They were considered part of the manor on which they lived. When a noble was given a manor, its serfs became his. They could not marry or leave the manor without his agreement.

Although serfs were property, they were not quite slaves. A serf who saved enough money to buy a plot of land could become a free peasant. A serf who escaped to a city and managed to live there for a year and a day without being caught also became free. As you will soon read, this custom had a big effect on medieval Europe.

SECTION 1 REVIEW

- Define** (a) Middle Ages, (b) medieval, (c) feudalism, (d) vassal, (e) manor, (f) self-sufficient, (g) serf.
- Identify** (a) Charlemagne, (b) Gaul.

- (a) How did feudalism benefit the wealthy and powerful?
(b) How did it affect the poor?
- Describe the life of a peasant on a medieval manor.

Critical Thinking

- Identifying Central Issues** Was feudalism the best way of providing protection for the poor? Give reasons for your answer.

Activity

- Writing to Learn** You are a medieval lord. List the various tasks you might perform in this position. Which tasks do you think you would like? Which do you think you would dislike? Explain your answers.