

# Feudalism

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### 1. FEUDALISM

Feudalism was a socio-economic and political system that dominated medieval Europe, between the 9th and 15th centuries as a reaction to the waning influence and protection of the Roman Empire. There was an increase in disorder and violence brought about by raiding parties from Germanic and Scandinavian lands and from Arabia and Hungary.<sup>1</sup> The resulting need for defence against the raiding parties evolved into a hierarchical arrangement in various regions of a contractual nature based on land ownership and military obligations.

The core concept of feudalism revolved around the relationship between lords (landowners) and vassals (those who were given land in exchange for military service and loyalty). It was primarily a system for organizing and managing land, labour, and military obligations. At the top of the feudal hierarchy was the king or monarch, who theoretically owned all the land in the kingdom. In practice, the king would grant large portions of land (fiefs) to nobles who in turn granted portions of that land to vassals (often knights), who would offer military service, protection, and counsel in exchange for the land. This created a complex network of allegiances, with each vassal owing a set of duties to their lord, including military service, agricultural production, and political support.

The peasants, also known as serfs, were at the bottom of the feudal structure. They were bound to the land and worked on the estates for the lords in exchange for protection and a small plot of land for their own use. Although they were not slaves, they had very limited freedom and were subject to the authority of their lord.

Feudalism was more than just an economic system; it also had a profound impact on the political and cultural life of medieval Europe. It created a decentralized structure of power, as local lords held more authority than the monarch in many regions. Feudal relationships were formalized through oaths of loyalty, ceremonies, and on occasion written contracts, which made the system more codified.<sup>2</sup>

The decline of feudalism can be attributed to several factors, including the growth of towns and trade, the rise of centralized monarchies, and the consequences of the Black Death, which reduced the population and thus

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<sup>1</sup> BLOCH, MARC, *Feudal Society*, Routledge Classics, 1962, page 45

<sup>2</sup> BADIE, BERTRAND, *International Encyclopedia of Political Science*, Sage Publications, Feudalism, p439

## Feudalism

the labour force. Additionally, the development of more professional armies and the shift towards a market-based economy contributed to the erosion of the feudal system. By the end of the medieval period, early forms of capitalism and nation-states had largely replaced feudalism.

Of the invaders, the Scandinavian Vikings were the most brutal as Marc Bloch describes them in his seminal work on feudalism:

Finally, these warriors of the North were men of strong and brutal sensual appetites, with a taste for bloodshed and destruction, which manifested itself at times in great outbreaks partaking of madness, when violence no longer knew any restraint: one such occasion was the famous orgy in 1012, during which the Archbishop of Canterbury, whom till then his captors had carefully guarded with an eye to ransom, was pelted to death with the bones of the animals eaten at the banquet.<sup>3</sup>

The Scandinavians often settled in conquered lands particularly in Britain where they worked in relays to conquer and settle further. It was not until the kings of Wessex reconquered Britain through a network of fortifications and by 954 AD succeeded in getting their authority recognised over the lands previously occupied by the Vikings. During this period Christianity gained influence and over the next three centuries overtook the Northern Teutonic beliefs.

We cannot say for certain that the slow transition of the Northern people from paganism to Christianity was the deciding step towards a more peaceful attitude, but it certainly moved in that direction. The feudal eras were still full of violence and plunder and therefore required a system to protect their people.

There are two distinct ages of Feudalism. The first stage was characterised by a decline in population due mainly to loss of protection from the Roman and Carolingian Empires and the plundering of villages by Northern and Southern tribes. The population moved away from the open farmland to villages for protection, which reduced agricultural efficiency. With the loss of state protection, public works and maintenance of existing infrastructure declined.

The currency in the form of coins, silver and gold from the empires also declined and replaced with barter of produce and goods. The greatest currency however, was land.<sup>4</sup> Land was the basis for most of the

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<sup>3</sup> BLOCH, MARC, *Feudal Society*, Routledge Classics, 1962, page 91

<sup>4</sup> Land in the Feudalist era was used to engage in contracts between people but the 'ownership' was rarely spoken of as the land was fought over, claimed and reclaimed, had no real boundaries and title deeds were rare. *Ibid*, page 368

## Feudalism

contractual arrangements between those that owned land and those that needed land. Indeed, it was land that was given to those lower in the hierarchy in exchange for agricultural and military support.<sup>5</sup>

The second stage of Feudalism occurred between 1050 and 1250 with an increase in population and a reduced threat from invaders. Land was reclaimed from nature and new villages established with stronger allegiances between people with democratic tendencies. Trade in cloth such as cotton and various metals increased which encouraged economic growth.

The overall Feudalist system of decentralised power and lack of military protection from an empire caused fragmentation and disorganisation. Kings would often fight between themselves using their vassals. In addition, communication and transport was slow and limited horses, foot traffic and sailing ships. Literacy levels were also low and only taught by the clergy. This is why most of the contractual arrangements between lord and vassal had a ritualistic nature rather than written contracts.

Disease and famine were commonplace and Christian ethics was weak. The Roman myths and old Germanic pagan myths were still prevalent and superstition and attention to supernatural manifestations of old world gods, imaginary enemies and threats was widespread. There were few clocks so time was based on natural cycles of day and night. The yearly seasons important for planting and harvest and the days of the week ritualised into weekly tasks.<sup>6</sup> For example, Friday was a day for love; Saturday was often regarded as 'washing day' and Sunday as the 'Lord's day', hence for worship.

The Feudalist age was a transition between the ancient world and its associated mythology of the Roman Empire and northern Germanic and Scandinavian people and the rising Christian influence with its moral guidelines and conscious awareness of our instinctive foundation. The need for security was a determining factor in the contracts between the owners of land (Monarchs and Lords), the warriors and the people needing protection. The Feudalist system evolved as a natural consequence to the circumstances and helped them find safety in groups around an exchange of service for property.

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid, page 231

<sup>6</sup> Whereas day and night are obvious as is the temperature difference between summer and winter, the days of the week were still described in terms of Roman gods: Diana as the Moon for Monday, Mars for Tuesday, Mercury for Wednesday, Jupiter for Thursday, Venus for Friday, Saturn for Saturday, and Apollo as the Sun. The growing influence of the Germanic beliefs translated the names of the days to Germanic gods: Mani as the Moon for Monday, Tyr for Tuesday, Woden for Wednesday, Thor for Thursday, Frig for Friday, Saturn for Saturday, and Sunna as the Sun.

## Feudalism

The Feudalist system evolved over time and brought with it great centres of learning in places like Bologna, Chartres and Paris. Romanesque art and architecture flourished and evolved into the great Gothic cathedrals in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Literature also flourished with poets openly discussing the importance of individuality:

The whole tendency of the new literature was towards the rehabilitation of the individual; it encouraged the growth of a more introspective habit of mind, reinforcing in this direction the influence of the religious practice of auricular confession which, after having been long confined to the monastic world, became widespread among laymen during the twelfth century.<sup>7</sup>

The latter part of the feudalist era is an excellent example of emerging consciousness. The spirit of violence and volatile emotions were still prevalent but people were becoming aware of the tempering quality of Christianity and its importance to overcome their possessing instincts. The growth of self-consciousness was becoming wide spread and the transition from the old myth based belief to Christianity was being felt, especially with the great religious awakening called the Gregorian reform after Pope Gregory VII.<sup>8</sup>

The increase in security from the first to second stage showed in the slow union of thought and practice. That is to say the fear of being conquered had subsided sufficiently to enable the free expression of ideas and the growth of culture.<sup>9</sup> The law had also shifted from the old vengeful retribution towards a conquering people towards the ideals of kindness, forgiveness and love. Blood feuds were still commonplace as the passion for vengeance easily erupted into action. This is an excellent example of how the unconscious expresses itself in positive ways such as the building of culture, and negative ways such as violence and destruction.

The relationship between lord and vassal was a complex arrangement of responsibilities and duties. The term 'vassal' meant young boy and this meaning persisted through the middle ages in the form of diminutive 'valet' or 'varlet'.<sup>10</sup> This put the lord and vassal in an almost father and son relationship even though it was never acknowledged as such. Even the lord was in charge; he would be answerable to his vassal and responsible to hold him to his duty and behaviour. Aristotle first recognised political

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<sup>7</sup> BLOCH, MARC, *Feudal Society*, Routledge Classics, 1962, page 341

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, page 343

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, page 347

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, page 475

## Feudalism

relationships based on the family and the feudal age exemplifies such a system of relationship.

The way the lord would engage the vassal varied from region to region. The reward for service could be direct and the lord providing food, clothing equipment and housing or grant him his own estate to provide for his own maintenance.<sup>11</sup> To make a military alliance an effective force against enemies, lords had many vassals and gave many grants of land, which constituted the lord's court.

The 'free men' as subjects of the king were also dependent on one or more lords. Theoretically, the king owned all the land and granted it to his subordinates who granted land to their subordinates. This hierarchy based on land use worked well for security and allegiances. For an individual to feel secure and thrive it was better to be part of this tangled and haphazard form of hierarchy and serve a master. European feudalism was a network of dependence from the upper to lower levels of social life.

Thus feudalism, a type of social organization marked by a special quality in human relationships, expressed itself not only in the creation of new institutions; it imparted its own colouring to what it received from the past, as if passing it through a prism, and transmitted it to succeeding ages.<sup>12</sup>

The top of the social structure was the nobility class with wealth and birth right heritage. "To be noble is to count among one's ancestors no one who has been subjected to slavery."<sup>13</sup> This class was defined by their wealth, exercise of authority and social habits. They were sometimes described as the 'landed class' with their income deriving from the use of the soil and labour of other men in agriculture, shops and workshops. Economic concerns were however, secondary to the need for security hence their function as a 'warrior' (knight) class of military vassals.

The feudal lord was very proud of their physical strength and courage, which was nurtured from childhood. As a consequence they sought methods to display those attributes through hunting, games (mock battles) and war, which were sought to overcome lengthy stretches of boredom. War was not only an outlet for their aggressive instincts, but gave them an opportunity to plunder and share those spoils with their vassals. To say that their wars were brutal is an understatement. They often left villages smoking ruins and all inhabitants brutally murdered.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, page 499

<sup>12</sup> Ibid, page 828

<sup>13</sup> Ibid, page 846

## Feudalism

A clear picture of the feudalist era cannot be complete until we discuss their sexual proclivities. The church imposed ascetic standards on their members but outside of the church it was different. Libertinism was the norm and sexual favours freely exchanged. They even created moral code of chivalry called 'courtly love'. It was sexual union outside of marriage and usually between a married woman and a lover of lower social rank.

This love was often bestowed upon a lady of higher rank, but in any case it always involved a strong emphasis on the man's adoration of the woman. It professed to be an all-engrossing passion, constantly frustrated, easily jealous, and nourished by its own difficulties; but its stereotyped development early acquired something of a ritual character.<sup>14</sup>

It was a curious system and regarded as a 'distant love' that could never be satisfied by complete union and marriage. It was therefore an adjunct to their warlike nature and served the function of love for unmarried warriors and a reason to fight and be rewarded when the fight was over. It was a clever way to redirect energy from the sexual instinct to the will to power knowing that the tension would be relieved when the fighting was done. It is a clever way to use tension to create energy and courage for a purpose of knowing that it will be rewarded once a task completed.

By the second half of the eleventh century, the feudalists had refined their system of lord and vassal and developed ritualistic methods to 'make a knight'. A young boy initiated into the knights was given arms, generally a sword symbolic of his future status, and an older knight gave the boy a blow on the neck or cheek presumably to impress upon him the importance of honouring his oath.<sup>15</sup> A moral code of behaviour influenced by the church was established for the knights as a 'code of chivalry'.

During the feudal era the church was as powerful as the military barons in wealth and learning. The judicial system was however fragmented and predominately ineffective as private agreements and litigants used arbitrators rather than seek a court judgment. What court cases there were used witness accounts without cross-examination and all judgements were representative of the monarchy. The cases only applied to free men, as slaves were the jurisdiction of their master.

The age was also a time for the differentiation of opposites. Spiritual matters led by the Christian church had jurisdiction over the soul whereas the monarchy was in charge of the body of men. The church wished to humble the monarchy and rulers of men's bodies and gain more influence

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid, page 907

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, page 919

## Feudalism

as the rulers of their souls. In their view, the body was influenced by the moon and the soul by the sun. They argued that the moon was a reflection of the sun and had less importance than the sun shining directly on the soul.<sup>16</sup> In essence, we can see a tussle for power between the monarchy and clergy. Whoever had more influence over the people had more control.

The struggle for control between the monarchy and clergy was on occasion united in one individual's belief. Before the feudal age the Roman Emperor Constantine converted to Christianity in 312 BCE and recognized its influence on individuals. Our history has many such unions between spirituality and worldly concerns that go back to ancient Greece with the Alchemy of Democritus (c.460 BCE–c. 370 BCE). A study of this phenomena shows that humanity oscillates between conflict of the opposites, their differentiation and their union, much the same as it occurs within an individual's psyche such as Constantine.

The later feudal age (Medieval Europe) also gave us Thomas Aquinas (1225- 1274) an Italian Dominican friar and Scholastic philosopher who tried to unite the science of Aristotle and the principles of Christianity, must the same as the Gnostics attempted in the late first century. Its culmination occurred later at the beginning of the Renaissance and heralded a new attitude in freedom of belief and expression. The transition was gradual as the people of medieval Europe were still hindered by the instinct for murder and destruction, which was easily brought to the surface. The increase in the Church's influence and Christian morals was a necessary reaction to a somewhat ambivalent attitude to human life.

Medieval men had little control over their immediate impulses; they were emotionally insensitive to the spectacle of pain, and they had small regard for human life, which they saw only as a transitory state before Eternity; moreover, they were very prone to make it a point of honour to display their physical strength in an almost animal way.<sup>17</sup>

The more influence the Church had over the people, the less did the Monarchy in their urge to conquer. Waging conflict for territory is difficult if their warriors take the words "Thou shalt not kill" to mean something.

The first stage of the feudalist era, as we have shown, was primarily based on security and the use of land payment through vassalage. Land was the currency and relationships formed through grants the transaction and oaths and rituals the contracts. The state had lost its ability to govern and protect its population from the northern and southern marauders and

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid, page 1113

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, page 1200



## Feudalism

a new system of self-contained protection was desperately required. It was ultimately based on the power of local kings who acquired lands through inheritance, marriage or conquest.

The hierarchy began with the king at the top to a host of nobles, lords, barons etc., and land parcels given to vassals or knights for an oath of political and military support.

As even the most perfunctory comparative study will show, one of the most distinctive characteristics of feudal societies was the virtual identity of the class of chiefs with the class of professional warriors serving in the only way that then seemed effective, that is as heavily armed horsemen.<sup>18</sup>

By the latter of the second stage of feudalism, the system was so fragmented and allegiances so fractured that it led to disorder and the other forms of association acquired new strength. By the thirteenth century the feudalist system was waning and the many militias with allegiances to many chiefs was a direct challenge to the authority of the king. Literacy was on the increase and written contracts became more prevalent. The warrior class, which had for a long time been exploited by their lords, began to regard themselves as nobles themselves through the 'nobility of the sword'.<sup>19</sup>

The transition gradually began from feudalism to the birth of the Renaissance era in Italy with the 'Bubonic Plague' (Black Death) in 1346, which spread to the rest of Europe. It is estimated that of the 200 million population, 75 million lives were lost. After the devastation of the plague, food and land were much cheaper which encouraged an increase in commerce and trade giving birth to the 'merchant class'.<sup>20</sup> With chaos of the feudalist system in decline, the plague and rise of the merchant class, the monarchies once again centralised power. Populations became more urbanised and the growing interest in classical and humanistic thought as well as advances in technology such as the invention of the printing press and rise of centres of learning, all contributed to the decline of the feudal manorial system and heralded a new age.

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid, page 1284

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, page 1305

<sup>20</sup> LOPEZ, R. S., *The Commercial Revolution of the Middle Ages, 950-1350*, 1976, Cambridge University Press

## Feudalism

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### 3. INDEX

---

#### *A*

---

Aquinas, Thomas · 8  
Aristotle · 6, 8

---

#### *B*

---

Black Death · 2, 9  
Britain · 3

---

#### *C*

---

Carolingian Empire · 3  
Christianity · 3, 5, 7, 8  
    Morals · 8  
Code of Chivalry · 7  
Conscious(ness) · 15  
Constantine · 8  
Courtly Love · 7

---

#### *D*

---

Democritus · 8  
Descartes R. · 12

---

#### *F*

---

Feudalism · 2, 3, 4, 5, 7, 9  
Fiefs · 2

---

#### *G*

---

Germanic · 2, 4  
    Mythology · 4  
Gnosticism · 8  
Gregorian Reform · 5

---

#### *K*

---

Knight · 6  
Knights · 2, 7, 9

---

#### *L*

---

Libertinism · 7  
Lords  
    Landowners · 2

---

#### *M*

---

Medieval Europe · 2, 8, 9

---

#### *P*

---

Pope Gregory VII · 5

---

#### *R*

---

Renaissance · 8  
Roman  
    Myths · 4  
Roman Empire · 2, 3, 4  
Romanesque Art · 5

---

#### *S*

---

Scandinavian · 2, 3  
    People · 4  
Serfs · 2  
Slavery · 6

## Index

---

V

Vassals · 2, 4, 5, 6, 7  
as Knights · 9  
Vikings · 3

---