



The Feudal System

The year is 1015. You live with your family on a manor, or large estate, in rural France. Because it is a warm spring evening, you decide to hitch up a cart and visit a friend who lives on another manor a short distance to the south. You whistle happily as you wave good-bye to your parents and proceed down the cobblestone road.

What is wrong with the above scenario? Several things. If you guessed that no one—child or adult—would venture out alone in the year 1015, you are correct. If you further guessed that most people who lived on manors were serfs with neither access to a cart nor permission to leave of their own free will, you are right again. And if you pointed out that there may or may not have been a decent road, you are extremely clever!

There is nothing particularly significant about the year 1015. It was just one year in a period of the Middle Ages known as *feudal times*. The word *feudal* refers to “feudalism,” the economic, political, and social system that characterized medieval Europe from about 1000 to 1300. Here is how it all came about.

For more than a thousand years, a people known as the Romans controlled most of Europe and all the lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea. They built magnificent buildings and constructed fine roads. Some of their roads are still in use today, as are some of the aqueducts they used to transport water. Aqueducts were bridge-like structures that carried water to cities throughout the far-flung world of the Romans.



One of many aqueducts constructed by the Romans. Some Roman aqueducts are still in use today.

The Romans were as skilled at government administration as they were at building things. From the city of Rome to the outlying provinces, efficient government and just laws made for an orderly society. This was particularly true during the first two hundred years of Rome’s empire period, extending from about 27 BC to AD 180. Taxes were collected and manufacturing and trade flourished. People in general were happy and traveled about the empire without fear for their safety.





But then, as the old saying goes, “the bottom fell out.” Within the Roman Empire, economic conditions deteriorated and citizens lost interest in civic affairs. Civil wars became the order of the day, and the army installed one emperor after another on the throne. Twenty-five emperors were murdered within one fifty-year period.

Outside the empire, the sinking of land in northern Europe and pressure from Asian peoples to the east set off mass migrations across the borders of the Roman Empire. It took more than two hundred years, but in AD 476, one tribe, the Visigoths, conquered the city of Rome. Although the eastern part of the Roman Empire continued for another thousand years, in the west the Roman Empire came to an end.

The fall of Rome led to the development of feudalism. Many Germans had lived under Roman rule or had been allies of the Romans against other invaders. In fact, the leader of the Visigoths who conquered Rome was Odoacer, a German who was serving as a general in the Roman army. But Europe was living in a state of almost continual warfare, and few people wrote accounts of the time. Because we know so little about this period of history, people call the period the *Dark Ages*.

For the most part, the Germans and Celts lived in tribes under local rulers. But in the eighth century, one Germanic king managed to bring much of Europe under his control. That king was Charlemagne, or “Charles the Great,” the first Holy Roman Emperor. Charlemagne was king of a German tribe known as the *Franks*. Does that name ring a bell? It should. It is from *Franks* that the name *France* is derived.

Charlemagne ruled from 768 to 814. During his long reign, there was stability in western Europe. But when Charlemagne died, his grandsons were unable to keep his empire together. The result was a breakdown in central government again, although Charlemagne’s laws survived as the basis for the medieval kingdoms of France and Germany.

Matters were made even worse by the regular invasions of the Vikings. Also known as the Northmen or Norsemen, Viking pirates swept out of Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) in the ninth century, raiding and plundering. The accounts of the Vikings that survive come from the monasteries that were the targets of their raids. A common prayer of the time was, “From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!”

Although remarkably democratic and civil among themselves, the Vikings were very warlike, showing no sympathy for the people they attacked. They





killed women and children with their long-handled axes just as easily as they killed men. After looting and then burning everything in sight, they sailed home in their long, sleek boats.

The lack of a central government led to the development of the feudal system mentioned earlier. This feudal system grew out of people's need for protection. With no strong kings to maintain law and order, people turned to local lords for help. At the heart of the system were personal arrangements between two parties.



Lithograph of a Viking warrior. The Vikings terrorized Europe in the early Middle Ages.

Feudal arrangements involved kings, powerful lords, and lesser nobles. Even though kings had little power, they were still kings, and on occasion they needed to raise an army, as did dukes and nobles. To do so, they granted tracts of land to the lords beneath them. A king or lord who gave land to a lesser lord became the latter's overlord. The one receiving the land became the vassal of the one who granted it. The land itself was called a *fief*.

A vassal who received land from a king or higher lord was obligated to fight for him for a certain number of days a year. If the vassal himself had vassals, they were obligated to fight also. Specially trained warriors called *knights*, lived in the castles or manor houses of great lords, or received a knight's fee, usually enough land to yield 20 pounds income a year. They paid for their keep by serving in the lord's army. For now, it is enough to say that only after successfully passing

through the ranks of page and squire did a young man attain knighthood.

Sometimes feudal arrangements and agreements were quite complicated. It was not unusual for a person to be a vassal to two or more lords at the same time. Having received a fief from each, he was therefore obligated to serve both. This posed no problem unless his two overlords went to war against each other! Sometimes the vassal's contract would say what he was to do. For example, he might have to fight for one lord but send a number of his knights to fight on the other side!

A vassal had responsibilities other than to serve his lord in battle. He also had to sit on the lord's court, where he might judge the guilt or innocence of





another vassal. If his lord stopped by for a visit, the vassal had to provide food and shelter for his superior and all of his party. Not the least of the vassal's promises was to help pay the ransom demanded when his lord was unfortunate enough to get himself captured by an enemy.

The lord/vassal relationship was a serious arrangement not to be taken lightly. It was initiated with great ceremony at the castle or manor house of the lord. The vassal knelt before his lord and placed his hands between the hands of the lord. He then solemnly swore that he would honor all the commitments expected of a vassal. This formal acknowledgment on the part of the vassal was called "doing homage." At the lord's demand, this ceremony, with its accompanying promise of allegiance, was repeated.

Technically, the peasantry were not part of the feudal system, because they were not warriors. They lived a hard life under the manorial system, which existed even before feudalism. Some were serfs, who were actually bound to the land. If the land was sold, the serfs went along with it as part of the deal. Others were freedmen, tenant farmers who paid the lord in money and a portion of their crops for the right to work the land. The lord gave his serfs and tenants protection and they turned to him for justice. In exchange, the lord charged taxes, required labor, took some of the crops, and generally made sure that the peasants were too poor to leave the land.



In this painting, King Charles V presents his sword to one of his vassals. A king's vassal was obligated to fight for his lord for a certain number of days a year.

Last, not every knight was a vassal to a lord. This was especially true toward the end of the feudal period. Some knights hired themselves out to the highest bidder for their services. They were known as mercenary knights. Mercenary knights were more professional soldiers than true knights. They became important toward the end of the feudal period when kings and lords started having difficulty rounding up enough knights to fight for them.

As you have seen, feudalism was a complicated system of agreements made between lords and vassals. But it served its purpose in an age characterized by a lack of government.

