

2 Medieval Life Was Based on Feudalism and the Manorial System

On the continent of Europe, organized government again disappeared within a century after Charlemagne's death in 814. Europe became a continent of small, independent local governments. We call the political system that evolved in Europe feudalism. **Feudalism**, a political system in which kings and powerful nobles granted land to other nobles in return for loyalty, military assistance, and services, was firmly established in northern France by the end of the 900s. By the mid-1000s, it had become the way of life throughout most of western Europe.

Feudalism

Feudalism arose when powerful nobles began to govern their own lands in the absence of a strong central government. In return for needed military help, weak kings granted the nobles the use of land from the royal estates. The strong nobles, who often had more land than they needed, granted part of this land to less powerful nobles in return for military help and other services. Many small landholders who needed protection gave their land to more powerful nobles. The small landholder retained the right to occupy and work the lands but had to provide military service to the noble.

The person who granted land was a lord. The person who held land in return for services was a **vassal**. The grant of land was called a **fief**. This term comes from the Latin word *feudum*, which gave rise to the word *feudal*. The granting and holding of a fief was really a contract between lord and vassal.

In time the fief became hereditary. Legal ownership passed from the lord to his son, while legal possession and use passed from the vassal to his son. Since a fief could not be divided, the eldest son always inherited it—a system called **primogeniture** (pry • moh • JEN • uh • chuhr). However, many lords held more than one fief.

Women could influence society and politics, but their legal property rights were limited. A woman could include fiefs in her dowry. However, her husband would take over the dowry, and she controlled it only if he died.

Local lords held many of the powers of government, and the king became just another feudal lord. In theory every holder of land became a vassal to the king, but in practice the king had power only over those who lived on the king's feudal lands.

The church, too, became part of the feudal system. By the 900s the church owned vast amounts of land, some of which it granted as fiefs to nobles in return for military protection.

Feudal relationships. Keeping three things in mind will help you understand the relationship between lord and vassal:

(1) It was an honorable relationship between legal equals. Only nobles could be vassals. The greater lords were vassals and tenants of the king. The less powerful lords were vassals and tenants of the greater lords, and so on down.

(2) The same man might be both vassal and lord—vassal to a more powerful lord above him and lord to a less powerful vassal below him.

(3) It was a very personal relationship. Each man owed loyalties and obligations only to the lord immediately above him or to the vassal immediately below him.

Obligations of feudalism. Under the feudal contracts, the vassal had more obligations than the lord. The vassal promised to provide the lord a certain number of fully equipped cavalry riders and infantry soldiers, and he agreed to pay their expenses while at war.

The vassal had to make special payments to help cover the lord's extraordinary expenses such as ransom if the lord became captive in war. The vassal also had to house and feed the lord and his companions for a certain number of days a year, attend such ceremonies as the marriage of the lord's daughter, and serve on the lord's court to administer justice.

Feudal justice. Feudal justice differed from Roman justice. Decisions at trials were made in one of three ways:

(1) **Trial by battle.** The accused and the accuser, or men representing them, fought a duel. The outcome of the duel determined guilt or innocence.

(2) **Compurgation, or oath-taking.** The accused and the accuser each gathered a group of people who swore that "their" man was telling the truth. Compurgators, the oath-takers, were similar to the character witnesses in today's trials.

(3) **Ordeal.** The accused carried a piece of hot iron in his hand, or walked through fire, or plunged his arm into a pot of boiling water to pick up a hot stone. If his wounds healed rapidly, he was judged innocent; otherwise he was guilty.

Warfare. Frequent wars plagued the medieval period. Sometimes two kingdoms fought. Other times a king tried to subdue a powerful, rebellious vassal. Most wars, however, stemmed from private fights between feudal lords or between lords and vassals.

In the early Middle Ages, the knight, or fighting man, wore an iron helmet and a shirt of chain mail—small metal links hooked together to form flexible armor. The knight carried a sword, a large shield, and a lance. Armor became complicated in later medieval times, as metal plates replaced chain mail. Metal armor was so heavy that a knight often had to be hauled or boosted onto his horse.

For nobles, wars represented opportunities for glory and wealth, but to the rest of society, wars brought suffering and famine. The church tried to limit private wars. It issued decrees, known together as the Peace of God, which set aside certain places, such as churches, where fighting was not permitted. The church tried to get all lords to accept another decree, known as the Truce of God, which forbade fighting on weekends and holy days. Gradually more days were added to the Truce of God, until only 80 legal fighting days a year remained. Restrictions on fighting, however, could almost never be strictly enforced. Private wars continued until kings became strong enough to stop them.

The Manorial System

While feudalism was essentially a governmental and military system, the manorial system became the economic system. The **manor**, a large estate that included the manor house, pastures, fields, and a village, became the economic unit of the early Middle Ages, just as the fief had become the

governmental unit. While a small fief had only one manor, large fiefs had several.

Because no central authority or organized trade existed, each manor tried to be self-sufficient—or able to produce everything it needed. Most manors produced their own food, clothing, and leather goods. Only a few items, such as iron, salt, and tar, were imported.

The lord and several peasants shared the land of a manor. The lord kept about one-third of the manor land, called the **domain**, for himself. The domain was often divided into several plots, although it might form one large block near the lord's house. The peasants paid to use the remaining two-thirds of the land. In exchange they gave the lord part of their crops, worked on his land, performed other services on the manor, and paid many kinds of taxes.

A typical manor village, usually on a stream that furnished water power for its mill, had houses clustered together for safety a short distance away from the manor house or castle. The land of the manor extended out from the village and included vegetable plots, cultivated fields, pastures, and forests.

The cultivated land of the manor was often divided into three large fields for growing grain. Only two of the three fields were planted each year so that the third field could lie fallow, or unplanted, to regain its fertility. The three large fields in turn were divided into small strips. Peasants had their own strips in each field. If the lord's domain was divided, he too had strips in each field.

Peasant Life

Most of the peasants on a manor were **serfs**, or people bound to the land. Serfs could not leave the land without the lord's permission, and the price of his permission was usually more money than they could afford. Serfs were not slaves, for they could not be sold away from the land. If the land was granted to a new lord, the serfs became the new lord's tenants.

Manors had some free people who rented land from the lord. Free people included the skilled workers necessary to the village economy, such as millers, blacksmiths, and carpenters. Most villages also had a priest to provide for the spiritual needs of the villagers.

Long hours spent doing backbreaking work in the fields made daily life very hard. The laborers' meager diet consisted mainly of coarse black bread, cabbage and a few other vegetables, cheese, and eggs. Beer was plentiful in northern Europe, and wine in the grape-growing regions of the south. People rarely ate meat because they needed animals to help them work the fields and because they were not allowed to hunt on the lord's land.

We know little about the life of ordinary people in medieval times. However, historians tell us that because of diseases and starvation, the average life expectancy was probably less than 40 years. Because people in their forties were regarded as old, medieval society was a much younger society than ours. People could become prominent by their twenties, and a bright child would be encouraged at an early age. When a village priest found a particularly intelligent boy, he could arrange to have him

educated for a career in the church, and thus a life in the wider world.

However, people rarely escaped the village. People usually died where they had been born. If a terrible disaster struck, such as a famine that lasted many years, villagers might flee. Usually, however, they stayed on, struggling to keep small families alive.

One of the few things we know about family life during these early years of the Middle Ages is that a child's status was sometimes determined by the mother rather than by the father. If a serf married a woman from a free family, for example, the couple's children might be considered free people rather than serfs.

The Life of the Nobility

When people today think of the Middle Ages, they sometimes picture luxurious castles and knights in shining armor. However, the nobles did not necessarily lead luxurious or even easy lives.

A castle, or a fortified home for a lord, served as a base for protecting the surrounding countryside and enforcing the lord's authority. Most people today picture a castle as a great stone structure. Actually, stone castles were not constructed until much later in the Middle Ages. Throughout the early medieval period, castles were relatively simple structures built of earth and wood.

Located on hills or in other places that were easy to defend, castles were built for defense, not for pleasant living. If a castle had to be built in flat country, a ditch often filled with water, called a moat, surrounded the outer walls. A drawbridge across the moat enabled people to reach the gate to the courtyard inside the walls. In case of an attack, the drawbridge was raised.

The main part of the castle was the keep—a strong tower that contained storerooms, barracks, and workshops, as well as the lord's living quarters. In the great hall, the lord received visitors. Here the family also lived during the day. The lord and his family usually had a separate bedroom, but everyone else slept in the great hall. There was little furniture. The thick walls, with their small, usually glassless windows, made the rooms dark, damp, and chilly. Fowl, dogs, and other small animals ran across the filthy, straw-covered floors.

The lord spent most of his day looking after his land and dispensing justice to his vassals and serfs. He might have to spend some time each year fighting, either to help his own lord or to resolve a quarrel with another lord.

The lord and the head of a peasant family each depended a great deal on help from his wife and children. Medieval people viewed marriage as a way to advance one's fortunes, perhaps by inheriting new lands. Marriage also produced children, who had to be cared for. A lord had to provide a dowry for a daughter. For a son he had to provide either land or a position serving the church or the king.

When not fighting, the nobles and vassals amused themselves with mock battles called tournaments. In early medieval times, tournaments often led to loss of life, but later they became more like pageants.

Chivalry

During the 1100s chivalry, a code of conduct for knights, changed feudal society. The word *chivalry* comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning "horse." A knight usually rode a horse when he performed deeds demanded by the code of chivalry.

In the early days, becoming a knight was quite simple. Any noble, after proving himself in battle, could be knighted by any other knight. As time passed, chivalry became much more complex.

To become a knight, a boy had to go through two preliminary stages of training supervised by a knight. First, at the age of seven, a boy became a page, or knight's attendant, learning knightly manners and beginning his training in the use of weapons. Then, in his early teens, the boy became a squire, or knight's assistant. He continued his training in both manners and weapons. He took care of the knight's horses, armor, weapons, and clothing. When he was considered ready, the squire accompanied the knight into battle. After the squire proved himself worthy in battle, an elaborate religious ceremony initiated him into knighthood.

Chivalry required a knight to be brave—sometimes foolishly brave. He had to fight fairly. Tricks and strategy were considered cowardly. A knight had to be loyal to his friends, keep his word, and treat conquered foes gallantly. In addition, he had to be especially courteous to women.

Chivalry greatly improved the rough and crude manners of early feudal lords. Behavior, however, did not become perfect by any standards. The knight extended courtesy only to people of his own class. Toward all others his attitude and actions were likely to be coarse and arrogant.

In addition to codes of conduct, other traditions originated in feudal times. As early as the 1000s, knights carried personal symbols mounted on banners or shields into battle. In the 1100s it became customary for sons to inherit these banners and shields from their fathers. Later, three-dimensional crests, mostly of aggressive animals such as lions and hawks, were added to helmets. In time these crests became badges of nobility.

By the 1200s the crest, helmet, and shield had been incorporated into a family coat of arms. When a knight stayed at an inn, he hung his coat of arms outside. In later times coats of arms such as Richard II's white heart or the rose and crown of England were incorporated into signs that identified the inn where the person had stayed.

3 The Church Had Many Roles in the Middle Ages

Central governments in medieval Europe were weak or did not exist at all. Therefore, the church performed many of the responsibilities of modern governments. In one way or another, the church touched the lives of most medieval people.

The Church Hierarchy

Members of the clergy were organized in ranks according to their power and responsibilities. The levels of this hierarchy (HY·uh·rahr·kee), starting at the bottom, were as follows:

(1) *The parish priest.* The parish priest, usually of peasant origin, had little formal education. He served the people in his parish, the smallest division of the church. The poorest clergy member, the priest could hardly be distinguished from the peasants among whom he lived.

Though at the bottom of the hierarchy, the priest was in one sense the church's most important officer, for he administered five of the seven sacraments. The sacraments consisted of special ceremonies at which the participants received the direct favor, or grace, of God to help them ward off the consequences of sin. By the 1100s leaders of the church recognized seven ceremonies as sacraments—baptism, Holy Eucharist (communion), confirmation (admission to church membership), penance (acts showing repentance for sins), ordination (holy orders), matrimony, and extreme unction (the anointing of the dying). The parish priest conducted church services in his parish and administered all the sacraments except confirmation and ordination. He supervised the moral and religious instruction of his people and the moral life of the community. Often, however, the beliefs of villagers were as much pagan and superstitious as they were Christian. For example, the villagers sometimes relied on local "wise women" and "cunning men" for spiritual help.

(2) *The bishop.* A number of parishes made up a diocese (DY·uh·suhs), which the bishop managed. The cathedral church, or official church of the bishop, was located in the most important city of the diocese. (*Cathedra* is the Latin word for the bishop's throne, or chair.) The king or great nobles usually controlled the selection of a bishop. Bishops, frequently chosen for their family connections and political power, were often feudal lords or vassals who had vassals themselves.

(3) *The archbishop.* An archbishop managed a diocese and had all the powers of a bishop. In addition, he exercised some authority over the other dioceses and bishops in his province, which consisted of several dioceses. An archbishop could summon provincial councils of the clergy to decide questions of church belief and policy.

(4) *The pope and his curia.* The pope had a group of counselors, called the curia, to advise him. Cardinals, the most important members of the curia, advised the pope on legal and spiritual matters. Beginning in 1059 the cardinals elected the new pope.

Only in the church hierarchy could a commoner rise in the world. It did not happen often, but a man of great ability, regardless of birth, might rise to great heights in the church. For example, Callistus I was originally a slave of a Christian master in Rome. He was later freed, and in time he became a bishop. From about 217 to 222 he served as pope.

Monasticism

The medieval church was much like a present-day government. Everyone became a member, just as we become citizens. Priests, bishops, and the pope belonged to what was called the secular clergy. They lived in *saeculo*, a Latin phrase meaning "in the world," or "among ordinary people." They administered the sacraments and preached the gospel. A second group of church people, called regular clergy because they lived according to a strict rule, or *regula*, was the monastics—monks and nuns.

Monks and nuns believed that one of the best ways to live a perfect Christian life was to withdraw from the world and its temptations and serve God through prayer, fasting, and self-denial. At first each monk lived alone. Later, monks gathered in religious communities called monasteries and nuns lived in convents. The way of life in monasteries and convents was called **monasticism**.

Monasticism lacked organization and direction until the early 500s. About that time Benedict, a young Roman noble, became disgusted with worldly corruption and left Rome to become a hermit. In time his reputation for holiness attracted so many followers that he established a monastery at Monte Cassino in central Italy. Benedict drew up a set of standards to regulate the lives of the monks. Monasteries throughout Europe adopted this set of standards, called the Benedictine Rule.

According to the Benedictine Rule, a monk could own absolutely nothing. Everything he used or wore belonged to the community of monks. The abbot, the elected head of the community, controlled and distributed all property. The monks promised to obey the abbot in all things.

Monks spent several hours every day in prayer, but they were also expected to work. The abbot assigned each monk certain tasks in and around the monastery.

Monasteries fulfilled the intellectual and charitable needs of medieval society. Monks were often the most learned scholars of the time, and the monastery libraries were the main preservers of the literature of ancient civilizations and the early church. Several monasteries also ran schools to train the clergy.

Over the years monasteries became very rich. As an act of piety, a noble might leave his land to a monastery. Or a monastery might receive a large gift in return for accepting a young man as a monk. There were fewer convents than monasteries, and the convents were not as rich as monasteries. Like the monasteries, however, convents usually gave some of their wealth to the needy in nearby communities. Monks and nuns often cared for the sick, fed the hungry, and clothed the poor.

Some monks left the monasteries to become missionaries, a practice that existed long before the time of Benedict. St. Patrick in Ireland and St. Augustine in England were among those who did important missionary work.

Christianity in Ireland and England

Christian missionaries arrived in Ireland in the 400s. St. Patrick, the best known missionary, began his work there in 432. Several monastic schools provided the basis of an advanced culture that lasted from about 500 to about 800. Missionaries and teachers from Irish schools went to all parts of the British Isles and to the royal families on the continent of Europe. During this time Ireland became the greatest center and preserver of ancient and Christian culture in western Europe.

About 600 Pope Gregory I sent missionaries to England. Led by a monk named Augustine, the missionaries converted many people. Soon all England accepted Christianity. Augustine, made the first archbishop of Canterbury, eventually became known as St. Augustine of Canterbury. Canterbury became the center of the Christian Church in England.

The Church and Medieval Life

Both the secular and the regular clergy played a leading part in medieval institutions and in life. The church sought the most intelligent people among all classes to become members of the clergy. During the early Middle Ages, church leaders were almost the only educated people in Europe.

Since printing was unknown in the early Middle Ages, all books had to be copied by hand. Monks did most of this work. To relieve the tedious work of copying and to beautify the texts, the monks often added small paintings at the beginning of a page or in the margins. The gold leaf and brilliant colors they used brightened the pages so much that such works are called **illuminated manuscripts**. These manuscripts were the finest artistic works produced during the early Middle Ages.

Political role. The church also became a political force during the Middle Ages. In the Papal States, the pope was both the political and spiritual ruler. Many popes claimed supreme political power for the church. They decreed that all monarchs in Europe had to obey the pope. Church leaders also held positions of power as feudal lords and as advisers to kings and nobles. The church preached that people should obey the laws of kings unless these laws conflicted with church laws.

The church had its own code of law, called **canon law**, and its own courts where members of the clergy were tried. The church enforced its laws by using excommunication and interdict.

Excommunication cut an individual off from the church. He or she could not receive the sacraments or be buried in sacred ground. All Christians had to avoid the excommunicated person, and the state treated him or her like a criminal. An excommunicated person was thought to be surely damned after death.

To punish an entire region, the church issued an **interdict**. No religious services could be held in the region, and only the sacraments of baptism and extreme unction could be administered. Everyone who lived in the region was in danger of eternal damnation.

As do present-day national governments, the church in the Middle Ages had the power of taxation. Through the parish priest, the church collected the **tithe**, or one-tenth of a person's income, from all Christians. In England and Scandinavia, the church collected "Peter's Pence," a tax of one penny a year on every household. The church also received fines collected by its courts and fees charged for the performance of ceremonies such as baptism and marriage. Finally, the church received vast income from church-owned lands. In the early 1200s, when the church reached the peak of its power, it had a larger income than all the kings of Europe combined.

Economic life. The moral ideas of the church affected all economic life. The church opposed people gaining wealth by exploiting others. It insisted that labor was in keeping with the dignity of free people.

Monks were leaders in agriculture. They developed new ways of raising crops, breeding cattle, and cultivating fruit. They cleared forests, drained

swamps, and built dikes and roads to increase the amount of land that could be farmed.

Monasteries carried on widespread trading activities. They owned their own pack animals, ships, markets, and warehouses. Their trade routes were carefully mapped.

Social role. The church considered the family a sacred institution. It forbade divorce and took responsibility for all widows and orphans. It also took complete charge of all social work, such as relief for the poor.

To relieve the sick and distressed, the church established hospitals, orphanages, and poorhouses. Special religious orders provided hospital care, care of lepers, burial of the poor, and general charity.

Problems of the Church

At the peak of its power, the church faced several problems.

(1) *Lay investiture.* The tremendous wealth of the church created a problem, especially after church leaders became feudal lords and vassals. Nobles often rewarded their loyal friends or relatives by appointing them bishops and abbots, a procedure known as **lay investiture**. No one questioned a king's or a noble's right to grant a bishop or an abbot a fief and to have him become a vassal. The church, however, did object to kings and nobles naming bishops and abbots. Church leaders firmly believed that only a church member could grant spiritual authority to another member of the church. In the case of a bishop, a ring and crosier, or staff, symbolized this authority. A king or lord who granted a new bishop his fiefs often insisted on giving him his ring and crosier as well.

(2) *Worldly lives of the clergy.* Some members of the clergy lived in luxury. People criticized them because they seemed more interested in wealth than in holy living.

(3) *Simony.* In feudal times people often paid to get positions in the church, a practice called **simony** (SY • muh • nee). The purchaser expected to make money through his position, either from church income or by charging high fees for performing religious services.

(4) *Heresy.* The church did not permit anyone to question the basic principles, or doctrines, that served as the foundation of the Christian religion. People who denied the truth of these principles or preached unauthorized doctrines were considered