



The Feudal System

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.

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.



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.





Name _____ Date _____

Solve a Feudalism Puzzle

Fill in the sentences for clues to complete the puzzle about feudalism.

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1. A piece of land granted by one lord to another was called a _____.
2. A _____ was a peasant bound to the soil.
3. An _____ was a structure that carried water to a Roman city.
4. A lord who granted land to another lord was called an _____.
5. A _____ received land from another lord.
6. _____ was a famous king of the Franks.
7. The _____ who raided Europe came from Scandinavia.
8. Rome fell in the year 476 to a German tribe called the _____.
9. A vassal paid _____, or promised allegiance, to an overlord.



Name _____ Date _____



Recall Information You Have Read

How well do you remember what you read? The ability to recall information is a learning skill that grows in importance as you advance from one grade to the next in school.

Without looking back over the packet, define or identify as best you can the names and terms listed below.

1. feudalism

2. vassal

3. overlord

4. fief

5. homage

6. Vikings

7. serf

8. aqueduct

9. Visigoths

10. Charlemagne

