

## 2.3 Feudalism: Establishing Order

By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. Feudalism provided people with protection and safety by establishing a stable social order.

Under this system, people were bound to one another by promises of loyalty. In theory, all the land in the kingdom belonged to the monarch (usually a king, but sometimes a queen). A great deal of land was also owned by the Church. The king kept some land for himself and gave **fiefs** (FEEFS), or land grants, to his most important lords, who became his vassals. In return, each lord promised to supply the king with knights in times of war. A lord then enlisted lesser lords and knights as his vassals. Often, these arrangements were written down. Many of these contracts **survive** to this day in museums.

At the bottom of the social system were peasants. Lords rented some of their land to the peasants who worked for them. However, some peasants, called **serfs**, were “tied” to the land they worked. They could not leave the lord’s land without permission, and they had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of their own.

Most lords and wealthier knights lived on manors, or large estates. A manor included a castle or manor house, one or more villages, and the surrounding farmland. Manors were in the country, far from towns. That meant the peasants had to produce everything the people on the manor needed. Only a few goods came from outside the manor, such as salt for preserving meat and iron for making tools.

During the Middle Ages, people were born into a social class for life. They had the same social position, and often the same job, as their parents. Let’s take a closer look at the social classes in feudal society.

**fief** land granted by a lord to a vassal in exchange for loyalty and service

**serf** a peasant who could not leave the lord’s land on which he or she was born and worked

Knights fought on horseback, along with foot soldiers and archers, to defend their king’s or their lord’s castle and land.

