Feudalism

In the Middle Ages, before the rise of national states in western Europe, the people there lived under a system called feudalism. This was a social system of rights and obligations based on land ownership patterns.

Each small district was ruled by a duke, count, or other noble. The noble's power was based on the land he held “in feud,” or in return for certain services or payments to a greater lord or the king. The noble allowed tenants to use the land, and the tenants owed the noble services or payments in return. This peculiar system of landholding determined the pattern of government. It also gave rise to fortified castles, knights in armor, and chivalry. The term feudalism therefore describes an entire way of life.

The system of feudalism was established gradually, between the 8th and 11th centuries. France was the land of its earliest and most complete development, but in some form or other it was found in all the countries of western Europe. It flourished especially from the 11th century to the end of the 13th century. Some aspects of feudalism have survived in laws and social customs of modern European countries.

Background: The Age of Disorder

Feudalism grew up in an age of disorder, when the central government was helpless to protect the people. Its beginnings can be traced to the breakup of the ancient Roman Empire. Various Germanic tribes, including Goths, Franks, Vandals, and others, began moving into Roman territory at the end of the 4th century, causing great confusion. The Romans called these tribes “barbarians,” and their movement into the empire's lands has traditionally been called the barbarian invasions. In 410 Rome fell to Alaric, a Visigoth chieftain. In 476 the western Roman Empire came to an end. This date or 500 is commonly taken as marking the end of ancient times and the beginning of the Middle Ages.

On the ruins of the Roman Empire there arose small Germanic kingdoms. The kings warred constantly with one another. Charlemagne, king of the Franks, tried to build a Christian empire modeled on that of Rome. He was crowned emperor in 800 of what later became known as the Holy Roman Empire, but when he died there was no strong ruler to take his place.

The roads and bridges the Romans had built eventually fell into decay. Money almost disappeared, making it impossible for kings to pay their officials and soldiers. Moreover, the kingdoms had to deal with invasions and raids. From the north came Scandinavian pirates—
the Northmen, or Vikings. In the south Muslims invaded the coasts of Italy and France.

People were at the mercy of the various invaders and marauding bandits. Lacking a strong central government, each district had to look out for itself. People naturally sought the protection of their nearest powerful neighbor. In time of trouble his wooden blockhouse or stone castle served as a refuge for both the villagers and their flocks.

**Land Tenure—Basis of Feudalism**

People had to pay for their protection. Money was scarce, but the noble was very willing to take land instead. The former owner was allowed to use the land during his lifetime. At his death it passed into the hands of his protector.

Many nobles acquired more land than they could manage. They then began to grant land to tenants. Such land was said to be held in feud, and each holding was a fief. The tenant became a vassal of the lord and took an oath to follow him in war and perform other services. If a vassal failed to keep his promises, he was supposed to forfeit the land. In time the fief became hereditary, passing usually to the vassal's oldest son.

In theory all land belonged to the king or emperor. He was the suzerain, or overlord, of the vassals who held land directly from him. Each of these tenants in chief parceled out most of his vast holdings to subtenants. He would then be suzerain over those to whom he granted fiefs, while remaining a vassal of the king. The subtenants in turn further subdivided the land. In addition to the person farming a fief, a half dozen people might have rights in it.

**Feudal Bonds and Feudal Powers**

In the early feudal age, when a freeman gave up title to his land he became the lord’s “man” and promised him fealty (loyalty). This was called commendation. Out of it grew the ceremony called homage (from the Latin word homo, meaning “man”). The vassal swore to serve his lord, to fight for him, to furnish knights in proportion to the size of his fief, and to give “aids” in the form of money on special occasions. Aids were generally demanded for the suzerain's ransom, if he should be made a prisoner; on his departure for a Crusade; when his oldest son was knighted; and at the marriage of his oldest daughter.

In the confusion of the barbarian invasions, some feudal lords became so independent that they maintained soldiers, collected revenues, held courts, and coined money. These powers grew out of older customs and institutions. One of these was called immunity. As the difficulty of maintaining a strong central government increased, kings and emperors depended upon their vassals to keep order. Often they granted them freedom, or immunity, from central authority. Sometimes the immunity was bought.

Strictly speaking, feudalism involved only the noble classes. The system rested, however, on
the work of the serfs, or villeins, who supported the lords and their knights. Officially the serfs were “unfree.” They, however, were not the property of other people, like slaves. They were bound to the land and not to any particular lord who held it in fief. They could not leave the place where they were born, but neither could the lord send them away.

The serfs worked on large estates called manors. The lord's residence was a strongly built manor house or a fortified castle. The serfs lived in a village close by. Each family had its own hut. In the village was the church, the center of religious and social life.

The farmland was divided into three large fields, and each field was divided into long narrow strips. Every serf had strips in each field so that no one person would have the best or the poorest land. The lord's land was called the demesne. The serfs cultivated the lord's land as well as their own. They also turned over to the lord part of the produce from their own land. The lord reserved to himself the woodland for his hunting and the pond or stream for his fishing. The serfs were allowed to pasture their cattle and other livestock in the meadow, called the common.

The manor was almost self-supporting. The miller ground the grain, and the smith welded and fashioned iron. The women spun linen and wool, wove fabrics, sewed, baked, and brewed. The chief materials that had to be brought in were salt and iron.

The main business of the lord and his knights was warfare. His sons were trained in horsemanship and handling weapons and also in social skills. Their code of behavior was called chivalry. (See also Arthurian legend.)

Trial by Battle, Ordeal, and Compurgation

Among the duties of a vassal was the obligation to sit in his lord's court to help render justice. The court made no attempt to get at the real facts by questioning witnesses. The usual procedure was to let the accuser and the accused face each other in a formal duel. It was believed that God would be on the side of the innocent. This was trial by battle, or combat.

Trial by ordeal required the accused to plunge his hand into boiling water or oil or to carry a piece of red-hot iron. If the wound healed properly after three days, it was assumed that he was in the right.

Compurgation was trial by oaths. The accuser or the accused was required to produce a number of knights of good reputation who would swear that they believed he was telling the truth.

Decline of Feudalism
A vassal might take the oath of fealty to numerous overlords, who did not necessarily owe fealty to one another. Thus the system led to endless conflict. In spite of the incessant turmoil, there was progress in commerce and industry, and money came into increasing use. As towns grew in wealth and importance, the feudal system became intolerable. The new middle class, as well as the church, wanted law and order and supported the king. Larger revenues enabled kings to maintain national standing armies.

At the beginning of the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453) armored knights on horseback yielded to foot soldiers armed with pikes and longbows. Then gunpowder came into general use, making the great stone castles conquerable. In the 14th century, before the Middle Ages ended, national states were taking the place of feudal governments.

Additional Reading

Cite

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