





◀ This page from an illuminated manuscript shows a typical day on a feudal manor.

# The Development of Feudalism in Western Europe

## 2.1 Introduction

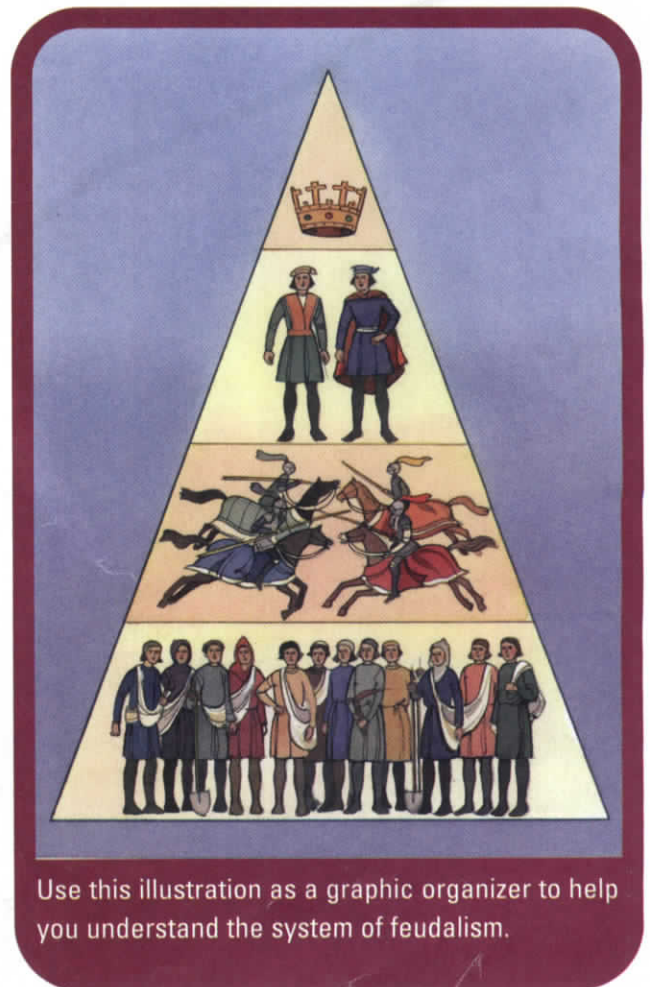
In the last chapter, you learned about the rich legacy of the Roman Empire. The fall of the Roman Empire in 476 C.E. marks the beginning of the Middle Ages. In this chapter, you will learn about the system of **feudalism** that developed in Europe during the Middle Ages.

Recall that historians divide the Middle Ages into three periods. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about 476 to 1000 C.E. The High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300. The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

The Early Middle Ages began with the fall of Rome. The Roman Empire had unified much of Europe for about 500 years. After the empire collapsed, life was dangerous and difficult in western Europe. People worked hard simply to survive and to have enough to eat. They also needed to protect themselves from conquest by invading barbarians and nearby kingdoms.

These challenges gave rise to the economic and political system historians call *feudalism*. In the feudal system, people pledged loyalty to a **lord**—a ruler or a powerful landholder. In return, they received protection from the lord. **Knights**, or armed warriors, fought on behalf of their lords. **Peasants** worked the land. At the bottom of the system were serfs, peasants who were not free to leave the lord's land.

In this chapter, you will learn more about the difficulties people faced during the Early Middle Ages. Then you will learn about the rise of feudalism. Finally, you will explore what daily life was like for people living under feudalism.



Use this illustration as a graphic organizer to help you understand the system of feudalism.

## 2.2 Western Europe During the Middle Ages

For 500 years, much of Europe was part of the Roman Empire. The rest of the continent was controlled by groups of people that the Romans called **barbarians**. When Rome fell to invading barbarians in 476 C.E., Europe was left with no central government or system of defense. Many invading groups set up kingdoms throughout western Europe. These kingdoms were often at war with one another. The most powerful rulers were those who controlled the most land and had the best warriors.

**Charlemagne's Empire** One powerful group during this time was the Franks (from whom modern-day France takes its name). The Franks were successful because they had developed a new style of warfare. It depended on troops of



In 800 C.E., Charlemagne was crowned Holy Roman emperor by Pope Leo III.

knights, heavily armed warriors who fought on horseback. To get and hold power, a ruler needed the services and loyalty of many knights. In return for their loyalty and service, the ruler rewarded knights with land and privileges.

One of the early leaders of the Franks was an ambitious young warrior named Clovis. In 481 C.E., at the age of 15, Clovis became king of the Franks. Five years later, he defeated the last great Roman army in Gaul. During his 30-year reign, he led the Franks in wars that widened the boundaries of the Frankish kingdom.

Clovis also helped lead the Franks into **Christianity**. Clovis married a Christian woman, Clotilda, and eventually was baptized into the **Roman Catholic Church**. Many of his followers became Christians as well.

The most important leader of the Franks was Charlemagne (Charles the Great). This impressive king ruled for over 40 years, from 768 to 814. Writings from that period say that he was six feet four inches tall—extremely tall for his time—and “always stately and dignified.” Legend has it that he read very little and couldn’t write, yet he loved to have scholarly works read to him. He encouraged education and scholarship, making his court a center of culture. Most important, he unified nearly all the Christian lands of Europe into a single empire. One of the poets at his court called him the “King Father of Europe.”

Charlemagne built his empire with the help of a **pope**—Leo III, the leader of the Catholic Church in Rome. As you will learn in the next

**barbarian** a person belonging to a tribe or group that is considered uncivilized

**Christianity** the religion based on the life and teachings of Jesus Christ

**Roman Catholic Church** the Christian church headed by the pope in Rome

**pope** the bishop of Rome and supreme leader of the Roman Catholic Church



chapter, the church was a central part of society during this time. For Charlemagne, the blessing of the church sent the message “God is on my side.” For his part, Leo needed the support of someone with an army. In return for Charlemagne’s help, the pope crowned him Holy Roman emperor in 800 C.E.

Charlemagne’s empire survived many barbarian attacks. After his death in 814, however, it quickly fell apart. The weak rulers who followed him could not defend the empire against new waves of invasions. Still, these kings helped prepare the way for feudalism by following Charlemagne’s example of rewarding knights with land and privileges in return for military service.

**A Need for Order and Protection** In the 9th and 10th centuries, western Europe was threatened by three main groups. Muslims, or followers of the religion of Islam, advanced from the Near East and northern Africa into what is now Spain. Magyars, a central Asian people, pressed in from the east. And Vikings swept down from present-day Norway and Denmark.

The Vikings were fierce warriors who struck fear into the people of Europe. At times their intent was to set up colonies. But they were best known for their terrifying raids on towns and villages.

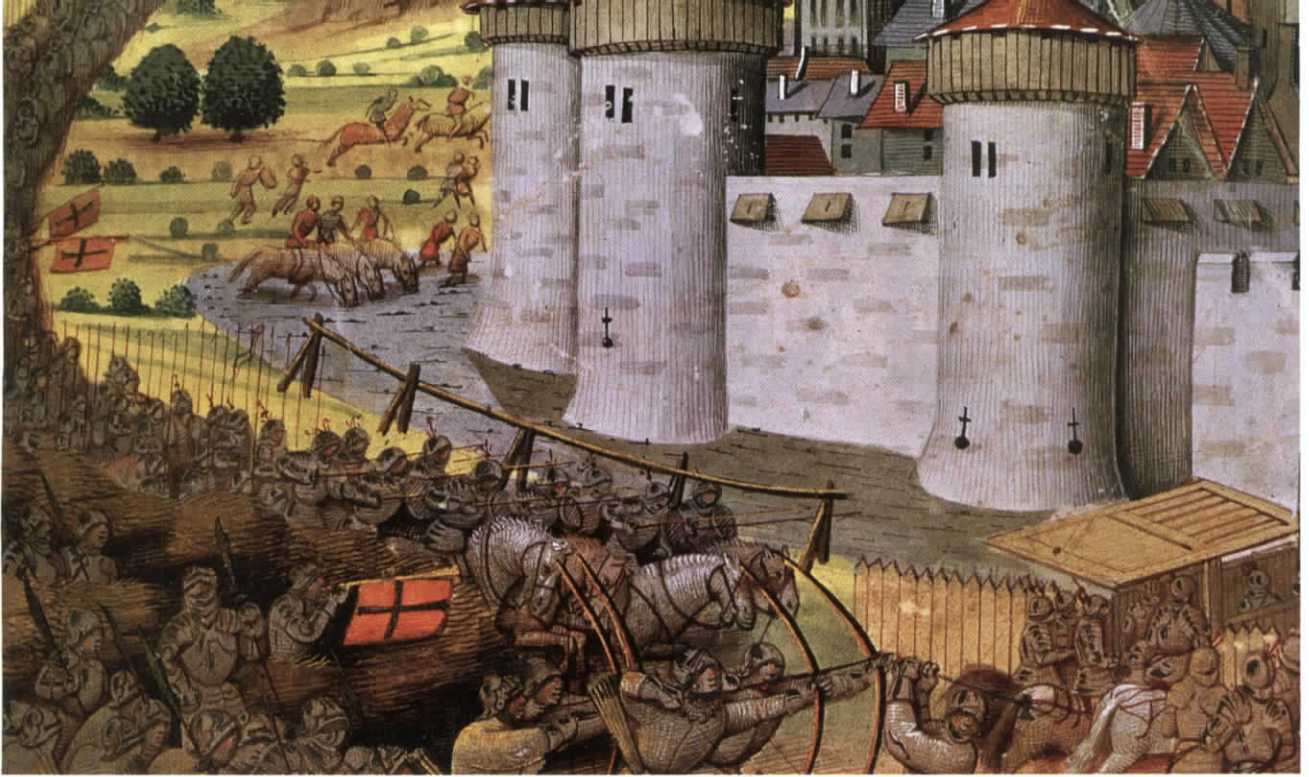
Imagine a Viking attack. The people of the village are at early morning church services when an alarm bell starts to peal. Vikings! Long, shallow wooden boats have brought the Vikings close to shore. Now they leave their boats and run toward the town with swords and axes raised over their heads. People are running in all directions. Several villagers who try to resist are killed. Others are seized by the Viking raiders and taken back to the ships.

Clearly, the people of western Europe needed ways to defend themselves. To protect themselves and their property, they gradually developed the system we call *feudalism*. Let’s find out how it worked.



A fleet of Viking ships attacked the walled city of Paris in 885 C.E.





Knights fought on foot and horseback to defend their king's castle and land.

**monarch** a ruler, such as a king or queen

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

**manor** a large estate, including farmland and villages, held by a lord

## 2.3 Feudalism: Establishing Order

By the High Middle Ages (about 1000 C.E.), Europeans had developed the system of feudalism. The feudal system 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**, or grants of land, 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 peasants who worked for them. Some peasants, called *serfs*, were “tied” to the land they worked. They could not leave the lord’s land, and they had to farm his fields in exchange for a small plot of land 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 classes in feudal society.



## 2.4 Monarchs During Feudal Times

At the very top of feudal society were the monarchs, or kings and queens. As you have learned, medieval monarchs were feudal lords. They were expected to keep order and to provide protection for their vassals.

Most medieval monarchs believed in the **divine right of kings**, the idea that God had given them the right to rule. In reality, the power of monarchs varied greatly. Some had to work hard to maintain control of their kingdoms. Few had enough wealth to keep their own army. They had to rely on their vassals, especially **nobles**, to provide enough knights and soldiers. In some places, especially during the Early Middle Ages, great lords grew very powerful and governed their fiefs as independent states. In these cases, the monarch was little more than a figurehead, a symbolic ruler who had little real power.

In England, monarchs became quite strong during the Middle Ages. Since the Roman period, a number of groups from the continent, including Vikings, had invaded and settled England. By the mid-11th century, it was ruled by a Germanic tribe called the Saxons. The king at that time was descended from both Saxon and Norman (French) families. When he died without an adult heir, there was confusion over who should become king.

William, the powerful **Duke** of Normandy (a part of present-day France), believed he had the right to the English throne. But the English crowned his cousin, Harold. In 1066, William and his army invaded England. William defeated Harold at the Battle of Hastings and established a line of Norman kings in England. His triumph earned him the nickname William the Conqueror.

When William conquered England, he brought feudal institutions from Europe with him. Supported by feudalism, strong rulers brought order to England. In fact, by the start of the High Middle Ages, around 1000 C.E., the feudal system had brought stability to much of Europe. Let's take a closer look at what daily life was like for people during this time.

**divine right of kings** the belief that God gives monarchs the right to rule

**noble** a person of high rank by birth or title

**duke** the highest type of European noble, ranking just below a prince

William, Duke of Normandy, depicted on the French tapestry below, became known as William the Conqueror after he seized the English throne.





## 2.5 Lords and Ladies During Feudal Times

Like monarchs, lords and ladies were members of the nobility, the highest-ranking class in medieval society. Most lived on manors. Some lords had one manor, while others had several. Those who had more



Lords and ladies were served elaborate meals at feasts, or banquets. Often musicians and jesters entertained them while they ate.

than one manor usually lived in one for a few months and then traveled with their families to the next.

### Manor Houses and Castles

Many of the people on a manor lived with the lord's family in the main house, or manor house. Built of wood or stone, manor houses were surrounded by gardens and outbuildings, such as stables. They were

protected by high walls and, sometimes, a **moat**.

The manor house was the center of the community. In times of trouble, villagers entered its walls for protection. Its great hall served as the manor court. It was also a place for special celebrations and feasts, such as those given at Christmas or after a harvest.

Kings and queens, high-ranking nobles, and wealthy lords lived in even grander structures: castles. Castles were built for many purposes. One of a castle's main functions was to serve as a home. Castles were also one of the most important forms of military technology. With their moats and strong walls and gates, they were built to provide protection for those who lived in them. Finally, their large size and central locations made castles strong visual reminders of the **hierarchy** within a kingdom and the strict barriers between classes.

The earliest medieval castles were built of wood and surrounded by high wooden fences. The strongest part, the *motte*, was built on a hilltop. A walled path linked the motte to a lower enclosed court, the *bailey*, where most people lived. After about 1100 C.E., most castles were built of stone to resist attacks by flaming arrows and stronger siege weapons.

Castles gradually became more elaborate. Many had tall towers for looking out across the land. The main castle building had a variety of rooms, including storerooms, a library, a dining hall, bedrooms for distinguished guests, and the lord and lady's quarters.

**moat** a deep, wide ditch, often filled with water

**hierarchy** a system of organizing people into ranks, with those of higher rank having more power and privileges



## The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Lords and Ladies

**Ladies** It was the lord's responsibility to manage and defend his land and the people who worked it. The lord appointed officials to make sure villagers carried out their duties, which included farming the lord's land and paying rent in the form of crops. Lords also acted as judges in manor courts and had the power to fine and punish those who broke the law. Some lords held posts in the king's government. In times of war, lords fought for their own higher-ranking lords or at least supplied them with a well-trained fighting force.

In theory, only men were part of the feudal relationship between lord and vassal. However, it was quite common in the Middle Ages for noblewomen to hold fiefs and inherit land. Except for fighting, these women had all the duties that lords had. They ran their estates, sat as judges in manor courts, and sent their knights to serve in times of war.

Noblewomen who weren't landowners were still extremely busy. They were responsible for raising and training their children and sometimes the children of other noble families. Ladies were also responsible for overseeing their household or households. Some households had hundreds of people, including priests, master hunters, and knights-in-training called *pages* and *squires*, who assisted the knights. There were also cooks, servants, artists, craftspeople, and grooms. Entertainment was provided by musicians and jesters ("fools" who performed amusing jokes and stunts).

When they weren't hard at work, lords and ladies enjoyed hunting and hawking (hunting with birds), feasting and dancing, board games such as chess, and reading. Ladies also did fine embroidery, or decorative sewing.

Although nobles and monarchs had the most privileged life in medieval times, their lives were not always easy or comfortable. Lit only by candles and warmed by open fires, manor homes and castles could be gloomy and cold. There was little or no privacy. Fleas and lice infected all medieval buildings. People generally bathed only once a week, if that. Clothes were not washed daily either. Diseases affected the rich as well as the poor. And, of course, war was a great and ever-present danger.



A lady had servants to help her with her personal needs as well as the care of her large household.



## 2.6 Knights During Feudal Times

**armor** a covering, usually made of metal or leather, worn to protect the body during fighting

Knights were the mounted soldiers of the medieval world. In general, knights had to have some wealth, as a full suit of **armor** and a horse cost a small fortune. Knights were usually vassals of more powerful lords.

**Becoming a Knight** The path to becoming a knight involved many years of training. A boy started as a page, or servant. At the age of seven, he left home and went to live at the castle of a lord, who was often a relative. Nearly all wealthy lords had several pages living in their castle. A page learned how to ride a horse and received religious instruction from the local priest or friar.

During this first stage of training, pages spent much of their time with the ladies of the castle. They were expected to help the ladies in every way possible. The ladies taught pages how to sing, dance, compose music, and play the harp. These skills were valued in knights.

Before a joust or tournament, knights received gifts, or tokens of support, from the ladies of the manor.

After about seven years as a page, a young boy became a squire. During this part of his training, he spent most of his time with the

knight who was his lord. He polished the knight's armor, sword, shield, and lance. He helped care for his horse. He even waited on him at mealtime, carrying water for hand washing, carving meat, and filling his cup when it was empty.

Most importantly, squires trained to become warriors. They learned how to fight with a sword and a lance, a kind of spear that measured up to 15 feet long. They also learned how to use a battle-ax and a mace (a club with a heavy metal head). They practiced by fighting in make-believe battles. But squires also went into real battles. A squire was expected to help dress his lord in armor, follow him into battle, and look after him if he was wounded.

In his early 20s, if he was deserving, a squire became a knight. Becoming a knight could be a complex religious event. A squire often spent the night before his knighting in prayer. The next morning, he bathed and put on a white tunic, or long shirt, to show his purity. During the ceremony, he knelt before his lord and said his vows. The lord drew his sword, touched the knight-to-be lightly on each shoulder with







the flat side of the blade, and knighted him. Sometimes, if a squire did particularly well in battle, he was knighted on the spot.

**The Responsibilities and Daily Life of Knights** Being a knight was more than a profession. It was a way of life. Knights lived by a strong code of behavior called **chivalry**. (*Chivalry* comes from the French word *cheval*, meaning “horse.”) Knights were expected to be loyal to their church and their lord, to be just and fair, and to protect the helpless. They performed acts of gallantry, or respect paid to women. From these acts, we get the modern idea of chivalry as traditional forms of courtesy and kindness toward women.

Jousts and tournaments were a major part of a knight’s life. In a joust, two armed knights on horseback galloped at each other with their lances held straight out. The idea was to unseat the opponent from his horse. Jousts could be done as a sport, for exercise, or as a serious battle. A tournament involved a team of knights in one-on-one battle.

Knights fought wearing heavy suits of armor. In the 11th century, armor was made of metal rings linked together. By the 14th century, plate armor was more common and offered better protection.

The institution of knighthood lasted until about the 17th century, when warfare changed with the growing use of gunpowder and cannons. Knights, who fought one-to-one on horseback, were no longer effective.

Next let’s turn to daily life for the vast majority of the medieval population: the peasants.

Knights in a joust tried to knock each other off their horses.

**chivalry** the medieval knight’s code of ideal behavior, including bravery, loyalty, and respect for women



## 2.7 Peasants During Feudal Times

Most people during the Middle Ages were peasants. They were not part of the feudal relationship of vassal and lord, but they supported the entire feudal structure by working the land. Their labor freed lords and knights to spend their time preparing for war or fighting.

During medieval times, peasants were legally classified as free or unfree. These categories had to do with how much service was owed to the lord. Free peasants rented land to farm and owed only their rent to the lord. Unfree peasants, called *serfs*, farmed the lord's fields and could not leave the lord's estate. In return for their labor, they received a small plot of land of their own to farm.

The daily life of peasants revolved around work. Most peasants raised crops and tended livestock (farm animals). But every manor also had carpenters, shoemakers, smiths (metalworkers), and other skilled workers. Peasant women worked in the fields when they were needed. They also cared for their children and their homes.

In addition to the work they performed, serfs owed the lord numerous taxes. There was a yearly payment called "head money," which was a fixed amount per person. The lord could also demand a tax known as

Men and women worked side by side in the fields.





*tallage* whenever he needed money. When a woman married, she, her father, or her husband had to pay a fee called a *merchet*.

Serfs were also required to grind their grain at the lord's mill (the only mill in the village). The miller kept portions of the grain for the lord and for himself. Lords could keep any amount they wanted. Serfs found this practice so hateful that some of them hid small hand mills in their houses.

Most peasants lived in small houses of one or two rooms. A typical house was made of woven strips of wood covered with straw or mud. Peasants had little furniture or other possessions. There was a hearth fire in the middle of the main room, but often no chimney, so it was dark and smoky inside. An entire family might eat and sleep in one room that sometimes also housed their farm animals.

Peasants ate vegetables, meat such as pork, and dark, coarse bread made of wheat mixed with rye or oatmeal. During the winter, they ate meat and fish that had been preserved in salt. Herbs were used widely, in part for flavor and in part to lessen the taste of the salt or to disguise the taste of meat that was no longer fresh.



Peasants' homes were small and crowded with people and animals.

## 2.8 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you learned about life during feudal times. The fall of the Roman Empire led to a time of uncertainty and danger. The feudal system arose as a way of protecting property. It was based on oaths of loyalty. Kings and queens gave fiefs, or grants of land, to lords, their most important vassals. In exchange, lords promised to supply monarchs with knights in times of war. At the bottom of the social structure were peasants.

Daily life was quite different for the various social classes. Monarchs, lords, and ladies oversaw their lands and the people who worked them. They lived in manor homes or castles. Knights were the soldiers of the medieval world. They were skilled warriors who went through years of training. Peasants labored to farm the land and to make most of the necessary articles of life.

One common link for people in western Europe during the Middle Ages was the Catholic Church. In the next chapter, you'll learn more about the church and explore its impact on the medieval world.