



◀ In this illuminated manuscript, the Horseman of Death represents the plague.

The Decline of Feudalism

5.1 Introduction

In the last chapter, you learned about daily life in medieval towns. Now you will explore key events that contributed to the **decline of feudalism** in the 12th through the 15th centuries.

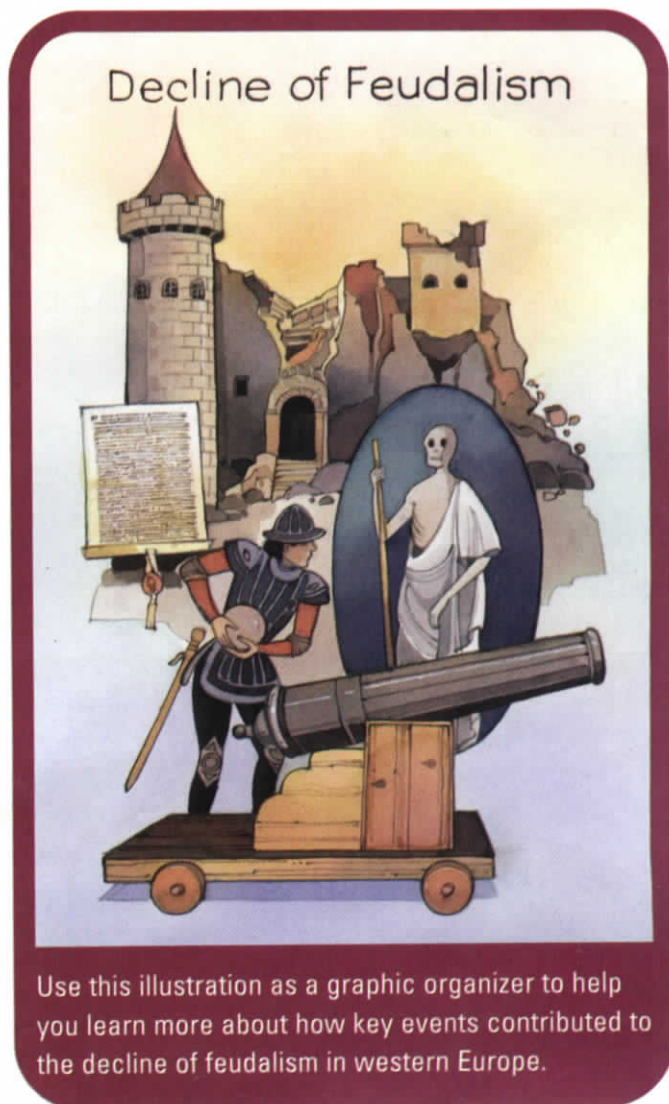
There were many causes for the breakdown of the feudal system. In this chapter, you will focus on three: political changes in England, a terrible disease, and a long series of wars.

In England, several political changes in the 12th and 13th centuries helped to weaken feudalism. A famous document known as the **Magna Carta**, or Great Charter, dates from this time. The Magna Carta was a written agreement that limited the king's power and strengthened the rights of nobles. As feudalism declined, the Magna Carta took on a much broader meaning and contributed to ideas about individual rights and liberties in England.

The disease was the **bubonic plague**, or Black Death. The plague swept across Asia in the 1300s and reached Europe in 1347. Over the next two centuries, this terrifying disease killed millions in Europe. It struck all kinds of people—rich and poor, young and old, town dwellers and country folk. Almost everyone who caught the plague died within days. In some places, whole communities were wiped out. The deaths of so many people led to sweeping economic and social changes.

Between 1337 and 1453, France and England fought a series of wars known as the **Hundred Years' War**. This conflict changed the way wars were fought and shifted power from feudal lords to monarchs and the common people.

How did such different events contribute to the decline of feudalism? In this chapter, you'll find out.





King John's acceptance of the Magna Carta has been illustrated and painted many times since the historic event. He is often shown signing his name with a pen. In fact, he did not. He stamped his royal seal on the document to show his agreement.

the right to try clergy accused of serious crimes in royal courts rather than in church courts.

Henry's action led to a long, bitter quarrel with his friend Thomas Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury. In 1170, four knights, perhaps seeking the king's favor, killed Becket in front of the main altar of Canterbury Cathedral. Becket's tomb soon became a popular destination for pilgrimages. In 1173, the church proclaimed him a saint. Still, most of the Constitutions of Clarendon remained in force.

King John and the Magna Carta In 1199, Henry's youngest son, John, became king. John soon made powerful enemies by losing most of the lands the English had controlled in France. He also taxed his barons heavily and ignored their traditional rights, arresting opponents at will. In addition, John quarreled with the church and collected large amounts of money from its properties.

5.2 Political Developments in England

There were many reasons for the decline of feudalism in Europe. In one country, England, political developments during the 12th and 13th centuries helped to weaken feudalism. The story begins with King Henry II, who reigned from 1154 to 1189.

Henry II's Legal Reforms Henry made legal reform a central concern of his reign. For example, he insisted that a jury formally accuse a person of a serious crime. Cases were then tried before a royal judge. Henry's reforms strengthened the power of royal courts at the expense of feudal lords. In time, trial by judges and juries replaced trial by ordeal and combat.

Henry's effort to strengthen royal authority led to a serious conflict with the church. In 1164, Henry issued the Constitutions of Clarendon, a document that he said spelled out the king's traditional rights. Among them was

In June 1215, angry barons forced a meeting with King John in a meadow called Runnymede, beside the River Thames. There they insisted that John put his seal to the Magna Carta, or Great Charter.

The charter was an agreement between the barons and the king. The barons agreed that the king could continue to rule. For his part, King John agreed to observe common law and the traditional rights of barons and the church. For example, he promised to consult the barons and church officials before imposing special taxes. He also agreed that “no free man” could be jailed except by the lawful judgment of his peers or by the law of the land. This idea eventually became a key part of English common law known as **habeas corpus**.

In many ways, the Magna Carta protected the rights and privileges of nobles. Later, it took on a much broader meaning as people in England came to regard it as one of the foundations of their rights and liberties.

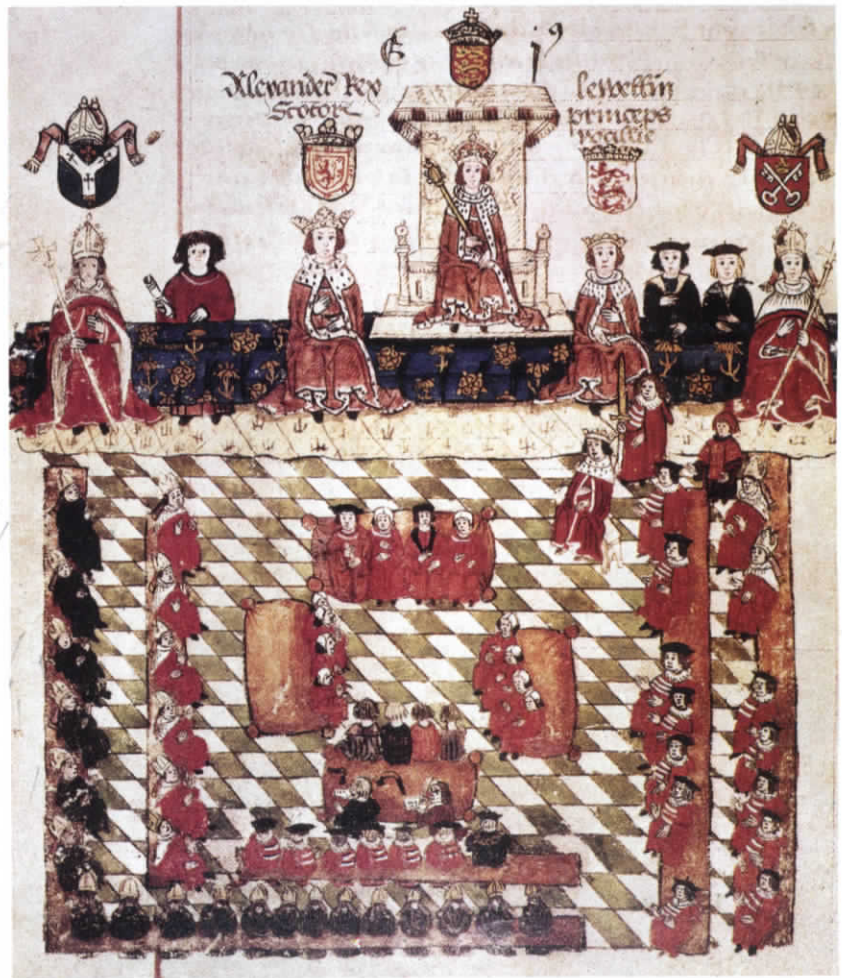
King Edward I and the Model Parliament In 1295, Edward I, King John’s grandson, took a major step toward including more people in government. Edward called together a governing body called the Model Parliament. It included **commoners** and lower-ranking clergy as well as church officials and nobles.

The Impact of Political Developments in England These political changes contributed to the decline of feudalism in two ways. Some of the changes strengthened royal authority at the expense of nobles. Others weakened feudalism by shifting power to common people.

The Magna Carta established the idea of rights and liberties that even the king cannot violate. It also affirmed that monarchs should rule with the advice of the governed. Henry II’s legal reforms strengthened English common law and the role of judges and juries. Finally, Edward I’s Model Parliament gave a voice in government to common people as well as lords. All these ideas became part of the tradition that later gave rise to modern democratic institutions.

habeas corpus the principle that accused persons cannot be held in jail without the consent of a court

commoner a person who is not of noble rank



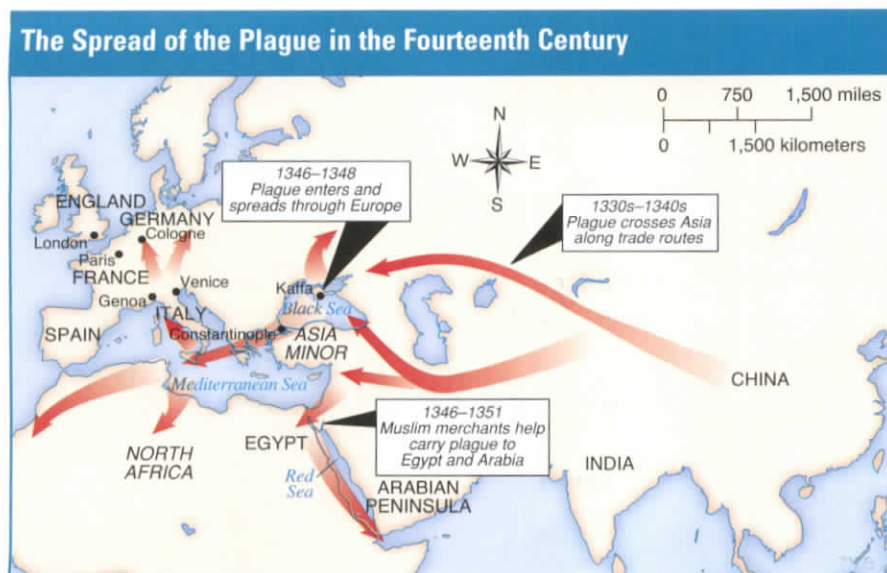
This 14th-century illuminated manuscript shows King Edward I sitting over his parliament. The King of Scots is seated to his right, and the Prince of Wales is seated to his left.

5.3 The Bubonic Plague

We've looked at how political developments in England helped to weaken feudalism in that country. Another reason for the decline of feudalism was the bubonic plague, which affected all of Europe. The bubonic plague first struck Europe from 1347 to 1351. It returned

about every decade into the 15th century, leaving major changes in its wake.

Historians think the plague began in central Asia, possibly in China, and spread throughout China, India, the Near East, and Europe. The disease traveled from central Asia to the Black Sea along the Silk Road (the main trade route between east and west). It was probably carried to Italy on a ship. It then spread north and west, throughout the continent of Europe and England.



The Black Death Symptoms, or signs, of the plague included a fever, vomiting, fierce coughing and sneezing fits, and egg-sized swellings or bumps. The name Black Death probably came from the black and blue blotches that appeared on the skin of many victims.

The dirty conditions in which people lived contributed significantly to the spread of the bubonic plague. The bacteria that caused the disease were carried by fleas that fed on the blood of infected rodents, like rats. When the rats died, the fleas jumped to other animals and people. During the Middle Ages, it was not unusual for people to go for many months without a change of clothing or a bath. Rats, covered with fleas, often roamed the floors of homes looking for food. City streets were filled with human waste, dead animals, and trash.

At the time, though, no one knew where the disease came from or how it spread. Terrified people blamed the plague on everything from the positions of the planets to lepers and Jews.

Persecution of the Jews did not begin with the plague. Prejudice against Jews had led England to order all Jews to leave the country in 1290. In France, the same thing happened in 1306 and again in 1394. But fear of the plague made things worse. During the Black Death, many German cities ordered Jews to leave.

The Impact of the Plague The plague took a terrible toll on the populations of Asia and Europe. China's population was reduced by nearly half between 1200 and 1393, probably because of the plague and

famine. Travelers reported that dead bodies covered the ground in Central Asia and India.

Some historians estimate that 24 million Europeans died as a result of the plague—about a third of the population. The deaths of so many people speeded changes in Europe’s economic and social structure that contributed to the decline of feudalism.

Trade and commerce slowed almost to a halt during the plague years. As Europe began to recover, the economy needed to be rebuilt. But it wouldn’t be rebuilt in the same way, with feudal lords holding most of the power.

After the plague, there was a shift in power from nobles to the common people. One reason was that the need for workers was high, but there were fewer workers because so many people had died. The workers who were left could therefore demand more money and more rights. In addition, many serfs abandoned feudal manors and moved to towns and cities, seeking better opportunities. This led to a weakening of the manor system and a loss of power for feudal lords.

After the plague, a number of peasant rebellions broke out. When nobles tried to return to the way things had been, resentment exploded across Europe. There were peasant revolts in France, Flanders, England, Germany, Spain, and Italy.

The most famous of these revolts was the English Peasants’ War in 1381. The English rebels succeeded in entering London and presenting their demands to the king, Richard II. The leader of the rebellion was killed, however, and after his death the peasants’ revolt lost momentum. Still, in most of Europe the time was coming when serfdom would end.

During the plague, a dancing mania spread among those who remained healthy—expressing their joy of life during those black times.



5.4 The Hundred Years' War

Between 1337 and 1453, England and France fought a series of wars over the control of lands in France. Known as the Hundred Years' War, this long conflict helped to weaken feudalism in England and France.

English kings had long claimed lands in France as their own fiefs. French kings disputed these claims. When Philip VI of France declared that the French fiefs of England's King Edward III were part of his own realm, war broke out in France.

Early English Successes Despite often being outnumbered, the English won most of the early battles of the war. What happened at the Battle of Crecy shows why.

Two quite different armies faced each other at the French village of Crecy in 1346. The French had a feudal army that relied on horse-mounted nobles, or knights. French knights wore heavy armor, and they could hardly move when they were not on horseback. Their weapons were swords and lances. Some of the infantry, or foot soldiers, used **crossbows**, which were effective only at short ranges.

In contrast, the English army was made up of lightly armored knights, foot soldiers, and archers armed with **longbows**. Some soldiers were recruited from the common people and paid to fight.

The English longbow had many advantages over the crossbow. Larger arrows could be notched and fired more quickly. The arrows flew farther, faster, and with greater accuracy. At Crecy, the longbow helped the English defeat the much larger French force.

The French Fight Back The French slowly chipped away at the territory the English had won in the early years of the war. In 1415, after a long **truce**, King Henry V again invaded France. This time the English met with stronger resistance. One reason was that the French were now using more modern tactics.

The king was recruiting his army from commoners, paying them with money collected by taxes, just as the English did.

Another reason for better French resistance was a new sense of national identity and unity. In part the French were inspired by a 17-year-old peasant girl, today known as Joan of Arc. Joan claimed that she heard the voices of saints urging her to save France. Putting on a suit of armor, she went to fight.

crossbow a medieval weapon made up of a bow that was fixed across a wooden stock (which had a groove to direct the arrow's flight) and operated by a trigger
longbow a large bow used for firing feathered arrows
truce an agreed-upon halt in fighting

At the Battle of Crecy, the English army's light armor and longbows triumphed over the French knights' heavy armor and crossbows.



In 1429, Joan led a French army to victory in the Battle of Orleans. The next year, the “Maid of Orleans” was captured by allies of England. The English accused Joan of being a witch and a **heretic**, and burned her at the stake.

Joan of Arc’s heroism changed the way many French men and women felt about their king and nation. Twenty-two years after Joan’s death, the French finally drove the English out of France. Almost 500 years later, the Roman Catholic Church made Joan a saint.

The Impact of the Hundred Years’ War The Hundred Years’ War contributed to the decline of feudalism by helping to shift power from feudal lords to monarchs and common people. During the war, monarchs on both sides had collected taxes and raised large professional armies. As a result, kings no longer relied on nobles to supply knights for the army.

In addition, changes in military technology made the nobles’ knights and castles less useful. The longbow proved to be an effective weapon against mounted knights. Castles became less important as armies learned to use gunpowder to shoot iron balls from cannons and blast holes in castle walls.

The new feeling of nationalism also shifted power away from lords. Previously, many English and French peasants felt more loyalty to their local lords than to their king. The war created a new sense of national unity and patriotism on both sides.

In both France and England, peasants bore the heaviest burden of the war. They were forced to fight in the army and to pay higher and more frequent taxes. Those who survived the war, however, were needed as soldiers and workers. For this reason, the common people emerged from the fighting with greater influence and power.

5.5 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, you’ve explored three key events that contributed to the decline of feudalism. Political developments in England helped shift power to the king and the common people. After the bubonic plague, the need for workers to rebuild Europe led to a shift in power from feudal lords to the common people. The Hundred Years’ War brought a rise in national feeling in both England and France. It also reduced the importance of nobles and knights on the battlefield.

This chapter ends your study of the Middle Ages in western Europe. In the next chapter, you’ll travel east to explore the Byzantine Empire.

heretic a person who holds beliefs that are contrary to the teachings of a church or other group



Joan of Arc, a 17-year-old peasant girl, inspired the people of France to fight for their country. She is honored for her heroism to this day. A late 19th-century artist painted this scene called *Entrance of Joan of Arc into Orleans on 8th May 1429*.