



FEUDALISM IN THE MEDIEVAL WORLD



Unit Overview

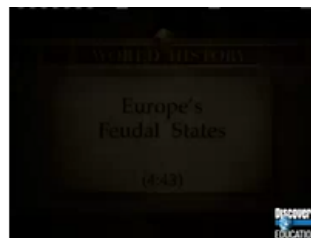
The constant invasions that had threatened Western Europe for nearly two hundred years were over by 1000. Nonetheless, they had created strong feelings of fear and insecurity. People looked for ways to protect themselves and their property. This led to feudalism, a military and political system based on the ownership of land. Let's see how it all happened.

The Feudal Contract

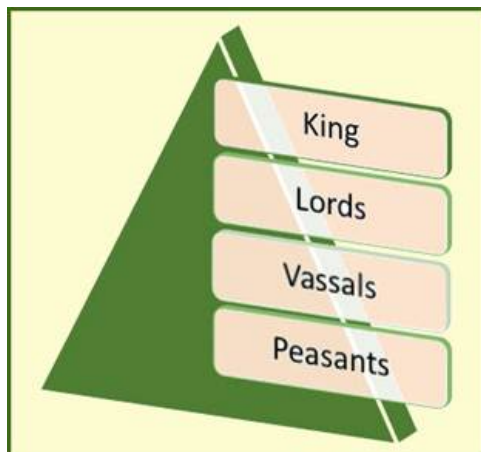
The centuries of invasions by German tribes, Magyars and Vikings caused Europeans to place a high priority on safety and protection. Kings, who were often weak rulers, exchanged land for the loyalty of powerful nobles. This led to a new military and political system called **feudalism**. Under this plan, important nobles or lords who owned vast amounts of land divided their property among lesser nobles known as **vassals**. In turn, vassals promised to provide service and loyalty to the greater lords. This agreement was referred to as the **feudal contract**. It established a **hierarchy**, a system in which people were ranked based on their authority.



A Vassal Swearing Loyalty to Charlemagne



Under the terms of the feudal contract, the lord gave the vassal an estate or **fief**. Fiefs, which ranged in size from several square miles to a few acres, included peasants to farm the land, buildings on the property and villages within its boundaries. The lord also promised to protect the vassal in case of attack. It was the annual obligation of the vassal to pay the lord a set amount of money or produce and to provide forty days of service. When the lord's oldest son became a knight or his daughter married, vassals were expected to contribute to the celebrations that accompanied these events. When traveling, a lord and those with him could stay at vassal's fief. The vassal had to be prepared to offer housing and dining for several days in this situation. If the lord was captured in battle and held for ransom, his vassals were duty-bound to pay for his freedom.



The Feudal Hierarchy

Knights and Castles

Competition for power among the great lords was intense. This rivalry made warfare a way of life during the Middle Ages and encouraged many men to become warriors on horseback or **knights**. A boy began his training for knighthood at the age of seven and was sent to live in the castle of his father's lord. The training that a would-be knight received was strict and demanding. Candidates learned to ride, to fight and to keep their armor and weapons in good condition. After an official ceremony called a **dubbing**, those who had completed their instruction took their places alongside the lord's other men. To keep their skills sharp, lords often invited the knights to participate in **tournaments** and awarded prizes to the victors. Although knights were expected to kill their enemies in battle, they were required to follow a code of conduct called **chivalry**. It stressed that knights be loyal and kind as well as brave. According to the chivalry's guidelines, they were obligated to protect women and to treat prisoners of war fairly.



A Reenactment of a Medieval Tournament

During the early Middle Ages, knights followed the Roman method of dressing for battle. They wore protective gear made from leather or **chain mail**, which was composed of small, interlocking metal rings. Neither leather nor chain mail, however, could prevent the penetration of a sharp-pointed weapon, such as a lance or javelin. As metalworking technology improved, the use of plate armor became popular. Although it was expensive and heavy, it offered protection from cuts and stab wounds. Because it could be shaped as separate pieces that covered every area of the body, it was possible to walk and to ride while wearing it. Plate metal even shielded horses from harm. By the end of the Middle Ages, suits of armor were obsolete because they were no match for firearms, the next development in weaponry.



Medieval Armor for Knight and Horse

The desire for security led the lords to fortify their homes in case of attack. At first, they simply added a tower or a **keep**, a fence and a ditch filled with water for defense. Eventually, these simple structures grew into large and grand castles. They were protected by high, stone walls, several towers and a drawbridge that could be lowered over a wide, deep **moat**. The objective of a battle was often to seize the castle of another lord, especially if it was located near a harbor or mountain pass. Castles were sometimes surrounded and held under siege for weeks at a time. Although most of us have dreamed of living in a castle at one time or another, they were not very comfortable. Most of these structures were cold, dreary and damp.



Conwy Castle: Wales



Bamburgh Castle: England



Manors and Serfs

The lord's castle or manor house, nearby villages and surrounding lands were all part of his estate or manor. Peasants, also referred to as **serfs**, made up the majority of the population during the Middle Ages. They lived and worked on the property. Because money had almost ceased to exist in medieval Europe, they paid their rent with a portion of the crops that they grew or the animals that they raised. The peasants were obligated to work the lord's farmland for a specified number of days each week. The repair of the estate's roads, bridges and fences was also part of their feudal contract. In addition, peasants gave up even more of what they produced for getting married, inheriting property and grinding grain in the lord's mill. In exchange, they received the lord's protection and the right to plant a few acres of land for themselves. The idea of trading goods or services for other goods and services was called **bartering**. It was the chief method of conducting business during the Medieval Period.



Peasants Working in the Fields during the Middle Ages

Most peasants were viewed as part of the estate and could not leave without the lord's permission. Since peasants produced almost every necessity, each manor was generally self-sufficient. Food, furniture, tools and clothing were all made locally. Most serfs knew nothing of the world beyond their village. Their community consisted of small, one-room huts, a church and a mill for grinding grain. The nearby fields were divided into narrow strips of land, and families were assigned several of these in different fields. This way, a serf did not have all his land in a field that was less productive. For the most part, peasants struggled just to survive, and most did not live beyond the age of thirty-five. There were a few peasants that were considered free men. They had fewer obligations to the lord and could leave the manor when they wished. However, one bad harvest or flood sometimes forced a free man into debt with his lord.

Women: Noble and Peasant

Although they lived in a world dominated by men, women played a role in feudal society. Because their husbands and fathers were often called to battle, noblewomen ran the manors during their absence. They held the vassals accountable for their obligations, supervised the household and prepared for the defense of the castle, if necessary. Because property was usually passed down to the oldest son in the family, women seldom inherited land. Fathers negotiated arranged marriages for their daughters. These unions were based on financial and political advantage rather than romantic ties. Most noblewomen who did not marry entered convents and became nuns. For peasant women, life was especially hard. They usually worked long hours in the fields with their husbands and helped fulfill the obligations of their families to the lords. At the same time, these women cared for their children, cooked meals from whatever foods were available and looked after the family's livestock. Very few European women, noble or peasant, could read or write at this time.



A Mural Picturing Eleanor of Aquitaine and One of her Sons

Although the medieval life was dominated by men, there were some influential women. **Eleanor of Aquitaine** first married **King Louis VII** of France. This was an arranged marriage, and the couple had little in common. To further complicate matters, Louis wanted a male heir, but Eleanor had given him two daughters. They divorced, and the former queen quickly became engaged to the man who was to become **Henry II**, king of England. They were the parents of eight children, five boys and three girls. The queen plotted with her sons to overthrow King Henry. The rebellion was not successful, and Eleanor spent the next fifteen years in prison. After Henry's death, her son **Richard** became the next king of England. He immediately freed his mother, and she ruled in his place when he was fighting wars outside the country. At a time when women had few rights and little political influence, Eleanor of Aquitaine was an exceptional woman.

What Happened Next?

The feudal system and its harsh realities were familiar aspects of the Middle Ages, but the era was also sometimes called the Age of Faith. The medieval Church shaped the lives and thoughts of Europeans through its teachings, but it also became the most influential force of its time. Great Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals were built across the European landscape and served as a reminder of the Church's power. Before looking at this topic in more detail in the next unit, review the names and terms from Unit 14; then, complete Questions 21 through 30.