

The Feudal System in the Middle Ages

World History Lecture Notes



An Invented Term

Modern historians have coined the term, **feudalism**, to describe the political and social system of the Middle Ages – particularly in medieval Europe, but it can also be applied to medieval Japan. No one actually said “feudalism” or “feudal system” in the Middle Ages. It was just something that developed in the centuries following the Fall of Rome when centralized government had fallen apart.

The New Rural Reality

The Roman Empire included a network of cities that were connected by well-maintained roads. As the power of Rome declined, people began to leave the decaying cities, which were increasingly filled with disorder and crime, and settled in rural areas. The network of well-maintained roads that made the Romans famous ceased to be maintained and trade collapsed. As a result, rural communities formed that had to be increasingly self-sufficient. A central authority, in the person of a king, united these communities under one leader, but that leader did not have a lot of power. Most people in medieval Europe never saw a king and lived their life in their own self-sufficient community, known as a **manor**, relying on the local **lord** to protect them, administer justice, and settle disputes between residents. Many medieval peasants lived on the manor as **serfs** who were legally tied to the land and not allowed to leave even if they wanted to do so.

Weak Central Authority

Anyone who has played chess knows that the king is one of the weakest pieces on the board and is dependent on the support of other pieces on the board. These other pieces on the board symbolize the Church, the nobility, the knights, and the peasants. Medieval kings held some of their own lands, but the lands that they reigned over resembled more of a patchwork quilt than it did a modern nation the way we think of it today. Kings would enter **lord-vassal contracts** with nobles, who would swear an oath of loyalty, or **vassalage**, to the king and receive a land grant, known as a **fief**, in return. The loyalty sworn by the vassal was most commonly delivered in the form of military service. When medieval kings went to war, they required each of their vassals to send a certain number of knights, as kings did not have the means to maintain large personal armies.

Those who entered into lord-vassal contracts directly with the king, known as **great lords**, would then enter into similar contracts with **lesser lords**, making themselves both lords and vassals. Each feudal lord was expected to maintain a certain number of non-noble **knights**, who also received land. **Peasants** who lived on the manor would receive the lord’s protection and would, in return, pay dues to their lord in the form of money, crops, or by doing manual labor on the manor for a certain number of days each year.

The Decline of Feudalism

In the Late Middle Ages, feudalism began to decline as kings began to grow more powerful (partly as a result of the Crusades), global trade increased, and more people started to move to towns, which were outside of the control of feudal lords. With the wealth that came into royal treasuries during the Age of Exploration, kings began financing their own armies and allowed nobles to pay money instead of raising their own men.

While feudalism began to decline significantly between 1400-1700, some elements of feudalism remained in Europe into the modern era. In 1789, the French National Assembly formally abolished the legal privileges of the nobility in the early stages of the French Revolution. Serfdom continued in Russia until a reforming tsar abolished it in the 1860s.