

# Feudalism and court services vassals



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Feudalism began in France around A. D. 900 and spread. The feudal hierarchy was an arrangement of rank resembling a pyramid. At the top of the pyramid was the king. In the feudal relationship the king was the suzerain, or lord, of a group of dukes and counts who were his vassals. Each of these vassals was in turn lord to lesser vassals, who had even less important vassals. At the bottom of the pyramid were the knights, who had no vassals. Lord and vassal owed certain obligations to each other. The vassal pledged to perform certain services for his lord, and in return the lord granted him a fief, or fee. A fief was anything that was considered useful or valuable. Usually, a fief was a piece of land, jurisdiction over the peasants who lived on the land, and ownership of the goods they produced. All fiefs were technically owned by the king, but a vassal held, in effect, all the rights of ownership of the fief as long as he performed the services required by his lord. The entire kingdom was divided into fiefs, except for the land held by the king personally. Feudal tenure was hereditary. When a vassal died, his heir did homage for his fief and swore an oath of fealty to his lord, promising to be faithful and render service. In the ceremony of investiture, the lord handed his vassal some symbol—such as a sword or a clod of earth—in token of title, and promised to defend the vassal's fief. If a vassal died leaving a minor heir, the lord usually became the guardian of the fief and managed it. If the heir was an unmarried daughter, the lord could select a husband for her because only a male could perform the services of the fief. Feudal services were the services that a vassal owed his lord varied. Military or Knight Service: A vassal was expected to serve his lord in war. Usually he served 40 days a year at his own expense if engaged in an offensive action against his lord's enemy. In a defensive action the term of service was

unlimited. A knight was expected to furnish only his horse and armor, but great vassals had to supply hundreds of knights and men-at-arms. With Court Services vassals had to serve, when summoned, in the lord's court. They were called upon to give the lord advice. They also met in assembly to settle disputes between vassals. This was the origin of the principle of trial by a jury of peers, or equals. Vassals were also summoned for ceremonial occasions, such as investitures. Financial Obligations included: A relief, or gift, to the lord when the fief passed to an heir. It amounted usually to a year's income. Aids, payments made by vassals when their lord needed additional resources. A common aid was to help ransom the lord when he was taken prisoner in war. Other aids were given when the lord's eldest daughter was married and when his eldest son became a knight. They were obligated to entertain the lord when he paid a visit. During feudal warfare a powerful vassal who did not fulfill his obligations could usually withstand his lord's wrath if he owned a strong castle, since medieval castles were almost impossible to overrun. Forty days' service—the usual limit for knights in the attacking force—left insufficient time for siege operations. Private warfare between nobles who were neither lord nor vassal to each other was common in France, since the king could not control the vassals of his vassals. The church sought to limit strife by forbidding warfare on certain days of the week and during church festivals. Chivalry developed as a code of conduct for knights. Feudalism came to an end as the kings increased their power and forced the lesser landowners to obey their orders. Feudalism was introduced in England in 1066 following the Battle of Hastings and the Norman Conquest. The Normans, led by William the Conqueror who was crowned King William I of England were responsible for introducing feudalism

to England. Feudalism was based on the exchange of land for military service. William the Conqueror claimed all the land in England and divide the land between himself (about 20%), the church (about 25%) and the remainder of English land was given to Norman soldiers and nobles (barons). Following the Norman Conquest William the Conqueror ordered a full survey of England which was called the Domesday Book. It gave the new King of England full details of the land, the people and how much taxes and dues would be paid to the Normans. Under the Feudal system the vassals who were awarded land swore an Oath of Fealty to their lord and provided fully equipped soldiers under the Feudal Levy. Medieval Serfs were peasants who worked his lord's land and paid him certain dues in return for the use of land, the possession (not the ownership) of which was heritable. When the land changed owners during the time of feudalism the peasants were obliged to work for the new owners - the Normans. The decline of feudalism in England occurred due to many events including the Black Death, changes from a land-based economy to a money based economy and the establishment of Centralized government. Feudalism began in 410 AD with the fall of Rome. Feudalism in Germany was different from that of France and England. The old Germanic tribes which plagued the Roman emperors emerged again after Charlemagne's successors lost power. Four stem duchies eventually emerged as the most powerful in Germany: Saxony, Franconia, Swabia, and Bavaria. One strong duke, Otto of Saxony (936-973) tried to establish lordship over the other dukes. He invaded Italy, starting a long tradition of German interference in that peninsula, and made himself King of Italy. He was then crowned emperor by the pope himself (962). The strong points were; 1) fragmentation of political power; 2) public power in private hands;

and 3) armed forces secured through private contracts. Feudalism is, therefore, a method of government, and a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government. It is also an extreme form of decentralization. There many centers of power. Power does not reside at a center, or at the top, even though there a pyramidal structure in theory, with the emperor at the top and the simple knight at the bottom. The weak points were weak central power and realizing that a strong defense relied on a single leader. Napoleon was a leader during that time. Feudalism in Germany ended in the 15th century at about the same time England's Feudalism ended, as well as the rest of Europe's feudalism.