

Example of essay on the rise of feudalism in the western world

[Religion](#), [Bible](#)



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

The collapse of the Roman Empire meant that a new way of life and government had to be established in the Empire's former territories. The seeds of the new system were born in the as new centers of powers were established on a more local level in a system called Feudalism¹. The term Feudalism was not actually used at the time it was in practice, but was “ a term invented in the sixteenth century by royal lawyers to describe the decentralized and complex social, political, and economic society out of which the modern state was emerging.” ² Feudalism in Europe lasted throughout the Middle Ages, roughly from the fifth through the twelfth centuries. ³ By the ninth century, Feudalism was more fully formed in the former Roman Empire, and its origins resulted from a variety of circumstances.

The main reason Feudalism developed was because the Roman Empire was no longer providing a centralized government with all its benefits for Europe. Without this central government providing economic, military, social structures, trade, or other direction, smaller local leaders were forced to develop their own means of goods production, security, and social structure. According to Nelson, “ Feudalism is a decentralized organization that arises when central authority cannot perform its functions and when it cannot prevent the rise of local powers.” ⁴ Some scholars claim the fundamentals of feudal societies are “ the knight, vassalic commendation, the fief, and the castle.” ⁵

At the end of the Roman Empire, the rich procured more and more land, but this also meant that they were subject to more taxation; therefore, since “ their private interests as landowners were . . . in contradiction with their

interests as rulers and clients of the state,” the rich began to find ways to evade these taxes. 6 Considering Nelson’s definition of feudalism, one way the rich could evade these taxes would be to seize the lands for themselves, proclaiming themselves as the rightful owners who were no longer beholden to Rome, but sovereign leaders themselves. Because Rome no longer had the force necessary to prevent an action like this, the rich landholder was now free of obligation to any central government and to fully pursue his own interests.

However, without the direction of Rome, the landowner now had many more responsibilities that were formerly provided by the central government.

Roads formerly used by the Roman Empire’s large trade network fell into disrepair, so transportation became more difficult, meaning that resources such as agriculture and other products needed to be produced at the local level. 7 In addition, the landowners needed to have a large enough security force to protect against not only the encroachment of adjacent landowners, but also raids by the Vikings, Magyars, and Saracens. 8 These conditions directly led to the establishment of feudalism.

The landowners needed to act quickly to be sure their lands were not lost to other ambitious landowners or raiders. The former slaves of the Roman Empire, now beholden to a local lord and known as serfs, were at first the main source of military power for the new Lords; however, in later times were replaced by a warrior elite known as Knights. 9 Because the new lords acted quickly to cement their power in their local areas, all classes of people came to see the new, smaller states created by each lord as “ a kind of family.” 10 This helped to develop the hereditary aspect of feudalism, where

a lord's family was seen as the natural successor of his rule, and serfs kept in their own status by the same belief in hereditary status.

Although the serfs were no longer technically slaves, their duties to their lord kept them from really prospering or advancing from their social status. They paid hefty dues to their lords, were often expected to supply their own work equipment, and usually had to offer some of their produce to their lord. ¹¹ However, in return for their work, the serfs had land to work, could keep some of their own produce, barter with others for goods, and had the protection of their lord from bandits and raiders. Another bonus under new lords versus the slavery of Roman times is that families stayed together rather than being split apart by the whims of a cruel master. This would also encourage the fealty a serf family felt for its ruler.

While lords and serfs were of great importance under feudal rule, not to be underestimated is the power of the Roman Catholic Church. Owning land and having the power to defend it was important in feudal times. The Church had its hands in politics from the beginning. On the morning of Christmas in 800 AD, Pope Leo III placed a crown on Charlemagne's head and "led the congregation in chanting: 'To Carolus Augustus, crowned by God, great and peace-giving Emperor of the Romans, life and victory.'" ¹² The great significance of Pope Leo's action is that he was the first Pope to ever crown an Emperor, and this also gave the Catholic Church a secure position in the European monarchies' secular business. ¹³ Rigby writes, "even before the time of Charlemagne, the Church owned a third of all land and its property rights constituted an essential element of contemporary agrarian relations." ¹⁴ With its monasteries, the church kept up its numbers of clerics, cardinals,

and bishops, as well as controlled a record of the knowledge of the times. It also became much, much richer, because not only did the church profit from the feudal rent collected from serfs, but also benefited from tax-exemption and tithes provided by the laity or lords loyal to them. ¹⁵ This wealth, fealty of lords, and the ability it had to defend itself insured the Roman Catholic Church's survival through the Middle Ages.

During the eighth century, the more powerful local lords were able to absorb some of the smaller lords, sometimes through conquest, but also sometimes as a settlement to end war or a simple agreement that the smaller lord could retain his lands in return for service to the more powerful one. ¹⁶ Though this may have resulted in larger land-holdings for some lords, it did not result in a more centralized government. According to some economic scholars, although the technology to increase productivity of the land such as leveling fields, underdraining, removing stones, and adding mineral fertilizer existed in medieval times, it was not employed by the serfs through their lords because serf labor was forced labor, and "labor applied to the demesne constituted a direct, forcible deduction from the applicable peasant's plot, so he had no incentive to work carefully or skillfully." ¹⁷ In other words, in order for the lord to organize the peasants to commit themselves to working on a project other than working their own allotted plots, he would need to find some way to compensate them. Otherwise, the serfs' time spent away from their fields would simply cause them to become in debt to the lord or not produce enough to keep the family for the year. Therefore, productivity was kept at a relatively steady rate per serf, keeping the feudal system in place until the industrial revolution began, productivity experienced exponential

growth, and new classes of free citizens arose.

Although some aspects of modern society already resemble feudalism, it is about as likely that a country like the United States will turn completely to feudalism as it will to the tribal cultures of the aboriginal Americans. Lynn Nelson relates the rise of gang and mafia cultures to a feudal government structure, with smaller groups developing “turf” within cities and controlled by a “boss” or “Godfather” of an entire city, whom they all owe part of their profits to, as serfs did to feudal lords. In some ways, it really does resemble feudal government because “Municipal governments at first tried to curb the growth of the gangsters, but their police soon found that they were outclassed.” 18

A difference between feudal societies and the gangs is that feudal lords needed their serfs and knights to provide the basic essentials of life, such as food and security, while gangs aimed to provide things that people want but the governments do not particularly want them to have, such as gambling and prostitution. In order for a country like America to split up into feudal states, some great calamity would have to take place, with communication and transportation breakdown on an extreme scale, where gangs or similar groups were the only ones willing to provide the security and supplies that the average person needs to live. If the essentials of feudal societies are really “the knight, vassalic commendation, the fief, and the castle,” it seems even less likely that a country like the United States would turn to this form of government, unless these so-called essentials can be renamed in modern terms. 19 It would also take a rejection or loss of technology that limited production growth to keep commoners beholden to the leaders.

In countries where the industrial revolution took hold and led to greater production, more demanding consumers, and capitalism, feudalism had to give way because the new merchant class could wield its power through economics. In these countries, little pieces of feudal attitudes and government styles may remain, as with the gangs, but overall the economics of the industrialized society will not allow it to turn back to feudal government.

Bibliography

Ariés, Phillipe and Duby, Georges. *A History of Private Life: Revelations of the Medieval World*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1988.

Dersin, Denise. *What Life Was Like in the Age of Chivalry: Medieval Europe, AD 800-1500*. Richmond, VA: Time-Life Books, 1997.

Encyclopedia Britannica Online. Feudalism. <http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/205583/feudalism> (accessed 27 June 2012).

Grabowski, Richard. "Economic Development and Feudalism." *The Journal of Developing Areas* 25, No. 2 (1991): 179-196.

Nelson, Lynn H. "Lectures for a Medieval Survey." *The Orb*, 1988. <http://www.the-orb.net/textbooks/nelson/feudalism.html> (accessed 27 June 2012).

Previté-Orton, C. W. *The Shorter Cambridge Medieval History, Vol I*. Binghamton, NY: Vail-Ballou Press, 1978.

Rigby, S. H. "Historical Materialism, Social Structure, and Social Change in the Middle Ages." *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 34, No. 3 (2004): 473-522.

White, Stephen D. "English Feudalism and its Origins." *The American Journal* <https://assignbuster.com/example-of-essay-on-the-rise-of-feudalism-in-the-western-world/>

of Legal History. 19, No. 2 (1975): 138-155.

Wickham, Chris. "The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism." Past & Present 103 (1984): 3-36.