

History 107



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History 107 Medieval Feudalism The feudal system was medieval Europe's prevailing form of political organization. It was based on a hierarchical series of relationships. A noble lord would grant land (called a fief) to a free man, and then the man would swear fealty to his lord. The man then became a vassal, and agreed to provide military service, as well as other obligations, to his lord. This is feudalism in a short, highly generalized nutshell; but to truly understand this or any other system, one must first look at the facets of its composition. The system was subjected to much corruption and little centralization, and resulted in much political, social, and economic reform. By establishing feudal relationships with their lords, aspiring vassals faced the great burdens of obligation and faithfulness. In order to become vassals (feudal tenants who received property in exchange for their services) young men had to go through a specific process, ensuring their utmost loyalty to their respective lords. These lords were typically referred to as liege lords, feudal lords to whom vassals owed their allegiances; however, sometimes, a tenant (vassal) would even form a feudal relationship with his king or a territorial prince. In this instance, the tenant would be referred to as a tenant-in-chief or a baron, but for a young, aspiring vassal, this title was a ways down the road. The very first step on a young man's quest for vassalage was to attend a commendation ceremony. The procedure of this ceremony was twofold; aspiring vassals would both perform the act of homage, and take an oath of fealty to their lords. During the act of homage, an aspiring vassal would appear before his lord in a submissive manner, swearing his loyalty, commitment, and service. After performing the act of homage, the soon-to-be vassal would take an oath of fealty to his feudal lord. In this oath, the feudal tenant would assure his allegiance, and swear to use

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his inherited property to serve his lord entirely. Out of the two elements of the commendation ceremony, homage was considered especially important. Unlike the oath of fealty, which could be sworn to several different lords, homage could only be performed to one. This stipulation exemplifies the significance of vassalage, the relationship and mutual agreement between a vassal and his feudal lord. In exchange for his duty and service to his lords, a vassal received a benefice, or fief. Both terms, in regard to middle-age feudalism, refer to the property to which a vassal was bound in order to satisfy the agreement with his lord. The formal exchange of fiefs from lords to vassals was called investiture, and would happen during the commendation ceremony. The new tenant would take the fief he received via the investiture, and start to produce the necessities of war for the good of his liege lord. In doing so, some vassals would opt for subinfeudation, the leasing of a portion of their already leased fief to a lesser vassal, or “ rear vassal. ” In the beginning stages of the feudal system, the rules were sort of ambiguous in regard to what a vassal could and could not do with his land; consequently, vassals would attempt to make profits from their fiefs and become lords themselves! However, if at any time a lord felt that his vassal failed to adhere to the oath he had taken, the fief could be seized back through a process called “ forfeiture. ” Although much of a vassal’s responsibilities were focused on his use of his fiefdom for his lord’s military security, he also had two other obligations to his lord, both pertaining to situations where the lord was in a rough spot. First, if in court, a lord could call upon his vassals to give him legal advice. The lord would call for the deliberation of his counsel of vassals when considering situations such as criminal offense, capital punishment, and whether or not to go to war. The

other obligation vassals had to their lords was in the form of financial payment called “ aid. ” If a lord were to be taxed by his superiors, or captured through an act of war, it was often up to his vassals to receive and deal with his financial burdens. When synthesized, all of this information forms the basis of vassalage, the essential element of feudalism. While the feudal system attended to the hierarchical political relationship between a lord or king and his vassals, manorialism (also referred to as seigneurialism) focused on the relationship’s (hierarchal) economic aspects. Medieval manors were large farming estates (settled within fiefs) that included a manor house, pastures, fields, and a village for its serf inhabitants. In the system of manorialism, the lord of the manor managed his tenants, giving him both economic and legal power over them. The land surrounding his manor was divided into strips (which were each usually about a half-acre) that peasants would use to cultivate and harvest crops. A singular lord could have many manors, and would therefore assign lesser lords to reside in manor houses and oversee the manor’s estate. Within the manor was an agricultural system where serfs (peasants who were bound to the land they worked on) harvested goods for “ the lord of the manor. ” These serfs were not only bound to labor, but also taxes and fees in the form of extra agricultural goods. Just as in feudalism, serfs were subject to the protection of their lords as a sort of mutual relationship, although the lords obviously received many more benefits through the relationship than their serfs. The agricultural efficiency of serfs was absolutely essential to their villages, as the inability to produce crops meant no food for the villages’ populations. There were several ways medieval agriculture improved upon previous farming methods, and one of the ways was technological innovation.

Although the plow had been prevalent in the previous years, its efficiency was dramatically increased in the middle ages. A reason for this was the makings of heavier plows, allowing for easier cultivation of land that was previously unable to be farmed. These heavy plows required teams of oxen to pull, but were later replaced with horses. The use of horses was brought on by the creation of the horse harness, made possible by the introduction of iron in the medieval period. In addition to technological innovation, medieval agriculture was greatly benefited by improved farming methods. This era saw a switch from the two-field crop rotation to the three-field crop rotation. Under a two-field crop rotation, seeds were planted in half of the land every year while the other half laid uncultivated. In the following year, the two fields were reversed. With the implementation of the three-field crop rotation, the land was divided into three sections. The first section was seeded in the fall with either wheat or rye. Then, in the spring, the second field was seeded with peas, beans, lentils, or other crops, while the third section remained uncultivated. In this way, a particular section of the field would remain untouched every three years for the entirety of the year. This allowed for healthier soil, increasing the yields from the cultivated fields because of their "rest." The economics of feudalism superseded mere labor in the form of merchets and heriots. A merchet was a sum of money paid by a tenant to his lord to allow his daughter to marry. When a woman married, a lord lost a worker, so her father would essentially purchase the ability to give away his daughter. This "tax on marriage" provided incentive to keep workers from leaving the workforce. As if the life of a tenant was not hard enough, after death his lord could take back military equipment or his finest horse as another form of tribute. As feudalism and manorialism were both

economic and political systems, two things were for sure in medieval Europe: hierarchy and taxation. The Benedictine Cluny Abbey in France was the epicenter of Church reform. It all started with the fact that, like any monastery, the Benedictine monasteries required land. As feudal lords had been lending out land, they did so for the monasteries; however, because of their contributions, they were then patrons of these monasteries, and felt that they had a hand in their business. On top of this, other secular leaders would invest in bishops and other religious leaders to slyly get them into office. Also, bishops were able to seize power and gain capital through the guise of the Church, further increasing their wealth. This is sometimes referred to as the “ Feudalization of the Church” because religious officials would become the noblemen involved in feudal relationships with vassals. Consequently, reform rose out of this corruption. The Cluniacs in the Benedictine Cluny Abbey sought to reform monasteries in Europe, and introduce strict rules to limit simony and celibacy by clergymen. Also, they sought to take the power away from secular leaders that had been used to gain control of religious officials; instead, the Cluniacs wanted all clergymen to see the pope as the head of all doings related to the Church. The Cluny Abbey united hundreds of monasteries all over Europe in order to join its cause and help it spread its word. The basis of the “ Investiture Conflict” was the desire of secular rulers to increase their already massive amounts of authority by rendering ecclesiastical leaders dependent on them for religious offices and property (lay investiture). In theory, this would take influence away from the Church; obviously, the pope and other non-secular leaders fought against this movement, consequently forming what is known as the “ Investiture Conflict. ” Pope Gregory VII took office in the Holy Roman Empire

in 1073, and sought to separate the Church from secular rulers. Instead, he wanted to bring the Church to the forefront and, as the pope, assume his position as the final authority. A few years later, Gregory decided to clamp down on lay investiture as he declared it an act of simony. To further emphasize this movement, he decreed that any nobleman not related to the Church who attempted to invest a person with a clerical office would be excommunicated. As this would undermine the power of secular rulers, Henry IV was accordingly not very happy. To illustrate his disapproval, Henry removed Milan's bishop and replaced him with someone else. Consequently, Gregory called for Henry's appearance in Rome to beg for his forgiveness. Henry called for a meeting with his German bishops who criticized Gregory. This caused Gregory to excommunicate Henry, removing all his power. As Henry had been rendered powerless, his adversaries back in Germany could capitalize and remove him from power forever. With nothing left to do, he reached out to Gregory, begging for his forgiveness. Gregory, however, made Henry stand in the snow for a few days until he allowed him to kiss his papal ring. Gregory's ability to force Henry to beg for forgiveness exemplifies the power religious leaders had over secular leaders. Ultimately, feudalism and manorialism in medieval Europe was a gigantic learning process; Europe grew politically, socially, culturally, and economically out of the faults of these two intertwined systems, growths that may not have happened if the systems were never implemented in the first place. However, feudalism and manorialism grew out of necessity, as free men, peasants, secular leaders and non-secular leaders were all looking for the same thing: security. Many people were even willing to give up their freedoms for the sake of their security. One may argue that the big lesson learned from feudalism is greed,

and how many exploit the rules of a system to exert their power and claim a profit at the expense of others.