

# THE ORIGIN OF FEUDALISM

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UNIT 9

# THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

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- From the 9th and 10th centuries, a political, social and economic system called **feudalism** developed in western Europe. This system survived until the Early Modern Period.



## CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

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- The **kings lost power** and shared it with the clergy and nobility. Therefore, the king lost authority to the nobles, who also had castles and knights under their command.
- The **society** was divided into **closed groups**. It included a minority formed of nobles and clergymen, who enjoyed privileges such as not paying taxes.
- The economic system was based on **peasants** working on the **land**. Meanwhile, the king and the privileged groups appropriated part of the peasants' production.



## The feudal pact

Lord



Vassal

The lord is the **king**.

The vassal is a **noble**.

He **needs** to form an army of faithful warriors.

He **obtains** land in exchange for military aid.

He hands over a **fief**, or in other words, an area of land, which the vassal lives on and is in charge of. Sometimes, an income or a political position is offered.

He is **obliged to assist** the lord in war by providing armed men (**auxilium**) and giving advice (**consilium**).

The pact is sealed at the **homage ceremony**; in it, the lord **invests** the vassal with the fief.

At the homage ceremony, the vassal **swears to be faithful**. This oath is sacred, and if it is broken, he loses the fief.

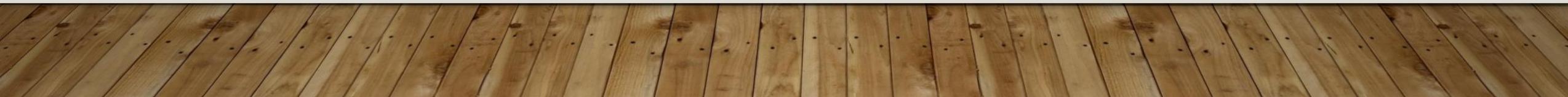
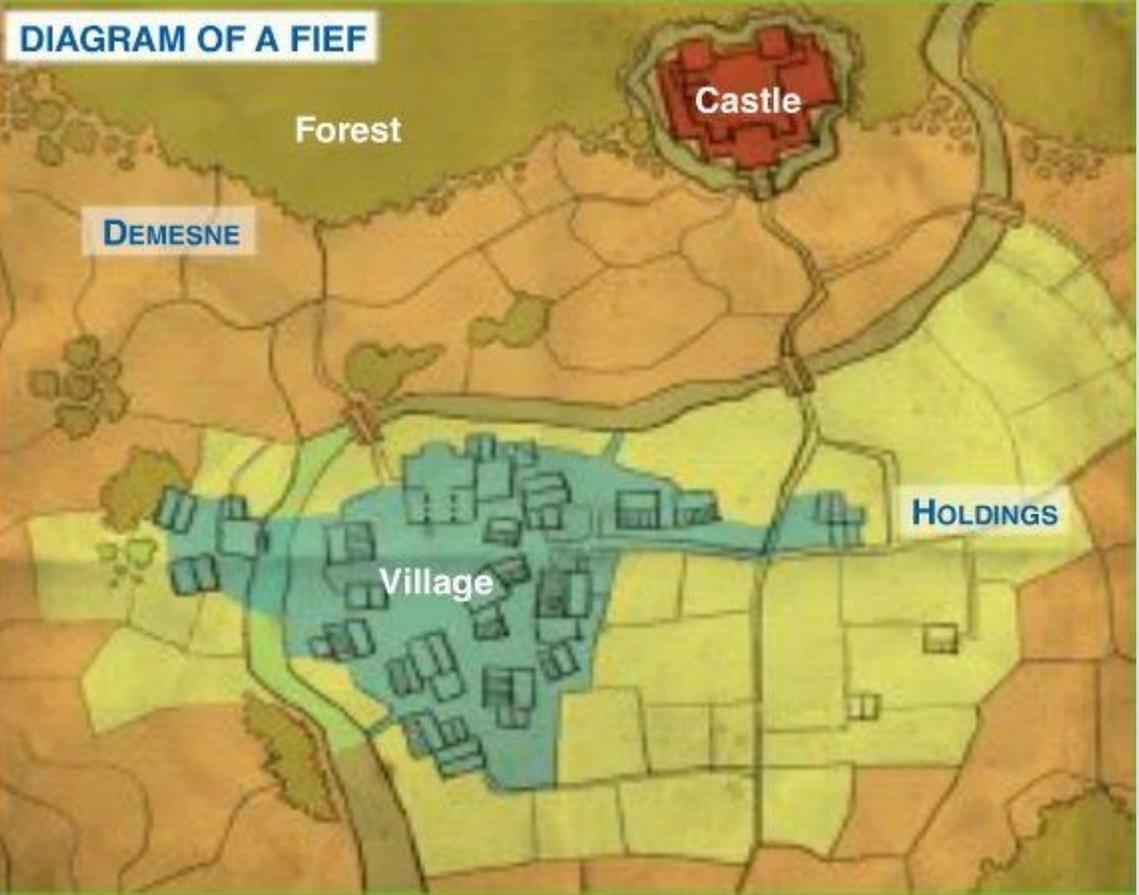
# THE FIEF

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The fief, this means the LAND of the lord or manor's land was divided into two parts.

## THE **DEMESNE** AND THE **TENEMENTS** OR HOLDINGS

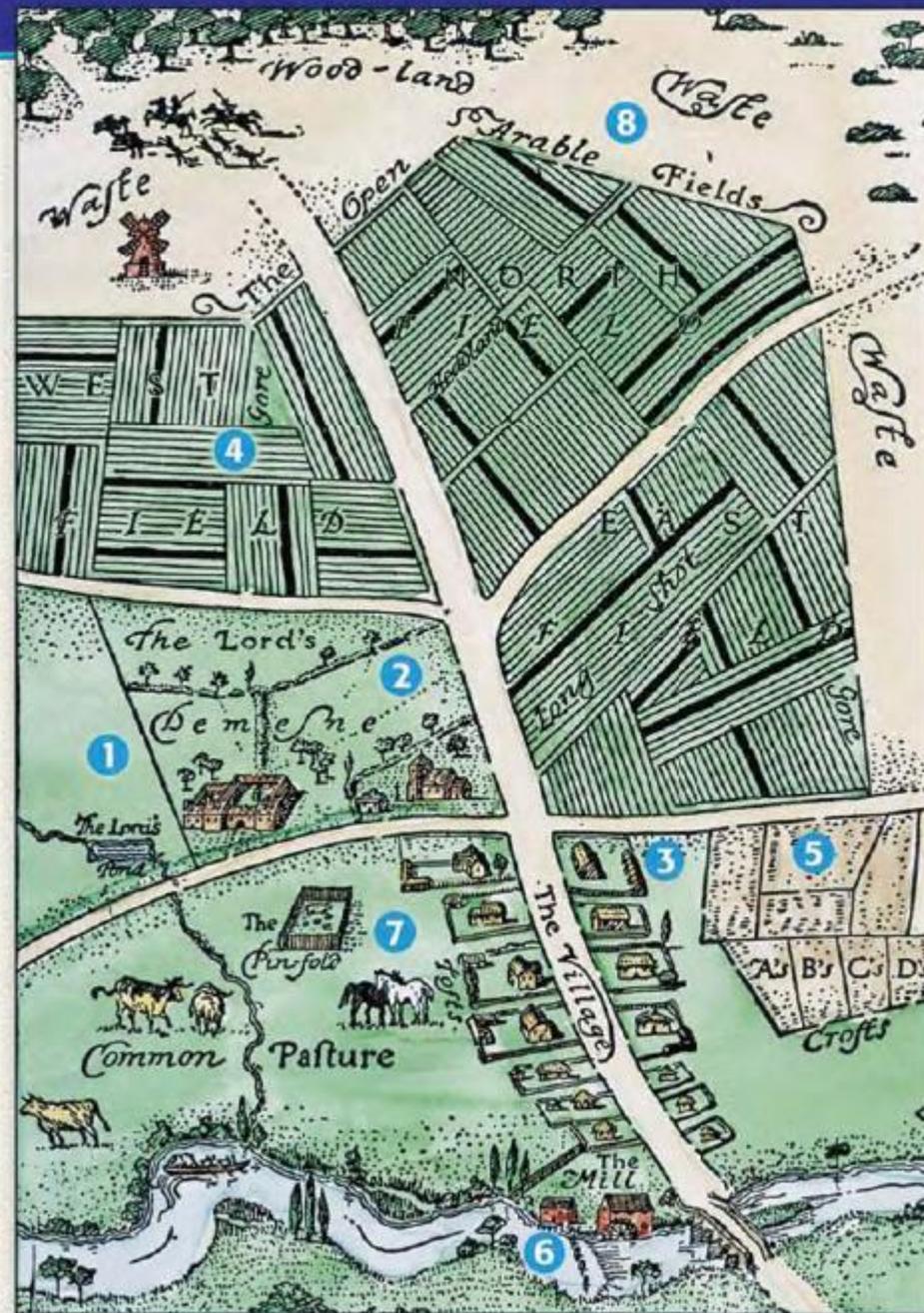
1. **DEMESNE.** Land that was **exploited directly by the lord.** It consisted of **farmland, pastures and wood.** It was **farmed by serfs.** The lord was also the owner of the mill, the press and the oven. All the peasants had to use and pay for the services if they needed to obtain products.
2. **TENEMENTS OR HOLDINGS.** Plots of land the lord gave to **free peasants in exchange for rent or part of the harvest,** and for carrying out **different services for the lord on his land**



### The Medieval Manor

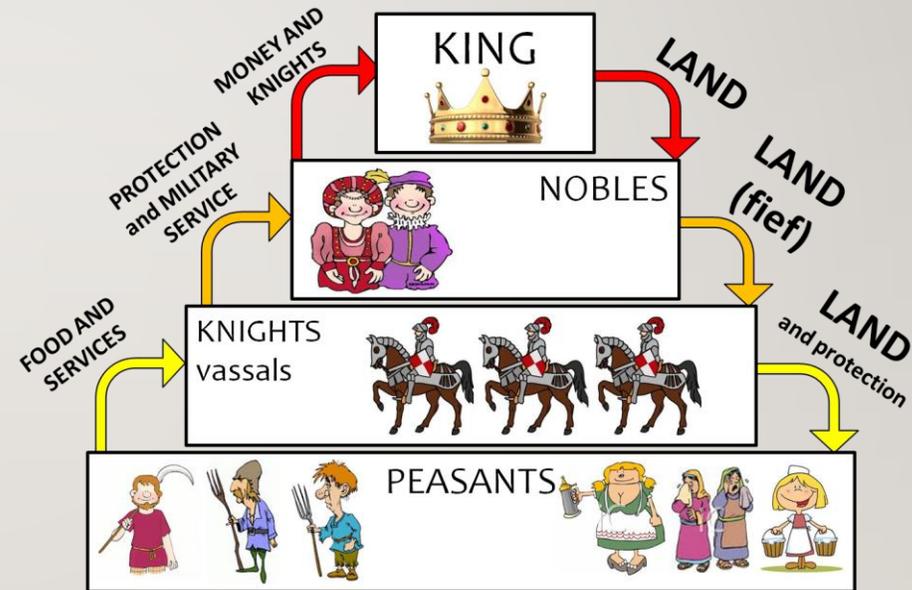
The medieval manor varied in size. The illustration to the right is a plan of a typical English manor.

- 1 Manor House**  
The dwelling place of the lord and his family and their servants
- 2 Village Church**  
Site of both religious services and public meetings
- 3 Peasant Cottages**  
Where the peasants lived
- 4 Lord's Demesne**  
Fields owned by the lord and worked by the peasants
- 5 Peasant Crofts**  
Gardens that belonged to the peasants
- 6 Mill**  
Water-powered mill for grinding grain
- 7 Common Pasture**  
Common area for grazing animals
- 8 Woodland**  
Forests provided wood for fuel.



# HIERARCHICAL STRUCTURE

- The king's vassals could also establish pacts with other nobles and knights, converting them into lords of new vassals. **Power relationships** were therefore fragmented and privatised, as they depended on **personal relationships** between lords, vassals and serfs who were organised into a hierarchical structure.



Feudal Pyramid of Power

# THE KING

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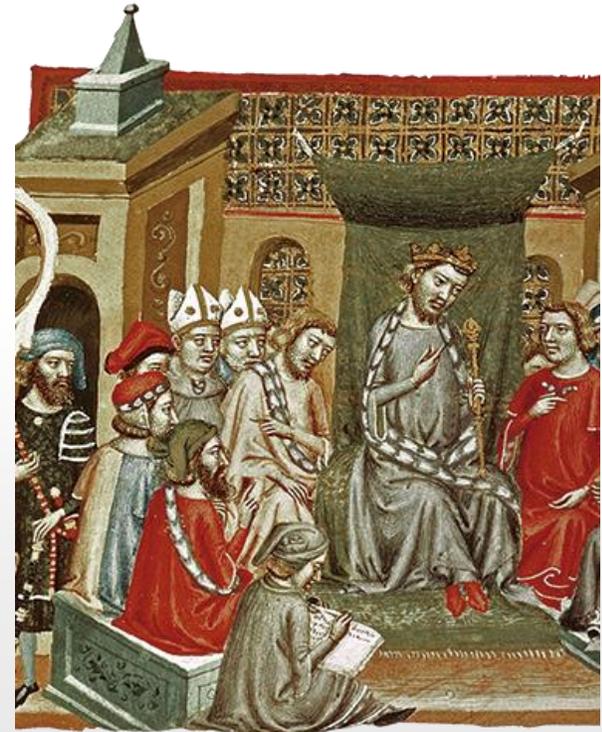
- The king was at the top of the hierarchy of personal relationships. He granted fiefs to the nobles, also known as **manors**, in exchange for their loyalty.
- He was considered as a **first amongst equals**; in other words, the king was the highest noble in the kingdom. Therefore, his power was limited to his own fiefs, known as the royal domain or **lands of the crown**. He could only administer justice and collect taxes on this land.



# VASSALS

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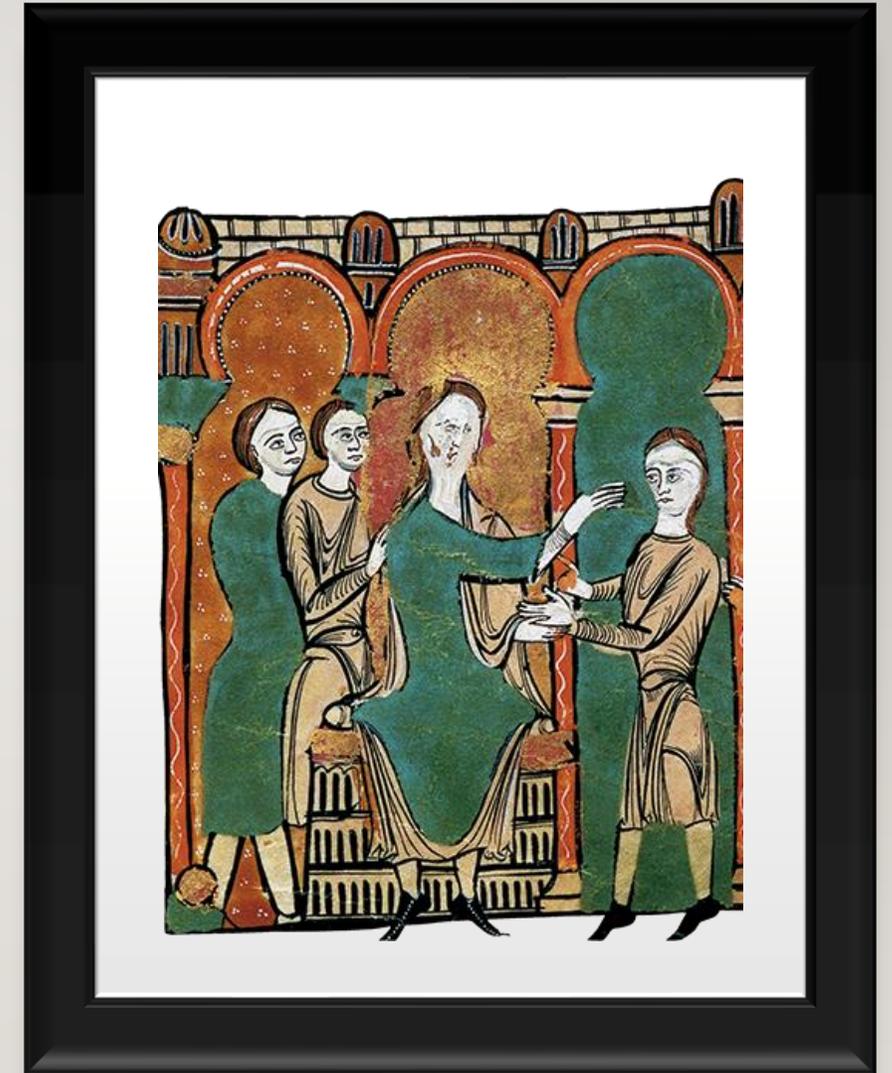
- Through the feudal pact, nobles received fiefs (manors). The vassal therefore became lord of the lands in the fief and of the serfs who worked them. **Clergymen**, such as bishops, could also receive feuds and act like feudal lords. Therefore, members of the **nobility** became direct vassals of the king. They obeyed him and helped him with his **armies** when the king demanded it (auxilium).
- In addition, senior nobles and clergymen met with the king in the royal **curia** or **court**. In it, they functioned as vassals, giving the king **advice** (consilium).



# MINOR NOBILITY

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- Nobles with the highest **lineage** reproduced feudal pacts with their immediate inferiors. They were similar to those they had established with the king. As a result, **nobles with lower lineage** in turn became vassals of the great nobles, from whom they had received less important fiefs.
- The lesser nobility and knights obeyed their immediate lord and went to war when he **summoned** them.



# SERFS

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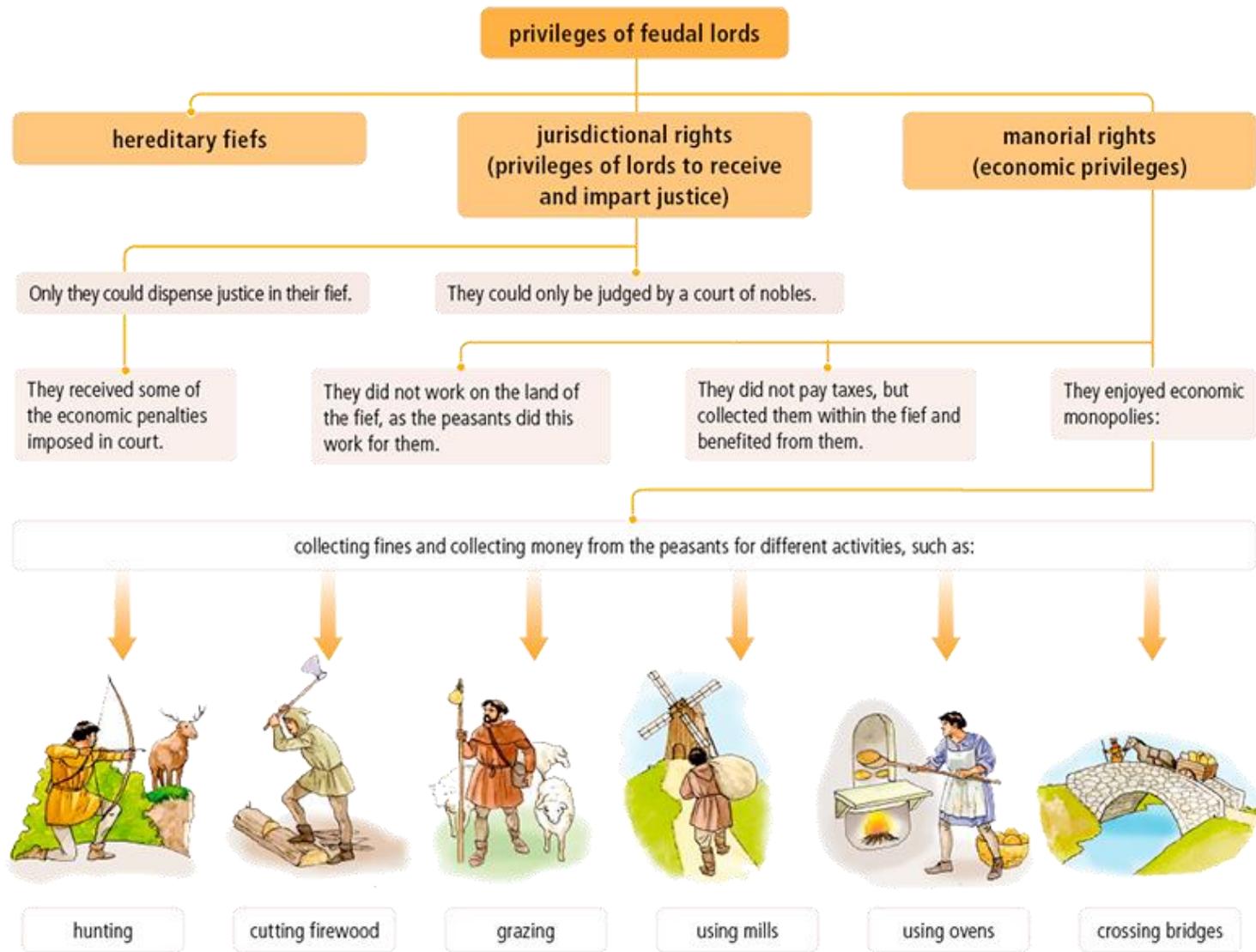
- **Peasants** who worked in the **fiefs** were at the bottom of the hierarchy. They were the serfs of a lord, who could be the king in the lands of the crown, a noble in feudal manors or a clergyman in ecclesiastical manors.
- The **status of serfdom** regulated the relationship between the serf, who was forced to work on the lands of the fief and to pay different kinds of **taxes**, and the feudal lord, who offered protection to peasants in his fief.



# FEUDAL LORDS

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- In the manors, the authority of the king was **superseded** by the feudal lords. This led to the fragmentation of royal power. This fragmentation of power was followed by the fragmentation of the law, as not all social groups were equal before the law. Therefore, social groups that shared power with the monarch enjoyed many **privileges**.



# SERFS

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- The inhabitants of the fief, called **serfs**, were under the authority of the lord, as they lived on his land and were subject to his privileges. The model of the relationship between serfs and lords is known as **serfdom**.
- Under this model, the serfs obtained certain benefits from their lord:
  - The right to **protection** by the lord's army against attacks from the outside;
  - The right to **live** on the lands of the fief and to **work** on them.
  - In return, the serfs who lived and worked in the fief had to accept the manorial and jurisdictional **privileges**, as well as meeting other **obligations**.

# OBLIGATIONS OF SERFS

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- **SERFDOM:** People became serfs by birth and were not free to leave the fief in which they were born. They were therefore forced to accept the privileges of the feudal lord.
- **LEGAL REGIME:** The manorial jurisdiction was very hard on serfs. The lords could even carry out abusive practices, known as feudal abuses, such as mistreating their serfs.
- **LABOUR SERVICE:** People were obliged to do certain tasks for the lord. These labour services, known as *corvées*, included vigilance and repairing the walls of the feudal castle.

# ACTIVITIES

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- What were the consequences of the loss of the monarchs' power?
- What was the vassal pact? Who do you think was the main beneficiary of such pacts?
- What was the homage ceremony?
- What was the royal domain?
- Explain the difference between 'auxilium' and 'consilium'.