

UNIT 9

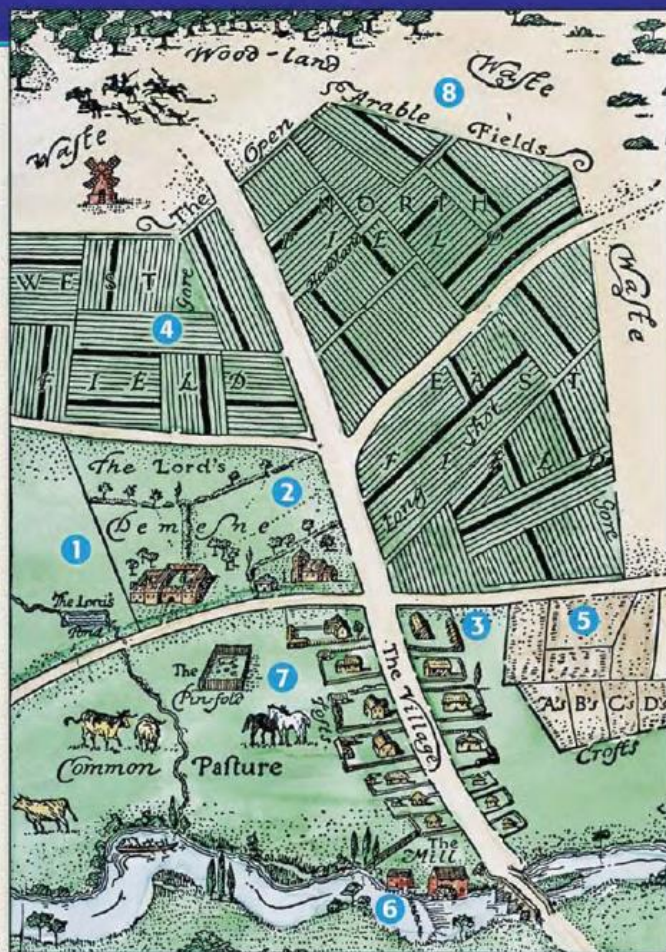
THE ORIGIN OF FEUDALISM

History *in* Depth

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.



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1. THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

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.

1.1. CHARACTERISTICS OF THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

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.

1.2. THE FIEF

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

- **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.
- **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**

2. 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.

2.1. THE KING

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.

2.2. VASSALS

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).

2.3. MINOR NOBILITY

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.

2.4. SERFS

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.

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**.

2.4.1. OBLIGATIONS OF SERFS

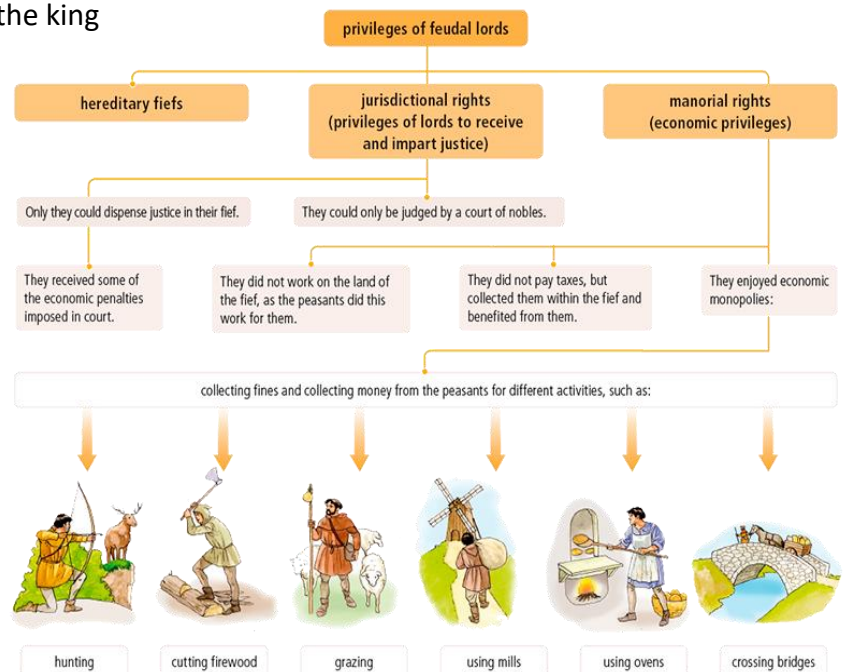
SERFDOM: People became serfs by birth and were not free to leave the fief in which they were born. They were therefore forced to accept the privileges of the feudal lord.

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.

3. FEUDAL LORDS

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**.



4. THE FEUDAL SOCIETY

Feudal society was organised into three groups or social orders which would later be known as **estates**. Each estate had its own obligations and rights. In addition, these were **closed groups**, as it was very difficult to change the social order.

Two of these estates, the **nobility** and **clergy**, were **entitled to privileges**. However, most of the population, which belonged to the **third estate**, did not have any privileges. This social structure was based on the activities that each group carried out in society.

5. THE FEUDAL ECONOMY

Farming and livestock rearing were the basis of the feudal economy. However, these activities were not very productive. Although the serfs had resources like communal lands, which were usually used as pastures, they often had to ask the lord for loans, meaning that their dependence was increased.

In addition, the **technical means** used to grow crops were very **rudimentary** and, therefore, the land had a low yield. **Technical improvements** which increased agricultural productivity were only introduced after the **11th century**.

The serfs began to implement some innovations in agricultural uses, such as using manure to fertilize the soil and the moldboard plough, which enabled better soil rotation.

To increase the productivity of the land, the serfs started using a three-year rotation system. This consisted of alternating crops of grains and pulses with fallow, when the land is left uncultivated to help regenerate it.

6. THE ORIGIN OF THE CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS

Muslims who set foot on the Iberian Peninsula in the 8th century only settled in the **richest agricultural regions**, such as the valleys of the Guadalquivir, the Ebro and the east coast.

In **poorer areas**, like the mountains of the north of the Peninsula, there was much less pressure from the conquerors and **enclaves of Christian resistance** were organised. During the 8th century, Christians fought to secure their enclaves. Later, they began a phase of **expansion**, mainly in the west.

7. LIFE IN THE PENINSULAR CHRISTIAN KINGDOMS

The society of Christian territories was organised following the dominant feudal system in Europe, but with some unusual characteristics.

The **nobility** was strengthened in the fight against the Muslims. Given the need for men to go to war, rich peasants who had a horse and weapons were **ennobled**.

In **border areas**, there were many free landholding peasants who did not work for a manor. In the safest areas, like Galicia, there were many serfs.

The first independent Christian settlements emerged in mountainous areas with low levels of Romanisation, so there were no major cities. Only some cities had significant administrative and religious functions, like Oviedo, León and Barcelona.

A subsistence economy dominated in these territories. This was based on growing cereals and raising livestock.

Trade was scarce, and only León and Barcelona had commercial activity beyond that of local markets.

8. CULTURE AND ART

The activity of Christian settlements was focused in the **monasteries**, including those of Ripoll (Cataluña) and Sahagún (Gerona). In the monasteries, books were copied, and chronicles were written that reflected the main events of each kingdom.

Two styles developed in art: **Asturian pre-Romanesque** and **Mozarabic**.

9. URBAN SOCIETY

The feudal structure of **society** was maintained. The nobility and the clergy continued to be the privileged classes, but inhabitants of cities enjoyed more freedom than peasants. There were big differences within the urban population.

The **great merchants** and **bankers** were among the richest classes. Their wealth was based on the possession of goods and money, but not on land ownership. These classes dominated the municipal government, forming the urban oligarchy.

Below them were small traders and craftsmen. They were joined by professionals related to the arts and the law. These trades were boosted by the development of cultural life, due to the foundation of ecclesiastic universities.

The largest social class was formed of workers and peasants who worked the land surrounding the city.

Finally, the most disadvantaged social class included many beggars with no resources.

The most important urban professions were those of merchants, bankers, craftsmen and men of law, which did not fit into the three-estate class system. In fact, the interests of cities often opposed those of the nobility. Kings took advantage of this situation, supporting the economic development of cities to counter the power of the nobles. In addition, monarchs also obtained economic benefits in exchange for their support as they collected various taxes from the cities, and their trade and craft activities.

10. TRADE

After the fall of the Roman Empire, long-distance trade had almost totally disappeared in much of western Europe. The insecurity of roads, lack of coins and general poverty

meant that only basic goods were traded for subsistence. However, in the **High Middle Ages**, particularly from the 12th century onwards, there was major economic expansion that favoured the **revitalisation of trade**, both in local markets and in long-distance trade. This expansion was due to several **reasons**.

