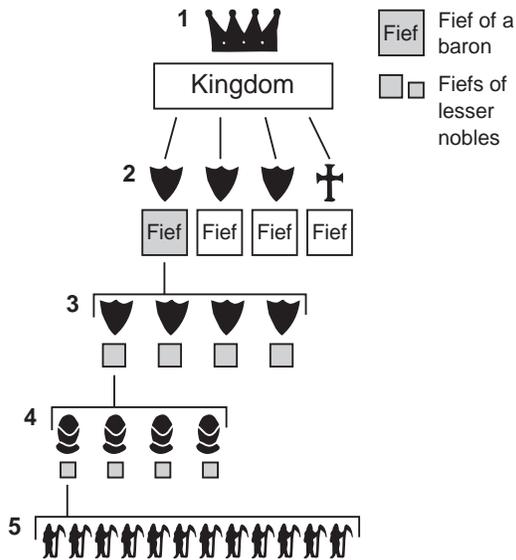


Feudal System 1000–1300

Feudalism was the political and military system of western Europe during the Middle Ages. Lords allowed vassals (other nobles who were their subjects and tenants) the use of land in return for military and other services. The land, known as a vassal's fief, could vary in size from a village to whole provinces. Ownership of the fief remained with the lord (and ultimately the king) but the vassal controlled farming, peasants who lived there, and justice within its boundaries.

FEUDAL HIERARCHY

In its established form, feudal relationships resembled a pyramid of hierarchy. Several layers might separate a vassal at the bottom level from a lord at the top. All lords and vassals were nobles; they were born into a wealthy and powerful social class distinct from the low social class of peasants.



1 King or emperor

At the apex in the feudal pyramid, he provided his vassals (usually powerful barons, bishops, and abbots) with fiefs in return for protection and military service.

2 Powerful barons, bishops, and abbots

The king's vassals were granted large fiefs and owed allegiance directly to the king. Monasteries as well as barons had to supply knights for the king's army.

3 Lesser nobles

It was customary for the king's vassals to divide their fiefs between lesser nobles, who became their vassals.

4 Knights

Lesser nobles might in turn divide their fiefs among their own knights (mounted and armored warriors).

5 Peasants

Worked the land for a lord (a noble or churchman). Peasants were not trained in fighting, and so held no rank in the political and military arrangements of feudalism. As workers on the estates of feudal lords, however, they produced the wealth upon which feudalism depended.

TYPICAL DUTIES AND PRIVILEGES

FEUDAL LORD

Rights and Privileges

- Power and status, depending on the size of his lands and number of vassals in service to him
- Right to military service from the vassal and the vassal's knights on a certain number of days each year (number of days dependent on the size of the fief)
- Right to take back the fief for breach of the feudal oath, or if the vassal dies without an heir
- Right to control marriages in vassal's family
- Right to other services and payments from the vassal

Duties to the Vassal

- Duty to honor and protect the vassal

VASSAL

Rights and Privileges

- Power and status, depending on the size of the fief and number of knights it can support
- Right to govern and administer law on lands within the boundary of the fief
- Right to food, clothes, and taxes provided by peasants living within the fief
- Right to divide the fief between his knights
- Right to attend the royal court and be consulted by the king on important matters (king's vassals only)
- By 1100, right for eldest son (or daughter in some circumstances) to inherit the fief

Duties to the Lord

- Duty to be loyal to the lord (and the king, if not one and the same)
- Duty to protect the lord and serve in the lord's army (and the king's army)
- Duty to attend the lord's court, judge cases between vassals, and settle judicial disputes by combat on behalf of the lord
- Duty to pay a ransom if the lord is captured.
- Duty to pay a sum when the lord's eldest son is knighted
- Duty to help make a dowry (with money or gift of land) when the lord's daughter marries

FEUDAL CEREMONIES

The feudal ceremony by which a man became a vassal of a lord was called **homage**. The vassal promised to be loyal and fight for the lord and the lord promised to treat the vassal with honor. After performing homage, the vassal usually took an **oath of fealty**, swearing to keep the faith he had pledged.