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Definition: **feudalism** from *Collins English Dictionary*

n **1** Also called: **feudal system** the legal and social system that evolved in W Europe in the 8th and 9th centuries, in which vassals were protected and maintained by their lords, usually through the granting of fiefs, and were required to serve under them in war See also vassalage fief

2 any social system or society, such as medieval Japan or Ptolemaic Egypt, that resembles medieval European feudalism

> 'feudalist *n*

> ,feudal'istic *adj*



Image from: [The feudal system, which dominated Europe in the... in Encyclopedia of World Trade: From Ancient Times to the Present](#)

Summary Article: **feudalism**

From *The Columbia Encyclopedia*

(fyō'dəɪlɪzəm), form of political and social organization typical of Western Europe from the dissolution of Charlemagne's empire to the rise of the absolute monarchies. The term *feudalism* is derived from the Latin *feodum*, for "fief," and ultimately from a Germanic word meaning "cow," generalized to denote valuable movable property. Although analogous social systems have appeared in other civilizations, the feudalism of Europe in the Middle Ages remains the common model of feudal society.

Characteristics of European Feudalism

The evolution of highly diverse forms, customs, and institutions makes it almost impossible to accurately depict feudalism as a whole, but certain components of the system may be regarded as characteristic: strict division into social classes, i.e., nobility, clergy, peasantry, and, in the later Middle Ages, burgesses; private jurisdiction based on local custom; and the landholding system dependent upon the fief or fee. Feudalism was based on contracts made among nobles, and although it was intricately connected with the manorial system, it must be considered as distinct from it. Although some men held their land in alod, without obligation to any person, they were exceptions to the rule in the Middle Ages.

In an ideal feudal society (a legal fiction, most nearly realized in the Crusaders' Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem), the ownership of all land was vested in the king. Beneath him was a hierarchy of nobles, the most important nobles holding land directly from the king, and the lesser from them, down to the seigneur who held a single manor. The political economy of the system was local and agricultural, and at its base was the manorial system. Under the manorial system the peasants, laborers, or serfs, held the land they worked from the seigneur, who granted them use of the land and his protection in return for personal services (especially on the demesne, the land he retained for his own use) and for dues (especially payment in kind).

The Fief

The feudal method of holding land was by fief; the grantor of the fief was the suzerain, or overlord, and the recipient was the vassal. The fief was formally acquired following the ceremony of homage, in

which the vassal, kneeling before the overlord, put his hands in those of the lord and declared himself his man, and the overlord bound himself by kissing the vassal and raising him to his feet. The vassal then swore an oath of fealty, vowing to be faithful to the overlord and to perform the acts and services due him. This formal procedure served to cement the personal relationship between lord and vassal; after the ceremony the lord invested the vassal with the fief, usually by giving him some symbol of the transferred land. Honors or rights, as well as land, could be granted as fiefs. Gradually the system of subinfeudation evolved, by which the vassal might in his turn become an overlord, granting part of his fief to one who then became vassal to him. Thus very complex relationships, based on fiefs, developed among the nobles, and the personal ties between overlords and vassals were weakened. Originally the fief had to be renewed on the death of either party. With the advent of hereditary succession and primogeniture, renewal of the fief by the heir of the deceased became customary, and little by little the fief became hereditary.

Military Service

The feudal system rested on the unsettled conditions of the times and thus on the need of the lord for armed warriors and the need of the vassal for protection. The nobility was essentially a military class, with the knight as the typical warrior. Since equipping mounted fighters was expensive, the lord could not create his armed force without the obligation of the vassal to supply a stipulated number of armed men, a number that varied from the service of the vassal himself to the service of hundreds in private armies. The gradations of nobility were, therefore, based on both military service and landholding. At the bottom of the social scale was the squire, originally the servant of the knight. Above the knight were classes that varied in different countries—counts, dukes, earls, barons, and other nobles. The vassal owed, in addition to military service, other dues and services that varied with local custom and tended to become fixed. The obligation of the overlord in the feudal contract was always the protection of the vassal.

History of Feudalism in Europe

Origins

The feudal system first appears in definite form in the Frankish lands in the 9th and 10th cent. A long dispute between scholars as to whether its institutional basis was Roman or Germanic remains somewhat inconclusive; it can safely be said that feudalism emerged from the condition of society arising from the disintegration of Roman institutions and the further disruption of Germanic inroads and settlements. Of course, the rise of feudalism in areas formerly dominated by Roman institutions meant the breakdown of central government; but in regions untouched by Roman customs the feudal system was a further step toward organization and centralization.

The system used and altered institutions then in existence. Important in an economic sense was the Roman villa, with the peculiar form of rental, the precarium, a temporary grant of land that the grantor could revoke at any time. Increasingly, the poor landholder transferred his land to a protector and received it back as a precarium, thus giving rise to the manorial system. It was also possible for the manorial system to develop from the Germanic village, as in England.

The development of fiefs was also influenced by the Roman institution of *patricinium* and the German institution of *mundium*, by which the powerful surrounded themselves with men who rendered them service, especially military service, in exchange for protection. More and more, this service-and-protection contract came to involve the granting of a beneficium, the use of land, which tended to

become hereditary. Local royal officers and great landholders increased their power and forced the king to grant them rights of private justice and immunity from royal interference. By these processes feudalism became fixed in Frankish lands by the end of the 10th cent.

The church also had great influence in shaping feudalism; although the organization of the church was not feudal in character, its hierarchy somewhat paralleled the feudal hierarchy. The church owned much land, held by monasteries, by church dignitaries, and by the churches themselves. Most of this land, given by nobles as a bequest or gift, carried feudal obligations; thus clerical land, like lay land, assumed a feudal aspect, and the clergy became participants in the temporal feudal system. Many bishops and abbots were much like lay seigneurs. This feudal connection between church and state gave rise to the controversy over lay investiture.

Spread

Feudalism spread from France to Spain, Italy, and later Germany and Eastern Europe. In England the Frankish form was imposed by William I (William the Conqueror) after 1066, although most of the elements of feudalism were already present. It was extended eastward into Slavic lands to the marches (frontier provinces), which were continually battered by new invasions, and it was adopted partially in Scandinavian countries. The important features of feudalism were similar throughout, but there existed definite national differences. Feudalism continued in all parts of Europe until the end of the 14th cent.

Decline

The concentration of power in the hands of a few was always a great disruptive force in the feudal system. The rise of powerful monarchs in France, Spain, and England broke down the local organization. Another disruptive force was the increase of communication, which broke down the isolated manor, assisted the rise of towns, and facilitated the emergence of the burgess class. This process was greatly accelerated in the 14th cent. and did much to destroy the feudal classifications of society.

The system broke down gradually. It was not completely destroyed in France until the French Revolution (1789), and it persisted in Germany until 1848 and in Russia until 1917. Many relics of feudalism still persist, and its influence remains on the institutions of Western Europe.

Other Feudal Systems

Other ages and other lands have seen the development of feudal institutions. In Japan the feudal system was well ordered before the 10th cent., and it persisted with modifications until the 19th cent. (see bushido; daimyo). In other areas, as in China, where feudal practices were in existence by 1100 B.C., society became feudalistic but not precisely feudal. Feudalism in India and in the Saracen and Ottoman civilizations was in many ways analogous to Western feudalism, but it proved less durable than its European counterpart. The existence of feudalism in several civilizations has given rise to theories of feudalism as a necessary and inevitable stage of political development. Some scholars, however, consider the European feudal system a unique phenomenon.

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