

Reading Essentials and Study Guide



Medieval Kingdoms in Europe, 800–1300

Lesson 1 Feudalism

ESSENTIAL QUESTIONS

How can changes to political systems impact economic activities? How is society influenced by changes in political and economic systems?

Reading HELPDESK

Academic Vocabulary

enable to make possible

contract a binding agreement between two or more people or parties

Content Vocabulary

feudalism political and social order that developed during the Middle Ages when royal governments were no longer able to defend their subjects; nobles offered protection and land in return for service

vassal under feudalism, a man who served a lord in a military capacity

knight under feudalism, a member of the heavily armored cavalry

fief “under feudalism, a grant of land made to a vassal; the vassal held political authority within his fief

feudal contract under feudalism, the unwritten rules that determined the relationship between a lord and his vassal

chivalry in the Middle Ages, the ideal of civilized behavior that developed among the nobility; it was a code of ethics that knights were supposed to uphold

TAKING NOTES: *Categorizing*

ACTIVITY As you read, use a table like the one below to identify the ideals of chivalry.

Ideals of Chivalry

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networks

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IT MATTERS BECAUSE

The Carolingian Empire was weakened inside and out after Charlemagne’s death. Local nobles became more important because people turned to them for protection. The result was a system called feudalism. Feudalism was a new political and social order in Europe.

The End of the Carolingian Empire

Guiding Question *What internal and external factors after Charlemagne’s death weakened kingdoms in Europe?*

Charlemagne died in 814. The Carolingian Empire began to fall apart soon after. It was divided among his grandsons into three major sections less than 30 years later. The sections included the western Frankish lands, the eastern Frankish lands, and the Middle Kingdom. Local nobles gained power while the Carolingian rulers fought one another. Invasions in different parts of the old Carolingian world added to the breakdown of the empire.

Western Europe experienced a number of invasions during the ninth and tenth centuries. The most far-reaching attacks of the time came from the Norsemen, or Northmen, of Scandinavia. These Germanic people were called Vikings. Their great love of adventure and search for spoils of war probably led them to invade other areas of Europe. They may also have been looking for new places to trade.

Vikings attacked villages and towns in the ninth century. They destroyed churches and easily defeated small local armies. The Vikings were warriors and expert shipbuilders and sailors. The Viking ships were long and narrow with curved prows, or front parts. The prows often had carvings of dragons or other magical animals. The Viking dragon ships could carry about 50 men. The way the ships were built **enabled** the Vikings to sail up European rivers and attack places far inland. By the mid-800s, the Vikings had begun to build settlements in various parts of Europe.

The ruler of the west Frankish lands gave land to one group of Vikings in 911. This land was at the mouth of the Seine River. It became the region of France that is now known as Normandy. The Frankish policy was to settle the Vikings and convert them to Christianity. The Vikings did convert to Christianity. As a result, they soon became a part of European civilization.



Reading Progress Check

Identifying What factors helped the Vikings invade Europe successfully?

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The Development of Feudalism

Guiding Question *Why did the collapse of governments lead to the new political and social order known as feudalism?*

The Vikings were a threat to the safety of people in Europe. Rulers found it more and more difficult to defend their subjects as organized governments such as the Carolingian Empire were torn apart. People began to turn to local land-owning aristocrats, or nobles, to protect them. To survive, it became important to find a powerful lord who could offer protection in return for service. This led to the formation of a new political and social order in medieval Europe known as **feudalism**. One of the major characteristics of feudalism was the idea of vassalage, or service to a lord.

Knights and Vassals

In Germanic society, warriors swore an oath of loyalty to their leaders and fought in battles for them. Then the leaders took care of the warriors' needs. By the eighth century, a man who served a lord by fighting in wars was known as a **vassal**.

The Frankish army originally had foot soldiers dressed in coats of mail and armed with swords. (Mail is armor made of metal links or plates.) There were also horsemen who threw spears. In the eighth century, larger horses and the stirrup were introduced. (Stirrups are loops in which the horsemen could put their feet.) After that, horsemen also wore coats of mail. This was possible because the larger horses could carry the extra weight of a horseman wearing the mail. The stirrups helped keep the horsemen on their horses. As a result, they could use long lances against enemies in battle and still stay on their horses. This heavily armored cavalry came to be called **knights**. Knights dominated warfare in Europe for almost 500 years. The knights had great social importance and were an important part of the European aristocracy.

It was expensive to have a horse, armor, and weapons. It also took time and practice to learn to use them well. As the royal governments broke down, the more powerful nobles took control of large areas of land. When these lords needed men to fight for them, they gave each vassal a piece of land in return. The land supported the vassal and his family. Wealth was based mostly on land in the Early Middle Ages. As a result, land was the best gift a lord could give to a vassal.

The Feudal Contract

Loyalty to one's lord was the most important virtue, or sign of good behavior, in feudal society. A ceremony was held to make the relationship between lord and vassal official. For example, he would place his hands together between the lord's hands. The vassal promised his loyalty to the lord as part of the ceremony. To become a vassal, a man performed an act of homage (respect) to his lord.

By the ninth century, the land given to a vassal had become known as a **fief** (FEEF). Vassals who held fiefs came to have political authority, or power, within their **fief**. The number of powerful lords and vassals increased as the Carolingian empire lost power. Many different people now maintained order instead of a single government.

Feudalism became increasingly complicated, with many levels. The vassals of a king were great lords. These lords might also have vassals who would owe them military service, or the duty to fight, in return for a grant of land from their estates. Those vassals might also have vassals. The vassals at the lowest level would be simple knights with barely enough land to provide income.

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Lesson 1 Feudalism, *continued*

The lord-vassal relationship bound together large and small landowners. It was an honorable, or respectful, relationship between free men. No one was thought of as a servant. Feudalism came to be characterized, or defined, by a set of unwritten rules known as the **feudal contract**. These rules determined the relationship between a lord and his vassal. The main duty of a vassal to his lord was to perform military service, usually for about 40 days a year. A vassal also had to appear at his lord's court, or place where he was residing, to give advice when he was asked to do this.

Under the feudal **contract**, the lord also had responsibilities to his vassals. Of course, he supported a vassal by granting him land. He also had to protect his vassal by defending him and by taking his side in a dispute, or disagreement.



Reading Progress Check

Analyzing Why was land the most important gift a lord could give a vassal?

The Nobility of the Middle Ages

Guiding Question *How was European feudal society structured?*

European society in the Middle Ages was dominated by men whose chief concern was warfare. Vassals had to fight for their lords when needed. The nobles included the kings, dukes, counts, and barons. Nobles even included bishops, who often had large landed estates and a great deal of political power. These groups formed an aristocracy, or nobility, of people who held political, economic, and social power.

Great lords and ordinary knights came to form a common group within the aristocracy. They were all warriors. The institution of knighthood united them all. However, there were also social divisions among them based on differences of wealth and landholdings.

Young knights were trained to be warriors. They had few responsibilities, and so they had little to do but fight. In the twelfth century, tournaments began to appear. These were contests in which knights could demonstrate, or show, their fighting skills. The joust had become the main part of the tournament by the late twelfth century. Jousts were individual combat between two knights.

An idea of civilized behavior gradually developed among the nobility in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. This behavior was called **chivalry**. The idea was influenced by the Catholic Church. Chivalry was a code of ethics that knights were supposed to obey. Knights made an oath to defend the Church and defenseless people. They were also expected to treat captives, or prisoners, as honored guests instead of putting them in dungeons. A knight was expected to treat aristocratic women with tenderness, or kindness, and respect.

Women could legally own property, but most women remained under the control of men. They were controlled by their fathers until they married and then by their husbands if they married. Still, aristocratic women had many opportunities to play important roles.

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The lady of the castle often had to manage the estate because the lord was often away at war or court. This usually meant managing many officials and servants. The lady also took care of the finances, which took a lot of knowledge. She was also responsible for supervising the food and maintaining all the other supplies needed for the smooth operation of the household.

Women were expected to obey their husbands, but there were many strong women who advised, and even controlled, their husbands. One of the most famous of these was Eleanor of Aquitaine. She was heiress to the duchy of Aquitaine in southwestern France. Eleanor was married at the age of 15 to King Louis VII of France. The marriage was not a happy one, and Louis had their marriage annulled. Eight weeks later Eleanor married Duke Henry of Normandy. He soon became King Henry II of England. She and Henry had eight children. Five of their children were sons. Two of her sons—Richard and John—became kings of England.



Reading Progress Check

Summarizing List three features of chivalry.
