

Fiefs, Feudalism, and Vassals

Fiefs:

Frankish kings, starting with Charlemagne's grandfather, Charles Martel, had always rewarded military service with land. These tracts of land were called fiefs. Each fief (each piece of land) came with serfs. Serfs were people who worked the land to produce crops. Serfs were tied to the land, not to the noble who owned the land. If a noble died with heirs, the king would reassign that land to someone else as a reward. The serfs stayed with the land. In exchange, serfs expected to be fed, sheltered, and protected from violence.

Soon, fiefs were also awarded to counts and local officials. There was a lot of land available. Every time two barbarian tribes went to war, the losers lost their land, and typically their lives as well. Their families were tossed out of their homes, and their land was assigned to someone on the winning side. This was one reason war was so popular. War was the way to riches.

In exchange for a fief, you had to promise to do certain things:

- You had to promise to be loyal to the lord (who gave you the fief)
- You had to provide military service. Landowners did not have to fight themselves, although most did. They did have to promise a certain number of knights that could be used in battle for 60 days each year.
- You had to act as a host, providing food and shelter when your lord came visiting.
- You had to contribute funds for a ransom if necessary, should your lord be captured in battle.
- You had to provide gifts of cash to help offset the cost of your lord's wedding, or any wedding or special occasion of your lord's children.

Feudalism:

Around 900CE, the lack of a strong central government led to a new form of government called feudalism. Feudalism started in France. In times of trouble, which were often and nearly continuous, a warrior had to have quick access to a large group of fighting men that he could call on for help. These fighters were called vassals.

Vassals:

Vassal means servant. In the feudal system, everybody was a vassal. At the top was the king. At the bottom were the knights, the professional fighting men. In the middle were the lords, other nobles, counts, and officials.

Vassals could promise their loyalty to more than one person. They could pledge their support to 10 or 12 lords. Problems arose though when lords went to war. For example, let's say you have pledged your support to the lord on either side of your land. These two lords are both counting on you. And both have given you gifts of land, weapons, and goods. What happens if these two lords go to war? You have promised your support to both. You could find yourself quite literally in the middle, and you would lose no matter who won.

Being a vassal was taken very seriously:

There was a ceremony attached to becoming a vassal. It was not just a handshake or an agreement. It was not in writing because very few vassals could read. But it was a solemn ceremony called homage. This gave weight to the agreement and made the agreement more public.

Small-scale wars and battles were common:

Without a strong, central government to act as a control, people were always fighting. There was nothing to stop them. The peasants were not armed. They had no defense. Many fief owners were prior warriors. They thought in terms of battle. If they wanted more land or more workers, or they wanted to get even for something, they would start a war with someone. That's why it was so important to have string vassals you could call on quickly. As a result, things were a mess. Crops were burned. Huts destroyed. People were being killed. It was a time of intense and continuous violence.

The Church:

You might wonder where the Church was in all of this. The Catholic Church tried to control and to limit these battles. First the Church issued a decree (a law) called The Peace of God. This was a ruling from the pope that stated no one could fight in a church. Once people got used to that law, the Church issued another edict called the Truce of God. The Truce of God made it illegal to fight any battle on a holiday or on a weekend. Finally, the Church made fighting legal on only 80 days a year.

These decrees had some effect. But, since the Church had no army at the time available to enforce these decrees, private wars continued to ravage Western Europe.

Directions: Answer the following questions using POQ.

1. What is a fief? What is a lord? What is a vassal?

2. What was the major religion in Western Europe during this time period?

3. Explain how feudalism worked: