

# From Feudalism to Medieval State

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## What is Feudalism

Human history adores central authority. Feudalism flourishes in the absence of a centralized authority, a structure like the Roman Empire that Europe had up to the fifth century.

Protection is the most important commodity that the governments offer. In the absence of centralized governance structures, the warrior elite, the medieval nobility, stepped in.

Feudalism is the mechanism Europe deployed as part of the struggle to bring order, which combined “elements of the old Germanic tribes, the Roman Empire, they inherited, and the Christian beliefs they embraced.” ( Sherman and Salisbury, P. 203).

## Feudalism and Medieval State

Feudalism exists at the intersection of a Monarchy and the Church in search of reliable military and financial support, enhanced productivity, maintenance of law and order, and some form of judicial mechanism to address the grievances of a monarch's subjects.

The sovereign offers land grants as an incentive to complete the transaction. Before sealing the deal, a grantee must pass the litmus test of nobility and loyalty.

The Church facilitates compliance and obedience of the royal subjects who are not slaves but owe service to their newly chosen lord as part of the land granted to him.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

Thus, the medieval state finds an instrument to reinforce its fragile structure. The feudal lords combine the functions of the defense apparatus, the IRS, homeland security, and parliament.

The arrangement allowed medieval monarchs to maintain control of their domains, while essentially delegating real authority to the nobles.

This was a system of governance in which the public sphere became merged with the private sphere. Instead of people rendering service to a state, individuals owed service to other individuals.

Feudalism depended on the relationships between the parties. Manorialism became the economic unit of feudal estates.

## Periodization

We are in the medieval period. So, just to remind ourselves, we divide this historical period into three parts.

We are in the Early Middle Ages, if we talk about the fifth to the tenth centuries, or as we call them, the Dark Ages in Europe.

Between the eleventh and the thirteenth centuries, we are in the High Middle Ages, which means the growth of feudalism, the Crusades, and the rise of universities (like Bologna and Paris) that we will discuss in our last session of this unit.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

The late Middle Ages mean the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the Black Plague, the Hundred Years' War, and the Renaissance.

We are discussing the nexus between Feudalism and Medieval State. This requires being flexible about the boundaries of our periodization. I would, for example, cite a legal document from the end of the eighteenth century, which will help us identify what Feudalism continued to mean over centuries of the medieval era and beyond and how it related to the medieval state.

What is Feudalism?

We will look at two interrelated feudal systems of England and France and, through them, trace the emergence of nation-state systems as well.

William the Conqueror had total ownership of England following the Battle of Hastings in 1066. He allocated some fifty percent of his unrivaled holding to 170 nobles. Only seven of them were Earls, which means holding hereditary rights, but with the consent of the king.

What is Feudalism?

Historian Wilson says, “It was from these men, almost to a man, that the nobility of medieval England descended” (Chris Given-Wilson, *The English Nobility in the Later Middle Ages: The Fourteenth Century Political Community* (Routledge, 1987). They were a class apart. By 1086, excepting two Englishmen, the rest of the 170 barons were of Norman descent.

William the Conqueror, excluding the land granted to the nobles, retained the largest part of the land as his royal demesne but also granted fifteen percent to the Church and distributed eight percent between minor royal officials and lesser tenants-in-chief.

What is Feudalism?

Wilson defined England of this period as a “federation of lordly spheres of influence.” English nobility viewed these “federating units,” or their “countries,” as the foundation of their power.

Kings valued them, besides their military prowess and revenue support, for the influence they enjoyed with the gentry, without whose consent and cooperation they would fail to exercise their authority.

## What is Feudalism?

Beginning in the early thirteenth century, these feudal lords had gained enough power to force King John (1199-1216) to sign [the Magna Carta](#) in 1215, which the subsequent Kings kept reissuing or reinforcing for various reasons. Here are some of its provisions as examples of defining the powers of a king:

(2) If any earl, baron, or other person that holds lands directly of the Crown, for military service, shall die, and at his death, his heir shall be of full age and owe a 'relief', the heir shall have his inheritance on payment of the ancient scale of 'relief'....

(4) The guardian of the land of an heir who is under age shall take from it only reasonable revenues, customary dues, and feudal services. He shall do this without destruction or damage to men or property. If we have given the guardianship of the land to a sheriff, or to any person answerable to us for the revenues, and he commits destruction or damage, we will exact compensation from him...

## What is Feudalism?

(5) For so long as a guardian has guardianship of such land, he shall maintain the houses, parks, fish preserves, ponds, mills, and everything else pertaining to it, from the revenues of the land itself. When the heir comes of age, he shall restore the whole land to him, stocked with plough teams and such implements of husbandry as the season demands and the revenues from the land can reasonably bear.

(6) Heirs may be given in marriage, but not to someone of lower social standing. Before a marriage takes place, it shall be made known to the heir's next-of-kin.

(7) At her husband's death, a widow may have her marriage portion and inheritance at once and without trouble. She shall pay nothing for her dower, marriage portion, or any inheritance that she and her husband held jointly on the day of his death. She may remain in her husband's house for forty days after his death, and within this period her dower shall be assigned to her.

What is Feudalism?

The nobles and barons preserved and perpetuated their hold over their spheres of influence by maintaining and expanding their lands and trappings of power, keeping the gentry on their side, and serving their Sovereign.

To their king, they were chief military commanders and advisers, a role that also took them to the king's parliament as peers.

Wilson maintains that peerage constituted the greatest honor and privilege of the nobles by the second half of the fourteenth century.

What is Feudalism?

By Wilson's count, by the fourteenth century, the peerage counted sixty to seventy nobles who were entitled to an individual summons to parliament.

The peerage had great privileges, including trial and being judged only by their peers in conformity with the statute of 1341 and being individually summoned to the parliament. In addition to this, variously, they had the right to license markets and fairs in local towns, rights to free warren in their demesne lands, private hundreds (court system), and licenses to impark their lands.

What is Feudalism?

The list of summonses was gradually standardized. Beginning with Edward III (1327-1377), the list had expanded to include bannerettes, the individuals who distinguished themselves in war but might not have a higher status as landlords. By 1425, they were all peers with no distinction between barons and bannerettes.

The parliament, nonetheless, predominantly was hereditary and restricted peerage, finding it difficult to reconcile with the presence of commoners.

What is Feudalism?

The difference of rank and status, says Wilson, was built into the origins of the nobility. Out of the original 170, for example, the highest allottee had land income worth Pounds 2500 and the lowest one only 26 pounds.

Ten great barons owned one-fourth of the English land, including two of the king's half-brothers.

The remaining 160 feudal lords shared the other quarter.

Built into their endowments was the need to be mobile and co-exist with their peers. The land allotted to the top one-seventy nobles remained scattered over several manors and counties. Consolidation of lands remained a major issue for the nobles.

## What is Feudalism?

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Earl was the highest rank after the king, the only heritable title apart from the kings. It was a narrowly defined circle, including the king's closest relatives.

Wilson defines Earls as an indispensable source of political, financial, and military strength to the king.

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Longevity tended to favor the younger composition of this leadership at the top. New men continued to join the peerage, if nothing else, because of deaths and the absence of heirs. During each twenty-five-year period of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, the rate of extinction among the peerage families averaged twenty-seven percent, requiring new faces to join the power structure.

What is Feudalism?

Nobility assessed the expansions or changes to their unique circle by considering if the king had promoted the right sort of men with social standing and influence. Kings naming new Earls or expanding the circle faced the most difficult, make or break, decisions of their rule as questionable choices could cause political unrest or rebellion.

Between 1355 and 1377, all thirteen Earldoms created by Edward III had been successful, but when the Kings moved outside the family between 1307-1330 and 1385- 1397, the Earls maneuvered to demote, exile, or execute fourteen of them within five years.

What is Feudalism?

By 1307, the end of Edward I's (1272-1307) rule, there were eleven Earls.

Between 1307 and 1397, the kings created 24 new Earldoms.

Edward II (1307-1327) added three. Edward III, another 11. Richard II (1377-1399) elevated 10 nobles as Earls, extending the circle to personal friends and favorites. The number at one time, however, never crossed twenty.

What is Feudalism?

Here are some examples of Earls reacting to the undeserved expansion of their circle.

Edward I (1272-1307) had exiled Edward II's (1307-1327) friend Piers Gaveston in early 1307. After his coronation, not only did he bring him back, but he honored him with the Earldom of Cornwall.

Gaveston was the son of a Gascon Knight. Edward II's peers considered him both a foreigner and a commoner. United, the Earls and barons forced Gaveston to exile twice between 1307 and 1312. As the Earls couldn't keep the King away from his favorite, three of them kidnapped and beheaded him at Blacklaw Hill near Warwick on June 19, 1312. One of the three, the Earl of Lancaster, became a focal point for opposition to the King.

What is Feudalism?

Edward III's mother and her lover Mortimer forced another rebellion by the Earl of Lancaster as Mortimer sought to assume earldom and strengthen his hold over Welsh Marches. Mortimer executed the Earl of Kent taking undue advantage of Edward III's minority which led to Edward's coup against Isabella and Mortimer in October 1330 and execution of Mortimer in November.

Between 1322 and 1330, seven earls had lost their lives. None of the newly created Earls between 1307 and 1330 survived longer than five years.

What is Feudalism?

After the death of Edward III, his grandson Richard II took over in 1377 while he was only ten. Richard II had a fate similar to Edward II. He was deposed in 1399 principally because he antagonized his leading subjects. Richard II appointed five earls on the day of his coronation, 16 July 1377, including his relatives, but the controversy occurred on two of the five, Robert de Vere and Michael de la Pole.

In 1385, he showed the red rag to the earls by promoting Vere as Marquis of Dublin, the first-ever in English history, and then also made him the Duke of Ireland.

What is Feudalism?

Another example of the nobles protecting their privileged circle is the fate of one of the invitees of Richard II, Beauchamp. He was a knight, but Richard II invited him as a lord, evoking the earls' resentment at his presence amongst them. They executed him without giving him a trial by his peers, a privilege they viewed as theirs alone.

What is Feudalism?

Hugh Despenser was another favorite of Richard II who turned the Earl of Lancaster's hatred of the King into armed opposition and a civil war in which Richard II won and beheaded the Earl of Lancaster. He also posthumously condemned the Earl of Hereford of treason and appointed two new Earls to replace them.

What is Feudalism?

Richard II faced a dilemma inherent to feudalism: the limited quantity of available land to distribute. He endowed the new titles through dubious reappropriations, which the cohort of earls deeply resented. This resulted in the crisis known as the Lords Appellants, which united five of the earls to secure in 1388 at the parliament the conviction of Vere and Pole for treason and convictions for eight of the King's lesser followers. Later, Richard II regained the upper hand against the Lords Appellants.

What is Feudalism?

In 1397, Richard II acted against three of the opponents and appointed five new dukes, one duchess, one marquee, and four new earls. The four new earls became controversial as the cohort of the Earls doubted their character and because Richard II employed controversial methods to endow them. In 1399, he parceled out inheritances of the Earl of Norfolk and Lancaster unfairly and usurped part of them for the Crown.

His action provoked rebellion, which Henry of Bolingbroke orchestrated. He finally deposed Richard in September 1399.

Apart from two, Henry stripped all of Richard II's promotions of their titles. Henry himself became King Henry IV (1399-1413).

What is Feudalism?

Within the allotted lands, the situation of the feudal lords remained in flux for various reasons. A noble could lose his lands if he failed to produce a male heir.

If there were only girls, the land was partible amongst them in the absence of any sons. Marriages could lead to a substantial change of hands in the form of doweries or the (joint) inheritance of heiresses.

Land may also be divided or re-granted by forfeiture or escheat to the king.

What is Feudalism?

An important part of the nobility was the “knightly class.” These small landholders might have suffered at the beginning of the thirteenth century because of increasing expenses to maintain a knightly way of life. They were a class below the “baronage,” defined by Wilson as “the rest of the nobility,” also known as the gentry. He affirms that there might have been 6500 knights in the reign of Henry II (1154-89), reduced to around 3000 by 1300, including both dubbed knights and esquires.

What is Feudalism?

Between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, however, their status had crystallized and evolved to give knights a social distinction as part of the chivalric order, beginning with the period of Henry I.

On average, the knights would own about one hide, approximately 30 modern acres of land. Their social standing would be higher than their income level given their role in the military and cavalry warfare, high degree of training in the runup, demanding greater investment in required equipment, and a horse.

What is Feudalism?

The knights gradually also developed an administrative and political role. As political communities, this so-called gentry served both king and baronage while also representing the aspirations and grievances of the common man.

They were part of the judicial and financial administration, held regular meetings at their shires and county courts, and served as jurors, tax assessors, and councilors. They got a more influential voice in the parliament by the second half of the fourteenth century.

What is Feudalism?

The rising rate of literacy enhanced their stature.

The esquires also preferred political and administrative roles to avoid the cost of dubbing and equipment.

As esquires, they became a lesser part of the nobility, both components holding about twenty to forty pounds per annum worth of land.

## The Commoners

- The commoners strived for inclusion in the decision-making.
- In 1381, during the Wat Tyler Rebellion, thousands of farmers raided London and royal offices, protesting a third poll tax in four years.
- Richard II initially showed an understanding of their demands, including the abolition of serfdom. Tyler's assassination, however, reversed the balance of forces, and the feudal system violently suppressed the revolt.

## The Commoners

- France had a similar experience in Jacquerie that began on 20th May 1358. It was a reaction of war-related devastation and taxation. The nobles suppressed it with equally violent means.
- In 1450, the Cade Revolt was another attempt by commoners to expose the inefficient feudal system. The rebels adopted a [Proclamation of Grievance](#).
- Here are some excerpts from this proclamation:

## The Commoners

- We, considering that the king our sovereign lord, by the insatiable, covetous, malicious persons that daily and nightly are about his highness, and daily inform him that good is evil and evil is good:
- Item. They say that our sovereign is above his laws to his pleasure, and he may make it and break it as he pleases, without any distinction. The contrary is true, or else he should not have sworn to keep it.

## Moving Towards a State

- .... Item. We say our sovereign lord may understand that his false council has lost his law, his merchandise is lost, his common people is destroyed, the sea is lost, France is lost, and the king himself is so set that he may not pay for his meat nor drink, and he owes more than ever any King of England ought, for daily his traitors about him where anything should come to him by his laws, anon they take it from him.
- Item. We will that it be known we will not rob, nor plunder, nor steal, but that these defaults be amended, and then we will go home; wherefore we exhort all the king's true liege men to help us, to support us, for whatsoever he be that will not that these defaults be amended, he his falser than a Jew or Saracen.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

- In August 1789, a few weeks after the French revolutionaries broke open the prison of Bastille, the French Constituent Assembly abolished the feudal system. These are some excerpts from the law they adopted:
- ARTICLE I. The National Assembly hereby **completely abolishes the feudal system**. It decrees that, among the existing rights and dues, both feudal and censual, all those originating in or representing real or personal serfdom (mainwork) or personal servitude, shall be abolished without indemnification...
- II. The exclusive right to maintain pigeon-houses and dovecotes is abolished. The pigeons shall be confined during the seasons fixed by the community. During such periods they shall be looked upon as game, and everyone shall have the right to kill them upon their own land.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

III. The exclusive right to hunt and to maintain unenclosed warrens is likewise abolished, and every land owner shall have the right to kill or to have destroyed on his own land all kinds of game...All hunting captainries, including the royal forests, and all hunting rights under whatever denomination, are likewise abolished... The president of the assembly shall be commissioned to ask of the King the recall of those sent to the galleys or exiled, simply for violations of the hunting regulations, as well as for the release of those at present imprisoned for offenses of this kind, and the dismissal of such cases as are now pending.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

IV. All manorial courts are hereby suppressed without indemnification...

V. Tithes of every description, as well as the dues which have been substituted for them, under whatever denomination they are known or collected ... are abolished...

VII. The sale of judicial and municipal offices shall be suppressed forthwith. Justice shall be dispensed gratis...

VIII. The fees of the country priests are abolished...

## Feudalism and Medieval State

IX. Pecuniary privileges, personal or real, in the payment of taxes are abolished forever.

Taxes shall be collected from all the citizens, and from all property, in the same manner and in the same form. Plans shall be considered by which the taxes shall be paid proportionally by all, even for the last six months of the current year.

X. Inasmuch as a national constitution and public liberty are of more advantage to the provinces than the privileges which some of these enjoy, and inasmuch as the surrender of such privileges is essential to the intimate union of all parts of the realm [empire], it is decreed that all the peculiar privileges, pecuniary or otherwise, of the provinces, principalities, districts [pays], cantons, cities and communes, are once for all abolished and are absorbed into the law common to all Frenchmen.

## Feudalism and Medieval State

XI. All citizens, without distinction of birth, are eligible to any office or dignity, whether ecclesiastical, civil or military; and no profession shall imply any derogation.

XII. Hereafter no remittances shall be made for annates (i.e., monies (church taxes effectively) that were collected and sent to Rome) or for any other purpose to the court of Rome, the vice-legation at Avignon, or to the nunciature at Lucerne...

XIII. The rights of dèport, of cotte-morte, dèpouilles, vacat, droits, censaux, Peters pence, and other dues of the same kind, under whatever denomination, established in favor of bishops, archdeacons, archpresbyters, chapters, and regular congregations which formerly exercised priestly functions [curés primitifs], are abolished...

## Technology Impacts the Medieval State

We have looked at some of the characteristics of feudalism, the mode of governance in a fragile Medieval state system.

In our next conversation, we will focus in detail on the Hundred Years War and the Black Plague. This will illustrate how emerging nation-states, far from being the replica of the centralized Roman empire, began to rise above the entrapped feudal networks.

We will begin this reflection today by highlighting some of the challenges that the feudal system and its institutional framework encountered by the fourteenth century.

## Technology Impacts the Medieval State

Kaeuper believes that between the late medieval and early modern Middle Ages, chivalry died and at least underwent a radical transformation (Richard Kaeuper, *Holy Warriors: The Religious Ideology of Chivalry* (University of Pennsylvania, 2014)). There are several possible reasons for this change.

Firstly, there was a military revolution that changed military professionalism; technology and tactics gained more prominence with the gunpowder revolution.

Secondly, new learning, as represented by Humanism, in its earliest manifestation, was a challenge to the chivalric spirit de corps. Humanism, as they articulated, was antiheroic, antiwar, and anti-chivalric.

What is Feudalism?

Thirdly, radical religious reform undermined spiritually the assertions that tournaments or war secured redemption through meritorious corporal suffering.

Fourthly, the state became relatively more powerful. Sociocultural changes included the size of the army and the growing use of and more effectiveness of infantry and new fortifications that altogether killed the chivalric spirit.

What is Feudalism?

Aberth says the army revolution made a huge difference: Infantry became more important than cavalry (John Aberth, *From the Brink of the Apocalypse: Confronting Famine, War, Plague, and Death in the Later Middle Ages*, 2013). Archers, with their longbowmen, provided a greater offensive capability. Gunpowder became another source of lethal power, and by the 15th century, cannons had developed to batter down walls. During the 1453 battle of Castillon, artillery decided the outcome.

By 1445, Charles VIII had created the first standing army.

## What is Feudalism?

- Technology and military innovations enhanced the monarchical ability to centralize authority, secure loyalty, and reduce dependence on the feudal order.
- In our conversation on Thursday, we will explore:
  - How state and feudalism intersected over the long period of the Hundred Years War,
  - How did the Black Plague impact this correlation, and
  - To what extent did the nation-state evolve during the process?