Lesson 2: Feudalism and the Manor Economy

Topic 7: Medieval Christian Europe
OBJECTIVES

Describe the development of the political and social system of feudalism

Summarize the life of knights and nobles

Analyze how the economic system of manorialism worked and how it affected peasants and nobles
Feudalism

Kings and emperors were too weak to maintain law and order.

People needed protection for themselves, their homes, and their lands.

In response to this basic need a decentralized political and economic structure evolved, known as **feudalism**.
Feudalism

A loosely organized system of rule

Powerful local lords divided their landholdings among lesser lords

In exchange, these lesser lords, or vassals, pledged service and loyalty to the greater lord
Feudalism

Varied greatly from place to place.

The traditions changed over time.

Became the basis for the political and economic system that governed life.
Mutual Obligations

Society involved a network of mutual obligations between the ruler and the ruled.

The relationship between lords and vassals was both political and economic.

Based on the exchange of land for loyalty and military service.

These vows were conducted publicly in front of witnesses.
Mutual Obligation

This relationship grew out of custom and tradition

Involved an exchange of pledges known as the **feudal contract**

Under this system, a powerful lord granted his vassal a **fief**
Fiefs ranged from a few acres to hundreds of square miles. Included peasants to work the land, as well as any towns or buildings on it.
Relationship

The lord promised to protect his vassal

The vassal pledged loyalty to his lord

Agreed to provide the lord with 40 days of military service each year, certain money payments, and advice
Everyone had a place

At the top of the power structure stood the monarch

Below the monarch were the most powerful lords

They held the largest fiefs
A Complex System

Each of these lords had vassals, and these vassals in turn had their own vassals.

In many cases, the same man was both vassal and lord.

Vassal to a more powerful lord above him and lord to a less powerful vassal below him.
A Complex System

Vassals often held fiefs from more than one lord.

A vassal who had pledged loyalty to several lords could have serious problems if his overlords quarreled with each other.

A vassal usually had a **liege lord** to whom he owed his first loyalty.
Nobles, Knights, and Warfare

Warfare was constant

For medieval lords and vassals, it was a way of life

Rival lords battled constantly for power

Both greater and lesser nobles trained from boyhood for a future occupation as a knight
At the age of seven, a boy was sent away to the castle of his father’s lord.

He learned to ride and fight, how to keep his armor and weapons in good condition.

Training was difficult, discipline was strict, laziness was punished with an angry blow or even a severe beating.
The Life of a Knight

At the end of training finished, named a knight, often in a public ceremony.

An older knight or the boy's future lord said words over the young man.

Then the young knight took his place beside other warriors.
The Life of a Knight

Knights usually fought on horseback using swords, axes, and lances, which were long poles. They wore armor and carried shields for protection. Other soldiers fought on foot using daggers, spears, crossbows, and longbows.
The Life of a Knight

As the fierce fighting lessened in the 1100s, tournaments came into fashion.

A powerful lord would invite knights from the area to a tournament.

Tournaments were as dangerous as real battles.

Over time they acquired more ceremonies and ritual.
Castles and War

Powerful lords fortified their homes to withstand attack.

The strongholds gradually became larger and grander.

By the 1100s, monarchs and nobles owned stone castles with high walls, towers, and drawbridges over wide moats.
Castles and War

Castles were fortresses

Wars often centered on seizing castles that commanded strategic river crossings, harbors, or mountain passes

Castle dwellers stored up food and water so they could withstand a long siege

In time of war, peasants from nearby villages might take refuge within the castle walls
The Lives of Noblewomen

Played active roles in society
While her husband or father was off fighting, the “lady of the manor” took over his duties

Supervised vassals, managed the household, and performed necessary agricultural and medical tasks

Sometimes went to war to defend her estate
Some noblewomen, like Eleanor of Aquitaine, took an active hand in politics.

Eleanor inherited vast lands in southwestern France.

Through two marriages, she became queen of France and, later, queen of England.

For more than 50 years, Eleanor was a leading force in European affairs.
Noblewomen

Right to inheritance was severely restricted

Land usually passed to the eldest son in a family

Frequently received land as part of her dowry

Fierce marriage negotiations swirled around an unmarried or widowed heiress

If her husband died before her, a woman gained her rights to her land
The daughters of nobles were sent to friends or relatives for training. Before parents arranged her marriage, she was expected to know how to spin and weave and how to supervise servants. A few learned to read and write. In her role as wife, a noblewoman was expected to bear many children and be dutiful to her husband.
A Code of Chivalry

Knights adopted a code of conduct called **chivalry**

Required knights to be brave, loyal, and true to their word

In warfare, they had to fight fairly

Warriors also had to treat a captured knight well or even release him if he promised to pay his ransom
A Code of Chivalry

The elaborate rules applied to nobles only

Dictated that knights protect the weak, including peasants and noblewomen

Few real knights could live up to the ideals of chivalry

Provided a standard against which a knight’s behavior could be measured
A Code of Chivalry

Raised women to a new status
In theory it placed women on a pedestal

**Troubadours** composed love songs praising the beauty and wit of women throughout the ages

In epic stories and poems, they told stories of brave knights and their devotion to a beloved woman

The ideas of chivalry would shape our modern ideas of romantic love
Manorialism

The heart of the medieval economy was the manor. Most manors included one or more village and the surrounding lands. Peasants made up the majority of the population. Lived and worked on the manor.
The Manor System

Under the **manor system**, the lord of the manor exercised legal and economic power over the peasants.

The lord administered justice and provided land and protection.

Peasants owed their lord labor and goods.
The Manor System

Factors that developed manorialism are the same as those that led to the development of feudalism.

Kings and emperors had become too weak to provide security.

Trade declined sharply.

Local communities had to become self-sufficient economic systems capable of meeting their own needs.
Most peasants on a manor were **serfs**

Were not slaves who could be bought and sold but they were not free

They could not leave the manor without the lord’s permission

If the manor was granted to a new lord, the serfs went with it
Mutual Obligations

Peasants and their lords were tied together by mutual rights and obligations.

Peasants worked several days a week farming the lord’s lands, repaired his roads, bridges, and fences.

Had to ask the lord’s permission to marry.
Mutual Obligations

Paid the lord a fee when they inherited their father’s acres and when they used the local mill to grind grain

Other payments fell due at Christmas and Easter

Paid fees with products such as grain, honey, eggs, or chickens
Mutual Obligations

In return peasants had the right to farm a certain amount of land for themselves.

They were entitled to their lord’s protection from raids or warfare.

Although they could not leave the manor without permission, they also could not be forced off it.
Mutual Obligations

In theory peasants were guaranteed food, housing, and land.

The manor system supported feudalism.

Lords and knights relied on estates to provide them with food, lodging, horses, armor, weapons, money, and time to train for warfare.
A Self-Sufficient World

The manor was generally self-sufficient.

Peasants produced almost everything from food and clothing to simple furniture and tools.

Most peasants never ventured more than a few miles from their village.

They had no schooling and no knowledge of a larger world outside.
A Self-Sufficient World

A typical manor included a village, water mill to grind grain, a church, and the lord’s manor house.

The fields surrounding the village were divided into narrow strips.

Each family had strips of land in different fields so that good land and bad land were shared evenly.
A Self-Sufficient World

Beyond the fields there were pastures for animals and meadows that provided hay.

Only the lord had the right to chop wood or hunt animals in the forests that lay beyond the cleared land.
Life was harsh

Men, women, and children worked long hours

Children helped in the fields, planting seeds, weeding, and taking care of pigs or sheep

The peasant family ate a simple diet of black bread with vegetables such as cabbage, turnips, or onions
Seasons and Celebrations

Peasants plowed in spring and autumn

In summer, they harvested and hayed, at other times, they weeded and repaired

Hunger was common, especially in late winter when the harvest was exhausted
Seasons and Celebrations

Disease took a heavy toll, and few peasants lived beyond the age of 35

Peasants found occasions to celebrate, such as marriages and births and breaks came on holidays

People might butcher an animal for a feast and there would also be dancing and rough sports, from wrestling to ball games