

FEUDALISM

&

MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

Feudalism

Feudalism was the system in 10th-13th century European medieval societies where a social hierarchy was established based on local administrative control and the distribution of land into units (fiefs).



** The word 'feudalism' derives from the medieval Latin terms *feudalis*, meaning fee, and *feodum*, meaning fief. The fee signified the land given (the fief) as a payment for regular military service. The system had its roots in the **Roman** manorial system (in which workers were compensated with protection while living on large estates)

** The feudal system proper became widespread in Western Europe from the 11th century onwards, largely thanks to the Normans as their rulers carved up and dished out lands wherever their armies conquered.

THE FEUDAL SYSTEM PERPETUATED ITSELF AS A STATUS QUO BECAUSE THE CONTROL OF LAND REQUIRED THE ABILITY TO PERFORM MILITARY SERVICE & LAND WAS REQUIRED TO FUND MILITARY SERVICE.

There was a perpetual divide between the landed aristocracy (monarchs, lords, and some tenants) and those who worked the land for them who could be free or unfree labourers. Unfree labourers were serfs, also known as villeins, who were at the bottom of the social pyramid and who made up the vast majority of the population.

CONSEQUENCE OF FEUDALISM

- Creation of localized groups of communities which owed loyalty to a specific local lord who exercised absolute authority in his domain.
- A permanent class divide was established between those who had land and those who rented it.
- Monarchs could distribute land for political purposes, fragmenting a noble's holdings or distancing him from the court.
- The presence of vassals in the local courts which deliberated on cases involving the estates of their lords.
- The Barons' Revolt led to the signing of the **Magna Carta** in 1215
- In subsequent revolts in the 13th century, the barons were acting collectively for their own interests which were a direct threat to the entire system of feudalism
- Military service was reduced to fixed terms, typically 40 days in England, in an effort to reduce the burden on nobles so that they did not leave their lands unattended for too long.
- 40 days was not usually enough to see out a campaign and so a monarch was obliged to pay mercenaries, dealing another blow to the tradition of feudalism and vassalage.

Causes for Decline of Feudalism

- Lords came to own multiple estates and vassals could be tenants of various parcels of land so that loyalties became confused and even conflicting with people choosing to honour the relationship that suited their own needs best.
- There was sudden population decline caused by wars and plagues, particularly the **Black Death** (1347-1352), and by Peasant Revolts (1381). Such crises caused a chronic shortage of labour and the abandonment of estates because there was no one to work them.
- The growth of large towns and **cities** also saw labour leave the countryside to find a better future and the new jobs available there.
- By the 13th century, the increase in commerce and the greater use of **coinage** changed the way the feudal system worked.

- Money allowed feudal lords to pay their sovereign instead of performing military service
- The barons themselves became less important to the defence of the realm.
- A monarch could now distribute money instead of land in his system of rewards.
- A rich merchant class developed with no ties of loyalty to anyone except their sovereign, their suppliers and their customers.
- Even serfs could sometimes buy their freedom and escape the circumstances into which they were born.

All of these factors conspired to weaken the feudal system based on land ownership and service

Reading list

- ❖ The Short Oxford History of English Literature by Andrew Sanders
- ❖ English Social and Cultural History by Bibhash Choudhury