

Europe

Feudal Society in the Middle Ages



Introduction to the Middle Ages

Feudal Society in the Middle Ages

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Flash activity (these activities are not editable)



Teacher notes included in the Notes page

For more instructions, see the *User Guide*.

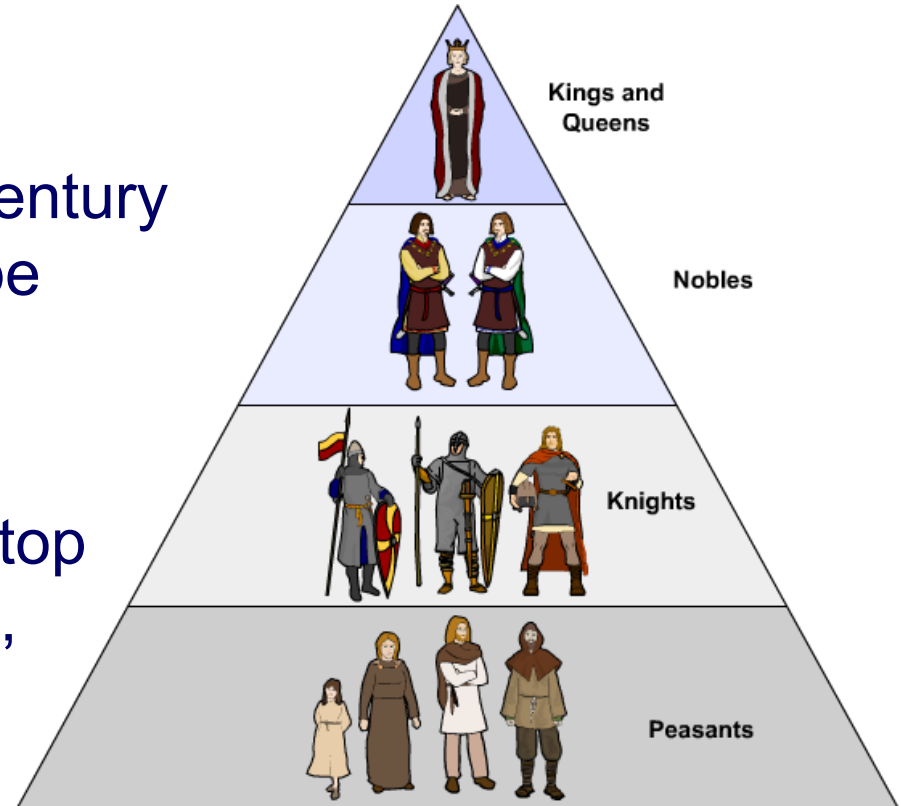




Society in medieval Europe was **feudal**. Relationships were formed by the exchange of goods and services.

Feudalism originated in the **Frankish** lands in the ninth century and spread throughout Europe during the 1000s.

Kings and Queens sat at the top of society, followed by nobles, knights and finally peasants.



What goods and services do you think each level was expected to provide?



The feudal system depended on the legal and military relationships between different members of society.



The king sat at the top of the feudal system. He would grant a **fief** (land) to a noble. In return, the noble would promise loyalty to the king and provide knights for military service.



The noble would then grant land to a knight and become his **lord**. The knight was referred to as his lord's **vassal** and would promise to protect his lord and fight for him.

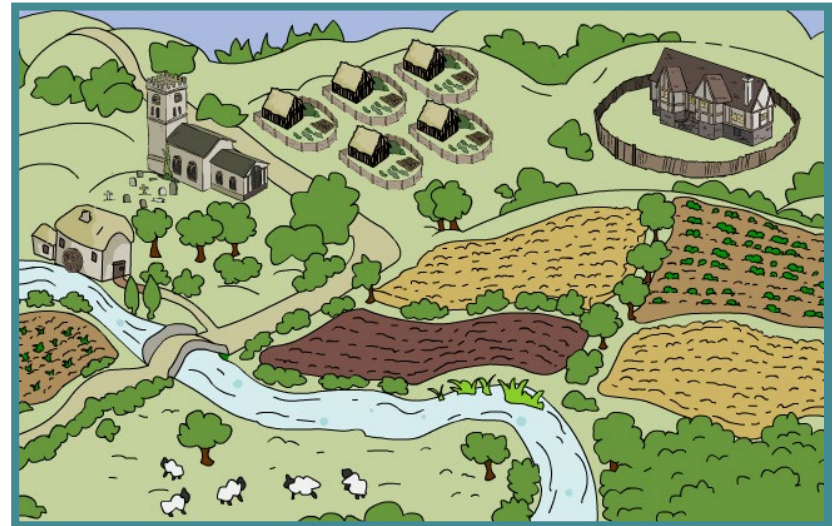
Who might a knight grant land to?



A lord or knight might divide up any spare land amongst free peasants and **serfs** (unfree peasants who were bound to the land they worked).

The peasants did not own the land, but were allowed to farm it. Lords offered them protection and maintained law and order. In return, peasants gave food and offered their farming services to the lord.

The area run by a lord was known as a **manor**. These would have a manor house, a peasant village, a church and farmland.





Towards the end of the Middle Ages, feudalism began to decline across Europe. Reasons for this included:

- the increase of royal power and the decrease in the power of the nobility
- the need for laborers to join the military
- the **Black Death**, which decreased the population
- a series of peasant **uprisings** across Europe
- the decline of **serfdom**
- the rise of cities and an improving economy.



What effect would these have on feudalism?





The power of the monarchy





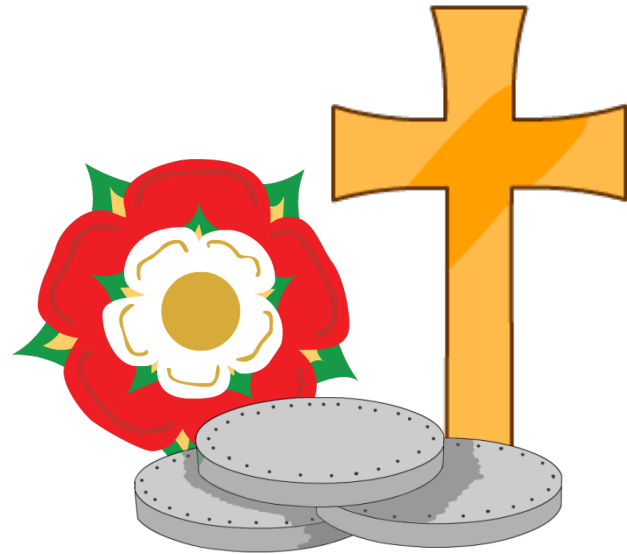
The English monarchy



Warfare was a common feature of medieval life. Most wars were fought between neighboring states or kingdoms, although there were examples of larger-scale warfare. Some wars took place internally, within a single country.

Reasons for fighting included:

- land
- money
- religion
- power.

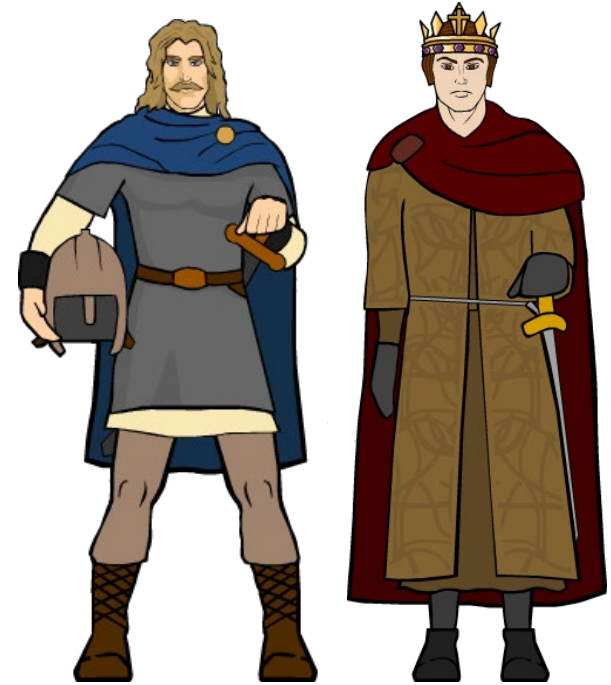


Can you name any wars or battles that took place during the Middle Ages? What was the motivation for them?



There are many examples of medieval warfare.

- The 1066 **Battle of Hastings** between Harold Godwinson and Duke William of Normandy was for the English crown.
- The **Crusades** were a series of wars fought from 1096 until 1291 for control of the Holy Land.
- The **Hundred Years' War** was fought between France and England from 1337 until 1453 over trade concerns, political alliances and claims to the French crown.



Do you know who won these wars?

The Hundred Years' War





Military techniques and weaponry developed during this time.



- Castles were a major feature of the Middle Ages. **Siege warfare** was more common than full-scale battle and involved surrounding and blocking off access to a castle, town or fortress. If defendants did not surrender, troops might launch an attack.
- The **longbow** made its first major appearance at this time. This meant that long-range warfare could be fought.
- **Gunpowder** appeared in Europe towards the end of the Middle Ages and was used in **cannons**. It was particularly effective against castles.



During the Early Middle Ages, soldiers were drawn through the feudal system. Troops were raised through a feudal **levy**. This means that they were conscripted as part of an official program for enlisting soldiers.

Nobles were expected to provide trained soldiers. Serfs and freemen were recruited to the army through the levy. The length of service expected was quite short.

Why do you think this was?

During later periods of warfare, such as the Hundred Years' War (1337–1453), **mercenaries** were used. Mercenaries were soldiers who were hired to fight for a foreign army.

What impact did this have on feudalism?



The Black Death





The spread of the plague





Consequences of the plague



Approximately one-third of Europe's population died as a result of the Black Death.

Some historians argue that the Black Death improved the lives of the peasants who survived. Before the plague, Europe was **overpopulated**: there was not enough land for everyone to live off. Wages were low and lords could easily replace laborers.

The **labor shortage** caused by the Black Death meant peasants could demand higher wages and more freedom from their lords, as they could no longer be replaced so easily.



What impact did this have on European feudalism?



After the Black Death, peasants did begin to demand higher wages and more freedom. However, lords imposed strict controls upon their laborers.

Taxes were collected throughout this period to pay for the ongoing warfare. Peasants felt that they were being **overtaxed** and could not afford to pay.



As a result, there were a number of peasant uprisings across Europe during the second half of the fourteenth century. Rebels demanded freedom from oppression, lower taxes and peasant rights.

How successful do you think these revolts were?



Some of the most famous uprisings occurred in England and France.

- In 1356, French peasants revolted against feudal taxation and orders to improve defenses, in a rebellion known as the **Jacquerie**.
- In 1381, English peasants took part in the **Peasant's Revolt**, opposing the Poll Tax and the oppressive “Statute of Labourers”.



Through these rebellions, peasants gained a sense of their worth and began to demand individual rights.

How would these revolts affect attitudes towards the feudal system?



Decline of serfdom



Serfs were peasants who were not free and were bound to the land they worked on.

Over time, serfdom began to decline in western Europe. The population fall caused by the Black Death allowed serfs to challenge the agreements they had with their lords.

Opportunities for serfs to make money by selling goods were also developing. Lords began to recognize the potential of renting out land and became more willing to allow serfs to buy their freedom.

The decline of serfdom was gradual. Although it began during the Middle Ages and basically disappeared by the fifteenth century, serfdom did not officially end in France until 1798!





Before the Black Death, the population of Europe rose. At the same time, trade across Europe increased. Towns and cities grew and the economy improved.



What effect would the growth of cities have on feudalism?

Serfs and peasants could move away from the manors and into the towns where there were new work opportunities.

The improved economy also increased the money in circulation. Knights and soldiers began to demand wages instead of land.



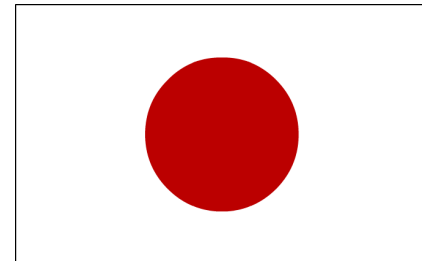
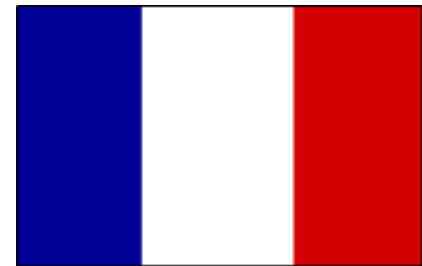


Nobles lost power as kings and queens increased their strength. War and plague reduced the labor force and cities provided new opportunities.

Which factor contributed the most to the decline of feudalism at the end of the Middle Ages?

As feudalism declined, nation states began to develop.

A **nation state** is an area of land (state) inhabited by a group of people (nation) with a common language, law and culture.



Can you name any nation states?

Keywords

