

# Ancient and Medieval History Online

## feudalism

The term *feudalism* was first used by jurists and legal historians in the 17th century to characterize many aspects of medieval society. According to their conceptualization, feudalism was a form of social and political organization based on personal ties and specific to the Western Middle Ages. The term, derived from [fief](#), emphasized person-to-person relationships supported by landed property and its rights and revenues. A major aspect of this was vassalage, which was the basis for these personal ties and was highlighted in the rituals that surrounded acts of homage and loyalty. These personal ties were in turn based on the holding of fiefs or incomes that mutually bound a lord and a vassal. These feudal and [vassal](#) relationships were viewed as concerning really only the aristocratic level of society. In the minds of these 17th-century lawyers, however, the ideological and economic substructures directly or indirectly influenced most social ties.

Such feudalism existed, if in any detail at all, primarily in the period between the 10th and 13th centuries. During these centuries western Europe experienced the weakening and dislocation of the state and public authority. Public authority, such as it was, no longer controlled the resources essential for keeping order such as fortresses, the effective power to constrain, impose, and administer justice, and the coinage of money. Authority depended on private ties and cohesion on the cooperation of local, [family](#), or [clan](#) groups. Feudalism was a way of coping with this climate of dispersed authority, which favored uncontrolled competition, rivalries, weak states, marauding, wars, and military force. Feudalism arose when the aristocracy militarized itself and gave itself a system of moral values based on war and the mutual support of fighting with men one personally knew. Feudalism can be viewed as providing a framework and the instruments for the rebirth of the notion of the state. This is why it has proved to be a useful and durable concept from the 17th century to the 20th.

In the 14th century monarchs were able to use this alleged system and ideology of personal ties to increase their own power and solidify their state. In the later Middle Ages feudalism was folded into the new state structures that it had once troubled. By the 14th and 15th centuries, as a system it no longer played a fundamental role in political authority as states built their solidarity and effectiveness on mercenary soldiers and paid administrators. However, by the 15th century if not earlier, a "bastard feudalism" that produced dangerous local lords who could rival the national state in terms of manpower tied to them and not the Crown had evolved. Whether this old and traditional scheme reflected reality or was as all-pervasive in society as assumed has been much questioned by recent historians.

### Further Information

David Herlihy, ed., *The History of Feudalism* (New York: Harper & Row, 1970); Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Concept: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe." *The American Historical Review* 79 (1974): 1063–1088; Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, 2 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961); Jean-Pierre Poly and Eric Bournazel, *The Feudal Transformation, 900–1200*, trans. Caroline Higgitt (New York: Holmes & Meier, 1991); Susan Reynolds, *Feifs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).  
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