

As other empires flourished around in Africa and Asia, Europe began to recover from the collapse of the Roman Empire. They had a system of feudalism that was very similar to what we learned about last week in Japan. The feudal lords and their armies would begin to form what became the countries of Europe.

Read “Feudalism and the Manor System,” p. 394 – 399 from *History of Our World*, then answer the question at the end.

Feudalism and the Manor System

Middle Ages *n.* the years between ancient and modern times

medieval *adj.* referring to the Middle Ages

feudalism *n.* a system in which land was owned by kings or lords but held by vassals in return for their loyalty

manor *n.* a large estate, often including farms and a village, ruled by a lord

serf *n.* a farm worker considered part of the manor on which he or she worked

knight *n.* a man who received honor and land in exchange for serving a lord as a soldier

A Medieval Story

As darkness fell, a young man put on a white tunic and red and black cloaks. Then he walked to the church, where he spent the long night alone, praying. Soon he would no longer be a mere squire, or knight-in-training. He would become a real knight, who would receive honor and land in exchange for serving his lord as a soldier.

The next morning, the squire entered the castle courtyard, where knights and ladies had gathered. His lord presented him with his sword, spurs, and shield. The squire knelt. Then he felt the lord's sword lightly tap him on each shoulder. “In the name of God Saint Michael, and Saint George, I call you a knight,” declared the lord. “Be loyal, brave, and true.” A knight was expected to be loyal to the lord

who knighted him. His lord was loyal to a more powerful or king. Knights and lords protected the less powerful people loyal to them. This system held society together.

The Middle Ages

Years ago, scenes like the one you just read about took place throughout Western Europe. These were the times of knights in shining armor, lords and ladies, and castles and cathedrals. These were the Middle Ages, the years between ancient times and modern times.

Historians usually say that ancient times lasted until about CE 500 and that modern times started about 1500. The period in the Middle Ages, is also called the medieval period. Medieval comes from Latin words that mean “middle ages.”

The Middle Ages began with the collapse of the Roman Empire in Western Europe. For centuries, the Roman Empire had provided order and stability in the region. It had spread its culture, the Latin language, and Christianity across the continent. Over time, however, the Roman Empire grew weak. It suffered economic and social troubles. Worse, the Roman Empire also suffered from invasions by peoples from the north.

In wave after wave, the invaders destroyed Roman towns and cut off trade routes. They claimed parts of the empire for themselves. Because these peoples kept their own languages and laws, they broke the bonds that had held the Roman Empire together.

By about A.D. 500, the Roman Empire in Western Europe had completely collapsed. It was replaced by a patchwork of small kingdoms. Reading and writing were in danger of disappearing from Europe because many of the invading groups could not do either.

One of the invading groups was the Franks. They claimed the area called Gaul, which is now France. In fact name *France* comes from the word “Franks.” In 768, a skilled military leader named Charlemagne became king of the Franks.

At the time, the many small kingdoms of Western Europe were often at war with one another. Charlemagne expanded his kingdom by conquering these weaker kingdoms. Soon, he ruled an

empire that stretched across most of Western Europe.

Charlemagne ruled his empire for nearly 50 years. During that time he worked hard to keep Western Europe united. He established schools throughout the land to promote learning and culture. He spread the Christian religion. He issued money and improved the economy. Western Europe had not been so prosperous or so united since the time of the Roman Empire.

After Charlemagne's death, his empire was divided among his three sons. They fought one another, weakening the empire. Other groups also attacked the weakened empire. Perhaps the fiercest attacks were made by the Vikings.

The Vikings came from the far north of Europe - present-day Denmark, Sweden, and Norway. They were skilled sailors and tough warriors. Their attacks began around 800 and continued for about 300 years. Relying on surprise, the Vikings burned and looted European towns. But they also reopened trade routes to Mediterranean lands and beyond. And they settled in other parts of northern Europe, mixing with the local populations. Even so, the Vikings did not unite these lands into a lasting empire.

Feudalism

Charlemagne's empire was gone. Western Europe was again divided into many small kingdoms. Viking attacks were a constant threat. Life was dangerous. Slowly, the people of Europe worked out a new system for meeting their military, political, and economic needs.

The system that developed was called feudalism. Under feudalism, land was owned by kings or lords held by vassals in return for their loyalty. By about 1000, feudalism was the way of life throughout Western Europe. It would last for hundreds of years.

In medieval Europe, power belonged to those who controlled the land. These landowners were nobles, such as barons and princes. They gave a share of land, called a fief to each of their vassals, or people who promised to follow the landowner's laws and to fight for him. A vassal could also be a lord.

Lords promised to treat their vassals with honor. In addition, the chief duty of lords was to protect their vassals and their lands. If a vassal with young children died, for example, the lord became the

children's protector. The lord also asked his vassals' advice before making laws or going to war.

Vassals were expected to raise and lead armies that would fight for their lord. Many of these vassals were knights -- professional horse soldiers who led other men into battle. Vassals also appeared at the lord's court when commanded to do so. And they paid taxes, often in the form of crops, to their lords.

The Manor System

In medieval Europe, feudalism was a system of power and economic relations across regions. Manorialism was a system of economic and political life at the local level. This system was based on the manor, a large estate that included farm fields, pastures, and often an entire village. It also included a large house, called the manor house, where the lord, or ruler, of the manor lived.

The lord of the manor was typically a vassal of a king or a more powerful lord. The manor was part of his fief. Most manors were far from towns, villages, and other manors. Therefore, they had to be self-sufficient, or able to supply their own needs. Food, clothing, and other things needed by the people who lived on the manor were made there.

A lord depended on the wealth his manor provided. He ruled over his manor -- and the poor people who lived there. He made the rules and acted as judge. He decided who would oversee the farming and other daily work. And he collected taxes from the peasants who lived on the manor.

Women of the noble classes also played an important part in feudal society. Like the men in her family, a noblewoman went to other noble families for training. Then, she took her place as lady of the household. She managed the household, performed necessary medical tasks, and supervised servants. When her husband or father was away fighting, she often served as "lord of the manor," making important decisions.

Peasants and Serfs

The majority of the people of medieval Europe were not lords, ladies, or knights. They were peasants, a group of people who made their living as farmers and laborers. Their lives were very different from the lives of the nobles.

Peasants were often very poor. They did all of the work on the manors of the Middle Ages. They farmed the lord's fields to raise food for his household. They were only allowed to farm a small strip of land for themselves. Even so, they had to give part of their own harvest to their lord.

Most peasants were also serfs. Serfs were peasants who were considered to be part of the manor. When a noble was given a manor as part of his fief, its serfs became his. They could not leave the manor, or even get married, without his permission.

Although serfs were tied to manors, they were not quite slaves. Successful serfs could save money to buy freedom and a plot of land of their own. A serf who escaped to a city and lived there for a year and a day without being caught also became free. Most serfs, however, remained serfs their whole lives.

Medieval peasants worked hard for most of their lives. They farmed their own fields and those of their lord. Men, women, and children were all required to work.

Peasants lived in one-room huts that often had only a single opening for a window. For heating and cooking, they built a fire on the dirt floor. Smoke filled the dark, cramped interior before drifting out of a hole in the roof. Peasants ate mostly simple foods such as black bread, cabbage, and turnips. They rarely ate meat, since the animals of the manor and surrounding land were reserved for their lord. Peasants even suffered when they slept; their mattresses were cloth sacks stuffed with straw.

Using the RACE method, write a paragraph on the following. During the Middle Ages, most poor peasants remained poor their entire lives. Why do you think this was so? Write a paragraph explaining what you think the reasons were.

Did you follow RACE? - 4 points

Did you use your own words throughout? - 2 points

Did you use a quotation for your Citation? - 2 points