

BRIEF HISTORY OF FEUDALISM AND MANORALISM:

STUDENT'S VERSION (BOLD) WITH EDUCATOR NOTES

VOCABULARY LIST - FEUDALISM - SECTION I

civilized	lord
savage	manor
wilderness	serf
wasteland	manorialism
Roman Empire	villein
aqueduct	oven
peasant	mill
offender	duty
defenseless	clergy
marauder	noble
peasant	specialization
vassal	patronage
peer	chivalry
fidelity	honor

SECTION I: TRANSITION FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE TO THE MIDDLE AGES

55 B.C. When the Emperor Julius Caesar sent his vast armies north all the way to Britain, they found savage people gathered into tiny villages, and vast areas of wilderness and wasteland.

The Romans were much more civilized than these people. The Romans designed roads of stone and sometimes pieces of metal, and they made the local people build them. Romans built roads to make it easier to move many soldiers from one place to another.

They also built many fortified camps and made strong buildings of wood and stone. In some places they built water systems called aqueducts. They allowed travelers and traders to stay in their camps. When people did bad things, Roman law was used to decide their punishment. Roman law was usually more fair than the savage way, “an eye for and eye. . .”

The Romans ruled a large part of Europe for about 500 years. As time went by, their fortified camps grew into villages and then into towns and cities. The Romans introduced new farming methods that provided the farmer with much more produce. There was a surplus of food, so some farmers changed their work and become specialized at being carpenters, blacksmiths, masons, etc. That meant that the farmer and his family didn't have to do everything themselves. If he needed a new plow blade he could trade food with the blacksmith for a blade. This specialization made life easier for everyone.

Key Idea: The Romans improved the quality of life for the peasants they conquered and moved them toward specialization.

The Romans brought their technology, farming methods, their roads, their water systems, their building techniques and their weapons. They transferred their technology and skills and spread their culture to far reaching areas.

Economic concept: All people were originally hunters and gatherers. Once one community figured out how to produce

food by planned farming, others followed suit. There were 5 actors that nudged communities of people toward food production and away from the subsistence existence of the hunter-gatherer.

- 1). Depletion of wild animals
- 2). The discovery and availability of domesticable wild plants
- 3). The development of technologies for collecting, processing, and storing wild foods
- 4). The rise in population and consequential rise in food production
- 5). The density of populated communities enabling them to kill off the scattered hunters and gatherers

The Romans had long since moved through the process of hunter-gatherer-farmer/specialized worker to a highly specialized civilization. They developed the ability to produce great surpluses of food to feed standing armies. Their surpluses enabled the production of other products as well, which in turn fostered trade with neighboring countries. The development of technological innovations, improved life style, and luxuries like hot baths, running water, excellent roads, and a centralized government to enforce the collection of taxes and laws came as a result of a rich economy where demand constantly out paced supply.

Over the 500 years of their reign, the Romans taught farmers techniques to improve crop production so that they and the soldiers could have plenty to eat. They promoted the idea of specialization and they helped create markets to sell excess products as well.

The Romans brought their form of law and order to the lands they conquered. Roman law gave different rights to different groups of people. Nobles and the wealthy had many more rights than the peasant. The Roman soldiers enforced the law and protected the peasants. Farmers felt safe taking their produce to markets. Traders were not robbed when they carried jewelry or expensive items from town to town.

Key Idea: Romans built trade centers and cities.

As their encampments became more permanent, they evolved into busy centers for trade and political administration for the numerous farms and villages that had developed peripherally in the surrounding countryside. Buildings and walls made of bricks and stone were built. Skilled and unskilled laborers as well as Roman government officials made residence there, many marrying local girls and settling in for their lifetime.

MANORIALISM AND SERFS

When the Roman Empire fell and the Roman soldiers left, life changed. Farmers and traders were no longer safe. Roads and buildings were not repaired. No one punished offenders.

Crime was terrible. People left the cities, scattered throughout the countryside. Farmers and their families were enslaved by the barbarians. The cities and villages mostly disappeared.

Key idea: It is important that students understand the dramatic change that happened once the Roman Empire failed and the barbarians took control.

The Romans had a way for poor and defenseless land owners to protect themselves against marauders and barbarians. The weak person could give his land to a powerful lord and in return the weak person would get protection from marauders. After the Romans army was gone, many people gave their land away to wealthy people who promised to protect them. Their land became part of the powerful person's manor. The weak person and his family became serfs. This economic system of a serf binding himself and his family to a lord in return for protection is called manorialism.

Background: Most of the features of Manorialism and Feudalism are derived from various practices common to Romans.

In additions to their customs, the Romans also spread their language and many of today's words are derived from their Latin roots. For example, the Roman villa or farm had a peculiar form of rental called the precarium, which was a temporary grant of land that the grantor could revoke at any time. As the Roman Empire disintegrated, increasingly, the poor

landholder transferred his land to a wealthy protector and received it back as a precarium. This practice of “renting” land in exchange for protection gave rise to the manorial system. The manorial system was a consequence of the fall of the Roman Empire.

As the Middle Ages progressed and the villages grew, they needed to protect themselves. Some of them looked like this. It was much easier to protect a walled city than one that was spread out.

Key idea: The physical characteristics of the medieval community were very different than that under the Roman Empire.

The community of the early medieval era looked little like the community of a few hundred years earlier. It was reduced to a huddle of cottages within reassuring reach of the lord’s manor house. During Roman times, most farmers had worked independently in their own field or vineyard. But as marauders sacked, burned and stole everything in their path, the independent farmer virtually vanished. Gone was the courageous entrepreneur who could count on law and order to protect him from criminals. In his place emerged the serf and a system called manorialism. In this system, the simple laborers and poorer farmers became serfs, bound to a lord for life in return for the lord’s protection. This was the most secure way of life these people could hope to organize for themselves.

SERFS AND VILLEINS

There were different types of serfs. The lowest only had a few acres of land to work and were very poor. Their jobs on the manor were the worse. But most peasants were called villeins, from the word villa or farm. A villein usually had 40 acres of land and had special rights. The villein could draw water from the lord’s streams and gather wood in the lord’s forests. In exchange, the villein worked a certain number of days a week on the lord’s land and had to supply the lord with produce, meat, wine and cloth.

All serfs and villeins were required to do both field-work and handwork, like ditch digging, tree cutting and road building. He was also required to do “boon” work that showed his gratitude to the lord for his protection.

Highest on the peasant social scale was the freedman. He usually had inherited land or a larger farm. Some were skilled in a craft and others were tradesmen who traveled and sold their good to others. He had to pay taxes also, but usually less. He also had special rights that protected him and his family.

The lord could make the serf, villein and freedman pay a variety of taxes, like a head tax, income tax, payments to use the manor’s ovens, mill and wine press. He could even make a serf pay for the right to marry a girl from another manor.

A serf wasn’t actually a slave and could escape his servitude by moving to a town and paying taxes to the town for one full year. He could sometimes buy his freedom from the lord, because nobles were always out of money. However it was very difficult for a serf to put aside enough money to buy his freedom.

Medieval society had a deep sense of duty, and it was the duty of the peasant or villein to serve the clergy and nobles. The relationship and responsibilities between serf and nobility on the manor was called manorialism. This should not be confused with feudalism. The relationship between noble and noble was called feudalism.

ORIGINS OF THE FEUDALISTIC STRUCTURE

Background:

It can safely be said that feudalism emerged from the disintegration of Roman institutions, the deterioration of roads, the disruption of travel, the killing of people and burning of settlements, especially in the Germanic(Frankish) area.

The breakdown of the Roman social, military and administrative institutions, e.g. ‘central government’ led to the rise of feudalism. In regions untouched by Roman customs the feudal system was already developing its unique organization.

Feudalism, appeared in definite form in the Frankish lands in the 9th and 10th century in the heart of the Frankish kingdom known as Gaul, between the Loire and Rhine Rivers. Under the Merovingians. Gaul frequently lapsed into com-

plete anarchy mainly because custom requiring that on the death of the king, his inheritance would be divided among his sons. This led to continual feuding and the birth of many small, unstable kingdoms. No kingdom was able to maintain public peace and the safety of its inhabitants. Such a society formed an ideal medium for the growth of bodies of armed retainers

Under the Roman Empire, Gaul was accustomed to private bands of armed soldiers called *buccellarii* who were bodyguards for prominent men. At the end of the 1st century the Franks had developed an institution called the *comitatus* which consisted of a group of free warriors who had taken service of their own free will under a chieftain and fought with him on his behalf as a band of close comrades.

The Frankish people developed the custom, similar to a Roman custom, of having armed companions accompany the king and queen wherever they went and fight for them against their enemies. In return for this service, the king would take care of these companions and protect them. Some of these armed companions were called vassals. To be a vassal was a great honor. To become a vassal, you first had to be of the nobility.

Background

The Frankish word *trustis* appears to correspond with *comitatus*, and the group of special armed companions of the king were called *antrustio*. These companions had a special mark of protection given by the king. If a *antrustio* were killed, the murderer had to pay the victim's family a sum three times as large as that normally due for the death of any other free man. The *antrustio* was a hand picked fighting man and he belonged to one of the highest social ranks in the population. Only a king and queen had *antrustios*.

There were also many other free men in the category of retainer in direct dependence upon the king or powerful people. These retainers were not warriors, however, they were often called upon to fight battles. The word vassal appears to be derived from the adjective *gwassawl*, (similar in sound to vassal), meaning one who serves, and was also applied to slaves until the end of the 7th century. Before this time, armed retainers were called *gasindi*.

Feudalism was a form of political government developed during the Middle Ages from this Frankish custom. After the Roman Empire fell there was no one to keep law and order. Many small kingdoms with weak kings were formed. Kings did not have enough money to hire armies to protect the people in their kingdoms. Noblemen who had large estates had no way to protect their estates against marauders.

To help him to have an army whenever he needed one, the king promised to protect each of his barons against marauders. Sometimes he allowed his barons to live on and use some of his land. In exchange, the barons promised to fight with the king in battle. If the king gave a baron an estate or manor, the baron promised to provide soldiers and knights to help the king fight his enemies. The king promised to defend each of his barons against their enemies as well. This protective relationship, where one free man voluntarily permits another free man to have authority over him in exchange for services or property is called feudalism. In a feudal relationship, the king became the "lord" and the barons who pledged themselves to him were his vassals.

The Merovingians (Frankish people from around Germany) had a formula for a free man to place himself under the patronage of another. This was done in a ceremony that made a verbal contract between the lord and his vassal. The ceremony was called the "commendation". A translation of a Germanic commendation follows:

During this commendation ceremony, the vassal knelt before the lord with his head bare and his hands placed between the hands of the lord. He said these words:

'He who commends himself to the power of another man.

To the magnificent Lord (fill in the blank), I, (fill in the blank). Inasmuch as it is known to all and sundry that I lack the resources to feed and clothe myself, I ask for you pit and good will be granted to me, permission to deliver and commend myself into your hands. This I have therefore done, in such fashion that, you have agreed to aid and sustain me in food and clothing, while I have agreed to serve you and be faithful to you as best I can. For as long as I live I am bound to serve you and respect you as a free man ought, and during my lifetime I shall not have the right to withdraw myself from your authority. I must be for the remainder of my days under your protection and power. And in virtue of this action, if

one of us tries to alter the terms of the agreement, he will pay a fine to the other, but the agreement itself shall remain in force.'

After these words were spoken, the lord kissed the vassal. If the lord intended to give the vassal some land, he would then place in the vassal's hands a clump of dirt to represent the fief which was the estate or manor.

Background:

The feudal relationship forged a contract between two free individuals, each responsible and accountable for his actions, and protected by the sanctity of the given word. The ceremony of homage was serious and solemn. The person about to become a vassal, kneeling with uncovered head, placed his hands in those of his future lord and solemnly vowed to be his man henceforth and to serve him faithfully even with his life. This part of the procedure, sealed with a kiss, was what properly constituted the ceremony of homage. It was accompanied by an oath of fealty, and the whole event was concluded by the act of investiture. The lord put his vassal in actual possession of the land or by placing him his hand a clod of earth or a twig to symbolize the delivery to him of the estate for which he had just now done homage and sworn fealty.

There was nothing shameful about this relationship. Like the lord, the vassal also had his own vassals and retainers pledged to him as well. The wealthiest barons were vassals themselves to the emperor, king, or to bishops. When the king called upon his vassals, they all got together and formed a feudal army.

The vassal had jobs that he had to do for the lord. He had to attend the lord's court to help him make fair decisions along with other vassals. This happened when one vassal had done something wrong. Every vassal had the right to be judged by his peers.

The vassal had to pay the lord a fee when he received his fief. He also had to pay yearly taxes in the form of money and goods like food, cloth, cattle and wine. If the lord traveled to the vassal's estate, the vassal had to provide the lord with rooms and food.

When the lord summoned him, the vassal had to appear in the field with a fighting troop made up of his own vassals that was in proportion to the value of the resources of his fief. The bigger the fief, the more soldiers the vassal had to provide. The vassals and his soldiers had to be on horseback and in armor.

The vassal was required to be ready to follow his lord on his military expeditions, but usually for not more than forty days in one year. He must defend his lord in battle. If his lord were unhorsed, he must give him his horse. If the lord is taken as a prisoner, he must offer himself as a hostage for his release.

CHIVALRY AND KNIGHTHOOD

Knighthood was a military order. Knights were trained fighting men and much more. To be a knight, a man had to be willing to live by the Code of Chivalry. Chivalry was a set of values, principles and behavior that all knights were obligated to live by. They pledged to protect the Church, to defend females, the weak and oppressed, to act with courage, live with honesty and treat everyone fairly.

Key Idea: Compare the code of behavior of knights with any other group of people, firemen, policemen, teachers. Who would be willingly to fight for others without payment today. Discuss the concept of "honor". Why was this concept so important in those lawless times?

A man could become a knight, even if he did not have a fief or own land. If he qualified by birth and was properly initiated, he could be a knight. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great number of knights were landless sons of the nobility.

TRAINING OF THE KNIGHT

When chivalry became established, all the sons of nobility, except those headed for the Church, were trained to be knights. The sons of poorer nobles were usually placed in the family of a wealthy lord to be trained in the duties and exercises of knighthood. This education began at the age of seven. The youth would act as a page until he was

fourteen. At fourteen he was given the title of squire or esquire. The lord and his knights trained the boys on manly duties and martial skills. The ladies of the castle instructed them on the duties of religion and in all knightly etiquette. The esquire always went to battle with the knight to whom he was attached. He carried the knight's weapons and fought in battle if his knight was in great danger of being killed.

THE CEREMONY OF KNIGHTING

At the age of 21 the squire was introduced to the order of knighthood through an impressive ceremony. After fasting and conducting a long vigil, the candidate listened to a long sermon on his duties as a knight. Then he knelt, as in the feudal ceremony, before the lord conducting the services. He vowed to defend the Church and the ladies, to take care of those in need, and to always be faithful to his companion knights. His weapons were then given to him and his sword was girded on. The lord, striking him with the flat of his sword on the shoulders, said, "In the name of God, St. Michael, and of St. George, I dub thee knight; be brave, bold and loyal."

TOURNAMENTS AND JOUSTING

The tournament was a favorite amusement of the age of chivalry. It was a mimic battle between two companies of knights, armed usually with pointless swords or blunted lances.

THE GOOD OF CHIVALRY

Chivalry contributed powerfully to the development of respect and admiration of females. Up until this time, women were treated much like any other possession. It also created that "ideal of character" by requiring that knights live by the values of courtesy, gentleness, humanity, loyalty, magnanimity, and fidelity to the pledged word. These were people who tried to live virtuous lives. Chivalry gave to the world an ideal of manhood and a set of values to use to guide their behavior.

Discussion point: Why did feudalism fail as a government system?

THE PROBLEMS WITH THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

Feudalism was perhaps the best form of social organization that was possible to maintain in Europe during the medieval period; yet it had many and serious defects. First, it made the formation of strong national governments impossible. Every country was divided and subdivided into a vast number of practically independent principalities. Thus in the 10th century France was partitioned among about a 150 overlords, all exercising equal and coordinated powers. The enormous estates of these great lords were again subdivided into about 70,000 smaller fiefs. The large overlords each had more power than the king himself and the king had no way to keep them obedient if they chose to cast off their allegiance to him.

A second problem with feudalism was its exclusiveness. Under this system, society was divided into classes separated by lines which, though not impassable, were very rigid with a proud hereditary aristocracy at its head. It was only as the lower classes in the different countries gradually wrested from the feudal nobility their special and unfair privileges that a better, more democratic form of society arose. After that, civilization began to make more rapid progress.