

## **BRIEF HISTORY OF FEUDALISM AND MANORALISM:**

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TEXT

### **TRANSITION FROM THE ROMAN EMPIRE TO THE MIDDLE AGES**

The Middle Ages is often viewed as a totally bleak and barren thousand years of dark slumber between the grandeur of Rome and the glory of the Renaissance. The term “Middle Ages” was first referred to by fifteenth-century humanists who saw a ‘middle time’ between the end of the Roman empire and their own revival of classical ideals of the Renaissance. The phrase ‘middle time’ first appeared in 1468, and the “Middle Ages” in 1518. Of course this after-the-fact label was attached by men eager to proclaim their own intellectual advancements.

The imprint of the Middle Ages, however, is inescapable. Trial by jury, assemblies of elected representatives, middle-class society, universities, banks, the capitalist system all had their roots in an era that is quite misconstrued.

The Middle Ages are highlighted by the extremes of human actions and living conditions. Corruption coexisted with saintliness, ignorance with erudition, bestiality with chivalry, unimaginable devices of torture with exquisite works of art. Additionally, there was little political unity. The succession of kings and political dynasties were short-lived. Only Charlemagne and the great Carolingian rulers were able to fuse together vast territories into a cohesive empire. For medieval people, there was no central authority. Their world was local, and they were accountable to their own lord of the manor, understood only the accent from their own region, and rarely communicated with people in other regions.

In spite of their isolation, people of the Middle Ages enjoyed a common bond of unsurpassed strength: the Christian faith. This faith made people of Medieval Europe a commonwealth that endured in spite of invading Moslem armies and barbarians from the east and north. All over Europe there was one Church only. If a person wasn’t baptized, he or she was not a member of society, and if excommunicated, would lose all political and legal rights.

The first half of the Middle Ages was a time of upheaval and chaos. As the Teutonic people began to suffer pressures from the marauding Huns to their east, they came west and south, looting and burning in their quest for new security. The Roman amenities of hot baths, central heating, main drains, efficient water supplies fell into disrepair as the empire crumbled. All over Europe the great light of the Roman civilization faded.

The next 500 years are sometimes called the Dark Ages because during that time Europe relapsed into stagnation. Cities disappeared and paved roads became impassable trails. Paul the Deacon, a historian at the court of Charlemagne wrote “The flocks remain alone in the pastures. You saw villas or fortified places filled with people in utter silence. The whole world seemed brought to its ancient stillness; no voice in the field, no whistling of shepherds. The harvests were untouched. Human habitations became the abode of wild beasts.”

The silence Paul spoke of was not just stagnation, but fear, hunger, and disease. Ravages by enemies were their constant reality. Law and order, the twin pillars of the Roman imperial system, lay in ruins. Safe cities and trade routes had totally disappeared. An individual’s sole hope of protection rested in the local chieftain who was powerful enough to fend off an enemy. Here was a fertile situation for the growth of manorialisms and feudalism.

### **IMPACT OF THE ROMANS**

55 B.C. When Julius Caesar sent his vast armies northward into Gaul and Brittany (France), and England, they encountered primitive, savage people gathered into tiny villages, and vast areas of wilderness and wasteland. Only Lutetia (Paris) was a large enough stronghold to warrant burning by the Romans.

The Romans brought their technology, 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. Over the 500 years of their reign, they created markets for local farmers to sell produce, and provided protection and housing for travelers and traders in their fortified encampments. 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. (Fall of Rome 476)

In addition 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 word 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.

## **MANORIALISM AND SERFS**

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.

There were distinctions between serfs, and those distinctions depended on the amount of land they were permitted to hold. At the bottom were the cotters, from the old Norse word kot - cottage. They were given three or four acres to farm and served as menials of the manor household.

The majority of serfs were in the category of villein - from the Roman word villa or farm. They were usually given about 40 acres to farm and special perks like being able to draw water from the manor's streams and gather wood from the forest. In exchange, the villein labored 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 villains 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.

The lord could impose 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. Society had a deep sense of duty, and it was the duty of the peasant to serve the clergy and nobles. The relationship and associated responsibilities between serf and nobility on the manor was called manorialism. This should not be confused with feudalism. With the aristocracy there was a complex custom of reciprocity of rights and debts. The relationship between noble and noble was called feudalism.

The effect of several new devices on the economy and health of people during the Middle Ages was at least as profound as those of the Industrial Revolution. The exploitation of these inventions destroyed the economic necessity that had given rise to slavery. The harnessing of the muscle power of animals and the further invention of a rigid collar fitted across the chest and back of work animals enabled them to draw loads ten times heavier than the flexible straps used previously. Stirrups were invented that enabled a rider to stay on the saddle and to more easily mount and dismount. The

adaptation of the motion-power of the wind and water, derived from the Arabs, came into widespread use in the eleventh century. The innovation of the wheelbarrow transferred backing-breaking loads from the backs of children and their parents to this wheeled cart. The spinning wheel replaced the slower distaff. The brace and bit (drill) transformed carpentry. Gears and toothed wheels led to the development of machinery and clock-making. And the progress in metallurgy and casting developed to a fineness exemplified in the bells of a carillon.

Increase flow of trade brought money into the peasant's coffers and affected the life of remote villages. Population rose and fell with famines and diseases. But always there was a shortage of labor on the manor that eventually brought about the ability for peasants to bargain for better conditions.

## **ORIGINS OF THE FEUDALISTIC STRUCTURE**

It can safely be said that feudalism emerged from the disintegration of Roman institutions and the disruption of roads and settlements, especially in the Germanic 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.

The origin of medieval feudalism has long been disputed between scholars as to whether its institutional basis was Roman or Germanic. When the Romans conquered Europe, wealthy and influential people had armed guards and retainers attached to them. Some regard this practice as the origins of feudalism.

Irregardless, 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, (first Frankish dynasty ruling from 428-448 AD and was succeeded by Pepin I of the Carolingian line), Gaul frequently lapsed into complete 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 these partitions resulted in the birth of many small, unstable kingdoms like Burgundy and Austrasia. By the 7th century, these struggles evolved into open war. No kingdom was able to maintain public peace and the safety of its inhabitants. The structure was too primitive, the officials in its service were too few in number and too unreliable for it to successfully carry out the elementary functions of government. 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 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. For example, 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 *gwasawl*, (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* by the Merovingians (Franks).

The protective relationship set up by one free man over another was called, in Latin, *patrocinium*. Patron and patriarch are contemporary words that imply the superior authority and responsibility of protection that one person has for another. The act by which one free man placed himself in the *patrocinium* of another was called *commendatio* or *commendation*.

The Merovingians developed a formula for a free man to place himself under the patronage of another. This was through

a contract, called the commendation. A translation of a Germanic commendation follows:

*'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.'*

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. If a fief (a manor) was being given, the lord put his vassal in actual possession of the land or by placing in 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 demeaning about this relationship. Like the lord, the vassal had vassals and retainers pledged to him also. The wealthiest counts were vassals themselves to the emperor, king, or bishop. When the king called upon his vassals, they assembled a feudal army.

The vassal was responsible for rendering several services to his lord. He attended the lord's court and helped him make just decisions, along with his associates, to judge in a trial of another vassal. All vassals had the right to this treatment by his peers. More importantly, he owed military service to the lord, both to supply castle guards and warriors in combat. When the lord summoned him, he had to appear in the field with a fighting troop made up of his own vassals that was roughly in proportion to the value of the resources of his fief. The vassals had to be on horseback and in armor, and had to supply their own soldiers. The mounted man was called a chevalier or cavalier.

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

## **THE FIEF**

As previously discussed, vassalage was an institution involving relationships of subordination and service on the part of one noble person with regard to another. The custom of adding a benefit, or a fief, to the lord-vassal relationship developed after the reign of Charlemagne.

The development of fiefs was influenced by the old Roman institution of patricinium by which rich and powerful lords surrounded themselves with men who rendered them military service in exchange for protection, similar to the vassal-lord relationship. This service-and-protection contract gradually came to involve the granting of a beneficiu, or a benefit, like a perk. A beneficium was the act of giving land to a vassal for his use and maintenance for the vassal's lifetime. The use of this land tended to become hereditary. The beneficium did not necessarily involve rent or payment, except in the responsibilities of the lord-vassal relationship. Local royal officers and great landholders increased their power by seizing church land and otherwise acquiring land and increasing their number of vassals. By having a large number of vassals, the wealthy could force the king to grant them rights of private justice and immunity from royal interference. Feudalism became fixed in Frankish lands by the end of the 10th cent.

Under feudalism, the lord provided to the vassal the fief and his assurance of its defense against an enemy. The lord also provided a forum for the settlement of feudal disputes, the origins of "trial by your peers".

The vassal had several obligations to the lord once he accepted the fief. He had to pay the lord a fee when he took over a fief. He had to provide lodging for the lord and his retinue if they passed through his manor. This type of fief was often onerous because the rent and labor owed by the tenant was directly related to the value of land.

Another type of fief that originated from the Romans, called the *beneficium*, permitted the tenant to exploit the lands in any way he wished without reciprocal duties to the grantor. The Merovingians called this type of fief *precarium*. They were usually granted for life in exchange for little rent, or no rent at all. The *precarium* was usually granted by the Church for numerous reasons, like to curry favor, to develop a poor region or stimulate growth, to acquire special crops.

The acquisition of a fief was a regular way in which a man of the middle or lower class could rise in the social scale. This was because very frequently in the 13th century, a fief constituted a lordship, and gave to the person acquiring it certain powers of jurisdiction and a number of positive rights and honorary prerogatives.

Feudalism has left behind many legacies that affect our behavior, thought and feelings. When a Frenchman presents ‘*ses hommages*’ to a lady, he is saying that he is her vassal. When a Dutchman says he will support a person or a cause ‘*met raad en daad*’, he is undertaking the same duties as those of a vassal. It is from feudalism that the prestige of the military profession, the belief in the binding force of engagements freely entered into, the idea that one is not bound to obey an order that is inconsistent with one’s dignity as a free person, are ultimately derived. It is to the sacredness originally affixed to the ‘*foi*’ which bound together the lord and vassal, that Western culture still attaches the high importance of the virtue of fidelity. *Semper Fidelis*, motto of the United States Marines exemplifies this code of honor and dedication.

## **CHIVALRY**

Chivalry has been aptly defined as the “flower of feudalism.” It was a military institution or order, the members of which, “knights” were pledged to the protection of the Church and to the defense of the weak and oppressed.

The germ out of which chivalry developed seems to have been the body of vassal horsemen which Charles Martel created to repel the raids of the Saracens into Aquitaine after the battle of Tours. At Tours 732 AD, the Franks learned about the advantages of riding a horse into battle and thereafter all vassals were required to appear in armor and be mounted on a horse when going into battle.

Gradually the feudal warrior caste underwent a transformation. It became in part independent of the feudal system, so that any person, if qualified by birth and properly initiated, might be a member of the order without being the holder of a fief. Toward the end of the Middle Ages, a great number of knights were landless sons of the nobility.

## **TRAINING OF THE KNIGHT**

When chivalry had become established, all the sons of nobility, except those headed for the Church, were disciplined for this service. 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 and the youth would act as a page until he was fourteen when he acquired 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 and carried his weapons and fought if needed.

## **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 lengthy sermon on his duties as a knight. Then he knelt, as in the feudal ceremony of homage, before the lord conducting the services, he vowed to defend religion 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 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 the 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 IN CHIVALRY**

Chivalry contributed powerfully to the development of respect and tender veneration for females and is a distinguishing characteristic that still exists in some segments of modern society today. It also created that ideal of character -- an ideal characterized by the virtues of courtesy, gentleness, humanity, loyalty, magnanimity, and fidelity to the pledged word. Chivalry gave to the world an ideal of manhood and a set of values around which to conform one's life.

## **DEFECTS OF 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 seventy thousand smaller fiefs. The large overlords each had more power than the king himself and he 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.

## **THE CHURCH AND FEUDALISM**

The church had great influence in shaping feudalism; although the organization of the church was not feudal in character, its hierarchy somewhat paralleled the feudal hierarchy. The church owned much land, held by monasteries, by church dignitaries, and by the churches themselves. Most of this land, given by nobles as a bequest or gift, carried feudal obligations; thus clerical land, like lay land, assumed a feudal aspect, and the clergy became participants in the temporal feudal system. Many bishops and abbots were much like lay seigneurs. This feudal connection between church and state gave rise to the controversy over lay investiture.

Because from the first Christianity emphasized the value of the individual, in the Medieval scheme every person had his or her place, duties, responsibilities and rights. These details were scrupulously recorded in the manorial rolls in England and have made it possible for us to understand the way of life on the manor.

It was Christianity that gave medieval Europe its identity and unity. From Iceland to Sicily, from Portugal to Finland, you could go into a church and attend a service in which the ritual and language was virtually the same. The organization of the Church was vast, with its own bureaucracy, revenues and courts. By the fifth century when the barbarians began their aggressive onslaughts, Christianity was firmly established. When the government established by the Romans began to crumble, the church hierarchy provided the basic pattern for government under the barbarian kings.