



Teaching Medieval History: The Age of Light with Dr. Junius Johnson

Lecture 4: Feudalism

Outline:

“The vassalage system...was a system whereby you pledged your fealty to the person above you in the feudal hierarchy. This placed both the vassal and liege lord under obligations...There were things you were bound to do as my vassal, and things I was bound to do as your liege lord, but my contract was not with you: it was with the king, and through him, with God.”

In this lecture, Dr. Junius Johnson explains the development and structure of feudalism in the Middle Ages, covering various ranks, roles, and the importance of contracts within the system.

Introduction to Feudalism

- Many associate the Middle Ages with feudalism, but it was a late development in France.
- Feudalism developed significantly during Charlemagne's reign (768-814 AD) and was introduced to England by the Normans in 1066.
- The Domesday Book was part of the Norman reorganization to establish a feudal structure.
- Feudalism took full form by the 13th century and titles varied over time and place.

Nobility Ranks and Titles

- **Duke:** The highest noble rank beneath royalty; originally a Roman military title.
 - Dukes ruled duchies, initially independent but later subsumed by stronger monarchies.
- **Marquis/Marquess or Margrave:** Those who governed marches, key military border territories.



- **Earls** (pre-Norman England) or **Counts** (continental Europe) ruled an earldom or county, respectively.
 - *Earl* derives from Anglo-Saxon *ealdorman* (“elder man”) who administered a shire or province.
 - It was a derivative of the earlier *jarl*, a chieftain who ruled a certain territory.
- **Viscounts**: Deputies to Counts, evolving into their own rank over time.
- **Barons**: The lowest rank of nobility who ruled baronies.
 - From the Anglo-Saxon *bailon* (warrior).
- **Knights**: Originally elite warriors who were rewarded with land; they required extensive training and often held significant power.

Citizens

- **Knights**: In countries and periods where knights were not ranked among the nobility, they were commoners.
 - These knights were attached to the service of some lord.
 - Their roles included being bodyguards or leaders in the lord's army.
- **Yeoman**: Free commoners attached to noble households.
 - The English term "yeoman" describes a reality that existed everywhere.
 - They could serve as sergeants, grooms, porters, stewards, and even warriors.
 - Many of the English archers were yeoman.
- **Tradesmen**: Skilled workers, such as blacksmiths, leatherworkers, and merchants.
- **Free Tenants**: Paid rent to a lord for the right to work a piece of land.
- **Serfs**: Workers under a voluntary and hereditary contract of everlasting servitude.
- **Slaves**: People who were owned by someone and had few to no rights.
 - European slavery, a holdover from the Roman system, began to transform into serfdom during this period.
 - This transformation was influenced by the Church's harsh stance against enslaving fellow believers.
 - However, slavery continued, particularly the enslavement of Jews and Muslims, which did not receive the same censure.

The Church

- The Church occupied a special place relative to the feudal system.



- Technically, the Church ought not to have been part of the feudal system, but it had its own hierarchy:
 - Pope
 - Cardinal
 - Bishop
 - Priest
 - Deacon
 - Monk
 - Nun
 - Lay Person
- There were also finer distinctions within these levels.
 - The distinction between social rank and ecclesiastical rank was meant to be observed.
 - For example, a noble who entered a monastery or priesthood renounced his hereditary claims.
- The Church's hierarchy likely influenced the development of the feudal hierarchy.
- **Breakdown of Distinctions**
 - The clear distinction between social and ecclesiastical ranks broke down for various reasons.
 - Notable abuses included:
 - Investing bishops with secular offices.
 - Donating parishes and bishoprics to nobles to hold in vassalage.
 - The far end of this trajectory was represented by Cardinal Richelieu, who was both cardinal of France and Duke of Richelieu (a title created for him that remained in force for over 300 years).

Vassalage and Obligations

- Vassalage involved pledging fealty, a loyalty bound by service, creating mutual obligations between vassal and liege lord.
- Feudal obligations were hierarchical, with each level accountable to the one above.
- Conflicts within the hierarchy were resolved by appealing to the next higher authority.
- Obligations included providing soldiers, which required maintaining accurate records of fighting men.
- The king's main concern was preventing his vassals from becoming too powerful.



Serfdom Contracts

- Serfdom contracts granted perpetual rights to work land in exchange for freedom, ensuring land would be continuously worked.
- Lords benefited by securing reliable labor, essential for meeting production quotas.
- Serfdom was a mutually beneficial contract that provided stability and long-term security for both serfs and lords.

“To understand this, we must ignore the Latin name [servus, ‘slave’] which they used, and see the transaction as a way of establishing a new claim to a man’s loyalty and aid. Land was plentiful; labourers were comparatively few. The greatest problem for an estate manager was to ensure full cultivation. Landlords were not above competing for labour. The condition of serfdom, though it did not take away a man’s property, prevented him from moving elsewhere. Probably most of those who came into this condition were already working on the land as tenants of the lord to whom they delivered their freedom; henceforth the lord was assured of their continual service—and would pay a price for this assurance. When the employee of a great industrial concern today accepts a substantial sum on condition that he will not move elsewhere, he is doing in a grand way what thousands of men, large and small, were doing in the eleventh century. The modern firm is not interested in securing the services of its tied-man’s children: and for good reason—they might be useless. The less selective eleventh-century landlord thought otherwise: the guarantee of service bound also the serf’s children. The securing of their labour was a vital part of the bargain.”¹

The Principle of Freedom

- Medieval people resented arbitrariness, not subordination; law was seen as the protector of freedom.

“What men feared and resented in serfdom was not its subordination, but its arbitrariness. The hatred of that which was governed, not by rule, but by will, went very deep in the

¹ R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (Yale University Press: New Haven, 1967)



Middle Ages [...] The supremacy of Will was itself an evil, whether the will was one's own or another's; the latter was more uncomfortable; the former more deadly. [...] The higher one rose towards liberty, the more the area of action was covered by law, the less it was subject to will. The knight did not obey fewer laws than the ordinary freeman, but very many more; the freeman was not less restricted than the serf, but he was restricted in a different, more rational way.

"Law was not the enemy of freedom; on the contrary, the outline of liberty was traced by the bewildering variety of law which was slowly evolving [...] High and low alike sought liberty by insisting on enlarging the number of rules under which they lived. The most highly privileged communities were those with the most laws. At the bottom of society was the serf, who could least appeal to law against the arbitrariness of his superiors. At the top was the nobleman, governed by an immensely complicated system of rules in his public life, and taught in his private relationships to observe an equally complicated code of behaviour."²

- Higher ranks had more laws, ensuring less arbitrariness in their lives.
- Liege lords had a vested interest in their serfs' welfare, often sending gifts for marriages and births to ensure future labor.
- Marriages within fiefdoms simplified contract management, with women typically moving to their husband's fiefdom.
 - If a woman who was sole heir to a serf contract married outside her fiefdom, the contract would need to be dissolved so the land could be re-assigned.
- Likewise, lesser lords and knights would have to consider the impact to property ownership when marrying a woman from another fiefdom.
- In conclusion, feudalism provided societal stability by tying people to the land.

² Ibid