

Feudalism

Feudalism, historiographic construct designating the social, economic, and political conditions in western Europe during the early Middle Ages, the long stretch of time between the 5th and 12th centuries. Feudalism and the related term feudal system are labels invented long after the period to which they were applied. They refer to what those who invented them perceived as the most significant and distinctive characteristics of the early and central Middle Ages. The expressions *féodalité* and feudal system were coined by the beginning of the 17th century, and the English words feudality and feudalism (as well as feudal pyramid) were in use by the end of the 18th century. They were derived from the Latin words *feudum* (“fief”) and *feodalitas* (services connected with the fief), both of which were used during the Middle Ages and later to refer to a form of property holding. Use of the terms associated with *feudum* to denote the essential characteristics of the early Middle Ages has invested the fief with exaggerated prominence and placed undue emphasis on the importance of a special mode of land tenure to the detriment of other, more significant aspects of social, economic, and political life.

Origins of the idea

The terms feudalism and feudal system were generally applied to the early and central Middle Ages—the period from the 5th century, when central political authority in the Western empire disappeared, to the 12th century, when kingdoms began to emerge as effective centralized units of government. For a relatively brief period, from the mid-8th to the early 9th century, the Carolingian rulers, especially Pippin (reigned 751–768) and Charlemagne (reigned 768/771–814), had remarkable success in creating and maintaining a relatively unified empire. Before and afterward, however, political units were fragmented and political authority diffused. The mightier of the later Carolingians attempted to regulate local magnates and enlist them in their service, but the power of local elites was never effaced. In the absence of forceful kings and emperors, local lords expanded the territory subject to them and intensified their control over the people living there. In many areas the term *feudum*, as well as the terms *beneficium* and *casamentum*, came to be used to describe a form of property holding. The holdings these terms denoted have often been considered essentially dependent tenures, over which their holders’ rights were notably limited. As the words were used in documents of the period, however, the characteristics of the holdings to which they were applied are difficult to distinguish from those of tenures designated by such words as *allodium*, which has generally been translated as “freehold property.”

Charles II

Fiefs still existed in the 17th century, when the feudal model—or, as contemporary historians term it, the feudal construct—was developed. At that time, the fief was a piece of property, usually land, that was held in return for service, which could include military duties. The fief holder swore fidelity to the person from whom the fief was held (the lord, dominus, or seigneur) and became his (or her) man. The ceremony in which the oath was taken was called homage (from the Latin, homo; “man”). These institutions survived in England until they were abolished by Parliament in 1645 and, after the Restoration, by Charles II in 1660. Until their eradication by the National Assembly between 1789 and 1793, they had considerable importance in France, where they were employed to create and reinforce familial and social bonds. Their pervasiveness made students of the past eager to understand how they had come into being. Similarities of terminology and practice found in documents surviving from the Middle Ages—especially the *Libri feudorum* (“Book of Fiefs”), an Italian compilation of customs relating to property holding, which was made in the 12th century and incorporated into Roman law—led historians and lawyers to search for the origins of contemporary feudal institutions in the Middle Ages.

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As defined by scholars in the 17th century, the medieval “feudal system” was characterized by the absence of public authority and the exercise by local lords of administrative and judicial functions formerly (and later) performed by centralized governments; general disorder and endemic conflict; and the prevalence of bonds between lords and free dependents (vassals), which were forged by the lords’ bestowal of property called “fiefs” and by their reception of homage from the vassals. These bonds entailed the rendering of services by vassals to their lords (military obligations, counsel, financial support) and the lords’ obligation to protect and respect their vassals. These characteristics were in part deduced from medieval documents and chronicles, but they were interpreted in light of 17th-century practices and semantics. Learned legal commentaries on the laws governing the property called “fiefs” also affected interpretation of the sources. These commentaries, produced since the 13th century, focused on legal theory and on rules derived from actual disputes and hypothetical cases. They did not include (nor were they intended to provide) dispassionate analysis of historical development. Legal commentators in the 16th century had prepared the way for the elaboration of the feudal construct by formulating the idea, loosely derived from the *Libri feudorum*, of a single feudal law, which they presented as being spread throughout Europe during the early Middle Ages.

The terms feudalism and feudal system enabled historians to deal summarily with a long span of European history whose complexities were—and remain—confusing. The Roman Empire and the various emperors’ accomplishments provided a key to understanding Roman history, and the reemergence of states and strong rulers in the 12th century again furnished manageable focal points for historical narrative, particularly since medieval states and governmental practices can be presented as antecedents of modern nations and institutions. The feudal construct neatly filled the gap between the 5th and the 12th century. Although Charlemagne may seem an anomaly in this evolution, he was presented as “sowing the seeds” from which feudalism emerged. A variety of Roman, barbarian, and Carolingian institutions were considered

antecedents of feudal practices: Roman lordship and clientage, barbarian war chiefdoms and bands, grants of lands to soldiers and to officeholders, and oaths of loyalty and fidelity. In the 17th century, as later, the high point of feudalism was located in the 11th century. Later rulers who adopted and adapted feudal institutions to increase their power were labeled “feudal” and their governments called “feudal monarchies.” Despite the survival of institutions and practices associated with the medieval feudal system in the 17th century, historians of that time presented medieval feudalism and the feudal system as declining in importance in the 14th and 15th centuries. This period was later dubbed an age of “bastard feudalism” because of the use of salaries and written contracts between lords and dependents.

Those who formulated the concept of feudalism were affected by the search for simplicity and order in the universe associated with the work of Nicolaus Copernicus (1473–1543) and especially Isaac Newton (1642–1727). Historians and philosophers were persuaded that if the universe operated systematically, so too must societies. In the 16th century some students of the law and customs of the fief declared that feudal institutions were universal and maintained that feudal systems had existed in Rome, Persia, and Judaea. The philosopher Giambattista Vico (1668–1744) considered the fief one of humankind’s eternal institutions. Adopting a similar position, Voltaire (1694–1778) contested the judgment of Montesquieu (1689–1755) that the appearance of feudal laws was a unique historical event. The philosophical historians of 18th-century Scotland searched for feudalism outside western Europe, and they expanded the construct’s field of significance to encompass peasants as well as lords. Adam Smith (1723–90) presented feudal government as a stage of social development characterized by the absence of commerce and by the use of semi-free labour to cultivate land. Smith’s student John Millar (1735–1801) found “the outlines of the feudal policy” in Asia and Africa. The association popularly made between the feudal construct and ignorance and barbarism fostered its extension to regions which Europeans scarcely knew and which they considered backward and primitive.

Following Millar’s precedent, some later historians continued to look for feudal institutions in times and places outside medieval Europe, most notably Japan. These efforts, predictably, resulted in misconceptions and misunderstanding. Historians using the feudal model for comparative purposes emphasized those characteristics which resemble or seem to resemble Western feudal practices and neglected other, dissimilar aspects, some of which were uniquely significant in shaping the evolution of the areas in question. For Westerners, the use of the feudal model necessarily created a deceptive sense of familiarity with societies that are different from their own.