

Europe's Feudal States

THE MIDDLE AGES BEGAN WHEN THE WESTERN ROMAN EMPIRE FELL IN THE FIFTH CENTURY. THIS PERIOD LASTED FOR HUNDREDS OF YEARS. WITHOUT THE ROMANS TO PROVIDE PROTECTION, MEDIEVAL EUROPE BECAME A VIOLENT AND DANGEROUS PLACE. FREQUENT FOREIGN INVASIONS BY VIKINGS, MAGYARS, MUSLIMS, AND OTHER RAIDERS WEAKENED EUROPEAN RULERS SO THAT THEY COULD NOT MAINTAIN LAW AND ORDER.

SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY, WEALTHY NOBLES, SEEKING TO EXPAND THEIR POWER AND LAND HOLDINGS, BEGAN FIGHTING ONE ANOTHER FOR TERRITORY. OUT OF THIS CHAOS EMERGED A NEW POLITICAL AND SOCIAL SYSTEM CALLED FEUDALISM. BECAUSE EUROPEAN KINGS WEREN'T STRONG ENOUGH TO CONTROL THE BATTLING NOBLES WHO WERE CHALLENGING THEIR POWER, THEY STRUCK A DEAL WITH THEM INSTEAD. IN A FORMAL CEREMONY, A MONARCH WOULD GIVE A NOBLE A FIEF, OR GRANT OF LAND. THE MONARCH ALSO PROMISED TO PROTECT THE NOBLE. IN EXCHANGE, THE NOBLE SWORE AN OATH OF LOYALTY, VOWING TO BE FAITHFUL TO HIS LORD, THE MONARCH, AND TO SUPPLY HIM WITH ARMED WARRIORS AND OTHER SERVICES.

THROUGH THIS FEUDAL CONTRACT, THE NOBLE BECAME THE VASSAL OF A KING OR QUEEN. THE MONARCH'S VASSALS BECAME LORDS THEMSELVES BY SUBDIVIDING THEIR FIEFS AND ACQUIRING VASSALS OF THEIR OWN. LIKE THEIR OVERLORDS, THESE LESSER NOBLES HAD TO PUBLICLY PROMISE THEIR LOYALTY AND SUPPORT IN RETURN FOR LAND AND PROTECTION. OFTEN, THE SAME MAN WAS BOTH LORD AND VASSAL -- LORD TO A LESS POWERFUL NOBLE BELOW HIM AND VASSAL TO A MORE POWERFUL NOBLE ABOVE HIM.

FEUDAL SOCIETY HAD A STRICT SOCIAL ORDER. THE MONARCH WAS AT THE TOP. DIRECTLY BELOW HIM WERE THE UPPER NOBILITY. EVEN THOUGH THEY WERE BELOW THE KING, IT WAS THESE LOCAL LORDS WHO CONTROLLED MOST PEOPLE'S LIVES. THE SOCIAL HIERARCHY CONTINUED DOWN THROUGH THE REST OF SOCIETY. JUST UNDER THE NOBILITY WERE THE KNIGHTS, MOUNTED WARRIORS WHO DID BATTLE FOR THEIR LORDS. NOBLES ALSO SOMETIMES HIRED MEN-AT-ARMS, SOLDIERS WHO HAD THE SAME EQUIPMENT AS KNIGHTS BUT NOT THEIR SOCIAL STANDING. THE PEASANTS WERE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE SOCIAL ORDER. THEY WERE GENERALLY POOR, UNEDUCATED LABORERS WHO LIVED AND WORKED ON THE LAND OWNED BY THE NOBLES.

BUT PEASANTS WERE THE ECONOMIC BACKBONE OF SOCIETY, GROWING THE CROPS AND PRODUCING THE OTHER GOODS THAT EVERYONE NEEDED. THE PEASANTS WERE CONSIDERED PART OF THE LAND THEY LIVE ON. WHEN A NOBLE RECEIVED A FIEF OF LAND, HE RECEIVED THE PEASANTS WHO LIVED ON IT, TOO. PEASANTS COULDN'T LEAVE THE LAND WITHOUT THE LORD'S PERMISSION, AND THEY HAD TO OBEY THE LORD'S LAWS. THEY ALSO HAD TO WORK FOR THE LORD, FARMING HIS LANDS AND GIVING HIM REGULAR PAYMENTS OF WHAT THEY PRODUCED. IN RETURN, THE PEASANTS WERE ALLOWED TO FARM SOME OF THE LORD'S LAND FOR THEMSELVES. PERHAPS MORE IMPORTANT DURING THIS CHAOTIC PERIOD, THEY ENJOYED THE STABILITY AND PROTECTION OF THE LORD'S LAWS AND HIS ARMIES. THESE WERE BIG BENEFITS DURING THE MIDDLE AGES, WHEN COMPETING LORDS, BANDITS, AND RAIDERS FROM OUTSIDE EUROPE WERE A SERIOUS THREAT.

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A MAIN SOURCE OF PROTECTION DURING THE MIDDLE AGES WAS A CASTLE. AN ARMY THAT WAS BARRICADED INSIDE A CASTLE WAS INCREDIBLY DIFFICULT TO DEFEAT, AND NOBLES, SAFE INSIDE THEIR CASTLES, WERE ABLE TO BUILD UP THEIR ARMIES AND EXPAND THEIR POWER. BUT THE CASTLES WERE MORE THAN JUST STRONGHOLDS FOR THE NOBILITY. THEY ALSO PROTECTED THE ENTIRE COMMUNITY. DURING TIMES OF TROUBLE, THE LOCAL PEASANTS GATHERED FOR SAFETY INSIDE THE CASTLE WALLS AND OFTEN HELPED TO DEFEND THE CASTLE. UNDER FEUDALISM, THE OVERLORDS, LESSER LORDS, KNIGHTS, AND PEASANTS ALL DEPENDED ON ONE ANOTHER FOR SURVIVAL. LIFE MAY NOT HAVE BEEN EASY FOR MOST PEOPLE, BUT FEUDALISM TURNED CHAOS INTO ORDER AND OFFERED STABILITY DURING A VIOLENT AND UNCERTAIN AGE.