

Castles with moats, lords and ladies, knights competing in tournaments—many people picture these images when they think of the Middle Ages in Europe. Feudalism was no fairy tale, however. The feudal system relied on serf labor to survive. Serfs were peasants who were attached to the land and unable to travel freely. They provided labor in return for food, shelter, and protection.

A serf could not rise through the ranks to become a lord. If you were a serf, you were only a serf, and you could never become a prince or princess. Feudalism was an organized system of governing land on a large scale, and it ensured peace in the kingdom. Yet feudalism and the role of serfs contributed to the rise of European society at the expense of individual rights. Was feudalism a necessary labor system, or did it cost too many people their freedoms?

What Is Feudalism?

The establishment of feudalism was based on the belief that all land belonged to God. It was believed that kings were chosen by divine right, or selected by God, to rule the land. This meant that kings could use the land as they wished. The king was at the very top of the social system and owned all the land in his kingdom.

Because the king could not manage all the land himself, he would grant pieces of land to his greatest allies to control. Dukes and earls were granted titles to parcels of land called manors. In return for these gifts of land, the dukes and earls were required to supply knights to the king to serve in his armies. Earls and dukes could further divide their manors, granting portions to lesser lords.

There were two other groups of people who lived on manors: the free peasants and the serfs. The free peasants paid rent to the manor lord and often worked in a trade, such as baker or blacksmith. The main occupants of the lands were the serfs. Serfs worked the land for the nobles and knights.

By the 11th century, feudalism became the primary economic system in northern Europe. This system placed lords and nobility at the top of the economic and social structure and serfs at the bottom. Relationships between each level of society relied on the exchange of loyalty and services. Kings gave land to lords. In



A lord pledged loyalty to a king. When a king gave lords land, the lords had to swear their loyalty to him.

turn, lords were loyal to the king and provided knights to serve the king in battle. Knights gave their service to the king, and the knights received training and a place to live in return. Lords and knights gave food and protection to serfs and free peasants in exchange for labor and services, such as baking and blacksmithing. Everyone in a feudal society relied on one another to survive, which played an important role in creating a stable economy in the Middle Ages.

The Importance of Serfs

Some people say that feudalism was a bad system of labor because it exploited, or took unfair advantage of, serfs. Without the use of serfs, the entire economy of Europe would have suffered. Serfs were the base of the economic system because they supplied labor and goods to the entire kingdom.

Serfs provided a manor with labor, but their responsibilities did not end there. They had to purchase their own equipment, like plows, to farm the land for the manor lord, and they were taxed to use animals like oxen. Taxes may have put a strain on serfs, but they added more money to the economy.

In addition to the labor and taxes that the serfs provided to lords, serfs also gave their lords the extra harvest to pass along to their landlords. The serfs were not able to keep any of the products of their hard work in the fields.

The labor of the serfs and their profits paid for the entire kingdom's success. The lord wanted to send skilled knights to the king in hopes of more rewards if there was a victory. The lord also wanted to ensure that his manor was represented well in the king's army. Manor lords paid for their land in knights and had to be sure that the knights were trained properly. Money was needed to train knights. For example, knights were fed at the manor house, so the lord might have to provide a communal dinner each day. Providing training and meeting the needs of the knights was important if the kingdom ever went to war.



Life on a manor is shown here. Note the difference in sizes between the manor home on the hill and the smaller serf cottages below.

The Loss of Individual Rights

Although serfs provided the manor with an important source of money and labor, it is important to remember that their lives were full of hardship. They were farmers in debt, and many of them spent their entire lives in poverty. If a serf did not have money to pay taxes, he or she would pay with more labor. Getting out of debt was nearly impossible.

In addition to being poor, serfs paid a great price for knightly and lordly protection. Laws on manors were strictly enforced. Both serfs and free peasants had very few rights. Serfs had to pay for the use of the lord's land and for services in the manor. They could grow grain, but they could not mill it. Instead, they had to pay to have it crushed at the lord's mill. They had flour, but they could not bake bread. The baker, a free person in the manor, was the only person who could bake bread. Serfs again paid for the use of the baker. Even if serfs had a hand mill, they could not crush their grain. If they were caught doing so, they would be punished. The economy was so structured that people were never allowed to do tasks outside of their assigned role.

During the Middle Ages, European societies tried to protect their people, land, and products in any way they could. Feudalism in Europe became the only way kings knew how to protect and grow their kingdoms. It may look different from social structures in countries today, but the ultimate goal of past feudal economic structures was protection and financial stability—which is similar to the goal of most modern countries. In your opinion, were the benefits of protection and stable government worth the loss of serfs' individual rights?

After reading the passage, answer the following questions:

- 1.** In what way were knights a part of the feudal class system?
 - A.** They were prisoners of war who were forced to fight.
 - B.** They were manor lords who fought in battle for the king.
 - C.** They provided labor in return for food, shelter, and protection.
 - D.** They fought for the king and the lord and protected the manor.

- 2.** What did serfs receive in return for their labor?
 - A.** land and food
 - B.** protection and food
 - C.** land and protection
 - D.** food and equipment

- 3.** What is an example of the excessive taxing, or overtaxing, of serfs under feudalism?
 - A.** Serfs were only given a few pieces of equipment.
 - B.** Serfs had to rent land on the manor.
 - C.** Serfs had to pay to have the grain they grew milled at the manor mill.
 - D.** Serfs collected taxes from the knights, but had to turn the money over to the lords.

- 4.** Which sentence from the passage expresses an opinion rather than a fact?
 - A.** “The feudal system relied on serf labor to survive.”
 - B.** “Relationships between each level of society relied on the exchange of loyalty and services.”
 - C.** “In addition to the labor and taxes that the serfs provided to lords, serfs also gave their lords the extra harvest to pass along to their landlords.”
 - D.** “Although serfs provided the manor with an important source of money and labor, it is important to remember that their lives were full of hardship.”

- 5.** In feudalism, serfs farmed most of the manor and supported the day-to-day life of the villages. If the nobility were a small percentage of the population, why do you think there were not more revolts by serfs? Provide details from the passage to support your answer.