Count William had just inherited the rich lands of Flanders. The local nobles gathered to pledge loyalty to their new lord. One by one, they knelt before him and took a solemn oath. “I promise on my faith,” pledged each lord, “that I will in future be faithful to Count William and will observe my [loyalty] to him completely against all persons in good faith and without deceit.”

The count then touched the noble with a small rod. With that gesture he granted the noble a parcel of land, which included any towns, castles, or people on it.

Although the words might vary, ceremonies like this one took place across Europe during the Middle Ages. In public, before witnesses, great nobles and lesser lords exchanged vows of loyalty and service. Those vows were part of a new political and social system that governed medieval life.

**THE EMERGENCE OF FEUDALISM**

In the face of invasions by Vikings, Muslims, and Magyars, kings and emperors were too weak to maintain law and order. People needed protection for themselves, their homes, and their lands. In response to this basic need for protection, a new system evolved known as feudalism. Feudalism was a loosely organized system of rule in which powerful local lords divided their landholdings among lesser lords. In exchange, these lesser lords, or vassals, pledged service and loyalty to the greater lord.

**MUTUAL OBLIGATIONS**

The relationship between lords and vassals was established by custom and tradition and by an exchange of pledges known as the feudal contract. A lord granted his vassal a fief (FEF), or estate. Fiefs ranged from a few acres to hundreds of square miles. In addition to the land itself, the fief included peasants to work the land, as well as any towns or buildings on the land.

As part of the feudal contract, the lord promised to protect his vassal. In return, the vassal pledged loyalty to his lord. He also agreed to provide the lord with forty days of military service each year, certain money payments, and advice.
Feudalism

For centuries, feudalism was the way of life in Western Europe. Everyone, from the poorest peasants to the richest king, was touched in some way by feudal relationships. The painting, the chart, and the quotation on this page all provide information about these relationships.

A Vassal Pledges Loyalty

“I John of Toul, make it known that I am the faithful man of the lady Beatrice, Countess of Troyes, and of my most dear lord, Theobald, Count of Champagne, her son, against all persons living or dead, except for my allegiance to lord Enjorand of Coucy, lord John of Arcis and the count of Grandpre. If it should happen that the count of Grandpre should be at war with the countess and count of Champagne on his own quarrel, I will aid the count of Grandpre in my own person and will send to the count and countess of Champagne the knights whose service I owe them fo the fief which I hold of them.”

- quoted in Institutions in European History (Esler)

A STRUCTURED SOCIETY Everyone had a place in feudal society. Below the monarch were powerful lords, such as dukes and counts, who held the largest fiefs. Each of these lord had vassals, and these vassals in turn hair their own vassals. In many cases, the same man was both vassal and lord – vassal to a more powerful lord above him and lord to a less powerful vassal below him.

Because vassals often held fiefs from more than one lord, feudal relationships grew very complex. A vassal who had pledged loyalty to several lords could have serious problems if his overlords quarreled with each other. What would he do if both demanded his aid? To solve this problem, a vassal usually had a liege lord to whom he owed his first loyalty.
THE WORLD OF NOBLES

For feudal nobles, warfare was a way of life. Rival lords battled constantly for power. Many nobles trained from boyhood for a future occupation as a *knight*, or mounted warrior.

ACHIEVING KNIGHTHOOD  
At the age of seven, a boy slated to become a knight was sent away to the castle of his father’s lord. There, he learned to ride and fight. He also learned to keep his armor and weapons in good condition. Training was difficult and discipline was strict. Any laziness was punished with an angry blow or even a severe beating.

With his training finished, the youth was ready to become a knight. Kneeling before an older knight, he bowed his head. The knight struck the young man with his hand or the flat side of his sword and declared something like the following: “In the name of God, Saint Michael, and Saint George, I dub thee knight. Be valiant.” After this “dubbing,” the young knight took his place beside other warriors.

As feudal warfare decreased in the 1100s, *tournaments*, or mock battles, came into fashion. A lord would invite knights from the surrounding area to enter contests of fighting skill. Early tournaments were as dangerous as real battles, and captured knights were held for ransom. In time, tournaments acquired more ceremony and ritual.

CASTLES  
During the early Middle Ages, powerful lords fortified their homes to withstand attack. Their strongholds included a keep, or wooden tower, ringed by a fence. The keep was separated from the surrounding area by a moat, or water-filled ditch.

The strongholds gradually became larger and grander. By the 1100s, monarchs and nobles owned sprawling stone castles with high walls, towers, and drawbridges over wide moats. Wars often centered on seizing castles that commanded strategic river crossings, harbors, or mountain passes. Castle dwellers stored up food and water so that they could withstand a long siege. If attackers failed to starve the defenders into submission, they might try to tunnel under the castle walls.

The Medieval Castle

By the late Middle Ages, some feudal castles had become vast fortresses. This castle at Carcassone in France, which people still visit today, had a double outer wall to protect it from attack.
Noblewomen

Noblewomen played active roles in this warrior society. While her husband or father was off fighting, the “lady of the manor” took over his duties. She supervised vassals, managed the household, and performed necessary agricultural and medical tasks. Sometimes she might even have to go to war to defend her estate.

A few medieval noblewomen took a hand in politics. For example, Eleanor of Aquitaine inherited lands in southwestern France. Through two marriages, she became, first, queen of France and, later, queen of England. Eleanor was a leading force in European politics for more than fifty years.

Women’s rights to inheritance were severely restricted under the feudal system. Land usually passed to the eldest son in a family. A woman did, however, receive land as part of her dowry, and fierce negotiations swirled around an unmarried or widowed heiress. If her husband died before her, a woman regained rights to her land.

Like their brothers, daughters of nobles were sent to friends or relatives for training. Before her parents arranged her marriage, a young woman was expected to know how to spin and weave and how to supervise servants. A few learned to read and write. As a wife, she was expected to bear many children and be dutiful to her husband.

Chivalry

In the later Middle Ages, knights adopted a code of conduct called chivalry. Chivalry required knights to be brave, loyal, and true to their word. In warfare, they had to fight fairly. A knight, for example, agreed not to attack another knight before the opponent had a chance to put on his armor. Chivalry also dictated that warriors treat a captured knight well or even release him if he promised to pay his ransom. Chivalry had limits, though. It applied to nobles only, not commoners.

In theory, if not always in practice, chivalry placed women on a pedestal. The code of chivalry called for women to be protected and cherished. Troubadours, or wandering poets, adopted this view. Their love songs praised the perfection, beauty, and wit of women. Much later, ideas of chivalry would shape western ideas of romantic love.

Peasants and Manor Life

The heart of the medieval economy was the manor, or lord’s estate. Most manors include one or more villages and the surrounding lands. Peasants, who made up the majority of the population in medieval society, lived and worked on the manor.
Most peasants on a manor were serfs, bound to the land. Serfs were not slaves who could be bought and sold. Still, they were not free. They could not leave the manor without the lord’s permission. If the manor was granted to a new lord, the serfs went along with it.

MUTUAL OBLIGATIONS Peasants and their lords were tied together by mutual rights and obligations. Peasants had to work several days a week farming the lord’s lands. They also repaired his roads, bridges, and fences. Peasants paid the lord a fee when they married, when they inherited their father’s acres, or when they used the local mill to grind grain. Other payments fell due at Christmas and Easter. Because money had largely disappeared from medieval Europe, they paid with products such as grain, honey, eggs, or chicken.

In return for a lifetime of labor, peasants had the right to farm several acres for themselves. They were also entitled to their lord’s protection from Viking raids or feudal warfare. Although they could not leave the manor freely, they also could not be forced off it. In theory, at least, they were guaranteed food, housing, and land.

A SELF-SUFFICIENT WORLD The manor was generally self-sufficient. That is, peasants produced almost everything they needed, from food and clothing to simple furniture and tools. Most peasants never ventured more than a few miles from their village. They had no schooling and no knowledge of a larger world outside.

A typical manor included a few dozen one-room huts clustered close together in a village. Nearby stood a water mill to grind grain, a tiny church, and the manor house. The fields surrounding the village were divided into narrow strips. Each family had strips of land in different fields so that good land and bad land were shared evenly.

PEASANT LIFE For most peasants, life was harsh. Men, women, and children worked long hours, from sunup to sundown. During planting season, a man might guide an ox-drawn plow through the fields while his wife walked alongside, goading the ox into motion with a pointed stick. Children helped plant seeds, weeded, and took care of pigs or sheep.

The peasant family ate a simple diet of black bread with vegetables such as peas, cabbage, turnips, or onions. They seldom had meat unless they poached wild game on their lord’s manor, at the risk of harsh punishment. If they lived near a river, a meal might include fish. At night, the family and any cows, chicken, pigs, or sheep slept together in their one-room hut.

Like farmers everywhere, European peasants worked according to the season. In spring and autumn, the plowed and harvested. In summer, they hayed. At other times, they weeded, repaired fences, and performed chores. In late winter, when the harvest was exhausted and new crops had not yet ripened, hunger was common. Disease took a heavy toll, and few peasants lived beyond the age of thirty-five.
Still, peasants found occasions to celebrate, such as marriages and births. Welcome breaks came at Christmas and Easter, when peasants had a week off from work. Dozens of other festivals in the Christian calendar brought days off. At these times, people might butcher an animal so that they could feast on meat. There would also be dancing and rough sports, from wrestling to ball games.

Questions

1. Define the following terms:
   a. feudalism
   b. vassal
   c. feudal contract
   d. fief
   e. knight
   f. tournament
   g. chivalry
   h. troubadour
   i. manor
   j. serf

2. Describe three features of feudal society.

3. What obligations did lords and vassals have under the feudal system?

4. How did the code of chivalry affect medieval ideas about women?

5. What responsibilities did the peasant have toward the lord of a manor?

6. What responsibilities did the lord of the manor have toward the peasants?

7. How did the breakdown of central authority in Europe lead to the development of feudalism?

8. Compare the code of chivalry to ideas about “good sportsmanship” today.