

# Lords, Vassals, Fiefs, Peasants: Medieval Society

- Definitions
  - The Ceremony



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## ■ Definitions

- Lord, Vassal, Fief, Peasant
  - The land is the tie between Feudal and Manorial systems.
  - Feudal relationship defined between 900-1200. Land had become hereditary; mutual obligations had to be clear.
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# Lords, Vassals, Fiefs, Peasants: Medieval Society

- Defining Characteristics of Feudalism
    - Primary Obligation was military service.
    - At first vassal rendered as much service as lord demanded.
    - Then by 12th century, service rendered on different terms depending on whether lord aggressor or victim.
    - In first case 40 days a year. Latter unlimited service.
    - How many followers would vassal bring? Enfeoffment - making of sub-vassals.
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- Question

Every custom and practice has its humorous side.  
Can you think of examples?



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- Defining Characteristics of Feudalism
    - Service usually field service. Other forms: castle duty, other necessary services.
    - Court service.
    - Advice and consent or to settle disputes.
    - All vassals had right to hear and settle. Right of trial by one's peers.
    - Wise lord asked vassals advice.
    - Vassals had to okay any change in relationship. Origin of Parliament.
    - Vassal owed aids and dues.
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- Defining Characteristics of Feudalism
    - Relief owed when taking up fief or getting new lord
    - Ransom when lord captured.
    - On marriage of lord's eldest daughter.
    - On knighting of eldest son.
    - Anything else extraordinary and had to be approved by vassals (again Parliament).
  - The Lord's Other Privileges
    - To approve marriage of vassal's daughters
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- Question

Who had the best of it, a vassal or a lord? If one was both lord and vassal, vassal to someone else but with his own vassals as well, which was the better position?



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- The Lord's Other Privileges
    - Wardship over minors or heiresses.
    - Escheat if vassal left no heirs.
    - Forfeiture if vassal broke relationship.
  - Feudal system depended on aristocratic domination of society.
  - Birth justified aristocratic domination.
  - Only well-born could be depended on to maintain personal bond.
  - Distinctions between aristocrats and peasants.
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## ■ Question

- 1. What are modern survivals of chivalry?
  - 2. Is aristocracy still alive in society today? Examples?
  - 3. Are people still defined by class? Why do you think so?  
Why not?
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- The terms for aristocrats: “noble”, courageous, courteous, generous.
  - Peasants: “villein” -> “villain”.
  - Chivalry originally meant horsemanship. Then code of values.
  - People defined by class.
  - How did men and women of feudal class live?
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- Males spent lives preparing to fight or fighting.
  - Young male sent to live with another household.
  - Learned basics of fighting, weapons, horsemanship.
  - The ceremony of knighting.
  - Thereafter spent lives in war, tournaments, hunting.
  - Their code of behavior towards each other; towards others not of their class.
  - Feudal chivalry and its values: skill in battle; wisdom; fidelity. Later values to make warfare more pleasant. Desire for glory; generosity. These values come to life in *chansons de geste*: Song of Roland.
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- Religious chivalry-virtues similar to feudal chivalry. Church attempted to soften excesses of feudal warriors. John of Salisbury (12th century) and Church's concept of perfect knight. Ceremonies; stories such as Parsifal and Galahad. Quest for the Grail.
  - Courtly Love-sensual, erotic side of chivalry. Troubadours in South of France originated. William IX, Duke of Aquitaine. Basic idea-adoration of a lady improves a man in every way. Lady becomes better too. Eleanor of Aquitaine. Her daughters Marie and Alice.
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- Courtly love defined: Andrew the Chaplain's work, Art of Courtly Love; Chrétien de Troyes' work, Lancelot
  - Women of the feudal class.
  - Supervising household tasks.
  - Their status.
  - Courtly love beginning in 12th century sought to elevate women.
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## ■ Questions

- 1. Were women victimized by men in this period?
  - 2. Is it appropriate to judge the past by our own standards?
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## ■ Manorial Relationships

- ❑ This is only a general pattern
  - ❑ On every estate the lord held part of arable land - *demesne* or domain. Also part of meadow.
  - ❑ Peasants worked lord's land 2-3 days a week.
  - ❑ Peasants paid lord rent from crops and for use of village resources.
  - ❑ Lord had right to hold court.
  - ❑ Pattern of farming: 2-field or 3-field system.
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# Lords, Vassals, Fiefs, Peasants: Medieval Society

## ■ Manorial Relationships

- This life produced subsistence-level living.
  - Life of peasants? Semi-free. If they were fixed to land, it was fixed to them.
  - Rents fixed.
  - Psychological assurance of knowing your place and being in it.
  - Is there any value in having psychological assurance about your place in society?
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