3. Feudalism

This chapter
This chapter is about society in the Middle Ages. After the Carolingian Empire was split into three parts, a new system of government developed. We call this system feudalism. The chapter covers:
- the reasons why feudalism developed
- the relationships between different social classes, and what life was like for each class of people
- the Catholic Church in the Middle Ages
- pilgrimages and crusades
- the Romanesque style of art and architecture

A dangerous world
In the 9th century, many invaders were attacking the people of Europe:
- The Vikings from Scandinavia attacked many countries including Britain, Ireland and France.
- Magyars from Hungary raided Germany and Italy.
- Saracens from North Africa attacked Italy, France and the Byzantine Empire.
Most people were peasant farmers, and they couldn’t defend themselves against these attackers. They needed protection, but there were two big problems:
1. The kings were too poor to have a big permanent army, so they couldn’t protect the people.
2. The invaders attacked suddenly and then disappeared again, so there was no time to gather an army.

PROTECTION AGAINST THE INVADERS
The peasants needed permanent, local protection. They got this protection from nobles with private armies. The nobles also built strong castles where people could go when the invaders came.
In return for protection, the peasants had to pay rent and taxes, and work on the nobles’ land. This situation made the nobles very powerful - even more powerful than the king.

HOMAGE
Although the nobles were often more powerful than the king, they still recognised the king as the ruler of the country, and so they paid homage to him.

Homage was a ceremony in which a noble promised to be loyal and obedient to the king or to a more powerful noble.
The person who promised to be loyal was called the vassal of the other person.
Sometimes kings paid homage to other kings. In this case, they often paid a tax called a tribute.

⚠ Even after they had paid homage, nobles often rebelled against the king!

Questions
1. Name three groups that attacked the people of Europe.
2. Why couldn’t the people defend themselves?
3. Copy the sentences and fill in the gaps with “peasants”, “nobles” or “king”:
   a) The ***** ruled the country.
   b) The ***** were most powerful.
   c) The ***** needed protection against invaders.
   d) The ***** had private armies.
   e) The ***** had to work for the *****.
   f) The ***** sheltered inside the castle if invaders came.
   g) The ***** paid homage to the king.
   h) The nobles were vassals of the *****.
   i) Sometimes the ***** rebelled against the *****.
The Vikings

The Vikings were one of the groups of invaders who made life in the Middle Ages so dangerous. But who were the Vikings really?

WHERE DID THE VIKINGS GO?

1. The Vikings mainly attacked the nearest countries, like Britain, Ireland and France.
2. They sailed to the Mediterranean and raided the Iberian Peninsula and Italy.
3. They went up rivers like the Volga and the Dnieper to trade with the Byzantine Empire.
4. They also went west to places like Iceland, Greenland and even America.

Most of the people the Vikings attacked were monks or farmers. Often they just stole food and treasure. However, they also founded cities like Dublin and York.

Questions

4. Why were Viking ships long and narrow?
5. Write down what these parts of the ship were for:
   a) oars   b) dragon’s head
6. Read the passage on the right. Are these statements true or false? Copy them and correct the errors.
   a) Although Svein was a farmer, he also went on trips to steal treasure.
   b) Svein went on one trip per year.
   c) Svein had to sow his crops in the autumn. However, once that was done, he went on a raid.
   d) He went raiding in autumn, but he came back in winter.

“This was how Svein used to live. He spent the winter at home. In the spring he had to sow seeds, which he did himself. Then when that job was done, he went raiding in the Hebrides and in Ireland on what he called his ‘spring trip’. He came back home just after midsummer, where he stayed until the corn had been safely harvested. After that he went off raiding again, and he never came back until the end of the first month of winter. He used to call this his ‘autumn trip’.”

Adapted from the Orkneyinga Saga
What was feudalism?

In the feudal system, the king, nobles, and peasants all had different responsibilities and rights. The system was quite complicated, but basically:

- one person gave protection and/or land to someone else
- in return, the other person had to fight or work for their protector

**KING**

The king was the ruler of the country, and he owned all of the land. However, he did not have a big army, so he was quite weak. He needed help from the nobles to fight wars.

The king gave the nobles:
- land
- protection

**in return for:**
- homage
- military aid

**NOBLES**

Barons were the vassals of the king:
- They paid homage to the king
- In times of war, they had to provide knights to fight in the king’s army.
In return, the king gave them large areas of land. On their land:
- They acted as judges.
- They collected taxes for themselves (not for the king!).

Knights were less important nobles who were the vassals of the barons:
- They promised to fight for the baron.
- In return, the baron gave them land.

The nobles gave the peasants:
- land
- protection

**in return for:**
- work on the land
- paying rent

**PEASANTS**

Peasants were farmers who rented land from a noble (baron or knight):
- Often they paid the rent by working for the noble.
- They also had to work for the Church.
- In return, they were protected by the noble.

Serfs could not leave the noble’s land without permission. However, they were not slaves—they could not be bought and sold.

Free men could leave if they wanted to; for example, they could go to work on another noble’s land.

Questions 1 5

7. Who were more powerful, the barons or the knights?
8. What was the main difference between serfs and free men?
9. What did the nobles give the peasants in return for their work?

Exercise 1A 1 5 7 8

Work in pairs. Each person should choose two different groups (from barons, knights, serfs and free men).
- Write down the advantages and disadvantages of the feudal system for each group.
- Tell your partner about the advantages and disadvantages. Use words like although, but and however.

Here is an example to help you:

“Although the king was the ruler of the country, he did not have a big army. However, he could get military aid from the nobles.”

Exercise 1B

Feudalism was a fair system. Everyone gave something and received something in return.
- Discuss the statement above with your partner. Do you agree with it? Explain your reasons.
- Then discuss which type of person you would like to be. Why?

Oh, serfs... I thought you meant surf!!
The fee

In feudal society, towns were no longer important. Instead, life was based around fees. A fee was the area given to a knight in return for providing military service. Each fee consisted of a castle or manor house, one or more villages, farming land and forest.

- The nobles lived in a castle or a big house called a manor house.
- The peasants lived in simple houses in the village.
- The peasants had to collect firewood and build roads and bridges.
- The peasants had to pay the noble to grind their corn in his windmill.
- The farming land was divided into sections. At least a third of the land belonged to the noble. Some land belonged to the Church. The peasants could grow their own food on the rest of the land.
- Animals like pigs and chickens slept inside the houses.
- Peasants had to spend more than half their time working for the nobles and the Church.
- Lots of people work long hours. Yes, but the peasants didn’t get paid!

Questions

10. Where did the nobles live?
11. Where did the peasants live?
12. Who did the farming land belong to?
13. What two jobs did the peasants have to do apart from farming?
14. What were windmills used for?

Agriculture

People grew crops like wheat, barley, beans and grapes. There were no fertilizers, so each year half of the land was left fallow (uncultivated). This allowed the land to recover its fertility, but it reduced the amount of food they could grow.

There were few advances in technology in this period, but it is when windmills were invented. They were used to grind corn into flour and extract oil from olives.

Consequences of Feudalism

Each fee produced what it required, so there was no need for trade between different fees. Trade almost disappeared, which meant that the different parts of Europe became isolated from one another. It became harder to share knowledge, so progress slowed down.

Exercise 2

Copy the paragraph below into your exercise book and fill in the gaps using the words from the labels in the picture. Then answer the questions.

Caerlaverock Castle is surrounded by a channel of water called a moat. To enter the castle, you had to cross the tower and go in through the gatehouse. If the castle was attacked, the drawbridge could be raised. The castle also had a great hall and a gatehouse in each corner for defence. Inside the castle was the drawbridge where the nobles dined.

- Caerlaverock Castle is on the border between England and Scotland. Why do you think it was built there?
- Write a list of the features that made castles easy to defend.
Everyday life

Nobles and peasants lived close to each other, and they had to work together on many tasks: growing food, making clothes and defending themselves. However, their lives were very different.

The lives of men and women were also very different.

**NOBLEMEN**

**Normal day:**
- Nobles got up at dawn. They always had to be ready to fight, so they spent a lot of time practising using their weapons.
- They also had to manage their land.

**Leisure:**
- Poets, musicians, jesters and acrobats entertained the nobles in their free time.
- They also went hunting with falcons.

**Food:**
- They ate lots of meat and fish.

**Boys:**
- Boys lived with a knight from another family as a page (a kind of apprentice). They learned how to ride a horse and use weapons like swords and lances.

**NOBLEWOMEN**

**Marriage:**
- Noblewomen had to marry and have children.
- Their parents arranged the marriage.
- They had to obey their husband.
- If they didn’t marry they became nuns.

**Normal day:**
- They spent most of their time sewing and weaving.
- They also looked after the children and organised the servants.

**Leisure:**
- Noblewomen hardly ever went outside the castle.

**Girls:**
- Girls were educated by their mothers.

**PEASANT MEN**

**Normal day:**
- Peasants worked in the fields from dawn to dusk (sunrise to sunset). In the summer, this meant getting up at 3 am.
- They made some of their own tools using wood, leather and cow horn.

**Leisure:**
- Peasants had very little free time, but a few times a year there were fairs and festivals.

**Food:**
- Peasants normally ate bread and vegetable soup. Nevertheless, they occasionally had rabbit or pork.

**PEASANT WOMEN**

**Marriage:**
- Serf women had to get permission from the nobleman to marry.
- They could only marry somebody from the same fee.

**Normal day:**
- Like the men, the peasant women worked in the fields.
- They also spent time cooking, looking after children, sewing and weaving.

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**Exercise 3**

Choose one of the four types of person above. Write a paragraph about what they did on a normal day. Was it easier or more difficult than your normal day? Was it more interesting?
Entertainment

For most people, life was very hard in the Middle Ages, but occasionally they were able to relax and enjoy themselves. At weddings, festivals, tournaments and fairs, people would sing and dance, and have fun playing sports and games.

FAIRS

Medieval fairs were big markets, where people came to buy and sell things. Some of the really big fairs, like the ones in Champagne, lasted for six weeks! Although the main purpose of the fairs was trade, they were also a chance to have fun. The local people and visiting merchants were entertained by singers, jugglers, acrobats and stilt walkers. You could also participate in archery and wrestling competitions, or play games.

TOURNAMENTS

Tournaments were originally a chance for knights to practise their battle skills. Later, however, they were mainly for entertainment, and lots of people came to watch the knights, including women and children.

There were two main parts to a tournament:

The mêlée: The knights were divided into two teams, which fought against each other.

The joust: A fight between two knights on horseback. You had to knock your opponent off his horse with your lance, but hitting his horse or his legs was cheating!

The knights used special weapons and armour, which were supposed to stop people being badly injured. Even so, tournaments were very dangerous, and participants were often killed. At the end of the tournament, the host held a big banquet, and the bravest and best knights were given prizes.

USEFUL WORDS

Medieval is an adjective that means from the Middle Ages.

CODE OF CHIVALRY

In the Middle Ages, there were special rules for how knights should behave, called the Code of Chivalry. Knights were supposed to:

• be loyal to their lord
• fight bravely in battle
• respect the honour of women
• protect the weak and defenceless, like widows and orphans

Questions

15. Match up the two halves and write the complete sentences in your exercise book:

1) Although life in the Middle Ages was hard, …
2) The joust only involved two knights, …
3) Fairs were mainly for trade; …
4) Obviously, jugglers juggled, …
5) Although the knights used special weapons, …

a) however, they also had entertainment.
b) but they also told jokes and played music.
c) people were often killed.
d) people still had fun.
e) but the mêlée involved two teams.
The Catholic Church in feudal society

We have learned about the nobles and peasants, but there was also a third class of people in feudal society: the **clergy**. The **Roman Catholic Church** played a very important role in people's lives in the Middle Ages. It was also very rich:

- Kings gave lots of land to the Church. The Church got money by renting out the land to peasant farmers.
- Everyone paid taxes called **tithes** (a tenth of their income) to the Church.

This is how the Church was organised:

**Pope:**
- leader of the Roman Catholic Church
- had a private army
- governed the Papal states in central Italy
- could excommunicate people

Below the pope, the clergy were split into **two groups:**

- **Regular clergy:** members of the religious orders
  - Monks, nuns
  - Abbots, abbesses
- **Secular clergy:** did not belong to a religious order
  - Archbishops, bishops
  - Priests

**High clergy** (came from the noble classes) → **Low clergy** (came from the poorer classes)

**LIFE IN A MONASTERY**

In the Middle Ages, many people chose to serve God by living in a **monastery** or **convent**. When they entered the monastery, they had to make certain vows (promises):

1. The vow of **obedience**. They promised to **obey the abbot or abbess, and the rules of the religious order**. Each monastery belonged to a particular **order**, like the Order of St. Benedict, and each order had different rules. In some orders, the monks were not allowed to speak at all.
2. The vow of **chastity**. They were **not allowed to marry**.
3. The vow of **poverty**. They gave away all of the things that they owned before becoming a monk or nun.

The most important activity in a monastery was **praying**, which the monks had to do **eight times a day**. There were also many other tasks: **working in the orchards**, **looking after the sick and the poor**, and **doing chores** (preparing meals, washing up and cleaning).

Monasteries were also centres of learning. The monks **studied and copied** Greek and Roman manuscripts, and gave **lessons** to boys and new monks.

### Questions

16. The Roman Catholic Church was rich, but where did it get its money from?
17. In your own words, explain the difference between:
   a) **regular clergy** and **secular clergy**?
   b) **high clergy** and **low clergy**?
18. What is a vow? What vows did monks have to make?
19. Although monks spent a lot of time **praying**, they also did other tasks. Write down **five other things** that monks did.
Pilgrimages

In the Middle Ages, many people went on pilgrimages. A pilgrimage was a journey to a place where a saint was buried, or where important relics were kept. When they got there, people would pray to the saint, and ask for help with their problems. Three of the most important destinations for pilgrims were Jerusalem, Rome and Santiago de Compostela.

WHY DID PEOPLE GO ON PILGRIMAGES?
Different people had different reasons, but these are some of the most important ones:

- People wanted to see holy places and objects.
- They visited holy sites as penance: it was a way of paying for their sins, so they could be forgiven.
- Pilgrims often wanted to ask a favour: maybe they were ill, and they hoped to be cured.
- Finally, some people went on a pilgrimage because they wanted to see the world.

THE JOURNEY
Most pilgrims went by foot or rode on horseback. Many even walked barefoot, to show their humility. Bandits waited in the mountains and forests, as it was easy to steal from the pilgrims. Pilgrims also faced bad weather, disease and wild animals like wolves.

People from all countries and all social classes went on pilgrimages, so you met people who you would never normally meet at home. It was safer to travel in groups, so people preferred to walk together. Although short pilgrimages only lasted a few days, long journeys took months: plenty of time to become good friends with the other pilgrims!

CONSEQUENCES
The pilgrimages had important economic and cultural consequences:

- Towns developed along the main pilgrim routes. The towns had inns where the pilgrims could eat and sleep, and markets where they could buy the things they needed.
- People from many different countries travelled together on pilgrimages. This helped to spread ideas across Europe at a time when there was not much trade. For example, it helped to spread the Romanesque style of architecture.

Exercise 4

One of the early books to be written in English was The Canterbury Tales. It is a collection of short stories that pilgrims on their way to Canterbury tell each other during the journey. Investigate by looking on the Internet:

- When was it written and who is the author?
- Where is Canterbury?
- Why were the pilgrims going there?
The Crusades

In the 11th century, the Turkish Muslims expanded their empire. They conquered many parts of the Byzantine Empire, and took the city of Jerusalem from the Egyptians. Many Christians in Europe were worried, because:

- They were afraid that the Muslims were becoming too powerful, and that the Byzantine Empire was collapsing.
- The Turks were less tolerant of Christians than the Egyptians; this made it harder for Christian pilgrims to visit Jerusalem.

The First Crusade

In 1096, Pope Urban II said that it was the duty of Christians to help the Byzantines fight against the Turks. He called for a crusade. Many barons and knights set out on the First Crusade. It was a long and dangerous journey, but in 1099 they took Jerusalem. The crusaders established several Christian kingdoms on the eastern coast of the Mediterranean.

Later Crusades

There were many more crusades, but gradually the Muslims took back the land that they had lost. Eventually, in 1291, the last crusader kingdom disappeared.

Of the later crusades, probably the most famous is the Third Crusade, which started in 1187 when Saladin took Jerusalem from the Christians. The crusade was led by Richard I of England. Neither side was completely victorious; Richard I had to go back home without taking Jerusalem, but Saladin promised to let Christian pilgrims visit the city.

Saladin (1138-1193)

Saladin, the Sultan of Egypt, was a good ruler, and a great military leader. First he defeated the neighbouring Muslim states, including Syria. Next he fought against the Christian crusaders, taking most of their important cities. He gained the respect of the Christians, because he did not destroy the cities or kill the inhabitants.

Richard I of England (1157-1199)

Richard was a tall and strong man, and a great warrior. People called him the Lionheart, because he was so brave. During the Third Crusade, he never lost a battle. However, a great warrior isn’t always a good king:

- Richard’s wars were expensive, and he had a luxurious lifestyle, so the people of England had to pay very high taxes.
- He was ruthless and sometimes cruel; he once massacred 2,700 hostages, including women and children.

Although he was King of England, he only spent six months there: he complained that it was always raining!

Questions

20. What were the main reasons that the crusades started?
21. After the First Crusade:
   a) How long did the Christians control Jerusalem for?
   b) How long were there Christian kingdoms in the eastern Mediterranean?

Exercise 5

While Richard was away fighting, King John ruled England. In the stories about Robin Hood, Richard is the good king, and John is the bad king. Investigate on the Internet whether that is true.
Romanesque architecture and art

In the Middle Ages, lots of people travelled on pilgrimages and crusades, which helped to spread ideas. This led to a similar style of architecture and art being established in much of Europe. This style was called Romanesque, and it was the first consistent style to appear since Roman times. The Romanesque style was widely used until the end of the 12th century, when the Gothic style started to take over.

ARCHITECTURE
There were not many towns, so most Romanesque buildings were churches, monasteries and castles in the countryside. They were built from stone.

Most churches had a cruciform plan as a symbol of Christ’s crucifixion:

One arm of the cross is longer than the others.

A Romanesque village church in England

Very thick walls for defence. People sheltered in churches, monasteries and castles if they were attacked.

Not many (and mainly small) windows. This was also for defence, and it made the buildings very dark inside.

Semi-circular arches on windows and doors.

PAINTING AND SCULPTURE
Romanesque paintings were simple in style. Most people could not read or write, so churches were decorated with murals showing scenes from the Bible. The walls of the church were like a “picture Bible”.

This mural of Christ is from the church of Sant Climent de Taüll. It uses very strong colours, which means that the picture looks very flat or two-dimensional.

Sculptures and reliefs on church buildings also showed scenes from the Bible. This relief from a French church shows Christ washing the disciples’ feet.

Questions
22. The cruciform plan uses the Latin cross. What is the difference between the Latin cross and the Greek cross used in Byzantine churches (see page 12)?
23. Where would you expect to see most Romanesque architecture – in big cities or in the countryside?
24. What subject does Romanesque art normally show?

Exercise 6
Here is a picture of the Tower of London. It was built for defence, so it has very thick walls. What other two features does it have that are characteristic of Romanesque buildings?
FEUDALISM - SUMMARY

In this chapter you have learned about life in the Middle Ages, and about the social system called feudalism. The most important things to remember about feudalism are:

• It was a system designed to protect people against invaders like the Vikings and Saracens.
• The system made the nobles very powerful – often more powerful than the king.
• Feudal society was rural, not urban. Life was based around fees, not towns.

A consequence of feudalism was that there was not much trade, so people didn’t travel much. When they did travel, it was often for a religious reason: to go on a pilgrimage, or to fight in a crusade.

A. KEY VOCABULARY

1. Write the definitions of the following key words in your exercise book:
   
   homage vassal baron
   fee serf

2. Explain what a pilgrimage and a crusade are. What is the difference between them?

3. Who were the Knights Templar?

4. The Hospitaliers were another military order. What do you think they did?

B. THE FEUDAL SYSTEM

1. Copy this diagram of the feudal system into your exercise book, and fill in the three groups of people: A, B and C.

2. Name two different types of people in group B and two types of people in group C.

C. THE BAYEUX TAPESTRY

The Bayeux Tapestry is an embroidered cloth, which was made in the 11th century. It is 70 metres long, but only 50 cm high. The tapestry tells the story of the Norman conquest of England. Below is just one short section of it.

1. Investigate by looking on the Internet:
   a) Where is Normandy?
   b) What language did the Normans speak?
   c) Where did they originally come from before they settled in Normandy?
   d) When did they conquer England?
   e) What is the name of the battle where they defeated the English?
   f) Who was their leader?
   g) What was the defeated English king called?
   h) Where is Bayeux?

2. Who do you think the two figures in the centre of the picture are? Look at the writing above the figures to help you.