



Charlemagne
King of the Franks and Emperor
of the Holy Roman Empire

742 - 814

“He was six feet four inches tall, and built to scale. He had beautiful white hair, animated eyes, a powerful nose... a presence "always stately and dignified." He was temperate in eating and drinking, abominated drunkenness, and kept in good health despite every exposure and hardship.”

—Einhard (the King's secretary) describing Charlemagne

Charlemagne (English: Charles the Great, Dutch: Karel de Grote, German: Karl der Grosse, Latin: Carolus Magnus) was born on April 2, 742 in Northern Europe. Charles was the eldest son of Pippin III and Bertrada of Laon. "By the sword and the cross," Charlemagne became master of Western Europe.

In 768, when Charlemagne was 26, he and his younger brother Carloman inherited the kingdom of the Franks. In 771 Carloman died, and Charlemagne became sole ruler of the kingdom. At that time the Franks were falling back into barbarian ways, neglecting their education and religion. The Saxons of northern Europe were still pagans. In the south, the Roman Catholic church was asserting its power to recover land confiscated by the Lombard kingdom of Italy. Europe was in turmoil.

Charlemagne was determined to strengthen his realm and to bring order to Europe. In 772 he launched a 30-year military campaign to accomplish this objective. By 800 Charlemagne was the undisputed ruler of Western Europe. His vast realm encompassed what are now France, Switzerland, Belgium, and The Netherlands. It included half of present-day Italy and Germany, and parts of Austria and Spain. By establishing a central government over Western Europe, Charlemagne restored much of the unity of the old Roman Empire and paved the way for the development of modern Europe.

On Christmas Day in 800, while Charlemagne knelt in [prayer](#) in Saint Peter's in Rome, [Pope Leo III](#) placed a golden crown on the bowed head of the king. Charlemagne is said to have been surprised by the coronation, declaring that he would not have come into the church had he known the pope's plan. However, some historians say the pope would not have dared to act without Charlemagne's knowledge.

Charlemagne learned to read Latin and some Greek but apparently did not master writing. At meals, instead of having jesters perform, he listened to visiting scholars read from learned works. Charlemagne believed that government should be for the benefit of the governed. He was a reformer who tried to improve his subject's lives. He set up money standards to encourage commerce and urged better farming methods.

"By the sword and the cross," Charlemagne became master of Western Europe

As is often the case, people considered great by historians are great killers as well. Throughout his conquests, Charlemagne was responsible for the death of masses of people who refused to accept Christianity, or their new king. Choosing to keep faith with their old gods and leaders, many thousands were slaughtered.

FEUDALISM

feudalism, form of political and social organization typical of Western Europe from the dissolution of Charlemagne's empire to the rise of the absolute monarchies. The term *feudalism* is derived from the Latin *feodum*, for fief, and ultimately from a Germanic word meaning cow, generalized to denote valuable movable property. Although analogous social systems have appeared in other civilizations, the feudalism of Europe in the Middle Ages remains the common model of feudal society. Characteristics of European Feudalism

The evolution of highly diverse forms, customs, and institutions makes it almost impossible to accurately depict feudalism as a whole, but certain components of the system may be regarded as characteristic: strict division into social classes, i.e., nobility, clergy, peasantry, and, in the later Middle Ages, burgesses; private jurisdiction based on local custom; and the landholding system dependent upon the fief or fee. Feudalism was based on contracts made among nobles, and although it was intricately connected with the [manorial system](#), it must be considered as distinct from it. Although some men held their land in [allod](#), without obligation to any person, they were exceptions to the rule in the Middle Ages.

In an ideal feudal society (a legal fiction, most nearly realized in the Crusaders' Latin Kingdom of Jerusalem), the ownership of all land was vested in the king. Beneath him was a hierarchy of nobles, the most important nobles holding land directly from the king, and the lesser from them, down to the seigneur who held a single manor. The political economy of the system was local and agricultural, and at its base was the manorial system. Under the manorial system the peasants, laborers, or [serfs](#), held the land they worked from the seigneur, who granted them use of the land and his protection in return for personal services (especially on the demesne, the land he retained for his own use) and for dues (especially payment in kind). The Fief

The feudal method of holding land was by fief; the grantor of the fief was the suzerain, or overlord, and the recipient was the vassal. The fief was formally acquired following the ceremony of homage, in which the vassal, kneeling before the overlord, put his hands in those of the lord and declared himself his man, and the overlord bound himself by kissing the vassal and raising him to his feet. The vassal then swore an oath of fealty, vowing to be faithful to the overlord and to perform the acts and services due him. This formal procedure served to cement the personal relationship between lord and vassal; after the ceremony the lord invested the vassal with the fief, usually by giving him some symbol of the transferred land. Honors or rights, as well as land, could be granted as fiefs. Gradually the system of subinfeudation evolved, by which the vassal might in his turn become an overlord, granting part of his fief to one who then became vassal to him. Thus very complex relationships, based on fiefs, developed among the nobles, and the personal ties between overlords and vassals were weakened. Originally the fief had to be renewed on the death of either party. With the advent of hereditary succession and [primogeniture](#), renewal of the fief by the heir of the deceased became customary, and little by little the fief became hereditary. Military Service

The feudal system rested on the unsettled conditions of the times and thus on the need of the lord for armed warriors and the need of the vassal for protection. The nobility was essentially a military

class, with the [knight](#) as the typical warrior. Since equipping mounted fighters was expensive, the lord could not create his armed force without the obligation of the vassal to supply a stipulated number of armed men, a number that varied from the service of the vassal himself to the service of hundreds in private armies. The gradations of nobility were, therefore, based on both military service and landholding. At the bottom of the social scale was the squire, originally the servant of the knight. Above the knight were classes that varied in different countries—counts, dukes, earls, barons, and other nobles. The vassal owed, in addition to military service, other dues and services that varied with local custom and tended to become fixed. The obligation of the overlord in the feudal contract was always the protection of the vassal. History of Feudalism in Europe Origins

The feudal system first appears in definite form in the Frankish lands in the 9th and 10th cent. A long dispute between scholars as to whether its institutional basis was Roman or Germanic remains somewhat inconclusive; it can safely be said that feudalism emerged from the condition of society arising from the disintegration of Roman institutions and the further disruption of Germanic inroads and settlements. Of course, the rise of feudalism in areas formerly dominated by Roman institutions meant the breakdown of central government; but in regions untouched by Roman customs the feudal system was a further step toward organization and centralization.

The system used and altered institutions then in existence. Important in an economic sense was the Roman villa, with the peculiar form of rental, the *precarium*, a temporary grant of land that the grantor could revoke at any time. Increasingly, the poor landholder transferred his land to a protector and received it back as a *precarium*, thus giving rise to the manorial system. It was also possible for the manorial system to develop from the Germanic village, as in England.

The development of fiefs was also influenced by the Roman institution of *patricinium* and the German institution of *mundium*, by which the powerful surrounded themselves with men who rendered them service, especially military service, in exchange for protection. More and more, this service-and-protection contract came to involve the granting of a *beneficium*, the use of land, which tended to become hereditary. Local royal officers and great landholders increased their power and forced the king to grant them rights of private justice and immunity from royal interference. By these processes feudalism became fixed in Frankish lands by the end of the 10th cent.

The church also had great influence in shaping feudalism; although the organization of the church was not feudal in character, its hierarchy somewhat paralleled the feudal hierarchy. The church owned much land, held by monasteries, by church dignitaries, and by the churches themselves. Most of this land, given by nobles as a bequest or gift, carried feudal obligations; thus clerical land, like lay land, assumed a feudal aspect, and the clergy became participants in the temporal feudal system. Many bishops and abbots were much like lay seigneurs. This feudal connection between church and state gave rise to the controversy over lay [investiture](#). Spread

Feudalism spread from France to Spain, Italy, and later Germany and Eastern Europe. In England the Frankish form was imposed by William I (William the Conqueror) after 1066, although most of the elements of feudalism were already present. It was extended eastward into Slavic lands to the marches (frontier provinces), which were continually battered by new invasions, and it was adopted partially in Scandinavian countries. The important features of feudalism were similar throughout, but there existed definite national differences. Feudalism continued in all parts of Europe until the end of the 14th cent. Decline

The concentration of power in the hands of a few was always a great disruptive force in the feudal system. The rise of powerful monarchs in France, Spain, and England broke down the local organization. Another disruptive force was the increase of communication, which broke down the isolated manor, assisted the rise of towns, and facilitated the emergence of the burgher class. This process was greatly accelerated in the 14th cent. and did much to destroy the feudal classifications of society.

The system broke down gradually. It was not completely destroyed in France until the French Revolution (1789), and it persisted in Germany until 1848 and in Russia until 1917. Many relics of feudalism still persist, and its influence remains on the institutions of Western Europe. Other Feudal Systems

Other ages and other lands have seen the development of feudal institutions. In Japan the feudal system was well ordered before the 10th cent., and it persisted with modifications until the 19th

cent. (see [bushido](#); [daimyo](#)). In other areas, as in China, where feudal practices were in existence by 1100 &BC;, society became feudalistic but not precisely feudal. Feudalism in India and in the Saracen and Ottoman civilizations was in many ways analogous to Western feudalism, but it proved less durable than its European counterpart. The existence of feudalism in several civilizations has given rise to theories of feudalism as a necessary and inevitable stage of political development. Some scholars, however, consider the European feudal system a unique phenomenon.

CHARLEMAGNE And FEUDALISM

Using this article, answer the following critical thinking questions. Be sure to read and understand the whole question, and sub questions.

1. RELIGION: COMPREHENSION/ANALYSIS

Illustrate the Feudal Model and The Hierarchy of the Roman Catholic Church side by side. These models were drawn for you yesterday. Below the models, explain the role the Church played in the Feudal Model and how the hierarchy worked within the church.

2. EDUCATION: ANALYSIS/EVALUATION

How was Charlemagne similar to Aristotle and Alexander the Great in political philosophy? How was his education different from the majority of his Frankish people, and the Saxons during his Coronation or Crowning? How do you think the Church accepted his strong education when they opposed it among the laity, or common people of the church, the "flock"?

3. FAMILY: ANALYSIS/SYNTHESIS

Primogeniture is translated as "First (primo) Born (geni). How did primogeniture play a role in the Feudal System? From yesterday's lecture, how were second sons fit into the feudal model? If the idea of the church was that it was Universal, and the laity were to have many children for the spread of the faith, how do you think 3rd, 4th, 5th,... sons fit into the model? Question five may help answer the last question.. What about women?

4. ECONOMICS: APPLICATION/SYNTHESIS

Categorize the elements of the manor system in terms of wealth. In other words, who had wealth and who didn't? Use the following terms: Vassals, Knights, nobles, serfs or peasants (the laity) and the Church. From what Roman system did this most likely derive itself?

5. POLITICAL: ANALYSIS/EVALUATION

Analyze the give and take of the Feudal system. Really, what was the feudal system needed for? How was this system protected? Does this tell you anything about sons 3, 4, 5 and....? Explain what this means to the history of the 1000 years known as the Medieval period. STUCK? Time to think about knights in shining armor and the need for castles.