

FEUDALISM



Definition

A social system of obligations between a lord and his subordinate (which could include a king and the barons and dukes, or those aristocrats and their knights). This warrior caste had a large base of peasants under them, to support their war training, arms, and fighting. The aristocrats had ownership of a *feud* (land) recognized by the king, in exchange for their loyalty and support in time of war. These aristocrats would then sub-let these feuds to their subordinates, who would in turn, fight under their lord, in exchange for the land.

Consequences for kings

Under feudalism, the kings tended to be less powerful than they were later, as their existence depended on the support of powerful aristocrats. If their allegiance shifted, the monarchy was lost: it was these nobles who provided the soldiers for the king's forces.

Comparison with earlier kings (and Roman emperors)

Roman emperors in Europe were much more powerful than medieval monarchs. Medieval monarchs didn't have the power to conscript soldiers whenever they wanted (as earlier kings and emperors could do)—they had to make do with what their subordinates showed up with, and were limited to the contracted number of days of fighting that these soldiers were bound to. Roman emperors also had tax revenues from the entire Roman world to work with; medieval kings typically were limited to the revenues off their own estates, as well as whatever taxes they could get the nobles and everyone else to live with.

Relationship with the Roman Catholic Church

The religious system of feudal Europe supported the feudal system in that the church would recognize the authority of the monarchs and aristocrats. If it withheld its recognition, others could attack and occupy the territory (one example of this in action was the Albigensian Crusades in the early 1200s). For its seal of legitimacy, the church enjoyed tithes of crops, land grants, and suppression of rival religious movements.

Investiture Controversy

One snippet of medieval history that shows much of this in action is this controversy between the Popes and medieval kings. This term comes from the act of investing, or furnishing with power, a bishop. The controversy was who would do it: a king, or the pope. When kings did this, one could expect a church that would act in accordance with the king's wishes (and fight on his side in wars). This was finally resolved with the concordat signed at Worms in 1122, whereby the pope was allowed this power, although the king would be present, and would formally present the bishops with their staff and ring, the symbols of their power.