

Unit 3.1: Medieval Europe

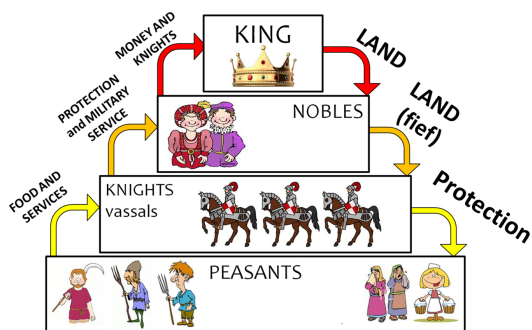
SSWH7 Analyze European medieval society with regard to culture, politics, society, and economics.

- Explain the manorial system and feudal relationships, include: the status of peasants and feudal monarchies and the importance of Charlemagne.
- Explain the political impact of Christianity and the role of the church in medieval society.
- Describe how increasing trade led to the growth of towns and cities, include: the impact of the Bubonic Plague.
- Describe the causes and impact of the Crusades on the Islamic World and Europe.

The Middle Ages

Charlemagne The last Latin speaking emperor lost power in Rome in 476 CE. After this, centralized political authority (emperors), long distance trade, urbanization (building of cities), and literacy (ability to read and write) slowly declined in Western Europe. Germanic tribes flooded into the region and established hundreds of small kingdoms and tribal chiefdoms. The political authority in these kingdoms tended to be very weak, based mostly on the king or another strong man's ability to provide protection. Borders and thrones shifted often as war between and within kingdoms was common. To increase unity, the Roman Catholic Church would begin to name kings under the title of "Holy Roman Emperor", one of which was **Charlemagne**. Under Charlemagne, Europe briefly enjoyed a level of political unity that had been unseen since the fall of Rome. Charlemagne also brought about an intellectual revival by sponsoring the creation of schools. Weak leadership by Charlemagne's children and heirs reversed much of this centralization and revival and Europe became a largely feudal society in the years after his death in 814.

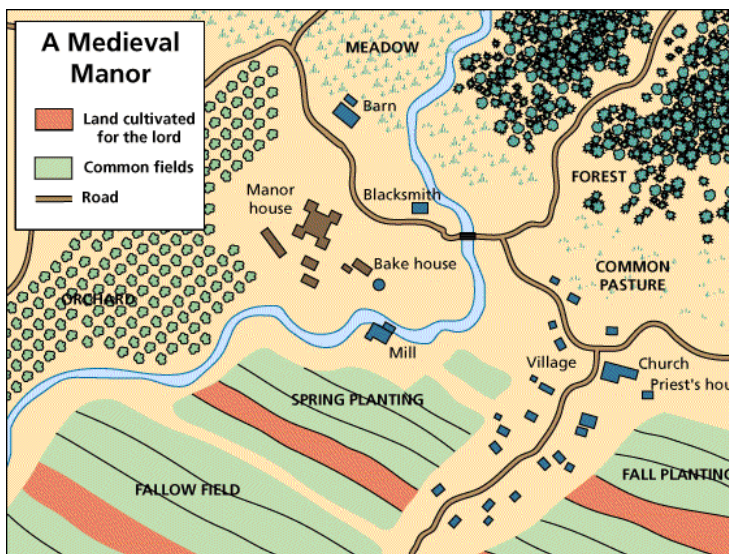
Feudalism The Vikings and other invaders threatened the safety of people throughout Europe. The worst years of the invaders' attacks spanned roughly 850 to 950 CE. The system of governing and land-holding, called **feudalism**, had emerged in Europe. The feudal system was based on rights and obligations. In exchange for military protection and other services, a lord, or landowner, granted land called a fief. The person receiving a fief was called a vassal.



Feudal Pyramid of Power

The Feudal Pyramid The structure of feudal society was much like a pyramid. At the top reigned the king. Next came the most powerful vassals—wealthy landowners such as nobles and bishops. Serving beneath these vassals were knights. Knights were

mounted horsemen who pledged to defend their lords' lands in exchange for fiefs. At the base of the pyramid were landless peasants who toiled in the fields. In the feudal system, status determined a person's prestige and power. Medieval writers classified people into three groups: those who fought (nobles and knights), those who prayed (men and women of the Church), and those who worked (the peasants). Social class was usually inherited. In Europe in the Middle Ages, the majority of people were peasants. Most peasants were serfs. Serfs were people who could not lawfully leave the place where they were born. Though bound to the land, serfs were not slaves. Their lords could not sell or buy them. But what their labor produced belonged to the lord.



The Manorial System The manor was the lord's estate. During the Middle Ages, the manor system was the basic economic arrangement. The lord provided the serfs with housing, farmland, and protection from bandits. In return, serfs tended the lord's lands, cared for his animals, and performed other tasks to maintain the estate. Peasant women shared in the farm work with their husbands. All peasants, whether free or serf, owed the lord certain duties. These included at least a few days

of labor each week and a certain portion of their grain. Peasants rarely traveled more than 25 miles from their own manor. By standing in the center of a plowed field, they could see their entire world at a glance. A manor usually covered only a few square miles of land. It typically consisted of the lord's manor house, a church, and workshops. Generally, 15 to 30 families lived in the village on a manor. The manor was largely a self-sufficient community. The serfs and peasants raised or produced nearly everything that they and their lord needed for daily life—crops, milk and cheese, fuel, cloth, leather goods, and lumber. The only outside purchases were salt and iron. Crops grown on the manor usually included grains, such as wheat, rye, barley, and oats, and vegetables, such as peas, beans, onions, and beets. For the privilege of living on the lord's land, peasants paid a high price. They paid a tax on all grain ground in the lord's mill. Any attempt to avoid taxes by baking bread elsewhere was treated as a crime.

Peasants also paid a tax on marriage. Weddings could take place only with the lord's consent. After all these payments to the lord, peasant families owed the village priest a tithe, or church tax. A tithe represented one-tenth of their income. For most serfs, both men and women, life was work and more work. Their days revolved around raising crops and livestock and taking care of home and family. As soon as children were old enough, they were put to work in the fields or in the home. Many children did not survive to adulthood. Illness and malnutrition were constant afflictions for medieval peasants. Average life expectancy was about 35 years. Despite the hardships they endured, serfs accepted their lot in life as part of the Church's teachings. They, like most Christians during medieval times, believed that God determined a person's place in society.

The Far Reaching Authority of the Church In crowning Charlemagne as the Roman Emperor in 800, the Church wished to influence both spiritual and political matters. There was a belief that God had created two symbolic swords. One sword was religious. The other was political. The pope held a spiritual sword. The emperor wielded a political one. It was the belief that the pope should bow to the emperor in political matters. In turn, the emperor should bow to the pope in religious matters. However, the pope and kings often disagreed about what powers they should have.

Throughout the Middle Ages, the Church and various European rulers competed for power.



Like the system of feudalism, the Church had its own organization. Power was based on status. Church structure consisted of different ranks of clergy, or religious officials. The pope in Rome was the head of the Church. All clergy, including bishops and priests, fell under his authority. Bishops supervised priests, the lowest ranking members of the clergy. Bishops also settled disagreements over Church teachings and practices. For most people, local priests served as the main contact with the Church. Feudalism and the manor system created divisions among people. But the shared beliefs in the teachings of the Church bonded people together. The church was a stable force during an era of constant warfare and political turmoil. It provided Christians with a sense of security and of belonging to a religious community.

In the Middle Ages, religion occupied center stage. Medieval Christians' everyday

lives were harsh. Still, they could all follow the same path to salvation—everlasting life in heaven.



The Law of the Church The Church's authority was both religious and political. It provided a unifying set of spiritual beliefs and rituals. The Church also created a system of justice to guide people's conduct. All medieval Christians, kings and peasants alike, were subject to Church law, in matters such as marriage and religious practices. The Church also established courts to try people accused of violating Church law. One the harshest punishments that offenders faced was excommunication. Popes used the threat of excommunication, or banishment from the Church, to use power over political rulers. For example, a disobedient king's fight with a pope might result in

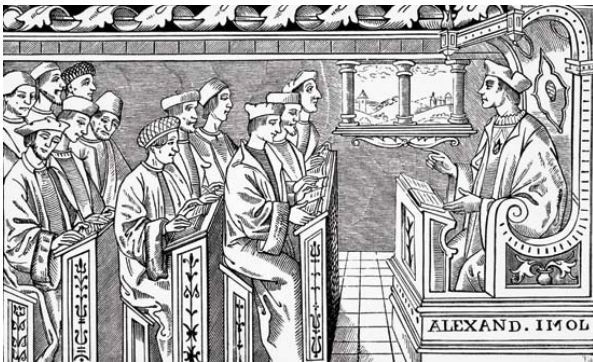
excommunication. This meant the king would be denied salvation. Excommunication also freed all the king's vassals from their duties to him. If an excommunicated king continued to disobey the pope, the pope, in turn, could take away the right to perform religious rights and ceremonies on the king's land. Not being able to perform these rights could lead to the vassals being doomed to hell.

The Growth of Cities While Church reform, cathedral building, and the Crusades were taking place, other important changes were occurring in medieval society. Between 1000 and 1300, agriculture, trade, and finance made significant advances. Towns and cities grew. This was in part due to the growing population and to territorial expansion of western Europe. Cultural interaction with the Muslim and Byzantine worlds sparked the growth of learning and the birth of an institution new to Europe—the university.

Agricultural Change Europe's great revival would have been impossible without better ways of farming. Expanding civilization required an increased food supply. A warmer climate, which lasted from about 800 to 1200, brought improved farm production. Farmers began to cultivate lands in regions once too cold to grow crops. They also developed new methods to take advantage of more available land. Scholars estimate that between 1000 and 1150, the population of western Europe rose from around 30 million to about 42 million. Towns grew and flourished. Compared to great cities like Constantinople, European towns were unsophisticated and tiny. Europe's largest city, Paris, probably had no more than 60,000 people

by the year 1200. A typical town in medieval Europe had only about 1,500 to 2,500 people. Even so, these small communities became a powerful force for change in Europe.

Trade By the later Middle Ages, trade was the very lifeblood of the new towns, which sprung up at ports and crossroads, on hilltops, and along rivers. As trade grew, towns all over Europe swelled with people. The excitement and bustle of towns drew many people. But there were some drawbacks to living in a medieval town. Streets were narrow, filled with animals and their waste. With no sewers, most people dumped household and human waste into the street in front of the house. Most people never bathed, and their houses lacked fresh air, light, and clean water. Because houses were built of wood with thatched roofs, they were a constant fire hazard. Nonetheless, many people chose to move to towns to pursue the economic and social opportunities they offered. People were no longer content with their old feudal existence on manors or in tiny villages. Even though legally bound to their lord's manor, many serfs ran away. According to custom, a serf could now become free by living within a town for a year and a day. A saying of the time went, "Town air makes you free." Many of these runaway serfs, now free people, made better lives for themselves in towns.



Education At the center of the growth of learning stood a new European institution, in part due to the connection with the Muslim world—the university. The word university originally referred to a group of scholars meeting wherever they could. People, not buildings, made up the medieval university. Universities arose at Paris and at Bologna, Italy, by the end of the 1100s. Others followed at the English

town of Oxford and at Salerno, Italy. Most students were the sons of well-to-do artisans. For most students, the goal was a job in government or the Church. Earning a bachelor's degree in theology might take five to seven years in school; becoming a master of theology took at least 12 years of study.