

13 MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

A HISTORICAL ESSAY

The end of Roman authority changed the political, economic, and social forces that had shaped western European society. Feudalism, a system of small semi-independent local governments based on personal contracts between lords and vassals, replaced Roman law and government. The broad commercial economy of the Roman Empire was replaced by manorialism, an economic system based on farm communities called manors. Manors supplied most of the goods and services the people living on them needed. The vibrant urban life that Roman commerce had supported nearly disappeared, cutting off the exchange of ideas and institutions between Europe and the Middle East.

The western Roman Empire had collapsed under its own weight as well as from barbarian invasions. It had become too large and costly to maintain. Communication was slow, and the emperors could not react quickly to changing conditions. The expense of keeping standing armies on the frontiers strained the treasury, and self-seeking provincial governors often took public money for their own use. In addition, Roman citizens became increasingly unwilling to serve as soldiers and public servants, and the wealthy indulged themselves in pleasure. Finally, thousands who had become Christians were more interested in serving God than Rome.

The lands once controlled by the Roman Empire split into three major divisions: the Byzantine Empire, the Islamic Empire, and the Carolingian (or Charlemagne's) Empire. (See map, this page.) The Byzantine Empire, also known as Byzantium, was the eastern part of the Roman Empire. It survived until 1453, when it fell to the Ottoman Turks. In the seventh century, the Arab Muslims, followers of Islam, waged holy wars in the former Roman lands in the Middle East and North Africa. They believed that they should win converts by force, and many of the conquered peoples did become Muslims. By the eighth century, the Muslims had also conquered Spain, and they threatened the rest of Christian Europe. There they came in contact with Charlemagne's empire, which included Rome's former provinces in western Europe.

Medieval Europe inherited many Roman traditions and institutions. German tribal chieftains imitated Roman emperors and wealthy landowners. They settled on estates farmed by serfs who were not allowed to leave the land. In 800, on Christmas day, Charlemagne, king of the Franks, was given the Roman title of emperor by Pope Leo III. He united under his rule most of the western Roman Empire and some lands that had not been in the empire.

The kings of western Europe needed the allegiance of the nobles if they were to stay on their thrones. The nobles enforced the laws and manned the armies that protected the kingdoms against invaders. Even Charlemagne depended on the noble landowners to see that churches were maintained, roads kept up, and the laws enforced. Through the institution of feudalism, the Frankish nobility supported Charlemagne. For their continued oaths of loyalty and obedience, Charlemagne gave his vassals grants of land. In return, they came equipped to do battle whenever he called.

The Ottomans were a new group of Muslim Turks who appeared around 1200. They were very successful as a military power.

Mohammed (570?-632) was the founder of the religion of Islam. The followers of Islam are called Muslims.

► Followers of many religions have waged wars to win converts. Should believers in a religion force others to join them? Why or why not?

Charlemagne's ability to govern was not inherited by his successors. At his death in 814, his son Louis I became emperor. However, Louis and his sons quarreled about dividing the empire. Their struggle permitted ambitious nobles to war among themselves and to increase their landholdings and power. They granted land to their followers, often requiring the vassal to supply armed men. The vassal, in turn, gave his followers portions of his land in exchange for their allegiance.

From the ninth century until the thirteenth, most of Europe was thus divided into hundreds of small feudal holdings. No monarch emerged, such as Charlemagne, powerful enough to rule over a large territory. For hundreds of years, the feudal governments provided Europe with adequate local administration and defense against invaders.

The Church, also inherited from Rome, played a major role in the feudal system. Christianity had become the dominant religion of the Roman Empire by the fourth century. After the crucifixion of Jesus, his followers had carried his message to all parts of the empire. They had created a permanent church to preserve and spread Christianity. Each Christian community was placed under a priest who preached the teachings of Jesus and administered the sacraments, or church rituals such as baptism. Each priest was appointed by the bishop in charge of his diocese. Eventually, the bishop of Rome dominated all other bishops and became the pope, the supreme authority of the Christian Church.

By 476 when the last western Roman emperor was deposed, the Church had become one of the most important institutions in western Europe. As the Church's power grew, the kings and nobles of Europe set aside large tracts of land to support its bishops and monasteries. But if the kings and nobles made the Church powerful, the reverse was also true. Kings and nobles relied on the Church to help them keep the support of the peasants and, more importantly, of the warrior-vassals.

The popes called upon the kings and nobles to go to war on behalf of the Church. Beginning in 1095 and continuing for two hundred years, the popes called for Crusades to recapture Palestine, the Holy Land of Jesus' birth, from the Muslims. Armies of Europeans went to Palestine. Although the Crusaders failed to take Jerusalem, those who returned to Europe brought with them a desire for the products of the East and curiosity about the rest of the world.

The Church served still another need during the Middle Ages. At a time when most people were occupied with satisfying their needs and fighting local wars, the Church carried on the intellectual traditions of the ancient world. The clergy ran the schools. Monks copied and illustrated the few books of the times. Churchmen continued to study Greek and Roman writings so that they were not forgotten. Religion was the subject of most medieval art and drama. Without the medieval Church, much that is fundamental to western culture would have disappeared.

At the same time that feudalism developed and the Church's influence increased, Europe's political unity was destroyed. Commerce was disrupted as thieves and the wars between nobles made trade dangerous. Tolls collected by each noble at the border of his territory made transporting goods expensive. Pirates on the Mediterranean Sea ended almost all trade between western Europe and the Middle East for hundreds of years. Europeans had to produce their own goods and services.

Most medieval Europeans were peasants who farmed the manor lands. Their contracts with the manor lords gave them protection and the right to cultivate a part of the land in return for dues and services. Most of these peasants were serfs who were not free to leave the manor. Those who were freemen could leave. But without much hope of finding a better life in the towns, they usually remained on the manors.

A small number of people continued to live in the towns during the Middle Ages. The medieval towns were the administrative centers of the Church. In addition, they housed a few small craft industries. Beginning late in the eleventh century, trade and the use of money revived. The population of the towns began to increase. As the merchants and craftsmen found a greater demand for their products, they organized into guilds.

Manors and guilds were responsible for most of the economic decisions during the Middle Ages. They decided what goods and services would be produced with the available resources. The manor lords selected the crops that would be grown and the items that would be made in the manor workshops according to long-standing traditions. In the towns, each guild regulated the production of a particular item. Manors and guilds also decided how resources would be used. Contracts with the lord of a manor stated when the peasants would work for the lord and when they would work for themselves. Guild regulations specified what capital and natural resources would be used to make each article. Finally, manors and guilds decided how goods and services would be distributed. Contracts also stated what portion of the peasants' crops and labor went to the lord. Guild rules listed prices craftsmen could charge for their articles and how much of the profits went to the guild masters.

The manors and guilds also regulated the roles and status of medieval men and women, and they established the norms of behavior. In addition to stating the peasant's economic duties, a manorial contract specified whom his daughters could marry, what his sons would do when they were grown, and what would become of his wife after he died. The contract of a serf gave him less status on the manor than the contract of a freeman. On the whole, role and status were inherited. The son of a serf grew up to be a serf; the son of a freeman grew up to be a freeman. Likewise, the oldest son of the manor lord inherited his father's role and status.

Inheritance played a smaller part in controlling role and status in the towns, but they were still largely inherited. Guild rules often barred from the trade anyone who was not the son of a member. And fathers expected their sons to practice their crafts. Guilds also concerned themselves with norms of behavior. Guild regulations had provisions about drunkenness, thievery, and piety. Moreover, the guild determined the status of its members according to their rank as craftsmen—apprentice, journeyman, or master.

Status in the medieval Church also often depended on one's father. Bishops and other high Church officials were generally selected from the nobility. Parish priests were usually the sons of peasants. On the other hand, the talented son of a peasant might become a bishop or even a pope, as did Gregory VII, son of an Italian peasant. A serf's son could become an administrative officer of a diocese. Within the monastic communities, men of humble origins sometimes worked their way up.

► What organizations, if any, do you feel have the right to dictate the roles, norms, and status of their members?

Gregory VII, known as Hildebrand before his election as pope, was educated in a Roman monastery. He became a monk and then progressed steadily within the Church hierarchy until he became pope in 1073.

► Some people in the United States live in small traditional communities. Often these communities were founded by religious or national groups. Do you think these communities should be left as they are or should they be brought into the mainstream of American culture?

The political, economic, and social systems of the Middle Ages restricted change. Besieged by invaders and divided into small political units, medieval Europeans followed the ways of custom and tradition. Political power, wealth, role, and status were generally inherited. The same families often owned and ruled their land for many years.

Yet many of the political, economic, and social forces that later shaped modern western society took root in the Middle Ages. The following chapters explore some of these forces as they contributed to the Renaissance and the Reformation. They show the development of national states and parliamentary and absolutist governments. Finally, they investigate the beginnings of modern science and the growth of market economies.