Voices from the Past

In 1020, Bishop Fulbert of Chartres wrote about the mutual obligations between lord and vassals:

"[The vassal] who swears loyalty to his lord ought always to have these six things in memory: what is harmless; safe, honorable, useful, easy, practicable. Harmless, that is to say, that he should not injure his lord in his body; safe, that he should not injure him by betraying his secrets; honorable, that he should not injure him in his justice; useful, that he should not injure him in his possessions; easy and practicable, that that good which his lord is able to do easily he make not difficult, nor that which is practicable he make not impossible to him."

—Readings in European History, James Harvey Robinson, 1934

A system of lords and vassals spread over Europe after the collapse of the Carolingian Empire.

The Invaders

The Carolingian Empire began to fall apart soon after Charlemagne's death in 814. Less than 30 years later, it was divided among his grandsons into three major sections: the west Frankish lands, the eastern Frankish lands, and the Middle Kingdom. Local nobles gained power. Invasions in different parts of the old Carolingian world added to the process of disintegration.
In the ninth and tenth centuries, western Europe was beset by a wave of invasions. The Muslims attacked the southern coasts of Europe and sent raiding parties into southern France. The Magyars, a people from western Asia, moved into central Europe at the end of the ninth century, settled on the plains of Hungary, and invaded western Europe.

The most far-reaching attacks of the time, however, came from the Northmen or Norsemen of Scandinavia, also called the Vikings. The Vikings were a Germanic people. Their great love of adventure and their search for spoils of war and new avenues of trade may have been what led them to invade other areas of Europe. In the ninth century, Vikings sacked villages and towns, destroyed churches, and easily defeated small local armies.

The Vikings were warriors, and they were superb shipbuilders and sailors. Their ships were the best of the period. Long and narrow with beautifully carved, arched prows, the Viking dragon ships carried about 50 men. The construction of the ships enabled them to sail up European rivers and attack places far inland. By the mid-ninth century, the Vikings had begun to build various European settlements.

Beginning in 911, the ruler of the west Frankish lands gave one band of Vikings land at the mouth of the Seine River, forming a section of France that came to be known as Normandy. The Frankish policy of settling the Vikings and converting them to Christianity was a deliberate one. By their conversion to Christianity, the Vikings were soon made a part of European civilization.

The Development of Feudalism

The Vikings and other invaders posed a large threat to the safety of people throughout Europe. Rulers found it more and more difficult to defend
their subjects as centralized governments like the Carolingian Empire were torn apart.

Thus, people began to turn to local landed aristocrats, or nobles, to protect them. To survive, it became important to find a powerful lord who could offer protection in return for service. This led to a new political and social system called feudalism.

**Knights and Vassals** At the heart of feudalism was the idea of vassalage. In Germanic society, warriors swore an oath of loyalty to their leaders and fought for them. The leaders, in turn, took care of the warriors’ needs. By the eighth century, a man who served a lord in a military capacity was known as a vassal.

The Frankish army had originally consisted of foot soldiers dressed in coats of mail (armor made of metal links or plates) and armed with swords. Horsemen had been throwers of spears. In the eighth century, however, larger horses and the stirrup were introduced. Now, horsemen were armored in coats of mail (the larger horses could carry the weight). They wielded long lances that enabled them to act as battering rams (the stirrups kept them on their horses). For almost five hundred years, warfare in Europe was dominated by heavily armored cavalry, or knights, as they came to be called. The knights had great social prestige and formed the backbone of the European aristocracy.

It was expensive to have a horse, armor, and weapons. With the breakdown of royal governments, the more powerful nobles took control of large areas of land. When these lords wanted men to fight for them, they granted each vassal a piece of land that supported the vassal and his family. In the society of the early Middle Ages, where there was little trade and wealth was based primarily on land, land was the most important gift a lord could give to a vassal.

**The Feudal Contract** The relationship between lord and vassal was made official by a public ceremony. To become a vassal, a man performed an act of homage to his lord:

> "The man should put his hands together as a sign of humility, and place them between the two hands of his lord as a token that he vows everything to him and promises faith to him; and the lord should receive him and promise to keep faith with him. Then the man should say: ‘Sir, I enter your homage and faith and become your man by mouth and hands (that is, by taking the oath and placing his hands between those of the lord), and I swear and promise to keep faith and loyalty to you against all others.’"

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**Feudalism**

The word feudalism usually makes us think of European knights on horseback armed with swords and lances. However, between 800 and 1500, feudal systems developed in various parts of the world.

In Europe, a feudal system based on lords and vassals arose between 800 and 900 and flourished for the next four hundred years.

In Japan, a feudal system much like that found in Europe developed between 800 and 1500. Powerful nobles in the countryside owed only a loose loyalty to the Japanese emperor. The nobles in turn depended on samurai, or warriors who owed loyalty to the nobles and provided military service for them. Like knights in Europe, the samurai fought on horseback, clad in iron.

In the Valley of Mexico, the Aztec developed a political system between 1300 and 1500 that bore some similarities to Japanese and European feudalism. Local rulers of lands outside the capital city were allowed considerable freedom. However, the Aztec king was a powerful ruler and local rulers paid tribute to him and provided him with military forces. Unlike the knights and samurai of Europe and Japan, Aztec warriors were armed with sharp knives and spears of wood, both fitted with razor-sharp blades cut from stone.

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**Comparing Cultures**

Research two of the three cultures discussed in this feature. What are the similarities and differences in their feudal systems?
In feudal society, loyalty to one's lord was the chief virtue.

By the ninth century, the grant of land made to a vassal had become known as a fief (FEEF). Vassals who held fiefs came to hold political authority within them. As the Carolingian world fell apart, the number of separate powerful lords and vassals increased. Instead of a single government, many different people were now responsible for keeping order.

Feudalism became increasingly complicated. The vassals of a king, who were themselves great lords, might also have vassals who would owe them military service in return for a grant of land taken from their estates. Those vassals, in turn, might likewise have vassals. At that level, the vassals would be simple knights with barely enough land to provide income for their equipment. The lord-vassal relationship, then, bound together both greater and lesser landowners.

The lord-vassal relationship was an honorable relationship between free men and implied no sense of servitude. Feudalism came to be characterized by a set of unwritten rules—known as the feudal contract—that determined the relationship between a lord and his vassal. The major obligation of a vassal to his lord was to perform military service, usually about 40 days a year.

When summoned, a vassal had to appear at his lord's court to give advice to the lord. Vassals were responsible for making financial payments to the lord on a number of occasions as well. These included the knighting of the lord's eldest son, the marriage of the lord's eldest daughter, and the ransom of the lord's person if the lord should be captured.

Under the feudal contract, the lord also had responsibilities toward his vassals. Of course, the lord supported a vassal by granting him land. The lord, however, was also required to protect his vassal, either by defending him militarily or by taking his side in a court of law.

**Reading Check** Identifying Why was land the most important gift a lord could give a vassal?

### The Way It Was

**FOCUS ON EVERYDAY LIFE**

**The Castles of the Aristocrats**

The growth of the European nobility in the High Middle Ages (1000 to 1300) was made visible by a growing number of castles scattered across the landscape. Castles varied considerably but possessed two common features: they were permanent residences for the noble family, its retainers, and servants, and they were defensible fortifications.

The earliest castles were made of wood. However, by the eleventh century, castles of stone were being built. At first, the basic castle plan had two parts. The motte was a man-made or natural steep-sided hill. The bailey was an open space next to the motte. Both motte and bailey were encircled by large stone walls. The keep, the central building of the castle, was built on the motte.

The keep was a large building with a number of stories constructed of thick stone walls. On the ground floor were the kitchens and stables. The basement housed storerooms for equipment and foodstuffs. Above the ground floor was the great hall. This very large room served a number of purposes.
The Nobility of the Middle Ages

In the Middle Ages, European society, like Japanese society during the same period, was dominated by men whose chief concern was warfare. Like the Japanese samurai, many European nobles loved war. As one nobleman wrote in a poem:

"And well I like to hear the call of
'Help' and see the wounded fall,
Loudly for mercy praying,
And see the dead, both great and small,
Pierced by sharp spearheads one and all."

The nobles were the kings, dukes, counts, barons, and even bishops and archbishops who had large landed estates and considerable political power. They formed an aristocracy, or nobility, that consisted of people who held political, economic, and social power.

Great lords and ordinary knights came to form a common group within the aristocracy. They were all warriors, and the institution of knighthood united them all. However, there were also social divisions among them based on extremes of wealth and landholdings.

Trained to be warriors but with no adult responsibilities, young knights had little to do but fight. In the twelfth century, tournaments—contests where knights could show their fighting skills—began to appear. By the late twelfth century, the joust—individual combat between two knights—had become the main part of the tournament.

Knights saw tournaments as an excellent way to train for war. As one knight explained: "A knight cannot distinguish himself in war if he has not trained for it in tourneys."

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, under the influence of the Catholic Church, there gradually evolved among the nobility an ideal of civilized behavior, called chivalry. Chivalry was a code of ethics that knights were supposed to uphold. In addition to their oath to defend the Church and defenseless people, knights were expected to treat captives as honored guests instead of putting them in dungeons. Chivalry also implied that knights should fight only for glory and not for material rewards, an ideal that was not always followed.

**Reading Check** Summarizing List three features of chivalry.

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Here, the lord of the castle held court and received visitors. Here, too, the inhabitants of the castle ate and even slept. Smaller rooms might open off the great hall, including bedrooms with huge curtained beds with straw mattresses, latrines, and possibly a chapel.

The growing wealth of the High Middle Ages made it possible for European nobles to improve their standard of living. Nobles sought to buy more luxury goods, such as jewelry, better clothes, and exotic spices. They also built more elaborate castles with thicker walls and more buildings and towers. Rooms became better furnished and more elaborately decorated.

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**Connecting to the Past**

1. **Explaining** What architectural and design features supported the two basic functions of castles?
2. **Describing** What was the lifestyle of the European nobility in the High Middle Ages?
3. **Writing about History** Does a nobility exist today? Where?
Aristocratic Women

Although women could legally hold property, most remained under the control of men—of their fathers until they married and of their husbands after they married. Still, aristocratic women had many opportunities to play important roles.

Because the lord was often away at war or court, the lady of the castle had to manage the estate. Households could include large numbers of officials and servants, so this was no small responsibility. Care of the financial accounts alone took considerable knowledge. The lady of the castle was also responsible for overseeing the food supply and maintaining all the other supplies needed for the smooth operation of the household.

Women were expected to be subservient to their husbands, but there were many strong women who advised, and even dominated, their husbands. Perhaps the most famous was Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor was one of the most remarkable personalities of twelfth-century Europe. Heiress to the duchy of Aquitaine in southwestern France, she was married at the age of 15 to King Louis VII of France. The marriage was not a happy one, and Louis had their marriage annulled. Eleanor married again, only eight weeks later, to Duke Henry of Normandy, who soon became King Henry II of England.

Henry II and Eleanor had a stormy relationship. She spent much time abroad in her native Aquitaine, where she created a brilliant court dedicated to cultural activities. She and Henry had eight children (five were sons). Two of her sons—Richard and John—became kings of England.

Reading Check Summarizing To whom were aristocratic women subject?