
UNIT 21 FEUDALISM: FORMS AND STRUCTURES

Structure

- 21.1 Introduction
- 21.2 Lords, Vassals and Homage
- 21.3 Fiefs, Tenements and Allods
- 21.4 Manors
- 21.5 Knights, Tournaments and Chivalry
- 21.6 Summary
- 21.7 Glossary
- 21.8 Exercises

21.1 INTRODUCTION

Feudalism was characterised in the first instance by the decay of the royal authority. There were three major waves of invasion into western Europe in the late ninth and early tenth centuries: one by the Norse who came by sea from Scandinavia and swept around the entire maritime boundary of Europe from Byzantium to Sicily to Normandy to the British Isles to Russia; one by the Magyars or Hungarians who came by land from the Balkans into northern Italy and southern Germany and France, and the last by the Saracens who came from Tunisia across the Mediterranean to Italy and parts of Spain. They came as plunderers, raiding and causing havoc before abandoning an area. Although the effects of the invasions varied in accordance with conditions in different parts of Europe, they succeeded in creating a general atmosphere of insecurity and instability as evident in depopulation, agricultural decline, and loss of wealth. The uniformity of government superimposed by the Carolingians proved to be superficial. Defence of the land – the original function of kingship – passed rapidly and irreversibly into the hands of the local potentates who consolidated their power amid the anarchy resulting from the dissolution of the Carolingian state. This consolidation could be accomplished only at the cost of the undermining and elimination of the small free peasant proprietors whom the Carolingians had made efforts to defend and promote. The feudal system was characterised by the appropriation by the seigneurial class, ecclesiastical and lay, of the entire surplus agricultural production achieved by the unclear peasant masses.

Complexities of this process were most developed in France and also, at a later stage, in Germany, but never completely worked out in Italy, where its development was checked by the persistence of traditions from the antiquity, and by the unusually early urban involvement of the landowners. It was even further from being complete in Spain, where the special conditions of the Reconquista gave the kings powers to limit those of the magnates. In England, in the Norman kingdom of Sicily, and in the Holy Land, the imported feudal system was more rigorous and sometimes closer to certain theoretical models than elsewhere, but its roots were also shallower. In the Slav lands local

traditions produced considerable differences in the feudal pattern, and Scandinavia lacked a feudal system almost entirely. In spite of such extreme regional variations across Europe, it is possible to form a general idea about the social and institutional structures of the feudal societies. At one level, it entailed the legal disintegration of the realm into fragmentary dominions, thus making political subjection a matter of private contract. At another, it institutionalised and regularised the relationships of dependence which involved the unequal exchange of service and protection.

Feudal society had a hierarchical structure in which individuals had their designated positions. King was at the top of this structure who bestowed fiefs or estates on a number of lords. The lords distributed fiefs to a number of vassals who had their specified duties and obligations. The knights were at the bottom of this hierarchy and performed military duties. The whole system worked on strong bonds of personal loyalty and allegiance.

In this Unit we will familiarise you with the position of Lords and Vassals and the nature of bonds between them. The nature of fiefs and tenements would be discussed. The conditions of cultivators and tenants with a manor will also be discussed. We will also introduce you to the institution of knights in the feudal set up.

21.2 LORDS, VASSALS AND HOMAGE

The legal complex of acts by which one free man placed himself in the protection of another was known as commendation. It involved a series of obligations binding on both parties. The person who commended himself was called a vassal and assumed the obligation of serving and respecting his superior, whom he called his lord, with the reservation that this service and respect was compatible with the maintenance of his status as a free man. The lord on his part agreed to assume the obligation of providing maintenance and protection to the vassal. The validity of commendation depended on the precise accomplishment of the formalities that accompanied these acts.

The primary rite of commendation was known as homage, which all classes performed during the Merovingian period but came to be limited under the Carolingian kings to the members of the aristocratic class. Two elements were comprised in the act of homage: *immixito manuum* (the rite in which the vassal, generally kneeling, bareheaded and unarmed, placed his clasped hands between the hands of his lord, who closed his own hands over them) and *volo* or the declaration of intention, whereby the placing of the vassal's person at the lord's disposition and the lord's acceptance of this surrender was verbally expressed.

Reflecting the improvement of the status of vassalage in the middle of the eighth century, the Carolingians added to the ceremony an oath of fealty (vassal's acknowledgement of fidelity to his lord) to emphasise the fact that the vassals, now comprising the members of aristocracy, served as free men. The man would take the oath when he would rise from his knees after performing his act of homage and while standing, as befit a free man, swear to be loyal to his lord placing his hand on the Scriptures or on a casket containing holy relics. In fact, the lord might demand that his vassals repeat such oaths of fealty a number of times, particularly when he had reason to suspect their loyalty. The act of homage and oath of fealty were held binding until the death of one of the

parties and, once the contract had been concluded, it could not be unilaterally denounced. In principle at least the contract of vassalage was regarded as one freely concluded between the two parties. The doing of homage and the taking an oath of fealty were fairly frequently accompanied, especially in France, by a ceremonial kiss (*osculum*), which was not only a spectacular way of confirming the obligations contracted by the two parties, but also lent dignity to the status of the vassal.

During the enfeoffment, usually following the act of homage and the oath of fealty, an act of investiture used to be performed symbolising the transfer of the property right and the vassal's assumption of the obligations of administering the fief which he received on this occasion. The rite consisted in the handing over by the lord of some symbolic object to the vassal. In some cases the object was intended to signify the act of concession which was taking place, and the lord retained the object employed, which might be a sceptre, (a staff borne as symbol of personal sovereignty or imperial authority) wand (slender rod for carrying in hand or setting in ground) ring, knife, glove etc. in other cases the object remained in the vassal's hands and symbolised the fief itself. It might be a corn-stalk, a piece of earth or turf, a lance, a banner or a pastoral staff in the case of the investiture of imperial bishops in Germany and Italy before the Concordat of Worms, and so on. The ceremony of investiture represented the moment from which the vassal acquired his right in the fief which was henceforth to be legally protected against any violation. In the later feudal age, the ceremony of the renunciation of a fief was modelled on this rite, where the vassal formally divested himself of the fief by handing over the lord the same object which had been used for the original investiture.

The idea of fealty implied, in its negative aspect, the principal obligation of the vassal of abstaining from any act which might constitute a danger to the person, property and honour of his lord. The positive aspect of the vassal's duty was to render certain services to the lord usually classified as aid (*auxilium*) and counsel (*consilium*). Military service was the essential element in the category of aid. The lord possessed vassals in order that he might have soldiers at his disposal, and the institution had a distinctly military character. According to specific settlements, some vassals were bound to render personal service only, while others were bound to serve with a fixed number of knights, who would generally be their own vassals. From the eleventh century onwards, these quotas generally bore some relation to the importance of the fief held by the vassal. By that time, the vassals were also able to impose on the lords the conditions that they could only be held to a certain number of (often forty) days of service, beyond which the lord could only retain them by paying wages. In addition to its purely military aspect, the obligation of *auxilium* covered duties in the administration of the manor or in the lord's household, the carrying of messages, the providing of escorts, and rendering financial aid to the lord in case of need. The payment of the lord's ransom if he were captured, the knighting of his eldest son, the marriage of his eldest daughter, and his departure on a crusade were the most common occasions for such aids. *Consilium* indicated the obligation to give counsel imposed upon the vassal the duty of meeting with his lord, usually in company with the lord's other vassals, whenever the lord might summon him. Tradition limited such gatherings to two or three a year. One of the most important of this duty of counsel consisted of judging, under the presidency of the lord, the cases which came before the latter's court.

The lord, on the other hand, owed to his vassal the obligations of protection and maintenance. The first implied that the lord was bound to defend his vassal against the latter's enemies both in cases of unjust military attack and in a court of law. Generally, if the vassal had been granted a fief, the lord was bound as the grantee to warrant the vassal its possession by defending it against any attempts which might be made to deprive him of it. As far as maintenance was concerned, its primary object, from the lord's point of view, was the necessity of making it possible for the vassal to provide the service, and in particular the military service, which he owed him. The lord might provide the maintenance either by keeping the vassal in his court and household or by granting him a fief. However, by the eleventh century most of the vassals were beneficed and not purely domestic, though the grant of a benefice did not necessarily exclude other forms of maintenance at the lord's expense.

The mutual obligations created by homage and fealty were of a personal character, and so could affect nobody outside the two contracting parties. No legal relationship was therefore recognised between the lord and the sub-vassal. A vassal might be bound to bring to his lord's service some or all of his own vassals, but the latter had no direct obligation towards their 'suzerain', as the lord of a lord came to be termed in late medieval France. There was, however, one important exception to this general rule. When a lord died without a certain heir, his vassals were regarded as the vassals of his lord until an heir to the deceased was legally established. In other words, the rights of a lord in the fiefs of his vassals necessarily reverted on his death without heirs to the lord of whom he ultimately held those fiefs.

Although in theory provisions of sanctions existed in the case of one party failing in his obligations, up to the twelfth and thirteenth centuries they were usually quite ineffective and in practice the conflicts which followed such breaches of agreement were most often settled by recourse to arms. Confiscation of the fief was of course a necessary consequence of the breach of fealty, since the grant of the fief was conditioned by the contract and obligations of vassalage. In reality, however, the progressive development of the rights of the vassal over his fief made confiscation difficult, and in twelfth century France the temporary 'seizure' or 'occupation' of the fief was developed as a less drastic sanction.

21.3 FIEFS, TENEMENTS AND ALLODS

The lord or the chief of a group of vassals could either keep the vassal in his own house and feed, clothe and equip him at his own expense, or he could endow him with an estate or a regular income derived from land and leave him to provide for his own maintenance. The tenure granted freely by a lord to his vassal in order to procure for the latter the maintenance which was his due and to provide him with the means of furnishing his lord with the services required by his contract of vassalage was termed as benefice or fief. Household vassals perhaps represented an older type of relationship than the beneficed vassals, but from the Carolingian period a great increase in the distribution of the benefices took place. This was the case because on the one hand, the regular provisioning of a fairly large group proved a rather difficult undertaking for the lord. On the other hand, many of the vassals needed independent revenues which, associated with the political authority they already exercised, would

enable them to operate in conditions consistent with their prestige. Moreover, a *vassus dominicus* was supposed to pass the greater part of his time in his province, exercising his supervisory functions.

A fief normally consisted of a landed estate, which could vary greatly in size. But a fief might also be some form of public authority, or a duty or right, including the right to tolls and market dues, the rights of minting and justice, the functions of advocate, mayor, provost, receiver, and so on. These fiefs which had no territorial basis but consisted in the right to certain payment made at regular intervals were known as 'money fiefs'. They existed in France, Germany and the Low Countries from the eleventh century onwards, but it was the English monarchy under the Normans and the Angevins that made the most extensive and systematic uses of such money fiefs. In the tenth and eleventh centuries, the lay vassals often held churches – abbeys, parish churches, chapels – amongst their fiefs. This allowed them the profits of the tithe, the endowments of the church, and even in some cases the income arising from the spiritual offices themselves (offerings of the faithful, church dues etc). One of the major objects of the eleventh century reform movements was the abolition of this kind of fief, and they were partially successful in checking and limiting the practice.

The nature of the rights enjoyed by the two parties, the lord and the vassal, did not remain the same across the centuries. The processes of patrimonialisation and subinfeudation considerably modified these rights. At the very beginning of the feudal period the lord held the ownership rights as envisaged in the Roman law, while the vassal was invested with rights corresponding to the Roman idea of usufruct which consisted merely of using and enjoying the fief and appropriating its produce. The situation began to change substantially from the ninth century as the effective occupation of the fief enabled the vassal to strengthen and buttress his real right over the land, and correspondingly, the power of the lord tended to decline. This was most evident in the way the fiefs came to be regarded as part of the patrimony or hereditary property of the vassals. Originally parcelled out as a form of life tenure that essentially represented a stipend, in theory the death of a vassal always brought the enfeoffment to an end and the legal rights of the lord over the fief revived in their entirety. Since vassalage was not transmitted by inheritance, the remuneration of the vassal could also not take on a hereditary character. But what generally occurred in practice was that an heir immediately occupied a fief left vacant by the predecessor from whom he hoped to inherit, and then addressed his request to the lord for investiture within a certain time limit determined by the local custom. The lords continually insisted on, but usually abstained from implementing, the principle of revocability. Because, in refusing the father's fief to the son the lord not only ran the risk of discouraging new commendations, he was also in the danger of provoking a serious reaction from his other vassals who nurtured similar expectations. In western France and Burgundy, as an upshot of the early weakening of the royal power, the *benefices* formed out of public offices were among the first to become hereditary. The process was relatively rapid and widespread in the whole of France, and rather slow and arrested in Germany and north Italy, and became general in England only in the twelfth century. Nevertheless, by the end of the twelfth century the investiture of the son in succession to the father acquired a legal status almost everywhere.

Inheritance of Fiefs

As long as the inheritance of fiefs had not become an established custom, the lord could demand some recompense from the aspiring candidate before admitting him as a vassal to fealty and homage and investing him with the fief. The payment which the lord exacted on this account was commonly known as 'relief', which could vary – depending upon the importance of the particular fief in question – from a horse and the equipment of a knight to one year's revenue of the fief. The ecclesiastical tenements, however, were free from the seigniorial exactions arising out of the lord's occasional rights connected with a breach of the continuity of possession. In the case of a fief descending by hereditary succession to a minor, either the nearest relative of the heir became a vassal of the lord and having been invested with the fief saw to the upkeep and education of the heir during his minority, or the lord himself was permitted by custom to take over the fief for the time being and enjoy its usufruct, on condition of providing for the maintenance and education of the minor heir. However, in both cases the child had the right, on attaining his majority, of demanding to be allowed to do homage and take the oath of fealty and so obtain for himself the investiture of the fief. Although originally women were entirely excluded from any right of feudal succession, by the end of the tenth century numerous cases of female succession were being admitted. In southern France and the Low Countries the custom came to be accepted at a relatively early date than it was in Germany.

It was the growing patrimonialisation of the fief that considerably resisted the legal idea of a fief being an indivisible right, and thus accelerated the process of subinfeudation. According to Ganshof, the more a vassal came to regard a fief as one of the elements in his personal fortune, the more he regarded it as natural that, like any other family possession, all his children should benefit from it. Consequently, the practice of partitioning fiefs was gradually established over the greater part of France and Germany, although in England the custom of male primogeniture was predominant. Along with indivisibility, the principle of inalienability also lost its force. With the property element in the complex of feudal relationship becoming increasingly preponderant, the engagements and obligations attached to property rights ceased to be personal services and instead became attached to alienable property which might be sold to the highest bidder. Originally, the subinfeudation of all or part of the fief was certainly not permitted to the vassal without the lord's authorisation. But from the tenth century onwards in France, from the eleventh in Germany and after the Norman Conquest in England, cases of the gift or sale of fiefs by vassals seem to have been generally and freely practised without any intervention on the lord's part. Initially, the vassal would have to resign his fief into the hands of his lord, who would then invest the new candidate with it after having received his fealty and homage. But eventually such complicated rites of resignation and re-investiture came to be abandoned since the lords could no more effectively oppose the alienation of fiefs. Nevertheless, the lord retained the right of exacting a payment on the occasion of a change of holder, and their explicit consent was still considered as essential. The lord's right of pre-emption, that is, his right to substitute himself if he wished for the purchaser by paying him back the price which he had paid for the fief, was also safeguarded. However, the right of disposal eventually became much more restricted in the case of the lord than it had in that of the vassal.

Before the end of the ninth century multiple vassalage came into practice. The practice of a vassal doing homage to several lords became rampant in France in the tenth and in Germany in the eleventh centuries. Several attempts were made to prevent this plurality of allegiance from too seriously weakening the binding force of the tie of dependence. Among them most significant was the system of liegeancy that by the end of the eleventh century was widespread in France, England, southern Italy and parts of Germany. In this system, it was recognised that there was one among the multiple lords of a vassal who must be served with the full strictness of early vassalage. This lord was called the liege lord who usually provided the largest benefice to the vassal. Gradually, however, even liege homage got multiplied.

Fief involved an obligation of service which contained a very definite element of professional specialisation and individual action. In this respect, it was sharply distinct from the *villein* tenement which was burdened with labour services and rents in kind. The usual villein tenement, ranging between ten to thirty acres, was distributed in scattered acre-strips in the two or three open-fields of the manor. These holdings were deemed in law to be at the will of the lord, but in practice were often protected by the local custom and generally subjected to quasi-legal rules of possession and inheritance on the payment of a tax.

Allods

While feudal tenure – the villein tenements and the fiefs — was certainly the most common mode of holding land, it was not the only form of real property rights. There were the ‘allods’, which remained independent to a significant degree owing to the porous and limited nature of the feudal network of dependent ties. The allodial right was one of complete ownership, not subject to any conditions of service or payment. While from the tenth century onwards, the feudal tenure rapidly spread at the expense of the allodial rights, the latter continued to survive particularly in southern France and Germany. Marc Bloch argues that in the countries where feudalism was an importation it was much more systematically organised than in those where its development had been more deeply rooted in local traditions. Hence, neither in Syria nor in England the allod was permitted. All land was held of a lord and this unbroken chain led link by link to the king. For most of Europe, however, independent peasant holdings were common enough. It must be clarified that they did not fully escape the economic exploitation of the seigneurial class who controlled the local markets and the regional economy as a whole. Frequently, the allodialists had to pay levies directly or indirectly through an intermediary. Their small individual or collective scale also made their economies vulnerable to the vagaries of the predominant feudal economy.

21.4 MANORS

The fundamental unit of economic production as well as social life in the feudal order was the manor. A manor was first and foremost an agglomeration of small dependent farms directly subjected to the authority of a lord and farmed by serfs or peasant cultivators bound to the soil. Its origins can be traced back to the Roman institution of *colonate* or *villae* continuing to survive in Frankish Gaul and Italy in a recognisable form. But the acquisition of new powers by the manors through the fusion of different kinds of tenures and the transference

of many allods to the control of a powerful individual coincided only with the development of the feudal nexus. Manors expanded both by force and contracts.

The estates were relatively small clearings among large stretches of forest and wastelands. In a characteristic manor the village was composed of peasant households clustered together in crude homes around the nucleus of a church, grist and stone mill, blacksmith shop, winepress, bakery and other facilities. Though the manorial village was not entirely self-sufficient since certain essential commodities like salt or metal-ware had to be obtained from outside sources, most of the daily needs of the peasants could be met with the goods produced within the manor. However, purchases had to be made outside the village, sometimes at long distances away, for catering to the needs of the lord and his family. The village was usually located in the centre of the arable land, somewhere near the most convenient water supply. Peasants as a rule lived, worked and died within the lord's estate and were buried in the village churchyard. The world of the medieval peasant was essentially the world and experience of the manor estate.

In stark contrast to the dark, damp and windowless single-roomed peasant homes made of mud brick and straw stood the lord's spacious castle or the large and well-defended manor house. Although the invasions were contained and eventually defeated in the course of the tenth century, the anxiety of lords to preserve, consolidate and expand their lordships led to small-scale arms races with neighbours. Wars were fought for plunder as well as conquest. The essential elements for the attacker were surprise and mobility, while the effective response for the defender was to keep wealth and human resources in well-fortified and well-garrisoned places. Campaigns were by and large limited to the months immediately before the harvest and wasting the countryside was considered an effective ploy to bring pressure on the enemy. Particularly the high middle ages saw expensive developments in the construction of fortifications. When a rival lord attacked a manor, the peasants usually found protection inside the walls of the castle.

The rest of the manor typically consisted of the arable (utilised by two or three-field rotation system), the meadowland (necessary to feed the draught animals) and the wasteland (used for summer pasture for animals of the whole manor and also providing wood, nuts, berries, honey, rabbits to the community). Farmland was generally divided into strips of ploughed land, worked communally by the peasants. Crops and peasant holdings were thus scattered in the different fields of the manor. Surrounding agricultural land lay mostly open fields, forests and wasteland, and a large amount of land known as the commons — land open to all to graze their animals on, gather firewood from, trap, fish and hunt from.

The majority of the manorial population was a vast body of servile peasantry of diverse origins, although over the course of the centuries the traces of the distinction mostly disappeared for all practical purposes. The word 'serf' was used to denote the lowest stratum of this body — who were not simply tenants of land which they did not own, but legally had no freedom of movement, of buying and selling land and commodities, of disposing of their own labour, of marrying and founding a family, and of leaving property to their heirs. In reality a *villein* had little difference from a serf though he was supposed to enjoy the privileges of a freedman except in his relationship to his lord against

whom he had no civil claims. One source of feudal serfdom undoubtedly was the slavery of the ancient world and the Dark Ages. When the Roman landowners began to parcel out vast portions of their former *latifundia*, which had ceased to be profitable under direct exploitation, they allotted a certain number of indivisible tenements (*mansi*) to their slaves in exchange for tithes on crops, service in the lord's own fields and various other types of dues. The control of social justice and the offer of 'protection' were also used to reduce free peasants to servitude, making them hereditarily bound to their tenements and liable to arbitrary levies and labour services. Poor harvests and flight from the invaders of course led some freemen to surrender their liberty, but the pressure from above was probably more powerful than the consent from below. As David Whitton points out, the most rapid subjection of the peasantry came not in the tenth century, the period of maximum volatility, but rather in the eleventh when harvests were improving.

The servile peasantry was bound to fulfil several obligations for the lord. Every villein household had to send a labourer to do work on the lord's farm for about half the number of days in the week. The principal of the many requirements of the demesne was ploughing the fields belonging to the lord, and for such ploughing the villein had not only to appear personally as a labourer, but to bring his oxen and plough as well. In the same way the villeins had to go through the work of harrowing with their harrows, and of carrying the harvest in their wains and carts. Carrying duties, in carts and on horseback, were also distributed. Then came innumerable varieties of manual work for the erection and keeping up of hedges, the preservation of dykes, canals, ditches and roads, the thrashing and garnering of corn, the tending and shearing of sheep and so forth. Exceedingly burdensome services were required at times of mowing and reaping. The villein, besides being tied to the soil (which meant that he could not leave the manor without the lord's consent), was subject to the servile fine of 'merchet' (*formariage*) on his daughter's marriage and to the exaction of his best beast as 'heriot' (*mainmorte*) or inheritance tax. He had to gain the consent of the lord as well as pay a small fee before his marriage. A lord could also select a wife for his serf and force him to marry her. Moreover, there were other substantial dues to be paid to the lord: the annual *capitation* or head tax (literally, a tax on existence), the *taille* (a money levy on the serf's property), and the *heriot* (an inheritance tax). Lastly, medieval serfs paid a number of *banalities* which were taxes paid to use the lord's mills, ovens and presses. As far as the clergy was concerned, the villeins had to render hens, eggs, wax, and other special payments to them on several occasions besides paying the regular tax of *tithe* for the upkeep of the church.

While it was assumed that everything a villein possessed was the property of his lord and liable to be resumed by him, there existed a considerable section of freeholders within the manor. These were the tenants who stood to the lord in a relation of definite agreement, paying certain fixed rents or performing certain specified services which, though burdensome, did not amount to the general obligation of rural labour incumbent on the villeins. The freeholders could seek and in some cases obtain protection for their rights in the royal courts and thereby acquired a privileged position in regard to holdings, dues and services vis-à-vis the villeins. However, the legal distinction between the tenants in a relation of contract with their Lord and the tenants in a relation of customary subjection must not be overstated. The freeholders had not only to

take part in the management of the manorial village community but also to conform to its decisions. They were not free in the sense of being able to use their plots as they liked, to manage their arable and pasture in severalty, to keep up a separate and independent husbandry. If they transgressed against the rules laid down by the community, they were liable to pay fines. Dues of all kinds, indeed, pressed equally on the villeins and the freemen. Both sections joined to frame the by-laws and to declare the customs that ruled the life of the village and its intricate economic practices.

Here it is necessary to point out that over time an internally differentiated body of manorial staff grew, often out of the class of the villeins and freeholders, to ensure efficient management of the manorial economy. This staff comprised the stewards and seneschals who had to act as overseers of the whole, to preside in the manorial courts, to keep accounts, to represent the lord on all occasions; the reeves who acted as a kind of intermediary between the villagers and the lord and led the organisation of rural services; the beadles and radknights or radmen who had to serve summonses and to carry orders; the various warders, such as the hayward, who superintended hedges, the woodward for pastures and wood, the sower and the thrasher; the graves of moors and dykes who looked after canals, ditches and drainage; the ploughmen and herdsmen, employed for the use of the demesne's plough-teams and herds. It was in the interest of the lord himself to strengthen the customary order which prevented the powerful intermediaries from ruining the peasantry by extortion and arbitrary rule. From the twelfth century this led to the enrolments of custom as to holdings and services. They constituted a safeguard for the interests both of the tenants and of the lord. This growth of the manorial staff was surely indicative of the emerging differentiation within the peasantry.

21.5 KNIGHTS, TOURNAMENTS AND CHIVALRY

However, "the agents of the seigneurial exploitation" – the phrase is Georges Duby's – were the knights. A knight was essentially a mounted warrior in the service of his liege-lord. Using the speed and momentum of a charge, the horse could trample his rider's enemies and the rider could use the long lance to injure his foes while he remained out of reach of their weapons. Then, with all speed, the knight could ride off, only to return for another deadly attack. This technique had the most devastating effect when the cavalry worked together in formation. The horse-mounted soldier was therefore of immense significance to an army and of great value to the lords during the period when kingdoms and estates struggled to survive in the face of constant threat of invasion by nomadic tribes and aggressive neighbours. They garrisoned the castle in rotation and all rallied to its defence in time of danger. They were frequently used also in intimidating and forcing peasants into paying dues etc. The position of the feudal knights was far more socially buttressed than their Roman predecessors, the *equites*.

A boy destined for knighthood had to undergo a long and careful training. At the age of seven he was taken from his mother's keeping, and sent to the castle of one of the great nobles to be educated with the lord's own children and other high-born boys. Hence the duty of respecting God and the ladies was at once impressed upon him by the women of the household, whom he served as

a page. Masters taught him some book learning, Latin and foreign languages, knowledge of music, singing, and the art of making rhymes. Great value was placed upon good manners, as courtesy was one of the most essential characteristics of a knight. Even lighter accomplishments, such as dancing and playing at chess, tables and other games, were not despised. Physical culture was, however, the most important part of his training. From the age of fourteen, when he was promoted to the rank of a squire, he was gradually taught to use knightly weapons, to bear the weight of knightly armour, to ride, to jump, to wrestle, to swim, to hunt, to hawk, to joust, and to endure the utmost fatigues of all kinds. Squires were supposed to attend their lord in his chamber, to serve in the hall, to taste his food or bear his cup, to keep charge of his horse and arms. Expert squires also attended their lords in battle, and took charge of his prisoners. In a few cases, young men completed their chivalric education by travelling, going to tournaments, and studying customs in other lands. Usually at the age of twenty-one, the knight bachelor was accoladed.

From the end of the tenth century, along with hunting deer or wild boar and falconry tournaments began to emerge as the major amusement of the knights, which was also a way for warriors to practise working together and rehearse their combat skills. For the knights looking for service, they provided a proving ground as well. Frequently legal disputes were settled after the contestants had asked God to grant victory to the righteous. The tourney proper was an encounter between two bodies of knights while the joust was a one-on-one combat. Usually they fought in enclosures before an audience. The opponents were not necessarily enemies. They often fought for the honour of their ladies or their lieges, or to gain renown in arms for themselves. No one who had injured the Church, been false to his lord, fled without cause from the battlefield, made a false oath, committed an outrage on a woman, engaged in trade, or could not prove his descent from a noble family was to be allowed to take part in a tournament. The conqueror was entitled to the armour, weapons and horse of the vanquished, and could also demand a ransom for his person. In the early tourneys no particular safeguard used to be taken for preventing deaths. The armours and weapons that were employed in the real battlefield were also used in the tournaments. However, the mounting financial and human losses that the tournaments involved and their potential for breeding political conspiracies worried the princes and the kings. The Church actively tried to ban the dangerous amusement and even threatened to refuse Christian burial to any knight killed in a tourney. But the institution had already evolved into a grand popular spectacle with the heralds announcing it to the public weeks in advance, colourful processions and evening banquets accompanying it. Prizes were introduced. The minstrels entertained the crowd. Merchants frequently organised small fairs to attract the numerous visitors. Therefore, rather than prohibiting tournaments, various measures were developed to bring them under control. The licensing system in England, devised by Richard I in 1192, was one such attempt. Restrictions were also put on the dangerous form of combat practice. The joust, where two mounted knights raced towards each other in a test of skill and nerve, was more and more encouraged to test the horsemanship and weapons skill of the individual knight. As part of the safety measures, certain special contrivances such as blunt-tipped lances, coronals, tilt barriers and more protective armours, gradually evolved.

The tournaments immensely contributed to the fashioning of the idealised code of conduct for medieval knights which was known as chivalry. Derived from

the French word ‘cheval’ (horse), the word gradually became associated with ‘chevalier’ (mounted warrior). It exalted courage and courtesy in battle, generosity to one’s inferiors and loyalty to one’s lord. Bravery, often verging on the border of complete recklessness, was the fundamental quality in the chivalric code. Even the slightest insult was to be avenged by blood and no knight could afford any suspicion of cowardice or treachery. Honour required that he never failed his lord or avoided a challenge. The true knight also disdained all tricks in battle and was not supposed to strike an unarmed or unprepared enemy. If defeated or captured, he could expect honourable treatment until he was ransomed. Gradually, the involvement of the Church in the Crusades added love of God and the defence of the Christian principles to the code of chivalry. By the twelfth century, the meaning of chivalry was expanded to include courtesy towards women and protection of the defenceless. Although it was held that a knight ought to help all ladies to the utmost of his power, especially if they had been deprived of their rights, or were in distress of any kind, he was expected to choose one as the special object of his attraction. To win her grace, or to enhance her reputation, he sought adventures, and fought for her both in war and tournaments. As the famous medieval ballads *Mort d’Arthur*, *Chanson de Roland* and *Amadis de Gaul* testify, the marvellous adventures and romantic love of the knights became the favourite themes of the poems of the troubadours and the minnesingers. **However, chivalry might be understood more as a normative guide of knightly behaviour than as a true reflection of what the knights actually did.** With the development of firearms in the thirteenth century the importance of cavalry and knightly armours and weapons remarkably declined. In the changed context of the growing commercial and urban culture knighthood increasingly became an obsolete order both in terms of efficiency and expense. Chivalry was transformed into a code of gentlemanly manners in polite society.

21.6 SUMMARY

The feudal system had its own specific forms and structures. The feudal ties involved a series of obligations binding on Lords, Vassals and peasants. Homage and the acknowledgement of obligation of fidelity to lord was the governing principle. The fief in the form of a landed estate was of varying size. It was also in the form of public authority or a duty or right. Elaborate rules governed the inheritance of fiefs where lords had their defined powers. The peasantry within a manor had a sort of stratification some enjoying rights and others completely subjugated. The cultivators were subjected to heavy land tax and various cesses. The institution of knights evolved out of the need for armed power to protect the manors and suppress dissent inside it. While going through this Unit you must have noticed that the form and structure of feudalism was not uniform in the whole of Europe and there were significant variations in different regions which were pointed out during our discussion. The study of this Unit must have helped you in understanding forms and structures of feudalism. In the next Unit we will discuss various phases of feudalism.

21.7 GLOSSARY

Reconquista : Spanish Portuguese word for reconquest. Reconquista were major wars fought by

	Christian rulers for the recapture of Spain and other European regions from the Arabs between 11 th and 15 th centuries.
Enfeoffment	: Invest person with land or fief under feudal system.
Concordat of Worms	: Concordat agreement especially between Church and State.
Investiture	: Formal investing of person (with office) especially ceremony at which sovereign confers honours.
Benefice	: Benefic – having favourable influence, benefice property held by ecclesiastical officer.
Low countries	: Netherlands (Holland), Belgium and Luxembourg.
Normans	: Descendants of mixed Scandinavian and Frankish people who conquered England in 1066. English Kings from William I to Stephen.
Angevins	: English kings from Henry II to Richard II.
Lay Vassals	: The church was a lord with extensive lands under its control; it also gave away some of its revenues to vassals outside its ranks; these were lay vassals.
Tithe	: Tax of one tenth, tenth part of annual produce of land or labour taken for support of clergy and church.
Primogeniture	: Right of succession belonging to the first born male child or the eldest son.
Grist	: Corn for grinding.
Villein	: Tenant entirely subject to lord or attached to manor.
Reeve	: Manorial supervisor of villeins or minor local official.
Equites	: Horsemen
Page	: Boy in training for knighthood or boy or man employed to attend to door or go on errands a; sort of personal attendant.
Joust	: Combat between two knights on horseback.
Accolade	: Bestowal of knighthood.
Liege	: Allegiance.

21.8 EXERCISES

- 1) What were the rights and obligations of Lords and Vassal in feudatory relations?
- 2) What was the nature of fief? How was it inherited? How did it change?
- 3) Analyze the conditions of different kinds of cultivators in a manor.
- 4) Who were knights? What was their significance in a feudal set up?