

Der Herzoge von Anhalte.

viii.

Theme II

# Feudalism in Europe From the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century



Time Line

Components of Feudalism

Lords, Vassals, Knights

Seigneurial Rights, Tournaments

Demense, Manor, Fiefs

Tenements

Allods, Serfs

Phases of Feudalism

First Phase: 9-11 Century

Second Phase: 11-14 Century



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**Photograph:** Tournament from Codex Manesse

UB Heidelberg, Cod. Pal. germ. 848, fol. 17r, "Herzog von Anhalt"

**Courtesy:** Pinterest

Master of the Codex Manesse (Foundation Painter) (fl. circa 1305–circa 1340)

**Source:** <http://digi.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/diglit/cpg848/0029>

[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1d/Codex\\_Manesse\\_%28Herzog%29\\_von\\_Anhalt.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/1/1d/Codex_Manesse_%28Herzog%29_von_Anhalt.jpg)

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## UNIT 5 FORM AND STRUCTURE OF FEUDALISM\*

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### Structure

- 5.0 Objectives
- 5.1 Introduction
- 5.2 Feudalism: Historical Context of Medieval Society
- 5.3 What is Feudalism?
- 5.4 Chief Components of Feudalism
- 5.5 Feudalism: An Overview of Form and Structure
- 5.6 Economic Arrangements under Feudalism
- 5.7 Feudalism: Legal Aspects and Political Authority
  - 5.7.1 Political Decentralization, Decay of Royal Authority, Parcellization of Sovereignty
  - 5.7.2 Military System
  - 5.7.3 Lords and Vassals
- 5.8 Social Order
  - 5.8.1 Church and Feudal Society
  - 5.8.2 The Nobility
  - 5.8.2 The Peasants
- 5.9 Towns and Trade
- 5.10 Gender
- 5.11 Questions of Historiography: Stagnation and Dark Age
- 5.12 Summary
- 5.13 Keywords
- 5.14 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 5.15 Suggested Readings
- 5.16 Instructional Video Recommendations

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### 5.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this Unit, you should be able to:

- locate Feudalism in a historical context and understand its connections with the medieval period in history,
- understand its defining features and the debate surrounding the concept of Feudalism, specifically in Europe,
- learn some of the differences in its features as they occurred in different parts of Europe,
- identify the key aspects in the structure of Feudalism in Europe, particularly the specific social formation and mode of production essential to the prevalence of Feudalism in Europe,

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## Feudalism in Europe from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century

- have an idea of the forms it was manifested in, in various parts of Europe; what we mean by demesne, manor, fief, etc.,
- analyze the fact that culture and art of this period characterized as Feudal in Europe had some relationship with the structures and forms of feudalism, and
- appreciate that chronologically what can be identified as Feudalism did not occur at the same time all over the world.

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## 5.1 INTRODUCTION

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In this Unit we will discuss mainly the form and structure of Feudalism in Europe, but we would like to discuss this structure and form in its historical context. We shall also relate these forms and structures with other aspects of society, polity and culture that constitute the broader features of a feudal society. In other words, we would like to look at feudalism as a specific **mode of production**. We will examine how society and economy were organized, as different from the ancient societies studied earlier and from capitalism that emerged later. Thereby informing ourselves of the broader aspects of medieval societies that formed their setting.

This does not, of course, mean that those patterns of life that existed prior to the emergence of feudalism disappeared overnight, or that the beginnings of what came to be known as capitalism did not have their roots in certain developments that took place within the feudal societies, particularly in the later years. Continuities and change always go together, and at different points of time the change becomes noticeable and fundamental in different places at different times. Different types of modes of production, i.e. different types of economic and social forms also continue to co-exist long after new forms have become dominant.

So when we talk of the structure and form of feudalism we speak of the periods in human history when Feudalism was the dominant form of organization of economy and society. This system of organization was accompanied by certain forms of polity, culture, mentalities and ways of thinking. Feudalism, as per this approach, is a study of not just structure and form, of social and economic organization, but of feudal societies as a whole.

Finally, even as we say that feudalism in Europe was the period from the ninth century to the fourteenth century<sup>1</sup>, the period was not by and large unchanging. We have the early phases, the middle phases and finally what are called the High Middle Ages. The latter centuries were very different from the earlier ones<sup>2</sup>. Therefore, the study of structures and forms of feudalism is inseparably linked with these changes and phases of medieval societies. There were some very clear distinctions between the first phase (9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century) and the second phase (from 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century), with some features that grew or got transformed in the overlapping 11<sup>th</sup> century. These encompassed changes in extent, means, methods and organization of agricultural production, population, trade, social stratification and cultural expression and cultural production, and some political changes as well. These were the features and changes that can be accommodated in or which characterized, in some form or the other, medieval societies all over the world.

Just as societies characterized by slavery were seen as ancient societies, and ancient economy was seen as based on slavery (though not all production was carried by slave labour), similarly feudalism (or other forms of similar economies, preceding capitalism)

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<sup>1</sup> There are debates about where did feudalism originate first and in which years specifically; and when it began to decline or get overtaken by capitalistic elements.

<sup>2</sup> You shall learn more about the phases of Feudalism in the next **Unit (6)**.

is characterized as medieval, and referred to as medieval economy and the period as medieval society. The 14<sup>th</sup> century marked the decline of feudalism in western Europe, and the transition to the early forms of capitalistic development.<sup>3</sup>

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## 5.2 FEUDALISM: HISTORICAL CONTEXT OF MEDIEVAL SOCIETY

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Often it is thought that medieval amounts simply to something that is in the ‘middle’ of the human history. The timeframe of the centuries we speak of as medieval, or even its phases, are not uniform everywhere. Feudalism or what can be termed as medieval societies did not emerge chronologically at the same time in all the regions of the world.

We must remember that Feudalism and the historical setting of medieval societies were not a mirror image of each other: the geographical setting, economic conditions, political vicissitudes, and external influences shaped the nature of medieval societies in the specific regions of the world. That said, there are certain features and forms of organization of economy and society that we characterize as medieval and more specifically feudal. It is Europe that we will talk about here, primarily Western Europe, and about its basic features rather than the dynamic of changes through stages and variations, which you will learn about in the next Unit of this Course.

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## 5.3 WHAT IS FEUDALISM?

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The term Feudalism signified the changes that occurred in Western Europe between the late 8<sup>th</sup> to the 14<sup>th</sup> century. Central to these changes was the grant of land called ‘fief’ (a form of real property right) around which revolved the social and economic relationships of the period under study. The word feudalism is derived from the German word ‘feud’, which literally meant a piece of land. In pre-modern societies, before the industrial revolution, land was the chief source of wealth. Who owned this land, who worked on it and on what terms, and how much income each derived from it, was not merely an index of the economic condition of society, but also of individual wealth and status. Therefore, the relationships that governed the tilling and income from this land are crucial to understanding feudal societies. The terms on which the relationship of each section of society utilized this land also governed their relationships to each other. Feudalism in this sense represents the entire complex of social, economic and political system derived from this crucial relationship.

Serfdom was the basic institution that determined the mechanics of feudalism: as distinct from slavery, in which the one who worked the land was also *owned* by a member of the ruling landed aristocracy. The relationship with the lord, although less onerous than under slavery, was nevertheless one in which he was oppressed and his labour exploited to an extent that barely left him enough for survival. Mostly he worked with his own tools, and he had to draw his means of livelihood from the parcel of land he was tied to, not from any remuneration from the work he did on the lord’s land. This remuneration was a form of labour rent for the **strips of land** allotted to him by the lord precisely to ensure labour for himself once slavery no longer remained viable.

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## 5.4 CHIEF COMPONENTS OF FEUDALISM<sup>4</sup>

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Feudal society had a hierarchical structure in which individuals had their designated

<sup>3</sup> On which (transition for feudalism to capitalism) too there is a very lively debate, to which social scientists of different disciplines have contributed over the decades.

<sup>4</sup> This Section is taken from **IGNOU Course MHI-01: *Ancient and Medieval Societies*, Block 6, Unit 21**, ‘Feudalism: Forms and Structure’ written by Dr. Bodhisattva Car, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi.

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 Section, we will define the chief components of feudalism.

### 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 emphasize the fact that the vassals, now comprising the members of aristocracy, served as free men.

During the **enfeoffment**, usually following the act of homage and the oath of fealty, an act of **investiture** used to be performed symbolizing 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 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. 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 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 recognized between the lord and the sub-vassal. 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.

### 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.

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'. The nature of the rights enjoyed by the two parties, the lord and the vassal, did not remain the same across the centuries. Since vassalage was not transmitted by inheritance, the remuneration of the vassal could also not take on a hereditary character. But by the end of the twelfth century the investiture of the son in succession to the father acquired a legal status almost everywhere.

Fief involved an obligation of service which contained a very definite element of professional specialization 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.

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. It must be clarified that they did not fully escape the economic exploitation of the seignorial 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.

### **The Manor**

The basic unit of production in the agrarian economy was the Manor, and at the level of the peasant it was the household or family. The manor was the landed estate in control of the feudal lord, which could constitute land in several villages, or parts of land in several villages, or parts of land in a single village. What is significant is that it was an institution that marked the land of a particular lord. Thus there were lords who controlled hundreds of villages, peopled by peasants and worked by them, while others had just a dozen families working on their land: the most obvious sign of gradation and hierarchy in the ruling classes under feudalism. The manorial estate was self-sufficient in many ways, insofar as daily necessities were concerned: grain, blacksmiths, carpenters, stone masons, household tasks were all taken care of within the estate. Women and children worked too, in the house and in wine presses, and spinning and weaving. Luxury items used by the lords and salt and some metalware came from outside through trade. Forest in his area provided grounds for hunting, and meadows served the purpose of grazing. The manor also housed the castle and household retinue of the lord.

How did the lord assume control over this land? Parts of it may have been received by him as fief, some taken over by his military might, some received as grant or gift. And how did he utilize it for maximum gain? He divided his manorial estate into two types of land: the demesne, which housed his castle and retinue; and land that he gave out to peasants for cultivation and use for their livelihood, in return for which the peasant family worked in his demesne without any further payments. In other words, the peasants in lieu of rent were required to perform labour services, the total sum of it not being jointly negotiated but imposed by the lord as expression of his power. It could vary in

direct proportion to his power vis-a-vis his peasants. The two components of the lord's land, and the terms of remuneration were linked by these relations of production, specific to feudalism.

The peasant was thus tied to the land, while the lord was ensured a regular supply of labour on terms of his choice. The demesne land was directly managed by the lord, but worked in the same way as peasant land i.e. divided into strips and subject to the same technology and agrarian relations, although in the later phase the lords began introducing new technology and also hiring labour for money payments if it so suited them. But the peasant had to work for certain number of days on the lord's demesne, on days most favourable for planting, harvesting, etc. The form of payment could change, but relationship between the lord and the peasant essentially remained the same, that of a serf, as described here. Thus under the feudal system, the peasant worked not only on his own holding allotted to him from which he gave over a share of the produce in the form of crop or money, but also on the lord's field. This as you would notice, was quite distinct from slavery in the ancient world. This system of social relations and economic organization was known as serfdom.

Leo Huberman has described several categories of serfs: the 'demesne serfs' who were permanently attached to the lord's land and lived and worked solely on it; 'bordars' who held barely two to three acres of land in strips at the edge of the village; and 'cottars' who had little more than the land on which their cottage stood. 'Cottars' were the most vulnerable as they mostly had to give out their labour to lord, for food and in the later period for meager money payments. However, with time there grew a section known as 'villeins', who enjoyed better conditions as their liabilities or obligations to the lord were fixed, and some of them didn't do any labour services at all. They were best placed for freedom when it finally came, although they were a small minority.

The most onerous were the 'banalities' or 'monopolies' the lord enjoyed by virtue of owning the facilities in the manor. For use of forest land, meadows, workshops, wine presses, flour mills – everything in the manor – the peasant had to pay arbitrary amounts. The peasant had nowhere else where he was permitted to go for such facilities. Not to forget the poll tax, inheritance tax, and even when he tried to repair his cottage or celebrate a marriage. It seemed like the peasant had to pay the lord for almost anything that he did! And all this the lord imposed, even though he was himself not the *owner* of the land: only a tenant vassal of a higher lord!

Serfdom as an institution was thus intrinsic to feudalism in Europe. The peasant had no right to buy and sell the land or commodities, no freedom of movement, inheritance of land, and not even free to take independent decisions regarding marriage, family and residence. Most peasants were born, lived their lives and died within the same manor. In a way, the manor was his world and his labour and struggle in the estate constituted his life experience.

The peasant also paid other dues, such as **tithe**, amounting to one-tenth of the produce, payable mainly to the Church, but in the early phase shared by the lord. It was called a religious tax, in addition to the dues enjoyed by the Church as landowner.

With time, the *fief* and other land controlled by the feudal lord became hereditary. The control over the peasants' labour and life remained immense throughout feudalism. Very little land, known as **allod**, remained outside this complex or outside its influence as long as feudalism remained the dominant mode of production. And here too there was a distinction between such land held by the landed aristocracy and peasants.

It must also be noted that although generally a grant of fief meant a landed estate, it



could sometimes also be simply the grant of a right. For example, to collect certain tolls and market dues, or rights of minting and justice, or certain functions, in which case, they were basically ‘money fiefs’. These were more so in France, Germany and England, particularly during the eleventh century.

The basic social and economic unit was the peasant household and family, firmly bound to the lord in servile relations that had legal sanction and political protection. *In turn, the nature of this servile relationship was the edifice of the entire complex of feudal societies.* Because of the juridical control, we can say feudalism came to include social and political aspects as well, which we have discussed below.

### 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. They were frequently used also in intimidating and forcing peasants into paying dues etc.

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 practice working together and rehearse their combat skills. The tournaments immensely contributed to the fashioning of the idealized code of conduct for medieval knights which was known as chivalry. 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. However, chivalry might be understood more as a normative guide of knightly behavior than as a true reflection of what the knights actually did. Over time, chivalry was transformed into a code of gentlemanly manners in polite society.

#### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) Give a brief description of the historical context of medieval society. What is meant by Feudalism?

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- 2) What was the relationship between lord and vassal?

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3) Give a brief description of Manor.

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4) How was chivalry defined during the feudal period?

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### 5.5 FEUDALISM: AN OVERVIEW OF FORM AND STRUCTURE

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Feudalism, and medieval economy in general represents a class society essentially based on extra-economic coercion, but in which the economic pattern that was coerced by the ruling classes was very different from that of the ancient societies. This means its institutional and legal system was as important in creating and sustaining it, as were its economic patterns. Land continued to remain the main source of wealth throughout feudalism and the medieval period of human history. The control of land remained with the landowners or those who held land in return for a political or military function. It was not always irrevocable, but increasingly so during the latter phase of feudalism.

The main social classes were these landowners and the peasants who worked on the land, in varying capacities, and whose relationship with the landowners was through legal sanction, whereby they had to work for the lord, offer him services and obligations, and pay taxes. The Church held a singularly important position in this scheme of relationships, being part landowner and part a keeper of religion and conscience. The middle classes were not entirely absent, but quite weak in these societies, a situation that considerably changed over time by the 14<sup>th</sup> century.

Feudalism was thus a society of multiple hierarchies, within the broad division of landowners and peasants, each tied to those higher or lower by a set of duties and obligations and some rights, but never equal rights in any aspect of existence. In its sum total, 'the ambience sociale totale', as Marc Bloch (one of the celebrated historians of feudalism) looked at Feudalism, feudalism consisted of the *fief* i.e. a service tenement

instead of wage, the overlordship of a class of warriors with control over land through sheer muscle power and political patronage, ties of protection through every level of society linked with service in order to ensure territorial stability. This assumed the form of vassalage for the warrior-landed classes, leading to **parcellization of sovereignty** and the economic organization of peasant service around the manor for the peasant.

The economies varied from simple to complex in the different regions and over the centuries. The differences can be gauged from the growth of towns, trade, architectural achievements, social norms and lifestyles of the rich, as well as emergence of towns, urban centres and merchant classes.

Political sovereignty was essentially parcellized, with an overarching Holy Roman Empire on the top. In Eastern and Central Europe, however, feudalism was brought about by and sustained by absolutist monarchies. To understand a society comprehensively, and to be able to underline its basic features, it has to be studied in its developed form. When we talk of the form and structure of feudalism we, therefore, refer to the elements that constituted its mature, developed form. No society, however, emerges overnight in its developed form, and its various features can be traced in earlier years. Historians have engaged in a lively debate both about the origins of feudalism and its decline.

### **Debate on the Origins of Feudalism**

The early historians such as F. W. Maitland, Karl Bucher, Fustel de Coulanges of feudalism emphasized upon the legalistic aspects of the system. Many of these historians traced the roots of these features and stressed on the continuity of elements from the Germanic kingdoms and the Roman Empire. The thesis of continuity with the classical world took a radically new turn with the work of distinguished Belgian historian Henri Pirenne. Pirenne based his thesis on the premises of the impact of Islamic expansion on the development of feudalism in Europe. He explained the cause of break with the tradition of antiquity and the end of the Mediterranean unity with the advance of the Arabs. Pirenne's thesis has drawn, both, approval and condemnation. Some historians have refuted the role of Islam and interruption of the Mediterranean trade and commerce as a decisive factor in the origin of feudalism in Europe. On the other hand, a criticism of this thesis stimulated new research in varied directions.

By the first half of the twentieth century, two conceptualities of feudalism emerged to the fore. The first conception, the mainstream liberal view, regarded feudalism as a body of institutions based on the practice of obedience and subordination. The second conception, especially propounded by Marxist and Soviet historians, undertook an examination of the economic structure of the feudal society. Largely moving away from both the restrictive legalistic view and the economic deterministic conceptualization of 'feudalism', the French historian Marc Bloch chose to explain the phenomenon by exploring the various forms of, what he called, 'the ties between man and man'. Bloch argued that the bond of kinship progressively tightened with the development of feudalism.

Now, let us turn our attention to the origins of feudalism. To Bloch, therefore, the term feudalism denoted a comparative study of local phenomenon, rather than being a blanket term for the medieval social order. Bloch's thesis has been criticized on several grounds.

Taking the cue from Bloch, Georges Duby, one of the most original and influential post-war historians of medieval society, attempted to look beyond the economic to the ideological dimensions of feudal institutions. His detailed study of the political, economic, and social life in the Maconnais settlement in France from the tenth through the twelfth centuries focused a generation of historical research on what he called the 'feudal

revolution' of the early eleventh century. Arguing that fief never played 'more than a peripheral part in what is generally known as feudalism', Duby focused on the realignment of the social functions in this period. The term 'feudal revolution' signifies this entire social process, slow but unmistakable, which not only transformed the previous economy of war and plunder, but also restructured the aristocratic family into the patrilineage and effected related changes in the domains of mental attitudes. Duby's work has generated an intense debate amongst historians, and has invited disapproval on many grounds such as underplaying the role of women in the feudal revolution.

Lynn White Jr. made an important intervention in the growing debate in 1962 by strongly emphasizing the role of technology in shaping the feudal societies. At another level, White claimed that the invention of the stirrup and the horse-shoe played a significant role in shaping the military organization of feudal society. White has been criticized by later historians for isolating the technical improvements from the larger social and economic processes that marked the period. In this sense, Hilton and Sawyer argued, White's thesis retained a strong content of technical determinism. In a similar vein, Perry Anderson argued that the simple existence of technological innovations was no guarantee of their widespread utilization. Most importantly, many historians have questioned White's fundamental assumption that the Franks were the first to exploit the stirrup.

Although feudalism had continued to be analyzed as a mode of production dominated by land and a natural economy within this tradition for long, the theory was fully developed and worked out in the work of the British historian Perry Anderson in 1978. Anderson's analysis contradicted the conventional characterization of feudalism as an economy of regression or an era of decline and disintegration. Maintaining that feudalism was a more advanced system of enhancing agricultural productivity and the agrarian surplus than the classical slave mode of production, he argued that there were several structural contradictions within feudalism whose overall consequences were to drive the whole agrarian economy forward. Although his thesis with emphasis of the single aspect leaves out the larger picture of the feudal societies. The debate on feudalism, in the recent years, has led to the re-evaluation of the existent historical literature.

### **How and in which areas did Feudalism originate?**

The origins of Feudalism can be found in the conditions created after the fall of the Roman Empire: the same factors that led to the decline of the slave mode of production and Germanic invasions also facilitated the seizure of power by local elites and the simultaneous emergence of dependent labour, a hallmark of feudal societies. This had already taken place by the seventh century. The features of decline of trade and commerce and money and exchange, of towns and lack of a centralized political authority once the Roman administrative institutions and military control gave way continued to be the major aspects of feudalism in its early phase.

But not everything was destroyed, and feudalism in Europe was a synthesis of both Roman traditions and the Germanic tribes, often referred to as 'barbaric'. Most of the institutions of feudalism in fact had, as Perry Anderson has shown, a hybrid origin: fief, manor and serfdom were derived from this synthesis (Anderson, 1974: 130-131). Traditions of folk justice and reciprocal obligations, as well as the Roman legacies of written law were significant inputs into the feudal societies.

The period of transition involved making concessions to the local elites and a changeover from slavery that had become a fetter to greater productivity, to a system where the lord need not be responsible for the peasant's survival apart from allotting him some strips of land to manage for survival of his family and himself. He did not need to provide him with tools either or to introduce any new techniques, except in his own *demesne* from which the earnings from production were entirely his – with labour of the peasant, as much as he could extract. On the other hand, the peasant also required protection from marauders, which was ensured through the link with a particular lord.

#### Three-fold Zone-wise typology of Feudalism

Following the Soviet historians, Perry Anderson advanced a three-fold zone-wise typology of feudalism: i) The first zone comprised of northern France and its neighbouring regions. In this '**core region of European feudalism**', which roughly corresponded to the homeland of the Carolingian Empire, Anderson saw a 'balanced synthesis' of the Roman and the Germanic elements; ii) The **second zone** that lay to the south of the core region included Provence, Italy and Spain. Here, especially in Italy, the Roman legacy was much more dominant in the recombination of barbarian and ancient modes of production. The rural society was considerably heterogeneous, combining manors (mostly in Lombardy and north Italy), free-hold peasants (principally in central Italy), *latifundia* (particularly in south Italy) and urban landowners in different regions. Precisely for the survival of the classical traditions, the municipal political organization could also flourish in the area from the tenth century onwards; and iii) In the **third zone**, lying to the north and east of the core region and consisting of Germany, Scandinavia and England, the influence of the Roman rule was either superficial or non-existent. Consequently, in these places an allodial peasantry strongly held on to its communal institutions which remarkably slowed down the pace of the transition towards feudalism. As a result, serfdom was not introduced into Saxony until the late twelfth century, and in fact, it was never properly established in Sweden at all.

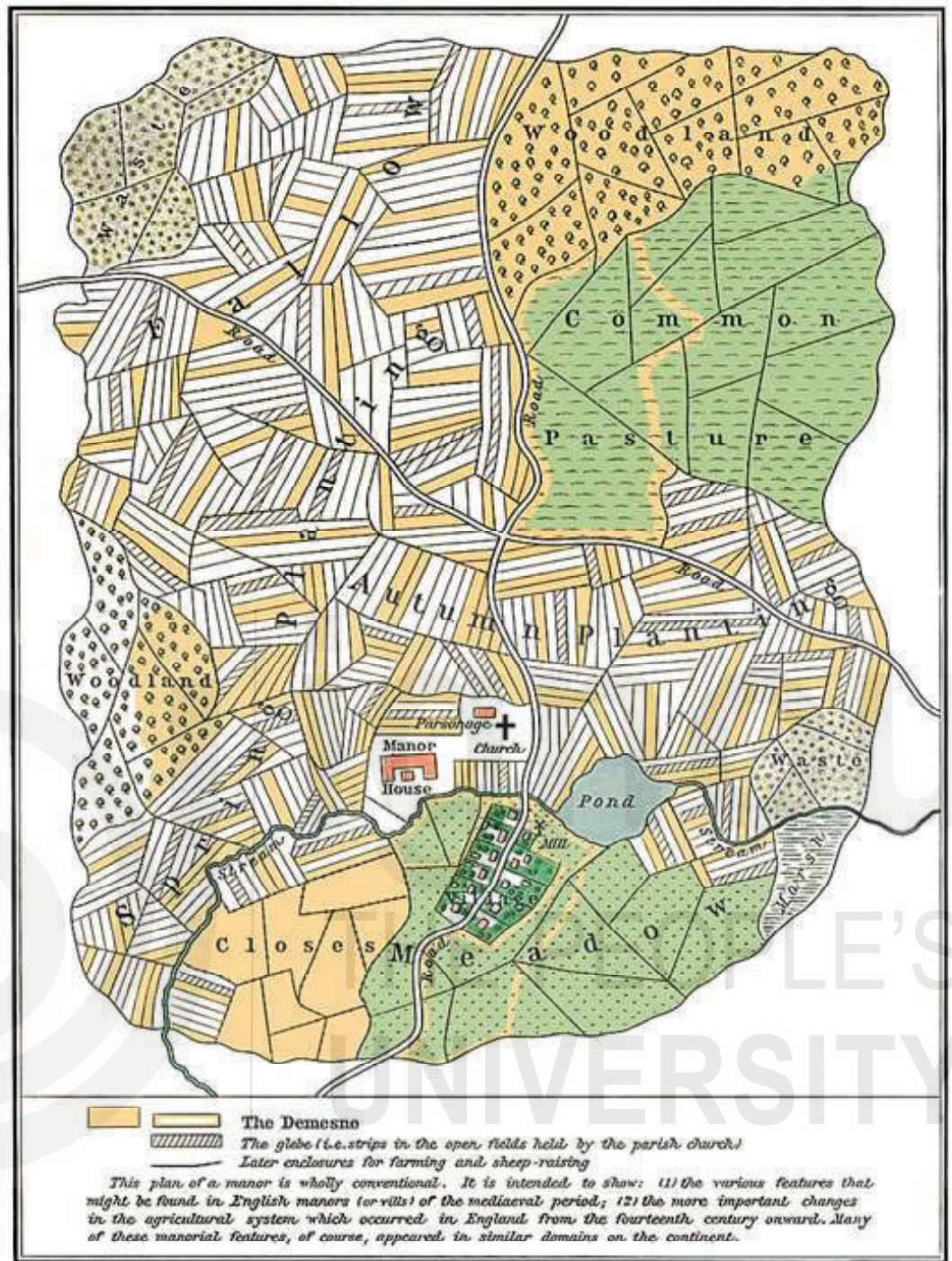
Source: MHI-01: *Ancient and Medieval Societies*, Block 6, Unit 20: 14

At a higher level the endowments of land were also tied to the bonds of service, more specifically military service, as different from gifts or grants: the system that came to constitute vassalage, down the line to the smallest lord and at the bottom the peasant, who was a serf. There were also some communal lands used by the community, over which the lords assumed control. These were grounds of contention between lords and peasants throughout the feudal period, a contradiction that derived from the period of transition.

These processes of feudalization of economy and society developed more completely and rapidly in France and later in Germany, but not so in parts of Italy that retained the strength of the traditions of antiquity and urbanism, the basis of the city-states. In Spain, feudal development was even more constrained, as kings here were able to retain some power over the magnates, and in Scandinavia almost absent. In Sicily and in England it was more rigorous, and in Slav areas it had its own specific pattern when it developed.

The second wave of invasions in the ninth century, of the Saracens in the Mediterranean region, and the Magyars in central Europe, ushered in a new phase allowing for more regions to adapt to the system of serfdom, and a society based on ties of dependence and hierarchy described above. The emergence and stabilization of the feudal system, and its form and structure was thus a long-drawn process in which the old and new forces of production and social relationships struggled to survive through both accommodation and coercion.

Feudalism in Europe from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century



**Map 5.1: Conjectural map of a feudal manor**

**Credit:** William R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1923 – [1]

**Source:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demesne#/media/File:Plan\\_mediaeval\\_manor.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demesne#/media/File:Plan_mediaeval_manor.jpg)

In the East, in the steppes and inhospitable climate of the northern region, the prolonged persistence of pastoral nomadism delayed the beginnings of serfdom, although eventually the boyars (landed magnates) who gained power at the expense of the monarchy were compelled to force a system that tied down the peasant to the land. Serfdom became the instrument for ensuring labour in conditions of peasant flight from their oppressive conditions. This has often been referred to as 'second serfdom' because of its variations from and chronologically late development as compared with Western Europe, 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in Western Europe and 15<sup>th</sup> to 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in Eastern Europe. Earlier attempts before the sixteenth century had been interrupted by conquests of the Russians and hugely resisted by peasant uprisings. Also, there was no precedence of ancient Empires like the Roman Empire and synthesis that the codification of laws and customary

practices of the Germanic invasions created. Finally, when serfdom was established it resembled more the backward and central regions of Europe than the western part, although the experience of the manorial system was of great influence.

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## 5.6 ECONOMIC ARRANGEMENTS UNDER FEUDALISM

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Unlike ancient societies, feudal economy had a much lower level of urbanism and trade. Production for market was much less and the size of towns was much smaller. The dominant feature of the agrarian economy was the large estates of the feudal lords. The methods of agriculture were simple, chiefly a wooden plough drawn by oxen, owned and worked by peasant labour, on a **two field system** whereby a part of the land lay fallow every second season of planting. In the absence of technological advance in the first phase, agriculture remained labour intensive, and the only way for the lord to increase his income was to make the peasant work longer hours and to increase the number of oppressive obligations that he imposed upon the peasant, and the taxes that were onerous. There was thus a fundamental contradiction between the feudal landed classes and the peasantry inbuilt in the feudal economy. The peasant on his part responded with passive resistance or violent uprisings throughout the feudal era.

By the eleventh century, new areas were brought into cultivation as a result of receding forests and by clearing marshes, the introduction of iron ploughs that enabled the plough to penetrate deeper and reach nutrients of the soil, methods of harness improved and horses began to replace oxen. Proliferation of windmills and water powered mills, the introduction of new crops and a **three field system** along with the above mentioned factors increased agricultural production and food availability. These developments benefitted the lords who could afford the changes, but not so much the peasantry, who continued to lose out in most regions due to the specific terms and conditions of their relationship with the lord. The latter continued to suffer because of the fact that land was primarily held by the feudal lords, who dictated the terms on which the peasants worked it.

### Check Your Progress-2

- 1) Write a short overview of the form and structure of feudalism.

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- 2) Discuss the debate on the origin of feudalism propounded by various historians. Explain the different factors that have been stressed in each of the thesis.

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3) According to Perry Anderson, in which areas did Feudalism originate? Explain his three-fold zone-wise typology of feudalism.

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4) What were the economic arrangements in feudalism?

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## 5.7 FEUDALISM: LEGAL ASPECTS AND POLITICAL AUTHORITY

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We mentioned above that Feudalism had certain extra-economic features. These were central to sustaining feudalism as a system of production with certain forms of oppression inbuilt into it. In fact, the earliest historians of feudalism emphasized precisely these legal aspects: these were fiefs, knightly or military service and forms of justice meted out by the lords or landowners, known also as **seigneurs**. These collectively constituted the method and institutions of governance and a way of securing the forces or military that helped maintain this form of governance. It was during the ninth century that the feudal lords were able to win for themselves political and juridical authority, which finally formalized and legalized the economic and military power they had already assumed, and in the tenth century this structure was firmly in place.

### 5.7.1 Political Decentralization, Decay of Royal Authority, Parcellization of Sovereignty

The collapse of the Roman Empire had led to the final collapse of central royal authority, the attempts by **Carolingians** and **Charlemagne** proving to be significant interludes that contributed to some features of the ensuing feudal development but failed to sustain a centralized political system. Kingship and the defense of occupied land passed into the hands of local but powerful individuals, who could exercise effective military and control of land (along with the peasants who worked these lands) in their areas. They, in turn needed to formalize this system in the areas under their control.

Even under Charlemagne there were 300 lords who administered the lands. Deriving legitimacy from the Pope, he earned for himself the title of Roman Emperor, and his successors that of Holy Roman Emperor. And the territories became designated as 'Holy Roman Empire'. But there was no centralized political system to back it and with time the feudal lords managed to get more and more power.



The lords who carried varied titles, such as count and duke, and derived their authority from the king, passed on similar authority to the smaller lords, who in turn did the same for those under them: eventually there emerged a juridical hierarchy, down to the lowest level in social hierarchy. And at each level the one who enjoyed authority was virtually a ruler in his own right, apart from his military functions and control over income from the land. It is this system that created the '**parcellization of sovereignty**' (which Perry Anderson has emphasized), the tight control over a certain defined area being accompanied by a dispersal created through the rights and obligations based on pervasive social and political hierarchy.

Political power was not centralized or concentrated in a monarch, yet oppression and control over those who worked the land remained as effective as in ancient societies of slavery. The lords enjoyed complete authority in their jurisdiction over justice and punishment and imposition of dues and labour. This hierarchical system was maintained and afforded through the system of vassalage, based on the land relations referred to above and a military system linked with both land control and vassalage.

### 5.7.2 Military System

As Amar Farooqui puts it so aptly, 'their power was backed by force, i.e. by their ability to mobilize armed supporters who were *personally* loyal to them alone' (Farooqui, 2001: 428). This emphasis on 'personally' implied that the force commanded by an individual lord in a given area was his source of strength over those inferior to him as well as those above him: he both ruled over and controlled those below him, and provided means of control to the one above him, with whom he bargained for the maintenance of his own position because he in turn provided military troops to maintain the position of his overlord.

In times of uncertainty the military system also implied military control of the land by the vassal, thus ensuring stability of revenue and surplus extraction for the lord, and a protected existence of survival for the peasant. The military system cemented the bonds of economic exploitation and wealth for the landed classes in the absence of slavery, that almost disappeared if not completely.

Fighting was done by foot soldiers and on horseback. The introduction of a better saddle and the stirrup introduced a new dimension in the military system. Both men and horses were fitted with armour. Common soldiers and nobility participated in the fighting, the nobility on horseback, with heavy weaponry. The manor house was, both, castle for fighting and defense as well as for living. The knight was the main mounted warrior of the feudal regime: he protected his lord from vagaries of other lords in the region, and from the peasants within the manor. He specialized in fast attacks on horseback with long lance for combat and swift movement.

Under feudalism there was neither a centralized army nor a salaried central bureaucracy. The feudal system of production and the decentralized political and juridical authority did not allow for centralized collection of revenue and the maintenance of a centralized army. The hierarchical military system was thus intrinsic to, and part and parcel of the feudal mode of production. The military system was facilitated by the creation over these centuries of an elaborate set of rituals and actual political practice. A hierarchical system of bonds was created complementary to the hierarchical structure of power.

### 5.7.3 Lords and Vassals

Theoretically, the land was 'owned' by the king, but 'held' by lords through a hierarchy reaching down to the peasant. Therefore, at each level the lord was a tenant of a higher

lord as well as a giver of fief to a lesser one. Each held his land from a higher one who in turn held his from a still higher one. This was the system of *vassalage*: the relationship with the higher lord made the lesser lord his 'vassal'. Every lord, in order to have some military at his command found a vassal, and the only way to do this was to give away a part of his land i.e. command over a part of the land that he controlled. This ensured him military assistance in time of need. Vassals also contributed on other ceremonial occasions, when the lord gained new honours, or when his son became knighted, and so on. These were all part of the 'obligation' that the men of 'lesser' status owed to their lords.

These obligations and status of protector were symbolized in rituals and an elaborate code of conduct was observed. Knights had 'Sir' added to their names, others were dukes, earls, barons and so on. Orderliness was maintained through the rituals of hierarchy, particularly the 'commendation' (an act elaborating the conditions and obligations involved when a man placed himself in 'protection' of the other). This was expressed through 'homage', whereby the vassal kneeled before the lord bareheaded and unarmed with hands clasped between the hands of his lord, and pledged allegiance and surrender to his overlordship. Later an oath of fealty or loyalty was added, with placing the hands on scriptures to underline the nature of duty owed. Often it was accompanied by an act of investiture, which symbolized the transfer of rights over the fief granted and the obligations it entailed. Sometimes the lord retained a sword or scepter to signify that he was the higher lord, sometimes a ring or a lance or some such object was given to the vassal to symbolize the fief, and so on. The object became the act of taking over the fief and later in a ceremony, if revoked, of handing it back.

This relationship was between the two persons involved and did not concern anyone else, so no general law was broken that might be universal. As in the case of lord and peasant, between the two lords, one a vassal to the other, there was an inbuilt conflict of interest and tussle for drawing greater benefit on either side, although in relation to the peasant-serf they both stood on the same side, benefitting from the feudal social-economic arrangements of the period.

Besides, there was the question of relative strength and other changes external to the system. The rights of the lord and the vassal did not remain the same over the centuries of feudalism or across regions. Although the fief became hereditary over time, it was not really an inheritance according to law, and the death of a vassal or lord always became an occasion for some change in equations. An interesting development was that although women were originally completely left out in the rights of feudal succession, by the end of the tenth century we see some cases where they do manage to inherit it, and there were rules regarding minors too with regard to the fief succession.

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## **5.8 SOCIAL ORDER**

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Medieval society was formally organized in 'Three Orders', believed to be dependent on their work: those who fought for and defended the land i. e. the Nobility; those who prayed for and satisfied spiritual needs and did charitable work, namely the Christian clergy; and those who did manual work, essentially the peasantry. This was a Church ordained understanding of society. In this scheme, each of the Orders enjoyed differential status and privileges and duties. The third Order having as its 'destiny' mostly duties and no privileges. Each was also hierarchical and graded within itself, as we will see, which actually resulted in the class society discussed above.

### 5.8.1 Church and Feudal Society

The Catholic Church was a powerful institution during the medieval centuries, which dominated the social and religious life of the people, apart from being a big landowner because it owned considerable lands. Because these lands were held on similar terms, often as grants, and cultivated on the same terms as land held by feudal lords, with the Church levying taxes (particularly the tithe) and demanding similar labour services, the Church can be considered a part of the feudal system. Moreover, it had its own laws and was not dependent on the king. There were tussles and conflict between the Church and rulers, but co-operation too in defense of the social order and the status quo, because, as explained above the Church enjoyed great privileges in society.

Within the Church were hierarchical positions that mirrored those in society. At the head was the Pope, and below them were the bishops who like the religious nobility commanded the income of vast amount of land under their control and lived very comfortable lives. Then there were the ordinary priests, not far removed in position from the common people among whom they worked in the parish, a church jurisdiction at the lowest level. Each manor had a church and priest that played an important role in the lives of the people, at marriages, births and deaths and several religious festivals, apart from preaching and readying people for an afterlife that they firmly believed in. Many customs and symbols, displaying loyalty (like kneeling and clasping hands while bowing) were shared with the system of vassalage described above.

In addition, were the monks and monasteries, in which those who chose to become monks or nuns lived celibate and isolated lives, unlike the priests. There were separate monasteries for men and women, where its inhabitants dedicated themselves to lives of prayer, study and manual labour. These institutions also had landed estates which provided income for their upkeep, two most famous ones being that of St Benedict founded in 529 and Cluny in Burgundy in 910<sup>5</sup>.

The language of the Church and of learning in general, during the medieval times, was Latin. The Churches were important centres of learning and Church played a significant role in education, prior to the emergence of secular schools and rise of Universities. You will learn about popular religion, world of ideas and mentalities in **Unit 7** of this Course.

### 5.8.2 The Nobility

The nobility constituted the ruling classes by virtue of their control over land, and the social and economic processes of rural life. It is only the nobles who could raise or own 'feudal levies' or soldiers. They sustained the system of vassalage, where each person was 'the man of another man' i.e. a person to whom he owed allegiance and obligation to provide troops in time of need in return for protection. The latter in turn provided protection to another man who would provide him troops in time of need. Within his own fief or limited area of control he was as if the king.

The most powerful amongst them were the dukes and earls, who had received their fiefs directly from the king. They owed direct allegiance to the king. The persons to whom they granted control on parts of their fiefs were known as barons, who pledged military support to them. Then came the knights who had no nobles lower than them to whom they could grant fiefs. But they played significant role in medieval wars and conflicts, and considerable effort went into their training, in arms and manners. There are numerous stories about their jousts and chivalry that characterized medieval courtly culture, about which you will read in the Unit on medieval culture.

<sup>5</sup> For a view of the Surviving remnants of the Abbey of Cluny, please see: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clocher\\_abbaye\\_cluny\\_2.JPG](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Clocher_abbaye_cluny_2.JPG)

### 5.8.3 The Peasants

The peasants were both free peasants and serfs. Both were subservient to the feudal system. Even the free peasants were to provide military service and work in the lord's land or other work in the manor, such as roads, buildings, fences etc. They were also subservient to the judicial and political power of the lord in every way. Even having their own lands did not free them from any of the obligations. In case of the serfs, they were tied to the land controlled by the lord, in the sense that they could not leave it, not only because they had nowhere else to earn their livelihood, but because they were legally bound in the relationship of work and obligations. They also had to give some portion of their produce as part of the obligation. We have discussed some of these in the Section on organization of feudal economy (**Section 5.7** of this Unit).

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## 5.9 TOWNS AND TRADE

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While the emergence of feudalism coincided with the decline of trade and towns, production and consumption within the manor (except for luxury items consumed by the lords or those not locally produced), improvements in agriculture and growth of population began to stimulate production, demand and exchange by the eleventh century. There was significant growth of fairs and growth of towns around them. Crafts were stimulated. Towns became centres of production. There was growth of full-time artisans, organization of guilds and merchants who traded in these goods. Guilds became an important feature in the organization of non-agricultural feudal economy. There were specialized guilds of different types of work and production, which trained apprentices, regulated prices, work norms etc.

The first towns were small, and continued to pay taxes to the lord on whose land they stood. But gradually by the twelfth century and in the High Middle Ages, the Italian cities like Genoa, Florence and Venice became flourishing trading centres. Most European trading towns were sea ports. With prosperity many of these towns, unlike the earlier ones, became free of the feudal control of lords. They began to gradually administer their own affairs and be free of the institution of serfdom that was part and parcel of the feudal structure in rural Europe. The peasants who managed to flee the shackles of serfdom also tried to escape to the towns.

Towns also came up as cathedral towns in areas where the rich contributed to the building of cathedrals as an investment in religion. And not to forget the University towns that came up and flourished during the High Middle Ages. These developments are important for understanding the form and structure of feudalism. It helps break the stereotype of feudalism as a dark phase in the human history as well as of feudalism representing a stagnant economy and culture.

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## 5.10 GENDER

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There was a vast difference between the status of men and women and the roles they could play in the feudal society. The role of women was divided in terms of class, while all had subordinate role in their families. In peasant families, they did a great amount of labour and had no time for leisure that noble women had. Some noble women were also educated and women of great learning, some (very few) played a role in the estates. But the entire legal framework of feudalism ignored women. They might not have existed at all, insofar as fiefs and vassalage system functioned. They could become nuns, but not priests. They could be labelled as witches, and some granted sainthood, but not recognized as persons in their own right. Some of them gained succession rights when fiefs assumed a hereditary right, but it was an exception rather than a norm. They had a

shorter life span than men. Their place in the essential form and structure was invisible, except as that of labour.

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## 5.11 QUESTIONS OF HISTORIOGRAPHY: STAGNATION AND DARK AGE

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Our survey of the form and structure of Feudalism has shown that the decline of the slave mode of production and collapse of a central political authority leading to strife and wars throughout Europe were not an unmitigated disaster. Serfdom, however exploitative and dehumanizing, did change the situation of the peasant from being treated on par with instruments of production and as non-persons. Another person did not *own* him as a slave even though he slaved for the lord; as serf he attained some minimum autonomy, not much, but nevertheless he worked for himself and his family on the strip of land he held, the right over which was recognized as part of feudal obligation. The survival of common lands under feudalism was a significant factor in this autonomy, as well as in fuelling the many peasant protests by the peasant community against the feudal lords. These protests became one of the factors for ultimately loosening the feudal bonds and ensuring some peasant rights. They also made possible the emergence of a basic class contradiction between the landed aristocracy and the peasants, in a society that otherwise was detrimental to emergence of classes due to the many gradations and hierarchies overlapping claims and rights and obligations. These protests and constant strife and wars for control of land-lent dynamism and contributed to movement rather than stagnation in society.

New inventions and technology and increase in production and greater flexibility in extraction of surplus became viable and widespread only within the new social relations that feudalism entailed once slavery had become unviable. The adoption and adaption of these inventions and economic changes in the social order and interaction between the new factors and social milieu created basis for restrictions, but also dynamism within the given social order. The growth of market and monetary exchange, growth of towns, use of stirrups in armed warfare kept feudalism in place. The legal and extra economic forms of coercion were possible only within the dynamic of the feudal social formation and its actual workings in practice. It had lot of flexibility and variations which was evident across centuries and regions. One has to look at the emphasis on the various factors privileged by different scholars in the light of this observation, as made by Perry Anderson.

The Church was an important autonomous institution that marked continuity in learning and became almost the only agency for literacy and education. Its contradictory role as a feudal landholder and as the ideological defender of serfdom on the one hand and its mission in education became the basis for dynamism in thought, both religious and secular. We cannot imagine religious protests movements or questionings of the Universe and the revival of antiquity in the Renaissance without this contradictory role of the Church.

Parcellization of sovereignty was an important factor allowing for emergence and growth of towns in the later phase of feudalism, that we have discussed above. These towns were far more independent of the landed interest and control as compared to the city-states and towns of the ancient period, which were subordinate to agrarian interests. While the ancient towns were dominated by the landed aristocracy, in the late feudal period the great port towns saw independent administration. Its main features were elective principles of representation, the rise of a powerful new merchant class that challenged the feudal social order and ultimately, the emergence of the guilds in non-

**Feudalism in Europe from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

agricultural production. These features finally brought it out of the dominance of feudal lords. Works of art and architecture and literature are not absent.

The origins of feudalism lay in the developments of fifth and sixth centuries. The formation of colonnades or settlements with former slaves began the process of tying down peasants to land, in return for tribute and labour services of the landed elite. By the ninth century, feudalism was stabilized and well established. It expanded in the tenth century and reached its zenith in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. By fourteenth century there were developments that began to loosen the system, new elements that eroded and contributed to its decline. By the sixteenth century, Europe, particularly western Europe, was poised for changes that ushered in modernity and elements of capitalism.

The fourteenth century was a period of crisis that manifested itself in the economic and political sphere. It was a general crisis across Europe, to which western and eastern regions of Europe responded differently. In the west was a loosening of the feudal ties and serfdom in some regions and intensification in others, and in the East a more onerous implementation of serfdom with full support of the absolutist monarchies. It was abolished eventually from above, by the Autocracy in the Russian Empire in 1861 – long after western Europe.

Europe under feudalism in its last phases in western Europe, and in its last phases in eastern Europe, looked very different from feudalism in its earliest phase. You will read about it in the next Unit.

**Check Your Progress-3**

- 1) What were the rights and obligations of Lords and Vassals in feudatory relations?

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- 2) Discuss the nature of military system under feudalism.

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- 3) Explain the social order under feudalism in the medieval European society.

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- 4) Write a short note on the position of women in the feudal economy.

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## 5.12 SUMMARY

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Feudalism was a social formation that existed before modern society emerged and is linked with the medieval period of history. It emerged in a situation of decline of the Roman Empire and the Germanic invasions in Europe, from the experience of which it derived its features. Serfdom was the basic feature of the feudal mode of production, and its institutions like the fief, the manor and vassalage were designed to create a hierarchical society. In feudalism, sovereignty was parcellized and political power dispersed, even as the control over territories was tightly maintained. The control was maintained through dependence and servitude at the lowest level, and obligations and dependence at all other levels. In the land under their control, the lords or seigneurs enjoyed complete authority of determining the life and working conditions of the peasants, of justice and punishment, with no check on the burdens placed on the peasant-serf. They were virtually the government in the areas under their jurisdiction. This is referred to as the parcellized sovereignty and wide dispersal of political power. At the local level, and at every level above till the king, it was backed by force, i.e. the ability to mobilize and command troops in defense of control of land and status of the seigneurs. This military system was intrinsically linked with the system of vassalage, as discussed in this Unit.

Feudal society was never a stagnant society and certainly not the Dark Age it was earlier thought to be. If anything, movement in the form of strife and wars was a continuing feature of the medieval period. The initial decline of towns and trade and monetary exchange was overcome in the later phases. These led to the emergence of circumstances that created conditions for a dynamic culture and intellectual advance, new forms of architecture and introduction of new techniques in production. All these eventually led to the decline of feudalism and the emergence of modern societies.

The Church was a powerful, autonomous institution, with a stake in serfdom and the defense of the oppressive social system, but also the only source of advances in literacy and education during the feudal era.

There were variations in the form and structure of feudalism over time and over regions. In Eastern Europe, in a marked difference from Western Europe, it was the centralized absolutist monarchies that sustained serfdom. In this region, serfdom coincided with centralized armies and centralized bureaucracy in the service of absolutism.

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## 5.13 KEYWORDS

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### Allod

- : A piece of land owned and cultivated entirely by a single family which neither enjoyed labour services of others nor rendered them to any lord. It could however employ wage labour. The produce of the allod belonged entirely to the family. It represented an alternative form of economic production in the heart of the feudal economy.

**Feudalism in Europe from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century**

- Benefice** : Having favourable influence, benefice property held by ecclesiastical officer.
- Carolingian** : A Frankish ruling dynasty which rose to power in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century. It gradually replaced Merovingian. Under Charlemagne it embraced most of the former territory of Roman Empire in the West. The empire dissolved by the end of 9<sup>th</sup> century.
- Charlemagne** : Known as Charles the Great, a king of the Franks (771-814), established a vast empire embracing the Roman territories in the West. In 800 he was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III.
- Enfeoffment** : Investing a person with land or fief under the feudal system.
- Investiture** : Formal investing of person (with office), especially a ceremony at which sovereign confers honours.
- Labour Dues** : Also called 'obligations'; imposed upon enserfed peasants to cultivate the *demesne* land, the produce of which went to the lord's stores; however, the produce of the tenement, also cultivated by the same peasants, went to their own households. The labour dues took a way half the peasants' labour. Besides there were some other dues as well. None of these were paid for.
- Latifundium* (pl. *latifundia*)** : Large agricultural estate in the Roman world, usually worked on by slave labour; most *latifundia* were sheep and cattle ranches, and some grew olives and grapes.
- Manse* (pl. *mansi*)** : A unit of land cultivated by one peasant family's labour, whether it belonged to the lord or the peasant himself. This was the unit of measurement of labour dues.
- Mode of Production** : A term used usually, but not exclusively, by the Marxist scholars to refer to the method of producing the necessities of life prevailing at a particular stage of history corresponding to particular relations of production like master-slave, lord-serf relations. According to Marx and Engels, this determines the general character of the social, political and spiritual processes of life.
- Parcellization of Sovereignty** : Overlapping authorities of jurisdiction. For instance, by powerful lords over less powerful lords who held authority at the peasants who lay at the bottom of the hierarchy, i.e. serfs. This



process first developed in Western Europe and later was witnessed in Eastern Europe.

<b>Seigneur/Lord</b>	: Feudal lord, person of high rank in feudal system.
<b>Stipendiary Tenements</b>	: Lands or rents given by a superior on a stipend or allowance.
<b>Strip System of Land Division</b>	: Cultivated land was divided into strips, scattered all over the village; the best strips were reserved for the lord.
<b>Tenures</b>	: Form of right or title under which landed property is held.
<b>Three-field Rotation</b>	: A system of cultivation in which a field was divided into three parts. One part was taken up for cultivating autumn crops, the second part for spring crops and the third was left fallow in rotation.
<b>Tithe</b>	: A tax imposed upon the peasants, amounting to one-tenth of the produce, payable mainly to the Church. In the early phase it was shared by the lord. It was also referred to as a religious tax.
<b>Two-field Rotation</b>	: A system of cultivation in which one part of the field was taken up for cultivation and the other was left fallow.
<b>Villein</b>	: Tenant entirely subject to lord or attached to the manor.

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## 5.14 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 5.2 and 5.3
- 2) See Section 5.4. Your answer must include a discussion of Lords, and their relationships with the vassals.
- 3) Manor was the basic unit in feudalism. See Section 5.4
- 4) The meaning of chivalry kept changing and becoming more inclusive between the tenth and twelfth centuries. See Section 5.4

### Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Section 5.5
- 2) See Section 5.5
- 3) See Section 5.5. Refer to the Information Box given in the Section.
- 4) See Section 5.6

### Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Sub-section 5.7.3
- 2) See Sub-section 5.7.2
- 3) See Section 5.8
- 4) See Section 5.10

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## 5.15 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Anderson, Perry, (1974) *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London and New York: Verso Classics).

Bloch, Marc, (1961) *Feudal Society*, 2 Vols. (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press).

Dev, Arjun, *The Story of Civilization: A History Textbook for Class IX*, Vol. 1 (New Delhi: NCERT Publication).

Farooqui, Amar, (2001) *Early Social Formations* (New Delhi: Manak Publications).

Leo Huberman, (1936) *Man's Worldly Goods: The Story of the Wealth of Nations* (New York: Monthly Review Press).

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## 5.16 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Medieval Feudalism: MGH**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rR0Dbp3wdKI>

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## UNIT 6 PHASES OF FEUDALISM AND ITS DECLINE\*

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### Structure

- 6.0 Objectives
- 6.1 Introduction
- 6.2 Two Main Phases
- 6.3 First Phase: 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> Century
  - 6.3.1 Agricultural Production: Means and Methods
  - 6.3.2 Organization of Agricultural Production
  - 6.3.3 Subsistence Economy
- 6.4 Second Phase: 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century
  - 6.4.1 Growth of Population
  - 6.4.2 Extension of Cultivation
  - 6.4.3 Changes in Organization of Agricultural Production
  - 6.4.4 Growth of Economy
  - 6.4.5 Social Stratification
- 6.5 General Debate on the Decline of Feudalism
- 6.6 Technology and Productivity of Land and Labour
- 6.7 Growth of Urban Centres
- 6.8 Transformation of Rural Scenario
- 6.9 Other Views on Decline
- 6.10 Summary
- 6.11 Keywords
- 6.12 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 6.13 Suggested Readings
- 6.14 Instructional Video Recommendations

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### 6.0 OBJECTIVES

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The large empire built by Charlemagne (Charles the Great) began to disintegrate in the ninth century CE. The collapse of central authority was accompanied by external invasions and decline of trade, commerce and the towns. Many of the military commanders and chiefs became independent rulers of their regions. During this period a new social formation was emerging in Europe which is termed as Feudalism. After going through this Unit, you will be able to:

- distinguish between the two phases of feudalism,
- know the unique aspects related to both these phases,

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\* Prof. Harbans Mukhia and Dr. Bodhisattva Car, Centre for Historical Studies, JNU, New Delhi. The present Unit is adapted from IGNOU Course **MHI-01: *Ancient and Medieval Societies***, Block 6, Units 22-23.

- understand the debate surrounding the process of decline of feudalism and views of scholars about it, and
- analyze the different factors responsible for the decline of feudalism.

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## 6.1 INTRODUCTION

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The feudal social formation contained Roman as well as Germanic groups. Feudalism as a form of political, economic and social system dominated Europe from around 9<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. However, during this entire period the political, economic and social structures were not static and uniform. A number of changes were taking place and new relations were emerging. The previous Unit (5) must have provided you a fairly good understanding of the feudal system in Europe. You must have also noticed that in the 14<sup>th</sup> century gradual decline of feudalism began and in due course of time it came to an end as a dominant system in Europe.

In this Unit, we will analyze the varied views held by scholars about the dominant causes for the decline of feudalism. Our aim here is to put before you the entire range of debate pertaining to the question of decline of feudalism. It is not possible to include the views of all the scholars who have worked on this theme. To give a fair idea we have selected a few main views such as those of Henri Pirenne, Maurice Dobb, Kochuru Takahashi, Guy Bois, Marc Bloch, Georges Duby, Paul Sweezy and Robert Brenner.

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## 6.2 TWO MAIN PHASES

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In order to appreciate complexities of the social and economic life in medieval Europe, feudalism has to be treated more as an evolving process than as a static structure. The idea of two evolutionary phases in feudalism owes much to the pioneering research of Marc Bloch. According to him, the first phase, that began with the establishment of the barbarian successor states on the collapsed political system of the Roman Empire and lasted until the middle of the eleventh century. This substantially preserved the basic social relations which characterized the Late Empire. This phase corresponds to the organization of a fairly stable rural territory where trade was insignificant and uncommon, coins were rare, and a wage-earning class almost non-existent. Ties of vassalage between the greater and lesser elements hierarchically linked the territorial aristocracies who monopolized both the social means of coercion and the regulation of jurisdiction. Most of the peasants were either completely unfree in the eyes of the law or so dependent in various ways on their lords that, if they were free, their freedom was a mere formality. In this phase the agrarian economy was producing very little surplus beyond what was necessary to support the power and position of the landed aristocracy. Production for market was low; rents tended to be in labour or in kind; there was little money in circulation; and there was little effective demand for the luxury commodities of international trade since upper-class incomes were received in kind (produce) rather than in cash. Consequentially, western European life was predominantly rural and localized.

The second phase, from the mid-eleventh to the early fourteenth century, was the result of the substantial growth of population, large land clearances, considerable technical progress, revival of trade, diffusion of a monetary economy, and growing social superiority of the merchant over the producer. During this period, Bloch argues, the evolution of society and economy began to move in opposite directions: the former, which was slowing down, tended to hone the class structure into closed groups, while the latter, which was accelerating, eventually led to freedom from serfdom and the relaxation of restrictions on trade and commerce. In the specific context of Maconnais,

Georges Duby places the turning point a century later, about 1160 from when an increase in the agricultural surplus facilitated a greater involvement in the network of a monetary economy, an increasing differentiation between urban and rural conditions, and various forms of the general social upheaval. Jacques LeGoff points out that the shift from the first to the second feudal age was a remarkably slow and stretched-out process, and was not evenly or simultaneously accomplished across western Europe.

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## 6.3 FIRST PHASE: 9<sup>TH</sup> TO 11<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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Although technology never remains static, in this phase it was extremely labour intensive and yields were low. Trade though scanty was never completely absent, but it was not the economy's driving force. Production was largely for consumption rather than for the market.

### 6.3.1 Agricultural Production: Means and Methods

From the present-day point of view, the productivity of land remained highly restricted in this phase owing to the limited effectiveness and inadequacy of the tools and of farming techniques. As a result, very limited returns were achieved. The practice of ploughing three or four times was common since the heavy clay soil – the most fertile when properly worked – put up a stiff resistance. It was necessary to use hands, forks, sickles, spades and harrows for breaking clods, cutting thistles and weeds, and digging up the field deeply. Artificial chemical fertilizers were unknown and the available natural fertilizers were very limited. Soil exhaustion was a constant problem owing to the extensive practice of the slash and burn agriculture or the cultivation of burnt patches. The peasants lacked pesticides and used to keep pigeons and doves that would not only eat insects, but also provide a small but highly concentrated amount of fertilizer for use in the gardens. In the absence of herbicides, weeds often posed a serious difficulty since the system of letting land lie fallow was the most common measure to recover the fecundity of land. Technical shortcomings of subsistence agriculture kept it still highly vulnerable to bad weather. Wet springs could reduce ploughing time, rot seed in the ground, and thus diminish the harvest. Fall rains could wet the grain before harvesting and make it impossible to dry and thresh.

Ploughing did not go deep enough in the soil. The symmetrical (plough) share of the ancient swing-plough sometimes tipped with iron but usually made of wood hardened in fire, scratched rather than cut through the soil. In this respect, the introduction of the heavy plough with an **asymmetrical share** and a mould-board with a movable wheeled front pulled by a stronger team represented a definite, considerable advance. By the sixth century it was introduced into the Po valley of Northern Italy (most probably from the Slavic lands) and by the eighth it was in use in the Rhineland. The wheels allowed the ploughshare to be matched to the furrow being ploughed. The mould-board turned over the sod. The iron ploughshare could make deep furrows and thus made more soil minerals possible and the traditional criss-cross double ploughing of fields unnecessary. Furthermore, it exposed much of those root systems of weeds in arable land to the open air and thus inhibited their growth. It was essential in the efficient use of the rich, heavy, often wet soils of northwestern Europe. Its use allowed the area's forest and swamps to be brought under cultivation. Open fields ploughed in long furrows were able to absorb great amounts of water, and because of the shape of the furrow, drainage caused little erosion. This tended to protect the rich, heavy crop-lands of northern Europe from heavy rains.

The problem with using a heavy plough was that it involved a great deal of tractive power. Since it took from four to eight animals to pull a full-sized **mould-board plough**,

few individual farmers could own the necessary number of oxen to pull this heavy plough. Le Goff also calls attention to the fact that the size and strength of medieval work-animals were noticeably inferior to those of the modern animals. However, although horses were faster, had greater endurance than oxen and did not need an additional man in the plough team to guide it with a sharp pole (as was the case with oxen), ploughing with horses did not gain popularity because of the high nominal price of the animal and the difficulties of having to feed it on oats. As late as the thirteenth century the employment of oxen and donkeys remained unchallenged in many fields of southern France and the Mediterranean region.

### 6.3.2 Organization of Agricultural Production

The village operated as a ploughing cooperative because the cost of plough and draught animals was too high to be borne by a single household. In flat or gently undulating country with good soil there were **open fields**, surrounding the big nucleated village, in which the strips of land that made up individual family holdings were intermixed, and over which, once the grain was harvested, **village gleaners** could first work and subsequently village animals graze, with no distinction being observed between one person's land and the next. Beyond the arable fields usually lay the woodland and the waste, available to the village community for gathering timber, nuts and fruits, chasing rabbits and hare, and giving extra grazing to their animals. Each household had to observe a common routine of sowing and fallowing in the open field. It had to agree on the rules determining gleaning and concerning access to the commons.

Rodney Hilton identifies this as the practical basis of village common action which eventually underlay the manorial system. We must keep in mind that there were many variations of open-field agriculture and neither strict rotational schemes characterized all of them nor were peasants' holdings always distributed evenly over the main divisions of the arable. But generally, each household owned portions in both of the two fields into which the arable lands of the village were grouped. One of the fields was ploughed in the early spring and planted in grain. The other field was then ploughed, but left unplanted to let the air and sunshine restore some of its fertility. Weeds were allowed to grow. Just before the weeds in the fallow field were ready to seed, the field was ploughed a second time and the weeds turned under. Though effective to some extent in restoring fertility and holding back weeds, this system carried a heavy price. For practical purposes, the villagers could utilize only half of their land each year while expending the effort of ploughing fallow land.

Field utilization reached a new height in the ninth and tenth centuries when many villages began to divide their two fields into three, and plant them in a rotating sequence of beans, winter wheat, summer wheat, and fallow. With good planning, this could result in three annual harvests in place of the traditional one. The replacement of the biennial crop rotation with triennial rotation succeeded in leaving land infertile one year out of three rather than one year out of two, or rather in using two-thirds of the cultivable surface area instead of only half. The villages had been primarily organized for the growing of grain — wheat in most places, but also oats, rye, barley or whatever the soil and climate permitted. Peasants started using peas and beans as a complement to their grain crops. Legumes restored nitrogen to the soil and vines choked out weeds, provided a source of protein to the humans as well as an excellent fodder for the winter stock feed. Vines also kept the soil friable and thus made ploughing easier.

To the improved method of crop rotation and limited diversification of crops, one must add the increasing utilization of iron and the remarkable spread of wind mills. There were certain other related changes in agriculture as well. To escape the problem of

turning several teams and a rather cumbersome heavy plough around when the peasant got to the end of the field, the method of strip farming – or long-acre farming – came into vogue in the north. This distinguished the northern agriculture from the older Mediterranean variety that had always used smaller, square fields.

### 6.3.3 Subsistence Economy

In spite of several small innovations, the technical level of agricultural production, transport and distribution remained quite low and the amount of surplus tiny. Human portage remained an essential form of transport. Roads were in a poor state. Carts and wagons were very few and very expensive. Even though there was an increase in tonnage in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries particularly in the north, the number of ships was extremely limited. The use of the compass became common only after 1280. The quadrant and the nautical astrolabe were introduced not before the Renaissance.

Throughout the medieval period the human manual work remained the principal source of energy. And yet, the productivity of the working people was significantly constrained by their lack of access to appropriate food and proper conditions of living. Poor food and limited medical knowledge kept life expectancy remarkably low. Infant mortality was appallingly high. Malnutrition exposed the poor classes more gravely to the dangers of bad health and untimely death than the aristocracy. The conventionality and inadequacy of production techniques, endorsed by the governing ideology, condemned the medieval economy to stagnation, to the exclusive purpose of subsistence and of ‘prestige spending by a minority’. Coupled with the relatively small market for agricultural commodities, it also prevented the scale of production from growing beyond the limits of a holding which could be worked by a family with at the most one or two hired hands. As a result, the internal stratification of peasant society was strictly limited during the greater part of the medieval period.

#### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) List the main features of the first phase of feudalism.  
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- 2) Give a brief account of the means and methods of agriculture in the first phase of feudalism.  
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- 3) How was agricultural production organized during the first phase of feudalism?  
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## 6.4 SECOND PHASE: 11<sup>TH</sup> TO 14<sup>TH</sup> CENTURY

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The second phase witnessed a number of dynamic changes in the feudal structures. The most significant change that took place was phenomenal rise in agricultural productivity and growth in population. This growth led to the extension of cultivated area and increased agricultural production. The organization of production also underwent change and the community based production gave way to individual peasant production increasingly destined for the market. The non-agricultural production increased leading to the growth of economy. The social structures changed and especially growing stratification of the peasantry was a new element. Let us take account of these changes starting with the growth of population.

### 6.4.1 Growth of Population

The growth of population at a noticeable rate is evident from the 11<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This increase continued till the middle of 14<sup>th</sup> century. Before taking into account the quantum of overall growth of population it is important to understand the factors that gave rise to this phenomenon. The main reason can be traced to the sharp decline in tribal attacks in the tenth century. The creation of feudal institutions for providing peace and security was also a contributory factor. Relaxation of legal restraints on peasant households helped in the process. Another important reason was the gradual improvement in technology and organization of agricultural production without which it would not have been possible to meet the demand of food for growing numbers.

The quantum of growth was impressive. Between the end of the tenth and the middle of the fourteenth centuries the population in the West doubled. Western Europe, according to an estimate by J. C. Russell (*Population in Europe, 500-1500*), went from 22.5 million inhabitants in about 950 to 54.5 million on the eve of the **Black Death** in 1348 while Europe as a whole, according to another estimate by M.K. Bennett, had 42 million inhabitants in 1000 and 73 million in about 1300. The rise in population most probably steeped around 1200. The population of France, it would seem, rose from 12 to 21 million between 1200 and 1340, that of Germany from 8 to 14 million, and that of England from 2.2 to 4.5 million. This period of growth came between two periods of demographic recession when the population of Europe fell from about 67 million in about 200 CE to about 27 million around 700, and from the 73 million reached around 1300 to about 45 million around 1400.

### 6.4.2 Extension of Cultivation

This sharp rise in population was the main stimulus for the great economic venture of land clearance during the eleventh and twelfth centuries. In most of the regions the available food resources could not keep pace with the demographic expansion, and in spite of considerable emigration the pressure on land was not effectively reduced. According to Le Goff, the focus of the new agricultural concern was a quantitative increase in the cultivable area (largely through land clearances) rather than a qualitative shift in the methods of enhancing productivity or improving tools. Enormous stretches of wilderness began to be settled after the first millennium. A great number of deserted



tracts were irrigated and colonized in Spain and parts of southern France; large forests were cleared in Wales and eastern Germany, and a laborious reclamation of land from sea was successfully undertaken in Flanders. Duby chooses to see this wave of land clearance as both a pressure from below and a sanction from above: while the peasants found it necessary to bring new lands under the plough to provide for the additional population, the lords were equally alive to the necessity of increasing their resources. Land clearances also radically transformed the layout of the farmland by shifting the focus of extensive tillage from the central parcels of arable lands closer to houses to the 'assarted' or cleared area on the perimeter. Cattle farming was organized more methodically. Famines did not altogether disappear but considerably decreased in scale and frequency by the end of the twelfth century.

### 6.4.3 Changes in Organization of Agricultural Production

Large scale extension of land under the plough and availability of improved technology for cultivation and irrigation was bound to change the organization of agricultural production. Duby contends that improved equipment now enabled the farmers to gradually withdraw from collective organization of farming and promoted a rudimentary form of agrarian individualism. The creation of the free zones and 'sanctuaries' (where immigrants could be sure of enjoying clearly defined privileges, of being treated as 'burgesses', and of benefiting from the tax-relief by virtue of living there) forced lords of ancient estates to relax their grip to some extent and to curtail their demands. Hence freedom of a sort gradually percolated through the rural world. It was essential to make and respect large promises to those involved in the agricultural expansion. Except in certain regions such as the countryside of southern Gaul and northwestern Germany, the *manse* finally disintegrated and disappeared in the twelfth century. Two new types of tenure – for rent and for crop-sharing payments – were becoming more prevalent on plots of land newly brought under cultivation on the margins of the existing arable. The annual rental was either fixed or proportionate to the harvest respectively.

Precipitated by population growth, higher agricultural yields, and land clearances, the process was certainly helped by the relaxation of seigneurial burdens. During the second half of the twelfth century, the lords frequently agreed to codify customary usages, regularize their fiscal powers and thus loosen the strongest bonds of servitude because such concessions helped to increase the number of peasant families subject to their authority and enabled the rural population to accumulate more cash. On the one hand, demographic growth led to the fragmentation and multiplication of agricultural holdings, and on the other, to the increased mobility of the rural population. An abundance of unoccupied land and a remarkable shortage of agricultural labour had marked the early medieval economy. Since landed property was valueless without the labour of the peasantry, the propertied class took special care to impose heavy restrictions on the mobility of the workforce. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, increased amounts of cultivable lands with higher productivity and an increased supply of labour accelerated the process of **manumission** and placed large areas of farmland into the hands of the non-nobles.

### 6.4.4 Growth of Economy

The areas of dense population saw the most rapid development of towns and of the political importance of their inhabitants. Technological innovations not only increased production, but also increased the peasants' productivity to such a degree that a smaller portion of the population had to be directly engaged in the production of food and a number of people could now devote themselves to the full-time pursuit of non-agricultural activities. As we have already mentioned, the towns in late medieval Europe were

sharply distinguished from those of the classical world in their emphasis on the non-agricultural functions. In these towns the merchants, craftsmen, moneychangers, doctors, notaries, and the like did not have to acquiesce in an inferior social position when they acquired wealth. Over the course of time they emerged as the politically, socially and culturally dominant urban group. Many drew their income from banking and mortgaging land, which could raise considerable sums when the members of nobility and upper clergy were running into financial difficulties. Particularly the Jews, who were not bound by the Christian prohibitions on usury, played a central role in these activities.

There also developed large-scale manufacture and long-distance trade. The three major items of export for this trade were slaves (taken by the Germans on their eastern border or by the **Vikings**, and particularly in demand by the Cordoba Caliphate), Flemish cloths and woollens (increasingly manufactured from English wool in the towns of Bruges, Lille, Bergues, and Arras) and silver from Saxony. Through Italy and the inland water ways of Russia these goods were traded for luxuries from the east (particularly silks and spices) which were at once valuable and relatively easy to transport.

Loans for consumption were the main, if not the only, form of loan during most of the feudal period. Loans for production remained almost non-existent. Interest made on loans for consumption was forbidden between Christians and was considered as usury, which was strongly condemned by the Church. The strong economic pressures against credit opposed all accumulation indispensable for economic progress. The lay aristocracy usually squandered its surpluses in gifts and alms and in shows of munificence in the name of the Christian ideal of charity and of the chivalric ideal of largesse whose economic importance was considerable. The dignity of honour of lords consisted in spending without counting the cost; the consumption and waste used up almost all of their income. When there was any accumulation at all, it took the non-creative economic form of hoarding. Precious vessels and hoards of money, which were melted down or put into circulation in the hours of catastrophe or crisis, came to satisfy bare survival at difficult moments, and did not feed a regular, continuous productive activity. The higher clergy similarly used up its revenues on unproductive expenditure and in **liturgical pomp**. However, a sizeable part of the revenue of the church was also used for the subsistence of the poor who were reduced to the living minimum by seigneurial exactions.

Money, historians now agree, never entirely disappeared from use in medieval west. Apart from the Church and the nobles, who always had a certain supply of money at their disposal to acquire luxuries, even the peasants often had some little amount of money with which they bought things such as salt, which they could neither produce nor receive and only rarely buy by barter. But the monetary circulation, as a whole, was weak and inelastic. The existence of non-metallic currency, such as oxen, cows, pieces of cloth, and especially pepper was common. In the first feudal age, money was appreciated not because of its theoretical value, but for the real value of the precious metal which it contained. During the thirteenth century Le Goff notices a 'monetary renaissance', or a return to the striking of gold coins. This coincided with the striking of the silver groat in Venice, Florence, Flanders, England, France and Bohemia. The strong pull exerted by the Muslim centres of production in the south prolonged a phase of raised prices right up to the start of the eleventh century which coincided with the end of the period of monetary economy. The eleventh century and first half of the twelfth saw a fall in prices, indicative of a phase of natural economy, the preceding phase having accomplished demonetization of the Christian kingdoms.

From the middle of the twelfth century, on the other hand, a phase of monetary economy evolved again when the quickening circulation of money encouraged the lords to extend the role that money played in rent. The small fines imposed in the private courts where the master settled disputes between himself and his tenants over services, 'new rents' to replace '*champarts*', and cash payments to buy off labour services, drew into the manorial household a larger share of the cash which passed through the peasant hands. Nevertheless, the proportion of feudal money income remained small.

#### 6.4.5 Social Stratification

The evolution of economy enhanced differentiation within the society, in general, and stratification within the peasantry, in particular. Most peasant *hospites* or settlers obtained exemptions and freedoms on the newly cleared land. A process of liberation occurred over all the landed estates of western Europe which improved the legal conditions of peasants if not their material welfare. Seigneurial exactions were restricted by replacing labour services with a due or *census* which was often fixed, and a fixed total (a quit-rent or *taille abonnée*) of the principal payments was determined by a charter. The lords were compelled to compound their rights into fixed dues and granted defined customs to their citizens which in turn accelerated further immigration. At this time began the commutation of labour services into lump sum cash payment to the lord. While this enabled the peasant to obtain complete freedom to pursue his own dream of either migrating or devoting his entire time to his own piece of land, it also ensured that the lord obtained liquid cash with which he could purchase labour in the growing labour market. These processes symbolized and brought about certain advancement for the higher segment of the peasant classes, especially for the labourers or ploughmen who owned their own teams and gear as opposed to the less skilled farm-workers. While among many of the lesser peasants the social dependence and economic inferiority was accentuated by the process, for many others in that echelon, the opportunities to rise high were opened up. The increasing gap within the class, itself growing out of the process of differentiation, redefined the social relations to a great degree.

Apart from the higher peasants, many burgesses, powerful lords and big town churches also grew rich at the expense of the poorer and middling members of the knightly class who had to sell much of their lands as they sank into debt. In fact, the growing stratification within the class of the lords became an important feature of the period. It was not simply the division between the *milites* and the *bellatores* – the knights and the lords they served – which was intensified within the aristocratic class, but also the increasing differentiation between the banal and the smaller lords. The former increasingly turned to feudal privileges as a source of their sustenance while the latter can be seen as attempting to adjust themselves to the demands of the market and producing for it. The process of differentiation at both the levels provided enormous dynamism to the latter phase of feudal economy and society.

In the late Middle Ages, the social classes underwent a period of fluidity. Economic conditions favoured the merchants and craftsmen, and even the peasantry could demand better circumstances. Feudal obligations between lord and vassal were being replaced by contractual agreements based on payments of money. The economy began expanding from an agricultural base to include commercial and manufacturing interests. Also, Europe was no longer in a constant state of warfare and even the Crusades had ceased to be a focus for the energies of the martial nobility.

**Feudalism in Europe from the 7<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> Century**



**Map 6.1: Charlemagne’s empire that included most of modern France, Germany, the Low Countries, Austria and northern Italy**

**Credit:** Hel-hama – “The Public Schools Historical Atlas” by Charles Colbeck. Longmans, Green; New York; London; Bombay, 1905

**Source:** [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early\\_Middle\\_Ages#/media/File:Europe\\_814.svg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_Middle_Ages#/media/File:Europe_814.svg)

**Check Your Progress-2**

1) Write a short note on growth of population and its effect on expansion of agriculture.

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2) How did the extent of cultivation led to change in the organization of agricultural production during the second phase of feudalism?

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3) How did changes in economy during the second phase of feudalism give rise to stratification within the society?

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## 6.5 GENERAL DEBATE ON THE DECLINE OF FEUDALISM

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The centrality of trade in both the rise of feudalism and its decline was established by the Belgian historian Henri Pirenne in the 1920s and 30s in his books, *Medieval Cities: Their Origin and the Revival of Trade*, *Economic and Social History of Medieval Europe*; and *Mahomet and Charlemagne*. For Pirenne, long-distance trade, or ‘grand trade’ as he called it, was the driving force of all flourishing civilizations and its disruption, for whatever reason, brought the onward march of civilization to a halt.

It was thus that European civilization in Antiquity that had attained glorious heights owing to trade across the Mediterranean, for it was not only an economic motor of society, but became the conduit for the cross fertilization of ideas and cultures across long distances. Once trans-Mediterranean trade was disrupted by the Muslim-Arab invasions in the seventh century<sup>1</sup>, and the Arab capture of crucial entry points to the Sea in both the East (Alexandria) and the West (Gibraltar) and the control of Sardinia in the middle, the European economy turned inwards and was ruralized. As a result, it became sluggish, even as petty trade continued in pockets. Pirenne called it ‘break-up of the economic equilibrium of the ancient world’. This also signalled the end of urban life, which could only be sustained by long distance trade, and the end of great ideas travelling long distances; life became dull. This was feudalism. However, the Crusades in the eleventh century pushed the Arabs back into the Middle East, their homelands, and Europe was thus liberated. ‘Grand trade’ was revived and urban centres came to life once again. This marked the beginning of the end of feudalism. He quotes the saying ‘city life makes a man free’ to emphasize the transformation.

Pirenne thus established a fundamental dichotomy between feudalism and trade, one was irreconcilable with the other. This was a watershed in conceptualizing European feudalism and it became the centre point of emulation and discussion among historians for a long time. Its influence spread far beyond Europe’s boundaries and feudalism/trade dichotomy formed the basis of the construction of the notion of Indian feudalism, for example, and the one in the Near East (developed by E. Ashtor); both follow its contours almost to the last detail.

In some fundamental ways Pirenne’s thesis altered history-writing altogether by widening its canvas so extensively as to encompass the whole society, whereas hitherto only small scale, particular causes were sought out to explain the rise and decline of feudalism. One theory in the nineteenth century even traced the origin of feudalism to the horse stirrup! The discussion of the Pirenne thesis understandably led to its questioning, and ultimately its complete rejection, especially its centre piece, the trade/feudalism dichotomy.

Among the most serious challenges to the thesis was the one posed by a Marxist economic historian of the rise of capitalism, Maurice Dobb at the University of Cambridge. In 1946 he published *Studies in the Development of Capitalism*, in which he began

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<sup>1</sup> You shall read in detail about the role of Muslim-Arabs in the Mediterranean trade in **Unit 16** of this Course (**BHIC-104**).

by examining the decline of feudalism. The question of trade was crucial for his examination. As a Marxist he would not accept trade as the autonomous agent in the working of an economic system. Trade on its own, for him, did not have the force to alter any economic system, for it could subsist with any and all of these, be it slavery, feudalism, capitalism, or any other. It would remain subservient to what he called the system's 'internal articulation', i.e. inherent class struggle. To elaborate this view, he recalled Frederick Engels' nineteenth century observation that far from dissolving feudal relations, the revival of trade in Eastern Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries led to 'the second serfdom' there. Serfdom was for Marxists like Dobb the very hallmark of feudalism. Trade and feudalism were in his view thus quite compatible with each other.

What then in Dobb's perception caused the decline of West European feudalism was its 'internal crisis', a mode of analysis very dear to Marxists. The eleventh century Crusaders that pushed the Arabs back into the Near East went chasing them right into their home territories. There they were introduced to the hitherto unheard of Oriental luxuries, like perfumes, silks and spices, etc. Having performed their duties as religiously fired crusaders, they now turned traders and sold these luxurious items back home to European aristocrats at fabulous prices. The introduction of Oriental luxuries to the West gravely altered the cultural and economic scenario, for the aristocracy began to long for them and would pay any price. If this longing encouraged low volume high value trade between Western Europe and the Middle East, it created a crisis of resources at home. For, the incomes of the class of landlords became inelastic because of the productivity of land – the chief source of income – had reached a plateau because of the 'low level of technology'. Thus the demands, and therefore the expenditure, of this class were rising, but the incomes remained static. There was, however, one mode of raising resources: squeezing the peasant further. The peasant in the agricultural economy being the primary producer of wealth could still be squeezed an extra bit to yield that extra money.

Here Dobb introduces another factor, which he shares with Pirenne: the revival of the city. Yet, if Pirenne links this phenomenon with the revival of trade, Dobb does not establish any causal links. He just seems to assume that the city was rising in Western Europe of its own will. The city in turn provided alternative avenues of employment to the increasingly impoverished peasant; inevitably, the flight of the peasant from the countryside to the city to escape the rising demands of the landlord was the form that class struggle took in this case. Indeed, there was a three-way class struggle: between the lords and the serfs; and between the lords and the urban bourgeoisie which was increasingly occupying economic space that was alternative to the feudal mode of production. The flight of the impoverished peasant from the countryside left the landlords helpless, and thus feudalism collapsed. If trade had any role in it, it was entirely subordinate to class struggle between the serfs and the lord. The city and the urban bourgeoisie aided the process of this decline.

Basically then Dobb was questioning the Pirennean feudalism/trade dichotomy and instead establishing compatibility between the two.

The publication of *Studies in the Development of Capitalism* led to an international debate with resonances still not quite silenced. The book was reviewed by another eminent Marxist economist of the USA, Paul Sweezy. Sweezy by and large upheld the Pirennean thesis and the trade/feudalism incompatibility. Dobb responded to it. The debate was joined by other chiefly Marxist scholars from as far as Japan. Kochuru Takahashi, Japanese historian, was the one who introduced yet another facet to the

debate by pointing out that capitalism did not arise from the debris of feudalism through the agency of the rising bourgeoisie alone. He articulated that in the case of Japan after the Meiji restoration, the State, and not the Capitalist class, became the agency for creating capitalist economy there. This view was greatly appreciated by the other participants. The whole debate was published under the title *The Transition from Feudalism to Capitalism* in 1952. Later on others joined in and a new volume with the same title was edited by R.H. Hilton and published again in 1978. The central problem in the debate still remained the role of trade and town in the decline of feudalism. The new edition had an additional contribution from John Merrington which specifically dealt with the varying views about town and country in the transition to Capitalism. Merrington does not give a 'yes' or 'no' answer and traces the history of the 'yes' or 'no' answers given by others. He did not support the view that town and trade were the chief agency of the dissolution of feudalism. The extensive debate showed decisively that there was not one, single Marxist view and that Marxists were as capable of holding differences among themselves as with others.

If Dobb argued for the compatibility of trade and feudalism, another Marxist historian from France, Guy Bois, went a step further and established a causal link between the two, though he was not directly participating in the debate. In fact his book appeared first in his native French and then in English translation long after the debate had occurred. In his book, *The Transformation of the Year One Thousand: The Village of Lournand from Antiquity to Feudalism*, he examines one village in transition in France at the date that conventionally marks the break and notices that development of trade, far from weakening the feudal ties of lord and peasant there, was actually reinforcing them. Unlike Dobb, he does not take his lead from Engels and does not study Eastern Europe in the eighteenth century to make his point. On the contrary he concentrates on the land that formed the heart of feudalism and around the date when feudalism had reached its highest point.

However, even as the debate on the question of trade as the dissolvent of feudalism raged, and the participants often appeared divided on two sides of the fence, there was yet a considerable number of shared assumptions among them. Pirenne's low opinion of the level of technology and productivity of land and labour in medieval Europe, was shared by Dobb, Hilton and others. Also common between them was the view that the town was the critical element in the dissolution of feudalism and that town was external to the feudal system. If, as stated above, Pirenne gives us a reason for the revival of urbanization, Dobb does not do even that; he just assumes that urbanization must have occurred somehow, and having once occurred it acted as a magnet to the impoverished peasantry as a source of succor and shelter. It is time to examine both these propositions about 'low technology' and the town as the extraneous dissolvent of feudalism.

### Check Your Progress-3

- 1) What was Henry Pirenne's view on the decline of feudalism in Europe?

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2) What was Morris Dobb's disagreement with Pirenne about the decline of feudalism?

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## 6.6 TECHNOLOGY AND PRODUCTIVITY OF LAND AND LABOUR

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Whether technology is low or high is a purely relative question, relative to time and space. Technology in any sector, or even in general, might be high or low relative to an earlier or later epoch in another space; or else, it might be low or high in relation to the same region at another point of time. For instance, the level of technology in the twentieth century in general can be said to be much higher than say in the fifteenth century around the globe, just as the level of technology in the automobile or the pharmaceutical sector can be said to be high in the U.S. than in Africa. Secondly, technology is never static, though it might appear so in a short term context; it constantly keeps evolving in each and all sectors over time. By assuming the low level of technology in medieval Europe, both Pirenne and Dobb lost sight of the enormous changes taking place in the long period encompassed therein.

It is thus that production technology, which basically raises the productivity of labour – and in the sphere of agriculture, of land – was steadily evolving in medieval Europe, though the pace of its evolution stretched it out over what to us appear as very long durations, sometimes running into decades and even centuries. The long stretches of evolution leave us with the impression of changelessness. Since land was the primary means of creating wealth, and labour its chief instrument, an overview of changes in technology and productivity in this arena would demonstrate its enormous dynamism.

In what is termed as the early Middle Ages – fifth to eighth or ninth centuries – in most of Southern Europe and the region around the Mediterranean, which is the most fertile because of the prolonged sunshine, the seed: yield ratio was about 1:1.6 or at the most 1:2.5<sup>2</sup>. The technology that was in use here was simple: a light plough scratched the surface of the soil, and was thus known as the scratch plough, or *araire*. This left the deeper fertility of the soil unutilized, for the soil there remained hard and would resist the spread of the roots of the seedling. This also necessitated large fields and a lot of manual labour input. On the other hand, the sunshine in the area lasted some four months in the year; hence all agricultural processes had to be carried out during this period. It was thus that there was constant tension at all levels in society over the demand for labour.

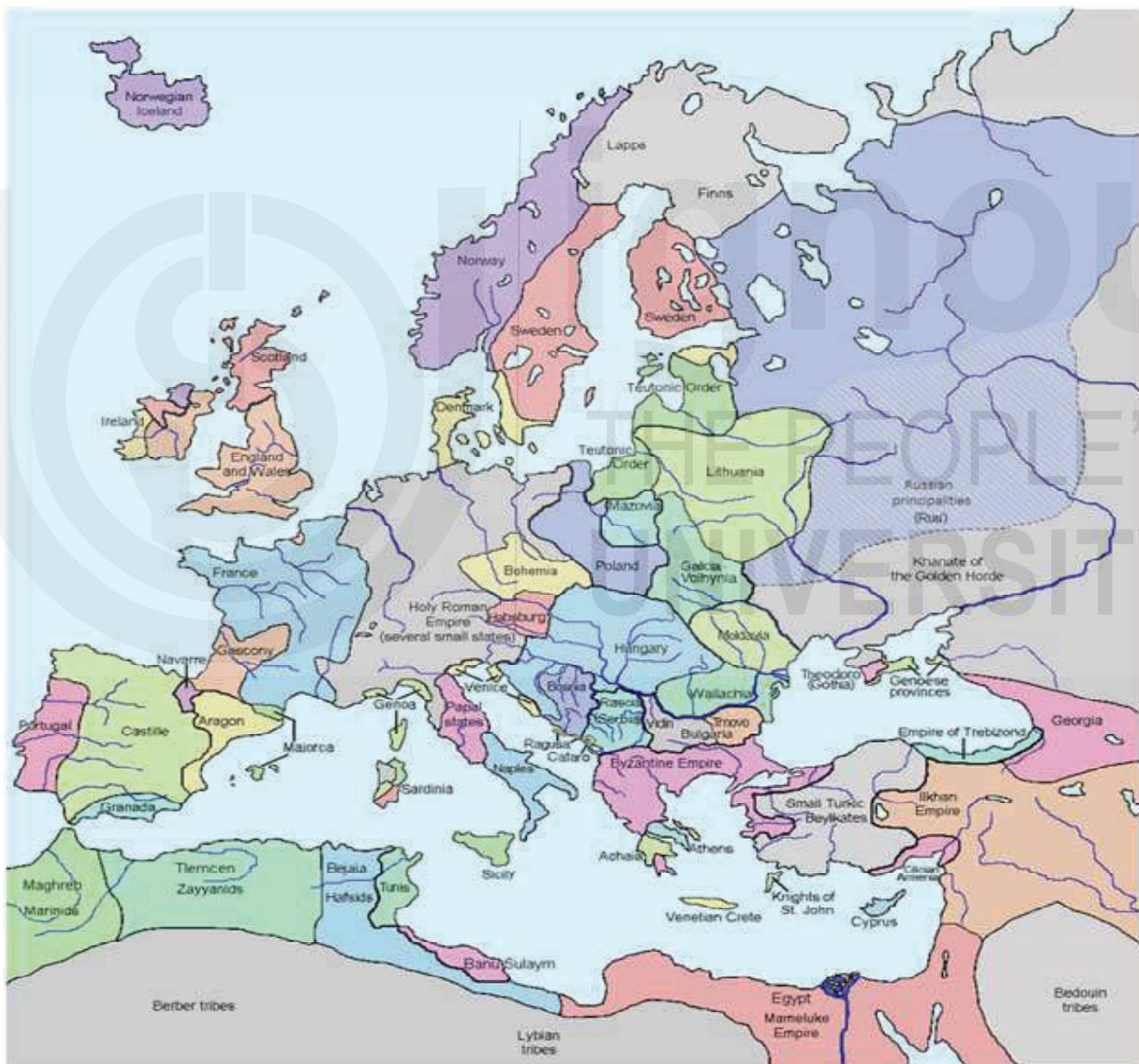
This was the setting for the evolution of agricultural technology. Heavy plough, the *charrue*, 3-field rotation in place of 2-field rotation, crop rotation, new crops like peas and beans which formed a better diet in that they provide vegetable proteins and whose roots left behind nitrogen fertilizer in the soil making it ready for another crop of a

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<sup>2</sup> That is for a seed of 10 kilograms, the field returned at the most 25 kilograms of yield. Of this 10 kilograms had to be reserved as seed for the next year's crop, leaving just about 15 kilograms for consumption.



different kind, better harness of the plough yoke on the draught animal like the bull, increasing use of the horse for draught etc. all raised the fertility of land and labour substantially by the 12<sup>th</sup> century. By then the average seed: yield ratio stood at 1:4, which actually doubled the amount of surplus available for consumption<sup>3</sup>. There were other technological innovations too: the water mill and later the wind mill took over many manual tasks and spared human energy for agricultural production. With more food available and better quality of diet, population too rose very substantially even as the amount of land required for providing food for each family declined because of higher productivity. The rising populace migrated out of the old established villages in search of virgin land. The twelfth century is the century of both what Georges Duby has called ‘agricultural progress’ and massive migrations into the heavily forested eastern German lands which were brought under the plough. The first migrations thus occurred within the countryside and not from the village to the city. Equally significantly, the march to this agricultural expansion was led by the peasant.



**Map 6.2: Europe and the Mediterranean region, c. 1328 Western/Central Europe**

Credit: William R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas*, New York, Henry Holt and Company, 1923 – [1]

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demesne#/media/File:Plan\\_mediaeval\\_manor.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Demesne#/media/File:Plan_mediaeval_manor.jpg)

<sup>3</sup> Thus to take our earlier example, with the new ratio, consumable amount available from a seed of 10 kilograms would be 30 kilograms.

But this technology was capital intensive. It gave great advantage to those strata of peasants who could afford to invest in the heavy plough etc.; it also gave them much higher returns on their investment. The gap within the class of peasantry, always present, began to grow. The very small peasant also began to invest his and his family labour and whatever savings he could manage in, say, growing a vegetable crop on his small field to sell it in the growing market and make some small gain. Sometimes he did manage to; at others, one crop failure and he lost the last resource and turned into a landless labourer. Of course the demand for labour, land and produce was also growing and the market was increasingly determining the patterns of production in the field. This was the process of differentiation within the peasantry that proved crucial for the decline of feudalism. Before we understand this point, let us consider the role of the city on the decline of feudalism.

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## 6.7 GROWTH OF URBAN CENTRES

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Where did the medieval city come from? For Pirenne, its origin lay in the revival of the grand trade across Europe. For Dobb, this is not a relevant question. But for both, the city remained extraneous to the feudal economy.

As we have briefly seen above, the face of the countryside was changing substantially, as the great historian of feudalism, Marc Bloch, had emphasized in his *Feudal Society*, and Georges Duby after him. The essence of this change lay in higher productivity and greater amount of production, availability of more and better food, growth of population at the lower rungs of society, growth of marketable surplus in the countryside and therefore growth of the market. All this allows sustenance of a higher level of urban population than was the case in the early medieval centuries. Thus the growth of cities is organically linked to developments in the countryside rather than in opposition to it.

Whether and to what extent did the rise of the urban centres contribute to the decline of feudalism remains debatable. While eminent historians like Pirenne, Dobb and Sweezy highlight the role, others have disputed it. The phenomenal growth of towns in the thirteenth to the fifteenth century was yet incapable of absorbing more than about 10 per cent of the total population. Even as centres of production, their share in the economy was far from preponderant or decisive. Several historians have questioned the significance of the town as an influential factor in providing subsistence to fleeing rural populace or the extent of this flight; according to them the countryside still remained 'overpopulated' and that the number of large cities even in Flanders (part of the modern Belgian-Netherlands-Luxemburg area), industrially and economically the most advanced in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, placed an unnatural economic burden on the countryside. Among several others, Robert Brenner, who initiated a major debate on the question of transition from feudalism to capitalism in the 1970s, questioned the extent of rural migration to urban areas.

Historians have also questioned the role of economic liberation of the peasant that is attributed to the town. First, if the urban income levels for the rural migrants were higher, so too was the cost of living. Urban employment was thus not always an economic advantage to them and did not always function as an effective 'pull factor'. More important, it was more advantageous for the urban bourgeoisie to exploit cheap rural labour in the countryside itself where the cost of living and wages were lower and workers' guilds were absent. Besides, in the village the labour of the entire family of the worker could be exploited through contractual labour, whereas in the town the worker laboured alone along with other similarly placed individuals. The fourteenth century thus saw the shifting of industrial production on behalf of urban merchants to rural areas

first in Flanders and then elsewhere in Western Europe. This phenomenon came to be designated as Proto-industrialization (Pi) in the 1970s and 1980s. There is evidence too that the peasants were also forced by the cities in Flanders to bring grains to them at cheap rates.

The flight of the peasants in later phase of feudalism in Europe was then largely confined to the countryside itself; peasants fled from one rural area to another in search of land with more favourable conditions. When the West European peasantry burst into rebellions of continental dimensions in the fourteenth century, one of their chief demands everywhere was the right to free mobility, and the cities by and large looked on passively when they were not helping the feudal lord in suppressing the uprisings. Italian towns did however give freedom to the peasants; but this freedom was 'neither general, nor always very lasting' in the words of historian Guy Fourquin. Historian L. Genicot observed that the cities also proved to be much more oppressive than the lords, using every means to lower the peasants' standards of living while at the same time granting them juridical freedom.

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## 6.8 TRANSFORMATION OF RURAL SCENARIO

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While we are still involved with discussing the role of trade and town in the dissolution of feudalism, we might take note of another perspective on the theme developed quietly, though emphatically, by a very distinguished French historian, Georges Duby, who bore no affinity with Marxism or with Pirenne. He took the debate away from the contours set by Henri Pirenne, Maurice Dobb and others. It is significant that Duby never participated in these discussions himself; yet his own work, published in two books of great importance, *Rural Economy and Country Life in the Medieval West*; and *Early Growth of European Economy*, decisively altered the paradigm. Duby concentrated on the internal development in the sphere of land and labour through the medieval centuries in Western Europe and brought forth a picture of enormous dynamism. He did not seek out this dynamism in dramatic upheavals, but in the slow alterations in the labour process in the field in daily toil. This slow alteration, accumulated over centuries, completely transformed the rural scenario. One of the major driving forces of this change was the process of differentiation within the peasantry at the lower end of society as well as within the class of lords at the upper end. Let us look at this process in little detail.

The estates of the lords in the countryside were huge establishments comprising on an average 4000 acres, often running into 10,000 acres and more. The management of the cultivation, storage and disposal of the produce of these estates was left by the lords in the hands of bailiffs, provosts etc. (who were themselves peasants of a slightly higher rank), for social values deterred the lords from engaging in these activities themselves. Gradually these bailiffs and provosts accumulated resources of their own through the operation of the lords' estates, for not all the grain collected from the *demesne* would go into the lord's hall and not all the money collected from the sale of these grains would be honestly passed onto the lord's treasury. By and by the bailiffs themselves started taking parts of the estate 'on farm' from the lord for a year, two years and longer. 'On farm' or 'farming' here meant taking the responsibility for the cultivation of land on oneself by contracting to pay a fixed amount of either grain or money to the lord. The profit or loss from this contract would accrue to the bailiff, now the contractor or 'farmer'. The lord's right to collect tolls and taxes from his estate could similarly be taken 'on farm' (see **Map 5.1**).

On these 'farms', the bailiffs would employ wage labour, because they were not entitled

to unpaid labour services of the serfs as the lords were, and they would cultivate the land with the sole purpose of selling the produce in the market for profit. Thus profit motive and wage labour – characteristics of capitalist economy whether in agriculture or industry – began to make inroads into the feudal economic system. This was the emerging class of capitalist farmers or *kulaks*, the much maligned *nouveau riche*, short on the finesse of feudal culture and long on showing off its newly acquired wealth, the butt of social ridicule, yet increasingly begin to dominate the sphere of the economy. This happened over very long periods of time, extending over a couple of centuries.

Two other segments of feudal society also helped in the process: the allods and the lower orders of the class of lords. The allods, whom we have encountered in **Unit 5**, by cultivating their own lands with their own family labour and often selling the produce in the market, were a divergent element within the feudal economy. With the market both in the rural and urban areas increasingly determining the patterns of production in the countryside, the allods were quick to attune production on their fields to crops that yielded the highest profits. This too turned them, especially the higher echelons among them into proto-capitalist producers, contrary to the feudal ethos.

So far we have spoken of the class of lords as if it were a homogenous group. Such however was not the case, for this class too was highly stratified, like the peasantry. While the higher levels were entitled to several rights of extraction of free services and goods from the peasants, the lower ones were not so endowed. They had the rights to their lands but not to the multifarious services. With labour becoming migrant and its wages rising, the smaller lords too were driven by resource crunch and were compelled by the developments to take to cultivation for the market by employing hired labour.

In this all encompassing flux, one could expect several movements up and down. ‘Commutation’ of labour services that the serfs owed to the lords, i.e. purchase of freedom in return for lump sum payment to the lord, went some distance in helping few peasants too, now free to move to greener pastures or to rise above their position through sheer hard work, a few sagacious decisions and a little bit of luck. Other peasants, given their very small surviving power, were rendered resourceless by one stroke of bad luck – a crop failure or the death of the draught animal or such other. Of course these small peasants still had their labour to sell in the expanding labour market. In the class of lords too, not everyone made good in the market, to which they had to adjust as to a new, unfamiliar situation.

This then was the general scenario of great dynamism, accumulated over slow developments stretched out in time in which everyone – or most – were progressing, but some rising higher and faster than others. Sharp social differentiation was the net result and no class, old or new, was immune to its effects. This is also the scenario here new forms of economy and new classes were emerging which were to strike at the very foundations of feudalism. The decline of feudalism came not through an external push of trade or pull of cities, but through a process internal to the feudal economy. The decline was the result not of the static nature of feudalism but the very opposite, i.e. its own internal dynamism. The growth of trade and town is not an autonomous variable, but is integral to this dynamism.

It was thus that Georges Duby quietly but decisively effected a paradigm shift in the discussion of this problem. There was also another shift that was effected in the way history is studied. Until about the 1950s or 60s, constituting binary opposites was the chief method of studying history and indeed social sciences in general. It was studied through the prism of lord vs peasant, capitalist vs worker, and slightly later women vs men etc. In the case of both Pirenne and Dobb, the binary categories were trade vs

feudalism, or town vs country. In the binary oppositions, change occurred as a dramatic consequence of a head on collision between the two, in the form of rebellions or clashes. The collapse of a system too was a dramatic event rather than a long drawn process.

If, however, one moves one's attention from the dramatic events to everyday forms of life, change acquires a different meaning altogether as in the historiography of Georges Duby and several others. Change in this perspective does not occur merely in a dramatic event like a rebellion or a revolution, a battle or an assassination; nor does it follow merely a catastrophic collision between two adversarial classes. It occurs too in everyday life, in everyday contacts between any two persons and it occurs at every level. Social differentiation was one such process which could not be compressed into any one day or a year or even a couple of decades; yet it decisively altered life in medieval Western Europe. It was this slow, almost imperceptible process of change that Duby sought to capture in his historiography.

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## 6.9 OTHER VIEWS ON DECLINE

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Somewhere along the line during the 1960s and 70s, a neo-Malthusian explanation of the decline of feudalism too was advanced. Malthus had propounded the notion in the nineteenth century that natural resources like land, forests, water, etc. could sustain a certain quantum of population. Whenever in history the total human population had exceeded this sustainable level, famines, pestilences, wars etc. have occurred that would bring the population figures down again to levels that corresponded to the resources. Some historians, like Emanuel Le Roy Ladurie, argued that the growing population in medieval Europe had similarly exceeded the sustainability level of agriculture. Therefore, the famines of 1314-15 and the devastating pestilence of 1348-51 that caused the Black Death which wiped out something like a quarter of the European population was such a manifestation of the Malthusian law. This upset the entire equilibrium in medieval Europe and brought about the transition to capitalism.

The Malthusian theory has always been a subject of great controversy; understandably therefore the explanation of the collapse of feudalism on this score found sharp critics. The basic flaw in the Malthusian theory is the assumption that resources are relatively inflexible and can sustain only a given level of population. Its critics assert that resources can always be enhanced through better technology and better management and the same amount of land, for example, can yield much higher output with a better method of cultivation. It is therefore fallacious to assume that population levels in medieval Europe had exceeded what agriculture could sustain. Such an explanation draws one's attention away from social factors arising from the social structure.

A yet another opening up of the debate on transition to Capitalism appeared first in the pages of the British journal, *Past and Present* in the 1970s and early 80s. The new debate was initiated by an American historian, Robert Brenner with an essay titled 'Agrarian Class Structure and Economic Development in Pre-Industrial Europe' in 1976. Brenner essentially reiterated the superiority of the classical Marxist methodology of analyzing history in terms of class struggle. Although he was not directly engaged in discussing the decline of feudalism, but the debate nevertheless overlapped with this theme in as much as it was seeking explanation of the different paths followed by Britain and France into the world of capitalism. The formulation of the problem itself has classic Marxist frame of reference. The debate that followed the publication of the article did not remain confined to Marxist historians alone, nor did agreements and disagreements remain bound by one's ideological loyalties. In 1985, the whole set of papers were published under the title, *The Brenner Debate*.

**Check Your Progress-4**

1) Discuss the technological changes in agriculture which increased the productivity in Europe.

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2) Write a brief note on the growth of urban centres in medieval Europe.

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3) What according to Duby caused the transformation of rural scenario?

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4) How was Malthusian theory of population linked to the decline of feudalism?

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**6.10 SUMMARY**

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The feudal system in Europe took roots and survived for almost five hundred years. In its initial phase it was not very well structured and was mostly confined to a sort of bond between the Lord and the Vassal. Over the years the bonds got defined and streamlined with various hierarchical levels. The feudal age also witnessed growth of new institutions. You must have noticed that the whole feudal period is not static and witnessed changes. In this Unit we have discussed them in two major phases – the first from 9<sup>th</sup> to 11<sup>th</sup> century and the second from 11<sup>th</sup> to 14<sup>th</sup> century CE. These phases are not identifiable distinctly in all regions at the same time. There were variations in developments in terms of periods and specific areas of change.

You must have noticed these changes in the area of agricultural production, technology,

pattern of cultivation and organization of production between the two phases since land was the main source of wealth in feudal system. The demographic changes during the period influenced the economic and social structures. During the second phase, the economic growth was significant and social stratification was pronounced. From the 14<sup>th</sup> century the process of decline of feudalism started.

In this Unit we familiarized you with a range of views on the decline of feudalism. Henri Pirenne established the centrality of trade in the rise and decline of feudalism. He believed that the revival of trade and urban centres marked the beginning of the decline of feudalism. Maurice Dobb challenged the position of Pirenne and said that trade on its own did not have the force to alter any economic system. He felt that the cause of decline was the internal crisis of feudalism. Dobb did concede that the urban centres were rising but he did not link it with the growth of trade. Dobb saw the collapse of feudalism a result of migration of peasantry to towns to escape feudal oppression which left landlords helpless. A form of class struggle ensued between the lords and serfs and between the lords and urban bourgeoisie. Kochuru Takahashi added another dimension to it and felt that capitalism did not rise on the ruins of feudalism through the agency of bourgeoisie but the state created capitalist economy; he referred to the case of Meiji Japan to make his point.

The improvement in technology increased the productivity with more surplus available, thereby giving rise to social stratification of peasantry. Many small peasants lost their lands and became labourers while richer peasants turned into contractors acquiring rights to collect rents. Capital intensive cultivation also crept in with large holdings of lords which were cultivated through hired labour. For Georges Duby, this transformation of rural scenario led to the decline of feudalism. Robert Brenner was of the opinion that expansion of trade does not fully explain the decline and reiterated the Marxian theory of class struggle between the lords and the peasants as the cause for decline.

This Unit then does not purport to answer the question whether or not trade and town had contributed to the decline of feudalism in Europe; instead it seeks to trace the ever changing contours of the question and its answers. In the end, it can be surmised that the significance of the discipline of history lies in restlessness and renewed energetic exploration of ever widening horizons. The debate that we have encapsulated here is an excellent testimony to it.

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## 6.11 KEYWORDS

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- Asymmetrical Share** : A form of plough with mould-board etc.
- Black Death** : Plague epidemic which struck Europe in the middle of the 14<sup>th</sup> century it is estimated that it killed between one-fourth and one-third of Europe's inhabitants.
- Burgess** : The town resident contributing towards the customary payments due to the king from boroughs; in the late medieval period, however, 'burgess' was frequently used to distinguish hone group of privileged townsmen from a less privileged group. Burgesses grew in power during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, gradually building wealth based upon the commerce and production that took place in the borough.

<b><i>Demesne</i></b>	: Land cultivated by serf with labour dues; its produce went to the lord's stores.
<b>Liturgical Pomp</b>	: Grand display of public celebrations of worship or rituals or ceremonies.
<b><i>Manse</i></b>	: A unit of land cultivated by one peasant family's labour, whether it belonged to the lord or the peasant himself. This was the unit of measurement of labour dues.
<b>Manumission</b>	: The freeing of a slave or serf from indentured service.
<b>Mould-board plough</b>	: See Asymmetrical share
<b>Open Fields</b>	: Arable land with common rights after harvest or while fallow; usually without internal divisions by hedges, walls or fences but made up of plough strips arranged by furlongs.
<b>Rhine Land</b>	: Region adjoining to Rhine river in Germany.
<b>Vikings</b>	: Scandinavian traders and pirates of 8 <sup>th</sup> to 10 <sup>th</sup> century
<b>Village Gleaners</b>	: Poor people in villages who used to collect ears of corn after the crop was harvested and taken away by cultivators.

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## 6.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

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### Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 6.2
- 2) See Sub-section 6.3.1
- 3) See Sub-section 6.3.2

### Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Sub-section 6.4.1
- 2) See Sub-sections 6.4.2 and 6.4.3
- 3) See Sub-sections 6.4.4 and 6.4.5

### Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Section 6.5
- 2) See Section 6.5

### Check Your Progress-4

- 1) See Section 6.6
- 2) See Section 6.7
- 3) See Section 6.8
- 4) See Section 6.9



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## 6.14 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECOMMENDATIONS

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**Medieval Europe: Feudalism | National Geographic Documentary**  
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymb9k8Tk\\_fY](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ymb9k8Tk_fY)

