
The Development of Feudalism in Western Europe

How well did feudalism establish order in Europe in the Middle Ages?

Introduction

The collapse of the Roman Empire in 476 C.E. marks the beginning of the period in Europe known as the Middle Ages. During this time period, a complex political and economic system developed that largely shaped people's lives.

Historians divide the Middle Ages into three periods. The Early Middle Ages lasted from about 476 to 1000 C.E. The High Middle Ages lasted from about 1000 to 1300. The Late Middle Ages lasted from about 1300 to 1450.

The Middle Ages began with the fall of the Roman Empire, which had unified much of Europe for about 500 years. After its collapse, life became dangerous and difficult in Western Europe. People worked hard simply to survive and to have enough to eat. They also needed to protect themselves from conquest by invading barbarians and neighboring kingdoms.

These challenges gave rise to the economic and political system historians call feudalism (FEWD-ahl-ism) in which people had clearly defined roles and relationships with each other. In the feudal system, people pledged loyalty to a lord—a ruler or powerful landholder. In return, they received protection from that lord. Warriors fought on behalf of their lords, and peasants worked the land. At the bottom of the system were serfs, or peasants who were not free to leave the lord's land without permission.

In this lesson, you will discover more about the difficulties people faced during the Early Middle Ages. Then you will learn about the rise of feudalism and how it helped to establish order and security after the fall of Rome. Finally, you will explore what daily life was like for people living under feudalism.