

THE ANVIL SERIES

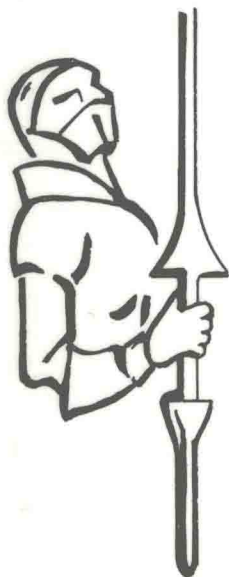
Louis L. Snyder

General Editor



FEUDALISM

STRAYER



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THE ANVIL SERIES

under the general editorship of
LOUIS L. SNYDER



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PREFACE

This book could be written only because great scholars for over three centuries have devoted themselves to the study of feudalism. Our own generation of historians has been especially fertile in new insights and new interpretations, and I owe much to the men whose works are listed in the recommended readings. My debt is especially great to Professor F. L. Ganshof, the dean of all living students of feudalism.

My own interpretation stresses feudalism as a method of government, and emphasizes the distinction between the great lords who had extensive political power, and the lesser vassals who were at first merely soldiers. In order to make these points clear I have translated a number of documents not commonly cited in studies of feudalism. For the same reason I have made my own translations from the original sources even when I was using familiar documents, since the translator's choice of words inevitably reflects his ideas about the nature of feudalism. I have probably not avoided bias, but I hope that I have achieved consistency, since in only one case (*Reading No. 35*) have I used the version of another scholar.

The dedication recalls long evenings of conversation with an old friend and colleague, whose wise and penetrating mind helped sharpen many of my ideas about the historical process. It is a small acknowledgement of a great obligation.

JOSEPH R. STRAYER

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Part I

FEUDALISM

INTRODUCTION

Feudalism is a difficult word. It was invented in the seventeenth century, at a time when the social phenomena it purported to describe had either vanished or were decaying rapidly. The men of the Middle Ages, who were deeply involved in what we call feudalism, never used the word, so that we cannot work out a definition from their statements. Modern scholars have long argued about the meaning of the term, without ever reaching agreement. Laymen have used it loosely, often as a way of condemning any political, economic, or social relationships they did not like. No definition will satisfy everyone, and yet we must have a tentative definition in order to know what we are talking about and what kind of behavior we are trying to describe.

Origin of the Term. We might start by remembering why the word was invented. The seventeenth-century lawyers and antiquarians who first used the term were either perplexed or fascinated by the survival of certain customs and institutions which were difficult to harmonize with prevailing legal and political theories. Restraints on royal power, the possession of public authority by private persons, peculiar rules about the use and transfer of real property, did not seem to fit with the concept of the sovereign state, the doctrine of divine right, or ideas about the sanctity of private property. It was also clear that these survivals did not go back to the classical period; they were just as repugnant to the spirit of Roman law as they were to the absolutism of the seventeenth century. They must, then, have originated in the Middle Ages, and

most of them seemed to be connected with the medieval institution of the fief. Hence they were lumped together under the name of feudalism.¹ And the antiquarians who tried to explain the term, or the lawyers who tried to justify the peculiar rights of their clients, knew perfectly well where to find the explanations or justifications they needed: they began to examine with greater and greater care the legal and administrative records of medieval governments.

The first descriptions of feudalism, then, were derived from a study of the medieval political structure. This is still the place to turn, for, as we shall see, it is here, and here alone, that we find the sharply defined characteristics which make it possible to distinguish feudalism from other patterns of social organization. Some other societies had some of these characteristics, and one other society, Japan from 1300 to 1600, had most of them. But feudalism appeared first and developed most completely in Western Europe between 800 and 1200.

Definition of Feudalism. When we look at the political situation in Western Europe in this period, there are three things that strike us. First, there is a fragmentation of political power. Over much of Western Europe the county is the largest effective political unit, and in some places even the county has splintered into small, autonomous lordships. Moreover, even in these small districts no single ruler has a monopoly of political authority. There are rights of jurisdiction and administration which are held as hereditary possessions by lesser lords. There may be enclaves within a county or a barony in which the count or baron has no authority at all.

Second, this fragmented political power is treated as a private possession. It can be divided among heirs, given as marriage portion, mortgaged, bought and sold. Private contracts and the rules of family law determine the possessors of judicial and administrative authority. Public power in private hands is accepted as a normal and inevitable arrangement; no one considers it peculiar or undesirable.

¹ The medieval Latin word for fief was *feodum* or *feudum*—hence the French *féodalité* (which came first) and the slightly later English “feudalism.”

Third, a key element in the armed forces—heavy-armed cavalry—is secured through individual and private agreements. Knights render military service not because they are citizens of a state or subjects of a king, but because they or their ancestors have promised to give this service to a lord in return for certain benefits. These benefits may range from mere sustenance in the lord's household to the grant of estates, villages, and even some rights of government. Increasingly, the grant of land comes to be the normal way of securing the services of a knight, but other arrangements are always possible. The essential point is that military service is provided through a series of private contracts between the lord and his men.

To sum up, the basic characteristics of feudalism in Western Europe are a fragmentation of political authority, public power in private hands, and a military system in which an essential part of the armed forces is secured through private contracts. Feudalism is a method of government, and a way of securing the forces necessary to preserve that method of government.

This is not as narrow a definition as it seems. The possessors of political and military power will naturally mold their society to fit their own needs. They will manipulate the economy so that they get the greatest share of production; they will develop a class structure which gives them the highest position; they will, as wealthy consumers, influence writers and artists; they will establish standards to which their society must conform. Thus, it is perfectly legitimate to speak of feudal society, or a feudal age, if we remember that it was the political-military structure which made the society and the age feudal.

On the other hand, if we try a wider definition, feudalism becomes an amorphous term. The most usual attempt to broaden the definition of feudalism stresses social and economic factors; in its simplest form it would find the essence of feudalism in the exploitation of an agricultural population by a ruling group. That this occurred in the feudal society of Western Europe is certainly true; it is equally true that it occurred in many other societies as well, both before and after the Middle Ages. Nor can we say that this situation is typical of all pre-industrial societies, and that therefore the socioeconomic definition of

feudalism is useful in marking a universal stage of economic development. Some pre-industrial societies were never feudal in any sense of the word; some highly industrialized societies can be called feudal if we use the socioeconomic definition of feudalism. The ruling class (or party) of the Soviet Union built up its heavy industries by exploiting the tillers of the soil, and the ruling class of Communist China has recently attempted to do the same thing. A definition which can include societies as disparate as those of the Ancient Middle East, the late Roman Empire, medieval Europe, the southern part of the United States in the nineteenth century, and the Soviet Union in the 1930's is not much use in historical analysis.

ARMED RETAINERS OF THE PERIOD OF MIGRATIONS

Feudalism, then, is a set of political-military arrangements which existed in Western Europe in the Middle Ages. These arrangements began to take shape in the eighth century, but they obviously must have had roots in an earlier period. When we look for these roots, we find that the political and the military aspects of feudalism had different origins and different rates of growth. While the two aspects were associated quite early with each other, they were not fully meshed together for several centuries. Thus, the first stages of military feudalism and of political feudalism must be discussed separately.

Retainers in the Late Roman Empire. The armed retainer, the man who fights because he has a personal allegiance to a military leader, is a familiar figure both in the late Roman Empire and in the Germanic kingdoms with which the Empire had to deal. Roman armies of the fourth and fifth centuries had long ceased to be Roman. They were composed largely of barbarian contingents whose zeal and loyalty fluctuated alarmingly, and who were especially unreliable when they thought that they were on the losing side. Any sensible general wanted a bodyguard of his own men—elite troops who could be relied on to deliver a charge in a wavering battle or to cover a retreat. Civilian officials, and even wealthy private citizens, also wanted groups of private soldiers for protection in a period of disorder. These groups were often very large—a bodyguard of several thousand men was

not unusual—and they were recruited from the lower classes. Many of them were slaves or barbarians. (See *Reading No. 2.*) Members of a bodyguard had some chance to become officers, but as long as they were simple soldiers there was nothing particularly honorable about their calling. They were more like a special class of servants than anything else. If they served their master faithfully they received food, clothing, a little pay, and, at times, a share of the spoils of war. But as a class they had no social standing and no political influence.

Retainers Among the Early Germans. The Germanic retainer appears earlier than the Roman and has a far higher social position. As early as the first century A.D. Tacitus describes a German institution he calls the *comitatus*—a band composed of young men of good family who have sought out a famous war-leader, and have pledged unswerving loyalty to him. (See *Reading No. 1.*) No leader has very many of these men, and he usually treats them with distinction. They are his companions rather than his servants; they receive presents rather than wages. If the leader is killed in battle and they survive, they are disgraced. On the other hand, if they win a series of victories, some of the companions will become leaders of war-bands in their turn, while others will return home and become local chieftains. They are, or can easily become, an aristocracy. Far fewer in number than their Roman counterparts, they have far greater influence.

There was certainly some connection between the two types of retainership. Most generals of the Late Empire were of Germanic origin; they may have introduced the idea of the *comitatus* into the Roman army while modifying it to meet Roman social conditions. Young Romans of good family were usually not eager to serve a barbarian commander. The emperors were quite satisfied with this situation, since young men of good family with military reputations were potential threats to the throne. Retainers, therefore, had to be found in the lower classes, and this meant in turn that they could not be given a distinguished status. On the whole, it made little difference that the member of a German *comitatus* was an aristocrat and the member of a Roman private army was not. Overriding all