

## TERMS OF HISTORY

## Feudalism

**F**eudalism is a modern word, like *capitalism* and *communism*. No one in the Middle Ages used it, or any of its related terms, such as *feudal system* or *feudal society*. Many historians today think that it is a misleading word and should be discarded. The term poses two serious problems. First, historians have used it to mean different things. Second, it implies that one way of life dominated the Middle Ages, when in fact there were numerous varieties of social, political, and economic arrangements.

Consider the many different meanings that *feudalism* has had. Historians influenced by Karl Marx's powerful communist theory used (and still use) *feudalism* to refer to an economic system in which nobles dominated subservient peasant cultivators. When they speak of feudalism, they are speaking of manors, lords, and serfs. Other historians, however, call that system *manorialism*. They reserve the term *feudalism* for a system consisting of vassals (who never did agricultural labor but only military service), lords, and fiefs. For example, in an influential book written in the mid-1940s, *Feudalism*, F. L. Ganshof considered the tenth to the thirteenth centuries to be the "classical age of feudalism" because during this period lords regularly granted fiefs to their vassals, who fought on their lord's behalf in return.

But, writing around the same time, Marc Bloch included in his definition of *feudalism* every aspect of the political and social life of the Middle Ages, including peasants, fiefs, knights, vassals, and the fragmentation of royal authority yet the survival of the state, which "was to acquire renewed strength" in the course of the feudal period. Some historians, reacting to this broad definition, have tried to narrow it by considering *feudalism* to be a political term that refers to the decline of the state and the dispersal of political power. Others, while also trying to narrow the def-

inition, use *feudalism* to mean a system by which kings controlled their men. These definitions are opposites.

Whatever the definition, they all stress certain institutions that some recent historians argue were very peripheral to medieval life. The fief, for example, a word whose Latin form (*feodum*) gave rise to the word *feudalism*, was by no means important everywhere. And even where it was important, it did not necessarily have anything to do with lords, vassals, or military obligations. "Nobles and free men," writes the historian Susan Reynolds, "did not generally owe military service before the twelfth century because of the grant of anything like fiefs to them or their ancestors. . . . They owed whatever service they owed, not because they were vassals of a lord, but because they were subjects of a ruler." For Reynolds, feudalism is a myth.

Mythical or not, all these views, even that of Reynolds, have one thing in common: a stress on vertical hierarchies, such as lords over peasants or kings over their subjects. Some recent historians, however, point out that not all of medieval society was hierarchical. Horizontal relations—such as those that created peasant communities, urban corporations, and the comradeship of knightly troops—were equally, if not more, important.

For all of these reasons, many historians have stopped using the word *feudalism*, preferring to stress the variety of medieval social and political arrangements. How many times have you encountered the term in this history book?

## FURTHER READING

- Bloch, Marc. *Feudal Society*. 2 vols. Trans. L. A. Manyon, 1961.
- Ganshof, F. L. *Feudalism*. Trans. Philip Grierson, 1961.
- Reynolds, Susan. *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted*. 1994.