

4. The Three orders

Introduction & Sources

- 9th–16th c.: Major socio-economic & political changes in Western Europe.
- Germanic groups occupied Italy, Spain, France after the Roman Empire collapsed.
- Land control central to society (Roman traditions + German customs).
- Christianity spread in central/northern Europe; Church = landholder + political power.
- Society organized into **Three Orders**: clergy, nobility, peasants.
- Historians use regional/village studies, land & church records.
- **Marc Bloch**: geography & collective behavior important; wrote *Feudal Society* (900–1300); killed by Nazis.

Feudalism

- Term from German “feud” = land.
- Developed in France, England, southern Italy.
- Based on lord–peasant relationship (labor for protection).
- Lords had judicial power.
- Origins: Roman Empire & Charlemagne.
- By 11th c., widespread in Europe.

France & England

- **France (Gaul)**: diverse geography; ruled by Franks; Christianity adopted.
- Charlemagne was crowned “Holy Roman Emperor” by the Pope (800).
- **England**: invaded by Duke of Normandy (11th c.); Norman feudalism established.

The Three Orders

1. **Clergy (First Order)** – prayer.
2. **Nobility (Second Order)** – fighting/military.
3. **Peasantry (Third Order)** – labor/work.

First Order: Clergy

- Independent power: laws, lands, taxation.
- Pope = head (Rome).
- Bishops held estates, lived in palaces.
- **Tithe** = 1/10th of peasant produce.
- Church ceremonies reflected feudal traditions.

Monks

- Monasteries (abbeys): prayer, study, manual labor.
- Schools, hospitals, estates.
- Friars = traveling preachers.
- Decline of monasticism's value by 14th c.

Church & Society

- Pagan traditions persisted (magic, folk practices).
- Christian festivals replaced older ones (Christmas, Easter).
- Pilgrimages are common.

Second Order: Nobility

- Vassalage = loyalty pledged to king/seigneur for protection.
- Nobles had land, courts, levies, minted coins.
- Controlled peasants (tenant farmers + soldiers).
- Land = estates with residences, farms, peasant villages.

Manorial Estate

- Lords controlled villages + manor-houses.
- Self-sufficient: farms, blacksmiths, weaving, carpentry.
- Included: forests, pastures, church, castle.
- Castles = military + political centers.
- Relied on external trade for luxury goods (salt, ornaments, instruments).

Knights

- Rose in 9th c. due to wars.
- Granted **fiefs** (land) in exchange for service.
- Practiced military skills; loyalty to lords.
- **Minstrels** spread stories of knights (literacy low).

Third Order: Peasants

- **Free peasants**: tenants, paid rent, some military service.
- **Serfs**: bound to land, unpaid labor, restricted movement, controlled marriages.
- Tax **taille**: paid by peasants only.

Feudalism in England

- Angles & Saxons settled (6th c.).
- William I (Normandy) conquered England (11th c.).
- Distributed land to Norman nobles (tenants-in-chief).
- Knights under nobles; peasants became tenants.
- **Private wars banned** in England.

Factors Affecting Feudalism

- Seen as stable, but underwent change:
 - **Environment:** 5th–10th c. cold, forests → poor farming. 11th c. warm period → agricultural expansion.
 - **Land use:** wooden ploughs, two-field system, famines, peasant resistance.
 - **Technology (11th c.):** heavy iron ploughs, harnesses, water/wind mills, three-field system → food doubled.
 - Shift to **money rents** weakened feudal ties.

A Fourth Order? Towns

- Population growth: 42m (1000) → 73m (1300).
- Agricultural surplus → towns grew (fairs, markets).
- Towns offered freedom from lords → attracted peasants/serfs.
- Rise of merchants, bankers, lawyers.
- **Guilds** regulated craft/industry.
- Trade expanded (West Asia, England, Scandinavia).
- Merchants gained power rivaling nobles.

Cathedral-Towns

- Wealthy merchants funded cathedrals.
- Cathedrals = religious, cultural, economic hubs.
- Stained glass told biblical stories (for illiterate).

Crisis of the 14th Century

- Climate cooling → crop failures.
- Famines (1315–1320s), cattle deaths.
- Black Death (1347 onwards): killed ~20% Europeans, population fell 73m → 45m.
- Labor shortage → higher wages, lower agricultural prices.

Social Unrest

- Lords tried to reimpose labor-services → revolts (Flanders 1323, France 1358, England 1381).
- Revolts suppressed but prevented full return to feudalism.
- The money economy is too entrenched.

Political Changes

- 15th–16th c. → **“New Monarchs.”**
- Stronger military & bureaucracy, standing armies, taxation.
- Nobility became royal loyalists (administration, patronage).
- The money economy tied merchants/bankers to kings.
- **France:** Absolutism, Estates-General suppressed.
- **England:** Parliament established, political conflicts (Charles I executed).
- Long-term: **France = Republic, England = Constitutional Monarchy.**