The Development of Western Civilization
Narrative Essays in the History of Our Tradition from
Its Origins in Ancient Israel and Greece to the Present
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MEDIAEVAL SOCIETY

BY SIDNEY PAINTER
Mediaeval Society

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Cornell University Press

ITHACA AND LONDON
Foreword

THE proposition that each generation must rewrite history is more widely quoted than practiced. In the field of college texts on western civilization, the conventional accounts have been revised, and sources and supplementary materials have been developed; but it is too long a time since the basic narrative has been rewritten to meet the rapidly changing needs of new college generations. In the mid-twentieth century such an account must be brief, well written, and based on unquestioned scholarship and must assume almost no previous historical knowledge on the part of the reader. It must provide a coherent analysis of the development of western civilization and its basic values. It must, in short, constitute a systematic introduction to the collective memory of that tradition which we are being asked to defend. This series of narrative essays was undertaken in an effort to provide such a text for an introductory history survey course and is being published in the present form in the belief that the requirements of that one course reflected a need that is coming to be widely recognized.

Now that the classic languages, the Bible, the great historical novels, even most non-American history, have dropped out of the normal college preparatory program, it is imper-
ative that a text in the history of European civilization be fully self-explanatory. This means not only that it must begin at the beginning, with the origins of our civilization in ancient Israel and Greece, but that it must introduce every name or event that takes an integral place in the account and ruthlessly delete all others no matter how firmly imbedded in historical protocol. Only thus simplified and complete will the narrative present a sufficiently clear outline of those major trends and developments that have led from the beginning of our recorded time to the most pressing of our current problems. This simplification, however, need not involve intellectual dilution or evasion. On the contrary, it can effectively raise rather than lower the level of presentation. It is on this assumption that the present series has been based, and each contributor has been urged to write for a mature and literate audience. It is hoped, therefore, that the essays may also prove profitable and rewarding to readers outside the college classroom.

The plan of the first part of the series is to sketch, in related essays, the narrative of our history from its origins to the eve of the French Revolution; each is to be written by a recognized scholar and is designed to serve as the basic reading for one week in a semester course. The developments of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries will be covered in a succeeding series which will provide the same quantity of reading material for each week of the second semester. This scale of presentation has been adopted in the conviction that any understanding of the central problem of the preservation of the integrity and dignity of the individual human being depends first on an examination of the origins of our tradition in the politics and philosophy of the ancient Greeks and the religion of the ancient Hebrews and then
on a relatively more detailed knowledge of its recent development within our industrial urban society.

The decision to devote equal space to twenty-five centuries and to a century and a half was based on analogy with the human memory. Those events most remote tend to be remembered in least detail but often with a sense of clarity and perspective that is absent in more recent and more crowded recollections. If the roots of our tradition must be identified, their relation to the present must be carefully developed. The nearer the narrative approaches contemporary times, the more difficult and complicated this becomes. Recent experience must be worked over more carefully and in more detail if it is to contribute effectively to an understanding of the contemporary world.

It may be objected that the series attempts too much. The attempt is being made, however, on the assumption that any historical development should be susceptible of meaningful treatment on any scale and in the realization that a very large proportion of today's college students do not have more time to invest in this part of their education. The practical alternative appears to lie between some attempt to create a new brief account of the history of our tradition and the abandonment of any serious effort to communicate the essence of that tradition to all but a handful of our students. It is the conviction of everyone contributing to this series that the second alternative must not be accepted by default.

In a series covering such a vast sweep of time, few scholars would find themselves thoroughly at home in the fields covered by more than one or two of the essays. This means, in practice, that almost every essay should be written by a different author. In spite of apparent drawbacks, this procedure
promises real advantages. Each contributor will be in a position to set higher standards of accuracy and insight in an essay encompassing a major portion of the field of his life's work than could ordinarily be expected in surveys of some ten or twenty centuries. The inevitable discontinuity of style and interpretation could be modified by editorial coordination; but it was felt that some discontinuity was in itself desirable. No illusion is more easily acquired by the student in an elementary course, or is more prejudicial to the efficacy of such a course, than that a single smoothly articulated text represents the very substance of history itself. If the shift from author to author, week by week, raises difficulties for the beginning student, they are difficulties that will not so much impede his progress as contribute to his growth.

This essay, *Mediaeval Society* by Mr. Sidney Painter, offers an introduction to an understanding of everyday life in the early Middle Ages. Social history of this period has been studied intensively for years, but, in spite of this or perhaps in part because of it, few brief, concrete, and comprehensive accounts of daily existence in mediaeval Europe have appeared. To fill this gap, Mr. Painter was asked to write an essay that could be read at a sitting, that would outline the most important technical developments, and that would infuse this information with understanding and sympathy. He has succeeded in producing a swift summary equally fitted to enlighten the ignorance of the beginner or to illuminate the knowledge of the more advanced student.

The author and editor wish to express their gratitude to Mr. Joseph R. Strayer for many helpful suggestions.

EDWARD WHITING FOX

Ithaca, New York
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Prolegomena

The term Middle Ages was coined by European historians to describe the years between the collapse of Roman civilization and what seemed to them the dawn of their own era. As they were primarily interested in the history of northwestern Europe, England, France, and Germany, they chose their limiting dates accordingly. In general the Middle Ages were considered to extend from the deposition of Romulus Augustulus, the last Roman emperor to have his seat in the West, in 476 to about 1500. To these historians the period called the Renaissance was the beginning of the modern era. They placed its commencement in Italy in the fourteenth century and its spread over western Europe in the years just before and just after 1500. Thus in its original meaning Middle Ages described a period of about 1,000 years in northwestern Europe and about 850 years in Italy. But like most historical terms it has been used by different scholars to suit their own tastes. There has been a strong inclination to push the beginning of the period back to the death of Diocletian in 305. There has also been a feeling that it should include the same period in the history of eastern Europe. The great basic work on the history of the Middle Ages, the Cambridge Mediaeval History, begins with the death of Diocle-
tian and includes eastern Europe. Although the series of which this essay forms a part contains a discussion of the Byzantine empire, this essay itself restricts its range to western Europe and particularly to northwestern Europe. Thus it is a description of mediaeval society in the narrow sense.

The environment in which the civilization that we call mediaeval developed was far different from that of the Roman Empire. The latter was essentially a Mediterranean state and its people were preponderantly of the race that anthropologists describe as Mediterranean. The lands that rimmed the great inland sea had a mild, dry climate and in general relatively infertile soils. Italy and Greece probably had more fertile soils in classical times than they have today, but it is doubtful that they were ever really rich. The only parts of this region that were fertile by our standards were the valley of the Nile and various irrigated districts in North Africa. Roman agriculture was based on wheat and olives. The light, dry soils were easy to work. The fame of the cedars of Lebanon demonstrates the rarity of forests in the Mediterranean lands.

Except in Italy, southern France, and the district around Barcelona in Spain, mediaeval civilization in the sense in which we are using the term did not touch the Mediterranean. And although these regions were important economically and culturally during the Middle Ages, they were weak politically. The center of power in the mediaeval period lay far to the north in a very different environment. To the north of the lowlands fringing the Mediterranean was a region originally covered almost entirely by vast forests of oak, ash, and beech. It was a well-watered country of mild summers and cold winters with deep, heavy, fertile soils. Here and there in the great forests the men of prehistoric
times had cleared land for their villages and fields. As time went on the settlements increased and more and more land was cleared, but the forests, though reduced in size, did not disappear. Moreover, the wet climate was suitable for rapid growth, and when a settlement was abandoned it soon became forest once again. In short, here was a land with great potentialities for agriculture but requiring far different techniques from those employed in the Mediterranean region.

Between the ninth and the fourth centuries before Christ this vast region stretching from the western shore of Ireland to the present frontiers of the Slavic peoples and from the North and Baltic seas to the Mediterranean was dominated by the Celts. In all probability the Celts were of the type called Alpine by anthropologists. Their political organization was essentially tribal, and they lived by farming and cattle raising. Soon after the fourth century B.C. the Celts began to feel the pressure from another expanding people—the Teutons or Germans. Starting from the Scandinavian peninsula the Germans slowly drove the Celts from the region now known as Germany. By the time Caesar invaded Gaul the Germans had occupied the country around the mouth of the Rhine and eastern England. Then for some four centuries their progress westward and southward was prevented by the armies of Rome. But when the Roman Empire began its collapse in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Germans began to move once more. They occupied northern Gaul, the valleys of the upper Rhône and Saône, the valley of the Po in northern Italy, and the part of Britain later called England. Although Germanic armed invaders ruled for considerable periods over central and southern Italy, southern France, Spain, and North Africa, their numbers were too small to affect the essential composition of the
population or the basic institutions of the regions. But by the end of the sixth century A.D. northwestern Europe was a German land. Only in Scotland, Wales, Ireland, and Brittany did a thin fringe of Celtic civilization survive.

The shift of the center of power in western Europe from the Mediterranean region to the north and from Romans to Germans is apparent when one glances at the situation in A.D. 800. Charlemagne had been crowned in Rome as Roman emperor. He ruled Italy, Gaul, and a strip of northern Spain and sought to have his imperial position recognized by the Byzantine ruler in Constantinople. But Charlemagne was essentially a German monarch ruling a German state. The center of his power lay in the regions on both banks of the lower Rhine, and his favorite residence was Aachen. Even his power in Italy rested on the possession of a German crown and the rule over a German people, the Lombards. Outside of Charlemagne’s empire were two important groups of Germanic peoples: the Anglo-Saxons in England and the Scandinavian inhabitants of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. Beyond to the west lay the remnants of Celtic civilization. Scots from Ireland had conquered the Picts and established the kingdom of Scotland. South of the Clyde river in southwest Scotland and northwest England lay the Celtic kingdom of Strathclyde. Various Celtic chiefs and princes ruled Wales and Ireland. Brittany was held by Celts who had fled from Britain before the advancing Anglo-Saxons.

To the south of Charlemagne’s realm lay the lands of the Moslem empire. Except for the march of Barcelona conquered by Charlemagne, Spain was held by the Moslems. They also ruled North Africa and were pressing naval attacks against the islands of the western Mediterranean and even the coasts of southern Gaul. To the east from the Bal-
tic to the Danube the Carolingian empire touched the lands of the Slavs. Although Charlemagne conducted a number of military expeditions beyond the Elbe and the Saale rivers that formed the eastern border of the German lands, they were chiefly punitive in nature, and he made no attempt to hold the country. The reconquest of eastern Germany was left for the mediaeval German kings and their vassals. South of the Danube the sons of Charlemagne in command of his Lombard cavalry drove the Avars, close relatives of the Huns, out of the lands at the head of the Adriatic Sea. Finally, the east coast of Italy and Sicily still recognized the rule of the Byzantine emperor.

The ninth century saw the Christian states of western Europe, the Carolingian empire, Anglo-Saxon England, and the Celtic lands, all victims of new non-Christian invaders. From Scandinavia was launched the last great wave of Germanic migrations. Two forces seem to have been behind this movement: overpopulation and the development of the Scandinavian monarchies. The former made it hard to find a living at home and hence encouraged men to seek their fortunes abroad, while the growth of royal power meant better internal order and hence less attractive conditions for lovers of war and rapine. In the ninth century the people of Scandinavia were divided into two groups—farmers who tilled the soil and Vikings who fought. It was the Vikings who first took to their ships and began to ravage the western coasts of Europe. At first it was simply a matter of summer plundering expeditions, but soon the Vikings were wintering in other lands and extending their raids inland. The Low Countries, western France, and the British Isles were thoroughly ravaged. Where they found favorable conditions, the Vikings would take possession of a region. In such cases
they were soon followed by migrant farmers from their homeland looking for new lands to cultivate. Charles the Simple, king of the West Franks, gave a Viking chief the lands about the mouth of the Seine in the hope that he would protect the realm from other Vikings. Although Charles's new subjects were able to keep the plunderers at bay, they sought more land for themselves until they occupied all of what was later called Normandy—the land of the Northmen. In England the Vikings fought a long, fierce war with Alfred, king of Wessex and chief king of England, which resulted at last in a treaty dividing the country between them. The sons and grandsons of Alfred reconquered the Danish region, but it retained a heavy Scandinavian population. The Vikings also took possession of the Celtic kingdom of Strathclyde and extended it to cover what is now Lancashire. Other Vikings occupied the islands off the west coast of Scotland and the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea. In the thirteenth century there was still a Scandinavian king of the Isles with his seat on Man. The Vikings also invaded Ireland and for a time ruled a large part of it. The chief Irish towns, Dublin, Waterford, and Wexford, were originally Viking strongholds. Finally Vikings and farmers settled Iceland, went on to Greenland, and apparently for a time maintained a settlement on the coast of North America.

The Viking raiders along the coasts of the North Sea and the Atlantic Ocean were Danes and Norwegians. The Swedes turned to the east. They occupied almost the entire shore of the Baltic Sea and pressed on into the Slavic lands. They established strongholds such as Novgorod and Kiev and from them ruled the native Slavs. By the end of the ninth century a series of Viking principalities extended from Novgorod to the Black Sea. These states were in commercial
contact with Constantinople, were eventually converted to Christianity by Byzantine missionaries, and so became part of the civilization of eastern Europe.

While the Vikings were harassing the north of Christian Europe, the Moslem power was spreading in the south. During the ninth century they seized the Balearic Islands, Sicily, Sardinia, and Corsica, invaded southern Italy, and even laid siege to Rome. By 900 they were almost absolute masters of the western Mediterranean. Meanwhile the eastern part of the Carolingian empire had still another foe: the Magyars, a Mongolian people closely related to the Huns and Avars. The Magyars occupied the great Hungarian plain and conducted continual raids into eastern Germany.

The attacks on Christian Europe by its foes came to an end in the tenth and eleventh centuries. The grant of Normandy to Rollo in 911 practically ended the Viking raids on France. By 939 the grandson of Alfred had reconquered the part of England occupied by the Danes. But in England the victory was temporary. Late in the tenth century the Danes came again, not as raiders but as a well-organized army under Swein, king of Denmark, and Swein and his son Canute ruled England for over twenty years. In fact, England did not become safe from the Danes until William, duke of Normandy, conquered the country and established an effective military system supported by a vast network of fortresses. The Magyar invasions of Germany were stopped in 955 by Otto I's great victory at the Lechfeld. Fierce adventurers from Normandy drove the Moslems from southern Italy and Sicily during the years 1057–1091 and established the Norman kingdom of Naples and Sicily. The eleventh century also saw the Moslems ejected from Corsica and Sardinia by the fleets of Genoa and Pisa.
The end of the period of invasions saw western Europe in a sad state. There were no towns in the economic sense, and the clusters of buildings around cathedrals and abbeys lay in ruins. The population had greatly decreased, and a great deal of land once cultivated had become forest or at least brush. Although we have no figures and any statement on the subject is a pure guess, it seems likely that the population of France about 950 was smaller than it had been at any time since the Roman conquest. For England we have a reasonably reliable estimate for the year 1086 of 1,100,000. In all probability this too represents the lowest point reached by the population of England since the Saxon settlement. But with the end of the invasions society began to recover and to form the institutions described in this essay. While the roots of mediaeval civilization lay deep in the past, it grew and flowered during the eleventh, twelfth, and thirteenth centuries. The time schedule was different in different lands. The feudal system started in France and spread to England, Italy, Germany, and Palestine. Feudal institutions also played an important part in Christian Spain and Scandinavia. The seignorial system seems to have developed simultaneously in England, France, and western Germany, and it too spread in various forms over most of Europe. Obviously no single essay can describe the many forms taken by these institutions in different countries. Mediaeval society as it will appear in this essay was that of France, England, and western Germany.

One might say that nothing but the arbitrary arrogance of English, French, and German historians can account for the selection of so small a part of Europe to discuss in detail under the heading mediaeval society. To some extent this is, of course, true. A Russian historian would obviously devote
more attention to eastern Europe. But the selection of this
region cannot be called purely arbitrary. This essay is in-
tended for students in the United States, and the origins of
our institutions lie in those of western Europe. Moreover,
as has been suggested in the previous paragraph, many of
the institutions that eventually spread over Europe as a
whole originated in this region. The seignorial system was
carried into the regions reconquered by the Germans from
the Slavs, spread to the neighboring Slavs and eventually to
Russia. Furthermore, every Russian historian today is deeply
affected by the development of civilization in western Eu-
rope. The theory of history enunciated by Karl Marx was
based on the history of the western nations, and Soviet his-
torians can ignore this theory only at their peril.

Finally, although this region was a small part of the total
area of Europe, its climate, soil, topography, racial structure,
and culture gave it a unity that would be hard to find in any
other major segment of the continent. From the border of
Wales to the river Elbe and from the North and Baltic seas
to the mountains of Auvergne and the Alps the country as
a whole was reasonably fertile and well watered. There were
hilly sections, but except for the Harz country in Saxony
there were no mountains. Between the villages were forests,
and land left untilled soon returned to that state. The climate
was mild in summer and cold in winter; the soils were deep
and heavy. In short, throughout this region the same agricul-
tural technique was effective. The racial structure was also
much the same everywhere. Prehistoric peoples had been
conquered by Celts and Celts in turn by Germans. The pro-
portions of Nordic and Alpine stock in the population might
differ from district to district, yet the basic ingredients were
the same. Then too these peoples were bound together by
the Roman Christian culture and the Roman Catholic faith. Although the spoken tongues varied widely, throughout the entire region Latin was the language of reading and writing. A clerk in the court of the English king could easily understand the decrees of a German emperor, and both could study the political system of Rome in the Institutes of Justinian. Again, from district to district church practice differed somewhat and different local saints were venerated, but the dominant beliefs were the same and all people looked for spiritual guidance to St. Peter's successors in Rome. Thus the peoples of England, France, and Germany had a common heritage and common problems.
CHAPTER I

The Feudal System

and the Feudal Caste

DURING the period that is known as the Middle Ages the basic centers of political, economic, and social life were the castle, the village, and the town. The people who lived in each of these had their own peculiar institutions. Continental historians as a rule use the term "feudal system" to describe the dominant institutions of the castle and the village, but English and American writers are inclined to restrict this term to the institutions that flourished among the noble castle dwellers and to call those of the inhabitants of the village the seignorial or manorial system. In this book "feudal system" will be used in the narrow sense to describe the institutions of the noble class while "seignorial system" will designate those of the villagers.

The fundamental elements of the feudal system were the lord, the vassal, and the fief. The vassal entered into an intimate subordinate personal relationship with the lord by swearing fidelity and doing homage to him. He might or might not receive from the lord a fief—that is, the use of something of value, usually a piece of land with its peasant inhabitants. It seems possible that the oath of fidelity estab-
lished a purely personal relationship without any economic considerations, while homage implied the furnishing of food and clothing even when no fief was granted, but this distinction cannot be conclusively established. Many scholars have attempted to draw a clear distinction between fidelity and homage, but their efforts have not been successful. In general all vassals swore fidelity and did homage. When a vassal was given a fief, he was expected to perform certain services in return for it. The inauguration of the relationship between a lord and a vassal was a solemn ceremony. The vassal knelt before the lord, placed his two hands between the lord’s hands, and swore fidelity to him. If a fief was being granted, the lord usually gave the vassal some symbol, such as a clod of earth. As these arrangements between lords and vassals formed the basic political structure for much of western Europe during the Middle Ages and have profoundly influenced our own political institutions, they deserve extended consideration.

**The Origins of Feudalism**

The origins of feudal institutions may be found in both Roman and German life. According to Tacitus, when a German war chief planned a campaign, he gathered about him a group of picked warriors which was called his *comitatus*. These men swore absolute fidelity and obedience to the chief in return for arms, food, clothing, and a share in the plunder. The German chieftains who set themselves up as kings in the Roman Empire had similar bands of sworn followers. The Frankish kings called the *comitatus a truste* and its members *antrustiones*. The Saxon kings were surrounded by bands of *thanæ*. Thus the practice of a warrior binding himself by an oath to follow a chief in war was well established among the Germanic peoples. The Romans had
a somewhat similar institution, the *clientela*. When a Roman freed a slave, the freedman usually remained a dependent of his former master, a *client*. Poor freemen might seek the protection of a senator by becoming his clients. In the latter years of the Roman Empire in the West the *comitatus* and the clientele tended to become merged into one institution. The great Roman nobles hired bands of German warriors to serve as their bodyguards. These warriors were known as *bucellarii*. Now the Roman senator may well have thought of his *bucellarii* as soldier-clients, but the Germans were more likely to consider themselves members of a *comitatus*. The *bucellarii* played an extremely important part in the wars of the fifth century: a large part of Belisarius' army was composed of his *bucellarii*. It seems clear that we have in these various Roman, German, and Romano-German institutions the prototype of the relationship between lord and vassal.

There is no evidence that the early Germans knew any form of land tenure other than simple ownership, but the Romans had a number of forms of dependent tenures. There was the *precarium*, a grant of land in return for some form of rent that could be terminated whenever the grantor saw fit. Then there was the *beneficium* that was usually given for a fixed term, sometimes for life. These tenures were taken over by the Germans who settled in the Empire. In Merovingian Gaul the church used the *beneficium* very freely to obtain men to cultivate its lands. Thus the conception of dependent tenures held by men who were personally free was well known to the Romano-German world.

*Charles Martel*

When Charles Martel became duke of the Franks, he had great need of a strong and reliable military force. Only a
body of soldiers whom he could trust could secure his dominance over the turbulent Frankish nobles, who had gotten completely out of hand since his father's death. Then the Frankish state faced for the first time in its history dangerous external foes. The Saxons were pressing against the eastern frontier while to the south the Moslems had conquered the Visigothic kingdom of Spain and were crossing the Pyrenees. Now the most effective type of soldier known to Charles was a mounted warrior armed with sword and lance and protected by a shield, helmet, and body armor. But horses, arms, and armor were so expensive that only a few Frankish nobles could afford them. Moreover, their efficient use in war required training and continuous practice. They would be useless to a man who had to wrest his living from the cultivation of his land. The Byzantine emperor could hire soldiers and equip them, but in western Europe by the eighth century the general economic system had decayed so far that Charles had little or no money revenue. The only way to support the soldiers he needed was to give them land and the labor to work the land. Charles arrived at a very simple solution. The Frankish church possessed vast tracts of land cultivated by its tenants. Charles compelled the church to give extensive beneficia or benefices to his soldiers. These soldiers took an oath of fidelity to Charles and promised to serve him as long as they lived.

The Vassi Dominici

Charles called these soldiers vassi dominici or vassals of the lord. The term vassus or vassal was an old one in Merovingian Gaul, but before Charles's time it seems to have usually meant a person of very lowly station. Charles's vassi served him well against the Frankish nobles, the Moslems,
and the Saxons. His descendants steadily increased their number. Both Pepin and Charlemagne were accustomed to give benefices in conquered lands to *vassi dominici* who would thus form a sort of permanent garrison.

With the Carolingian *vassi dominici* and their benefices we have all the fundamental elements of the feudal system. The *vassus* swears fidelity to his lord, receives a benefice to support him, and performs military service for the lord. In short, feudal institutions existed in the Carolingian state, but they lacked many of the features of later feudalism and they were far from universal. The benefices of the *vassi dominici* occupied only a small part of the Frankish state, and most Frankish nobles and freemen held their lands in full ownership. Lands held in this way were usually known as *alods* to distinguish them from benefices.

During the years between the death of Charlemagne in 814 and the accession of Hugh Capet in 987 feudalism spread over the West Frankish state until it embraced almost all the land and its free inhabitants. Unfortunately the historical sources for this period are extremely scanty and hence little is known of the process by which feudalism developed. One can, however, make fairly satisfactory hypotheses. This century and a half was a time of almost continual turmoil. Fierce Vikings raided the coasts of France, sailed up its rivers, and even conducted expeditions across country. The wild Magyar riders from the plains of Hungary harried the eastern part of the land. Moslem plunderers occupied the delta of the Rhône and ravaged the neighboring region. Moreover, the country was torn by civil wars. First there were bitter rivalries between various members of the Carolingian royal house and later a long struggle between the Carolingians and the Capetians. In short, during these years
there was rarely a government capable of keeping order and defending the realm from outside enemies. Great landowners obtained soldiers by giving benefits to able warriors. Small landowners sought the protection of greater men by becoming their vassals. They would give up their alodial holding to a lord and receive it back as a fief. The royal *vassus dominici*, finding the king unable to protect them, became the vassals of local dignitaries. Once in a while the sources reveal a glimpse of what was happening. An early biography of St. Leger, bishop of Auxerre, explains that before he entered the church he was a royal *vassus dominicus*. He vigorously resisted the demands of the local count that he give up his direct relationship to the king and become his vassal. But clearly most *vassi* had to give way before the power of the local magnate.

**The Feudal Hierarchy**

Although the process is obscure, the result is quite clear. By 987 the soldiers of the West Frankish state were arranged in a feudal hierarchy bound together by oaths of vassalage. The king was at the top of the feudal pyramid: the suzerain of the land. A few dukes and counts were his direct vassals. They in turn had their vassals, rear vassals, and rear rear vassals. At the bottom of the pyramid was the simple knight with just enough land and peasant labor to support him, his family, and his horses. Now this structure was not all embracing by 987; in fact, it never was. As late as the latter part of the twelfth century the count of Dreux surrendered large alodial holdings to the count of Champagne and received them back as fiefs. A recent study has shown that large alodial estates persisted throughout the Middle Ages in the region around Bordeaux. But in comparison with the total area
of the country these exceptions were of slight importance, and the principle beloved by feudal lawyers—no land without a lord—became essentially true. Thus all land was someone's fief and every landholder except the king was someone's vassal. The soldiers, the knights, held the land of France, and they were bound together by the feudal system.

The development and definition of the rights and obligations of lords and vassals was a long, slow process that extended over five centuries, from the eighth to the thirteenth. At the beginning the vassal can have had few if any rights against his lord; the benefice was often revocable at the lord's will and was never hereditary. But in practice only a strong king can have been able to prevent a vigorous warrior from succeeding to his father's benefice. This is evident as early as the reign of Charles the Bald. When Charles was about to leave for Rome to assume the imperial crown, he decreed that if the holder of a royal benefice should die during his absence, the vassal's son should hold the benefice until his return to France. It is clear that by the end of the ninth century the benefice had become hereditary. This gave the vassal and his family proprietary rights in the benefice or fief. It also made it necessary to define the mutual obligations of lord and vassal. Obviously this would come about through an endless series of disputes over particular questions, between individual lords and vassals. Perhaps the most important single feature of the feudal system was its method of settling such disputes. When a lord and his vassal disagreed, the question was settled by all the vassals of the lord. The lord presided over the assembly, called his curia or court, but the vassals made the decision. Thus in each fief there developed a body of custom governing the relation between the lord and his vassals. Although historians often speak of
“feudal law,” there was in reality no such thing—each feudal court had its own law. Hence when we describe feudal customs we are making generalizations based on many different sets of laws. The following account of the rights and obligations of lords and vassals would probably not be exactly correct for any particular fief.

Military Service

As the fundamental purpose of the feudal system was effective military organization, the basic obligation of a vassal to his lord was military service. In the beginning there is little doubt that the vassal was expected to serve his lord as a soldier as frequently and for as long periods as the lord desired. But as time went on the vassals began to distinguish between different types of military service and to limit their obligations in regard to some of them. When the lord’s fief was being invaded by an enemy, the vassals were clearly bound to aid him until the danger was over. Offensive action by the lord against a neighbor was a different matter. By the twelfth century at least the vassals of most fiefs had limited their obligation in a war of this sort. Perhaps the most common rule was that the vassal should serve the lord for forty days. In some fiefs the arrangement was that he was obliged to serve forty days at his own cost and another forty days if the lord offered to feed him.

A simple knight holding just enough land to support himself and his family, what feudal lawyers called a knight’s fief or knight’s fee, could only serve his lord with his own right arm. But what of the powerful vassal who had enfeoffed many knights; could he fulfill his obligation to his lord by simply offering his personal service? Here it is almost impossible to make any useful generalization. It depended largely
on the respective power of lord and vassals. The petty vassals of the count of Champagne owed him the service of a number of knights roughly proportionate to the size of their fiefs, but the greater vassals like the count of Grandpré owed only their personal service in the count's army. In Normandy every fief owed a set quota of knights to the duke's host, and William the Conqueror established this system in England. As the Norman dukes were strong lords, their vassals owed them a good proportion of their available knights—581 out of 1,500. But the great lords of France, the direct vassals of the French crown, owed the Capetian king ridiculously small contingents. The count of Champagne who had some 2,039 knightly vassals owed but 10 to the royal army. In general one can say that the vassal was inclined to argue that his personal service fulfilled his obligation no matter how large his fief might be, but that he could rarely succeed in maintaining this position. Usually he was obliged to lead to his lord's army some proportion of his own knightly vassals.

In addition to serving as knights in their army most lords expected their vassals to provide garrisons for their fortresses. During the tenth century the castle became an important element in the feudal military system of France. The earliest castles were artificial mounds of earth surrounded by a ditch or moat. On top of the mound was a palisade of wood. Often a wooden tower stood inside the palisade. The more pretentious fortresses would have one or even two areas enclosed by moat and palisade. In the terminology of the day the mound and its fortifications were called the motte and the adjacent fortified areas baileys. By the eleventh century very powerful lords were building stone towers—massive structures with walls twenty to
thirty feet thick. These were called “towers” and were usually surrounded by moats. Thus there were two types of castle: the motte and bailey and the tower. By the twelfth century some stonework was being added to motte and bailey castles. Usually the first part to be reinforced was the gate—a stone-gate tower could not be easily burned. Later large rectangular stone buildings called keeps replaced the motte as the central stronghold of the castle. Still later, stone walls replaced the wooden palisades, and by the thirteenth century these stone walls were usually reinforced by towers.

Most lords of any importance had household knights, men they armed, fed, and clothed, who safeguarded the castle in which they resided in time of peace. But in case of war a more adequate garrison was required. Then many lords had several castles and had to provide garrisons for all of them. The vassals performed this duty of castle-guard under a wide variety of arrangements. A petty lord with only one castle might require certain of his knights to garrison it in time of war. A lord with several castles might divide his knights into groups with each group being responsible for one of his castles. Thus the lands of the count of Champagne were divided into castellanies. The knights holding fiefs in a castellany were obliged to perform castle-guard duty in its castle. In England the king provided for the garrisoning of his castles by demanding knights for guard duty from his vassals. Nine fiefs provided a permanent garrison of twenty-two knights for the great royal fortress of Dover. In general one can say that most knights owed guard duty at a castle. Sometimes it was only in case of war, but often it was an annual period of service. The knights of the great barony of Richmond in England owed three months’ annual service in Richmond castle.