

Developing the Feudal Order

The long coast of northwestern France became home to a tribe of Vikings in 911 after the Frankish (or French) king Charles the Simple struck a bargain with the marauding, seafaring Vikings. Deciding it would be easier and less destructive to grant land from his kingdom to the Vikings rather than face their recurring invasions, which featured pillage, plunder, rape, and burning, Charles surrendered a coastal region of thick forests, rolling hills, and rich pastures to the Normans.

The Normans lived up to their end of the bargain, promising to recognize Charles as their king and agreeing to convert to Christianity. Soon, the Vikings intermarried with local women, and adopted the French language. Once they settled down, they began establishing their loyalty to the Frankish kings. They became warriors in their service. Normandy was a rich land of pastures where horses thrived. The Normans became expert riders. Such horse-bound fighting men developed into an elite group of military servants to their king known as knights. Knights soon became the standard warrior of kings across Europe.

Such men were highly trained professional soldiers. Our popular image of the medieval knight is of a fighter wearing heavy-plate armor that completely covered him from head to toe. However, earlier knights wore long, knee-length shirts made of chain mail called *hauberks*. Such protective garments consisted of small, interlocking iron rings, often hundreds of thousands of them. They were usually hooded and split from the waist down to allow the knight to mount and ride a horse. Other gear rounded out their military wardrobe, including iron helmets, lances, shields, and swords.

The Norman knights living on the French coast were used in important battles on behalf of the Frankish king. In 1053, a Norman army of knights defeated an army of Pope Leo IX in the battle of Civitate. In 1066, Norman cavalry defeated Saxon

infantry in the famous battle of Hastings in 1066. This fight took place on the English mainland. Victory in this battle allowed William the Conqueror, duke of Normandy, to defeat the Saxons and establish himself over a great kingdom on both sides of the English Channel, the body of water which separates England and France.

To ensure their occupation of the English mainland, the Normans built strong fortifications called castles. Such structures provided powerful stone strongholds not only in England but in France, and ultimately throughout all of Europe.

Holding together the developing relationship between knights and their loyalty to kings was a system known as feudalism. It was a series of relationships, between a king or a lesser lord and his knights. Under this system, an exchange took place. A lord distributed land to his knights in exchange for their vow of service, known as a fealty oath. This oath was made during a ceremony of homage. The knight knelt before his lord, placing his hands within his master's and vowed to

him, "Lord, I become your man." The lord then ordered his knight servant, or vassal, to stand, followed by a ceremonial kiss.

The service the knight promised to his lord was military in nature. He would fight for his lord and protect his estate or kingdom. Along with the land granted to a knight, there were farming people who came with it, peasants, who were bound to the land all their lives, agreeing to accept the protection of lord and knights in exchange for their labor. Such peasants, bound by contract to the land, were known as serfs.

Feudalism served as the primary social, political, economic, and military system in Europe between 900 and 1300. During these centuries, approximately 80 to 90 percent of the people served their lord as serfs.

