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**FEUDAL  
SOCIETY**

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THE GROWTH OF TIES OF DEPENDENCE

MARC BLOCH

Translated from the French by  
L.A. MANYON

Marc Bloch's book is considered to be a standard international treatise on feudalism. It is the last product of his scholarly activities. These volumes open up a view of Middle Ages much wider and truer than most other studies dealing ostensibly with the same subject. The second volume appeared in 1940.



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VOLUME

1

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L.A. MANYON

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## FOREWORD

### I

Marc Bloch's book, now the standard international treatise on feudalism, is the last product of his scholarly activities. Yet it must not be read as an epitome of his life's work. The second volume appeared in 1940 and was circulated to his friends in this country as from the 'author on active service': *de la part de l'auteur aux armées*. But although his wartime readers could have had no premonition of his tragic end three years later, and had every reason for expecting him to go back to the study of the Middle Ages, the book must have struck them then, as it must strike the informed reader now, as part of a serial, *un traité fleuve*, on the Middle Ages of which the other instalments had appeared a few years earlier. The best known and the most important of these earlier instalments, *Les Caractères originaux de l'histoire rurale française*, like the several studies which preceded and accompanied it,<sup>1</sup> presented an image of the medieval world, which from Bloch's point of view was incomplete. In spite of the generous sweep of their ideas, those earlier books did not illuminate the entire range of medieval culture and society. Their interest was sharply (in writing about Bloch we cannot use the word narrowly) focused on the material basis of medieval existence: soil,

topography, technique of cultivation, forms of settlement; or else on those social relations through which the material basis plainly showed.

That this was not Bloch's full view of the Middle Ages must be obvious not only from his writings, but also from innumerable hints and references all over his *Caractères originaux* itself. True enough, his predilections and his preoccupations as a historian were with 'rational' aspects of history, with tangible facts capable of being understood, i.e. ordered and analysed in the way in which most modern scientists order and analyse their data. Students of ideas who happen to have preserved a vocabulary uncorrupted by recent usage will therefore recognise Bloch's approach as 'positivist' in the proper sense of the word. Bloch himself might have fought shy of this appellation. In his posthumously published notes on the historian's craft he dissents from positivists of the wrong kind, the *positivistes de stricte observance* or the *positivisme un peu rudimentaire* or *positivisme mal compris*.<sup>2</sup> But this very anxiety to dissociate himself from the misconceptions of positivism displays an affinity with positivism properly conceived. To him history is a science in the true epistemological sense of the term: a *connaissance* which offers us *un classement rationnel et une progressive intelligibilité*. And he accordingly defends history's claim to the name of science (*au nom scientifique*) even though it be incapable of Euclidean demonstration of immutable laws.<sup>3</sup>

Yet this attitude, even though positivist and rational in the proper sense of the terms, did not restrict him to economic phenomena, to the mere business of earning and spending, or to those social problems which Marxists would classify as 'social relations of production'. Everything in historical inquiry capable of being tested by verifiable proof and of yielding useful sense was grist to his mills. And those powerful millstones of his ground fine sense out of the greatest possible variety of historical facts—men's ideas, beliefs, fears and political incentives as well as their material needs and economic devices.

Hence his plan to pass from the *Caractères originaux* and similar studies to a treatise on feudalism considered as a system of human relations. In so far as the earlier studies dealt almost entirely with agriculture and village society, they bypassed many other topics of medieval history and gave no more than part of Bloch's full design. In order to complete his picture and to do so in a manner appropriate to his outlook he had to follow his earlier studies with a further treatise analysing the medieval world from the point of view of its social order, or rather of those elements in the social order which were not involved in productive processes or directly determined by them. And that meant writing the story of the social ties embodied in vassalage, fealty, personal dependence, private authority over men, as well as of the older ties of family and tribal system which the feudal system absorbed or replaced.

## II

It is on these relations that the present volume concentrates and thereby complements Bloch's other studies. Yet even taken by itself it opens up a view of the Middle Ages much wider and perhaps truer than most other studies dealing ostensibly with the same subject. A hasty reader, trained in the British or German tradition of medieval studies, may consider the book as yet another recapitulation of the ideas which form the main corpus of academic thought about the Middle Ages. In this corpus 'feudalism' is merely a name for the legal or customary principles embodied in the *feudum* as the universal principle of military organization. Thus told the history of feudalism is mainly the story of baronial and knightly contracts of service. In tracing their origin constitutional historians are often content to demonstrate how military necessities of the earlier centuries of the Middle Ages called into existence the knights' fees with their baronial and honorial superstructures. In tracing the subsequent mutations of English or German feudalism, they try to show how the military system of fees broke up was replaced, revived or bastardised, and how new contractual

principles—indenture or plain hire—replaced the older contract of military fief.

This identification of feudalism with military service is bound to narrow the history of feudalism down to a single issue and to remove out of its history a vast range of subjects which other historians habitually weave into it and to which the word and concept of feudalism owes its prominent place in historiography. How far this difference of approach can sometimes go has recently been demonstrated at an Anglo-Soviet occasion, when the two principal speakers, the Russian and the English, gave carefully composed disquisitions on feudalism which hardly touched at a single point. The English speaker dwelt learnedly and gracefully on military fiefs, while the Russian speaker discoursed on class domination and exploitation of peasants by landlords. Needless to say the Russian disquisition was packed tight with familiar Marxist furniture : the state as a vehicle of class rule, 'commodity exchange' as a solvent of feudalism, feudal economy as an antecedent of early capitalism. Yet for all its dogmaticism and ancient verbiage, the Russian use of the term appeared to bear more directly on the intellectual enterprise of history than the conventional connotation adopted by the English speaker.

Needless to say, the concept of feudalism as it figures in English and perhaps German historiography has its uses. The English and German lawyers who gave it birth and the constitutional historians who developed it have brought to its study a great deal of juristic and scholastic rigour. This rigorous tradition has now deposited a body of ideas which university teachers can usefully employ for pedagogical purposes, mainly as a vehicle of intellectual discipline and an antidote to the journalistic levities of modern historiography. But regarded as an intellectual tool, to be used in the study of society, the conventional Anglo-German approach has been, to say the least, unhelpful. In so far as it concentrates on military service it cannot provide a key to the fundamentals of medieval society or indeed any society; in so far as it concerns itself with contractual principles it conceals from the view the underlying social realities. And even within the narrow range of legal and

contractual problems it cannot allow for the time lag between the evolution of legal forms and the changing needs of society.

Of course, from some points of view the legalistic formulation of feudalism is no worse than its other generalized formulations. It is indeed possible (and some writers have also found it convenient) to argue that no portmanteau formula and certainly no single term can do what we expect the term feudalism to do, i.e. to sum up the essentials of social system or of a historical situation. Such comprehensive words, be they mercantilism, capitalism, or socialism, must over-simplify the reality they purport to epitomize. In some contexts the practice of giving general names to whole epochs can even be dangerous. It may lure its practitioners into the worst pitfalls of the nominalist fallacy, and may encourage them to endow their terms with real existence, to derive features of an epoch from the etymology of the word used to describe it or to construct edifices of historical argument out of mere semantic conceits.

These are all very real dangers. But the same dangers are inherent in all general terms. If pressed consistently this objection to general terms will hold good against such humdrum concepts as war, peace, state, estate, class, industry, agriculture. Indeed, without generalized terms representing entire groups of phenomena not only history but all intelligent discourse would be impossible.

Of this Bloch was well aware. Why he asks 'be afraid of general words? No science can do without abstractions . . . and is the chlorophylic function more "real" than the economic function?'<sup>4</sup> But if generalized concepts are to be used, there is much to be said for employing only the useful ones, i.e. those which help us to distinguish one historical situation from another, and to align similar situations in different countries and even in different periods.<sup>5</sup> And in order that the concept of feudalism could be thus useful it must invoke the really essential features of an historical situation or an epoch and show them in their interdependence.

This the constitutional and legal concepts of feudalism cannot do, but this is what Bloch obviously had in mind. True

enough, his definition of feudalism, where he attempts it (e.g. in Part VIII), might at first sight bear strong resemblance to conventional definitions of text books. But looked at more closely it will be found to embrace most of the significant features of medieval society. 'A subject peasantry; widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of salary; supremacy of a class of specialized warriors; ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man; fragmentation of authority; and, in the midst of all of this, survival of other forms of association, family and State.'<sup>6</sup> This is certainly an approach much wider than the one which equates feudalism with *feudum* and begins and ends its history with that of the knight service. In Bloch's definition the fief is only an element, albeit a very important one, of the whole situation. But to him a society might still be feudal even if the fief occupied a more subordinate position. This latitude might strike the orthodox as incompatible with etymology of the term. But he argues, etymological rectitude is not the final test of an historical concept. 'What', he asks in his *Métier d'historien*, 'if the term is currently used to characterize societies in which the fief is not the most significant trait. There is nothing in this contrary to the practice of all the sciences. Are we shocked by the physicists persisting to apply the term atom, i.e. indivisible, to an object they subject to the most audacious division?'<sup>7</sup>

### III

A connotation of feudalism in which fief is merely a part clearly derives from the assumption 'that the framework of institutions which govern a society can in the last resort be understood only through the knowledge of the whole human environment', and is equally clearly implied in his insistent references to the *ambiance sociale totale*.<sup>8</sup> It is therefore not surprising to find him introducing his story of feudalism by a stimulating and perceptive discussion of medieval mentality. For not only are men's ideas embedded in the *ambiance sociale*, but they are of the very essence of social structure. To quote

him again, 'social classification exists in the last analysis only by virtue of the ideas which men form of it.'<sup>9</sup>

However, what makes this epigram significant is not only its emphasis on ideas but its underlying assumption that the true universe of discourse of an historian of feudalism is social classification. And once social classification becomes the main theme in the history of feudalism, that history must inevitably concern itself with the masses of people below and outside the system of military fiefs.

Bloch may insist that the manor had a history separate from that of the feudal system, but he repeatedly emphasizes that it was 'an essential element in feudal society'. He in fact begins his final definition of feudalism with 'a subject peasantry.' If he does not deal with a subject peasantry in greater detail in the main body of this book, this is merely because he has already done so in the *Caractères originaux*. From this point of view the two studies are complementary and cannot display Bloch's view of feudal society except in combination. And even then the view might be capable of yet another enlargement. For all we know, had Bloch survived the war he might have rounded off his account of the Middle Ages by a major work on the history of medieval ideas: *les caractères originaux d'histoire morale et intellectuelle européenne*

M.M. Postan

## NOTES

1. More especially *Rois et Serfs*, Paris, 1920; 'Liberte' et servitude personnelles au moyen age' *Annaris de historia del derecho espanol*, Madrid, 1933; and 'The Rise of Dependent Cultivation' in *Cambridge Economic History*, I.
2. *Le métier d'historien*, Paris, 1948 (English translation under the title of *The Historian's Craft*), pp. xii, 4.
3. *Ibid.*, pp. xvi, xii-xiii, 72.
4. *The Historian's Craft*, p. 74.
5. 'un lexique . . . don't la généralité se veut supérieure aux résonances d'aucune époque particuliere, *ibid*, pp. 87-8; also p. 72

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6. Below, p. 446.
7. p. 86
8. *Métier d'historien*, p. 8 and *passim*.
9. Below, p. 268, also p. 59.

## INTRODUCTION

### GENERAL SCOPE OF THE INQUIRY

ONLY within the last two centuries or so could the words 'Feudal Society', as the title of a book, have conveyed an idea of what the book was about. Yet the adjective itself is a very old one. In its Latin form, *féodalis*, it dates from the Middle Ages. The French noun *feodalité*, feudalism, though of more recent origin, goes back at least to the seventeenth century. But for a long time both these words were used only in a narrowly legal sense. The *fief* (*feodum*) was, as we shall see, a form of real property, and *féodal* was therefore understood as meaning 'that which concerns the fief' (this was how the French Academy defined it); and *feodalité* might mean either 'the quality peculiar to a fief' or the obligations incident to such tenure. The French lexicographer, Richelet, in 1630, described these terms as 'lawyers' jargon'—not, be it noted, historians' jargon. When did it first occur to anyone to enlarge their meaning so as to designate a state of society? *Gouvernement féodal* and *féodalité* are used in this sense in the *Lettres Historiques sur les Parlemens*, published in 1727, five years after the death of their author, the Comte de Boulainvilliers.<sup>1</sup> This is the earliest example that I could find, after fairly extensive research.

Perhaps one day another inquirer will be more fortunate. Until this happens, however, this strange man Boulainvilliers, at once the friend of Fénelon and the translator of Spinoza, above all an impassioned apologist of the nobility whom he believed to be descended from Germanic chieftains—a sort of prototype Gobineau with less enthusiasm and more learning—may be regarded as having a presumptive claim to be the inventor of a new historical classification. For that is what it really amounts to, and in the study of history there have been few stages so decisive as the moment when ‘Empires’, dynasties, famous periods identified with some great name—in a word, all the old arbitrary divisions born of a monarchical and oratorical tradition—began to give place to another system of classification, based on the observation of social phenomena.

It was however a more celebrated writer who first gave wide currency to this conception and to the terminology that expressed it. Montesquieu had read Boulainvilliers. The vocabulary of the lawyers, moreover, held no terrors for him: was not the literary language of France to emerge from his hands greatly enriched with the gleanings of the Bar? If he seems to have avoided the term *féodalité*, which was doubtless too abstract for his taste, it was unquestionably he who convinced the educated public of his time that the *lois féodales* were the distinguishing marks of a particular period of history. From the French the words, along with the idea, spread to the other languages of Europe, being in some cases merely transcribed, and in others translated, as with the German word for feudalism, *Lehnwesen*. At length the French Revolution, in its revolt against what remained of the institutions but lately christened by Boulainvilliers, completed the popular diffusion of the name which he, with entirely opposite sentiments, had conferred upon them. ‘The National Assembly’, declares the famous decree of the 11<sup>th</sup> August 1789, ‘totally abolishes the feudal régime’. How could one thenceforth deny the reality of a system which it had cost so much to destroy?<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, it must be admitted that the word

feudalism, which was to have so great a future, was very ill-chosen, even though at the time the reasons for adopting it appeared sound enough. To Boulainvilliers and Montesquieu, living in an age of absolute monarchy, the most striking characteristic of the Middle Ages was the parcelling out of sovereignty among a host of petty princes, or even lords of villages. It was this characteristic that they meant to denote by the term feudalism, and when they spoke of fiefs they were referring sometimes to territorial principalities, sometimes to manors. But not all the manors were in fact fiefs, nor were all the fiefs principalities or manors. Above all, it may be doubted whether a highly complex type of social organization can be properly designated either by concentrating on its political aspect only, or—if 'fief' be understood in its narrowest legal sense—by stressing one particular form of real property right among many others. But words, like well-worn coins, in the course of constant circulation lose their clear outline. In the usage of the present day, 'feudalism' and 'feudal society' cover a whole complex of ideas in which the fief properly so called no longer occupies the foreground. Provided that he treats these expressions merely as labels sanctioned by modern usage for something which he has still to define, the historian may use them without compunction. In this he is like the physicist who, in disregard of Greek, persists in calling an 'atom' something which he spends his time in dividing.

It is a question of the deepest interest whether there have been other societies, in other times and in other parts of the world, whose social structures in their fundamental characteristics have sufficiently resembled that of our Western feudalism to justify us in applying the term 'feudal' to them as well. This question will turn up again at the end of this book, but it is not the subject of our present study. The feudalism which we shall attempt to analyse here is that to which the name was first applied. Apart from some problems of origin or of later developments, the inquiry will be confined to that period of our history which extends roughly from the middle of the ninth century of the first decades of the thirteenth; and it will be restricted to western and central Europe. The reasons

for the choice of dates will become clear in the course of the work itself, but the geographical limits seem to call for a brief explanation.

Ancient civilization was centred about the Mediterranean. 'I believe that the earth,' wrote Plato, 'is very large and that we who dwell between the pillars of Hercules and the river Phasis live in a small part of it about the sea, like ants or frogs about a pond.'<sup>3</sup> These same waters remained through many centuries the axis of the Roman world, even after conquest extended that world. A senator from Aquitania could make his career on the shores of the Bosphorus; he could own vast estates in Macedonia. The great fluctuations of prices that shook the Roman economy were felt from the Euphrates to Gaul. Without the grain of Africa, the existence of Imperial Rome is as little conceivable as Catholic theology without the African Augustine. On the other hand, anyone crossing the Rhine found himself at once in a strange and hostile land, the vast territory of the Barbarians.

Now, on the threshold of the period that we call the Middle Ages, two far-ranging movements of peoples had destroyed this equilibrium—there is no need at present to inquire how far it had already been shaken from within—and replaced it by a very different pattern of peoples. The first of these was the Germanic invasions; the second, the Moslem conquests. The Germans penetrated the greater part of the countries formerly included in the western section of the Roman Empire, and the territories occupied by them became united, sometimes through subjection to the same political régime, but always and in any case by the common mental habits and social customs of the invaders. Little by little, the small Celtic groups in the British Isles were linked up with this Romano-Germanic society and more or less assimilated to it. North Africa, on the other hand, was to follow an entirely different course. The counter-offensive of the Berber tribes had prepared the breach with Rome: Islam completed it. Elsewhere, on the shores of the Levant, the victories of the Arabs had isolated the former East Roman Empire in the Balkans and Anatolia and transformed it into the Greek Empire. Difficulties of

communication, a distinctive type of social and political structure, and a religious mentality and ecclesiastical organization very different from those of Latin Christianity combined to cut off this Empire more and more from the Christian communities of the West. The West, it is true, exercised a wide influence among the Slav peoples in the eastern parts of Europe, among some of whom it introduced not only the Catholic form of Christianity, but also Western modes of thought and even certain Western institutions; but, none the less, the societies which were linguistically Slavonic evolved, for the most part, on quite independent lines.

Hemmed in by these three blocs, Mohammedan, Byzantine, and Slav, and ceaselessly engaged in pushing forward its ever-changing frontiers, the Romano-Germanic world was itself by no means homogeneous. Differences arising from their different backgrounds had deeply marked the various societies of which it was composed, and had lasting effects. Even where the points of departure were almost identical, the lines of development might subsequently diverge. Yet, however pronounced these differences may have been, how can we fail to recognize, over and above them, the predominant quality of a common civilization—that of the West? If in the following pages where the phrase 'Western and Central Europe' might have been expected, we say simply 'Europe', this is not merely to avoid the repetition of cumbersome adjectives. What does it matter, after all, how the name and its limits were defined in the old artificial geography, with its 'five parts of the world'? All that counts is its human significance. European civilization arose and flowered, until in the end it covered the face of the earth, among those who dwelt between the Tyrrhenian, the Adriatic, the Elbe, and the Atlantic Ocean. It had no other homeland. The eighth-century Spanish chronicler who, after their victory over Islam, styled 'Europeans' the Franks of Charles Martel, had already dimly perceived this. So, some two hundred years later, had the Saxon monk, Widukind, who, when Otto the Great had driven back the Hungarians, enthusiastically hailed him as the liberator of 'Europe'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense of the word—and it is the

richest in historical content—Europe was a creation of the early Middle Ages. It was already in being at the beginning of the feudal age proper.

The term 'feudalism', applied to a phase of European history within the limits thus determined, has sometimes been interpreted in ways so different as to be almost contradictory, yet the mere existence of the word attests the special quality which men have instinctively recognized in the period which it denotes. Hence a book about feudal society can be looked on as an attempt to answer a question posed by its very title: what are the distinctive features of this portion of the past which have given it a claim to be treated in isolation? In other words, what we are attempting here is to analyse and explain a social structure and its unifying principles. A similar method—if in the light of experience it should prove fruitful—might be employed in other fields of study, under a different set of limiting conditions. I hope that what is undeniably new in the present enterprise will make amends for the defects of execution.

The very magnitude of the inquiry, so conceived, has made it necessary to divide the material. The first book will describe the social background generally and the growth of those bonds of interdependence between men which, more than anything else, gave the feudal structure its special character. The second book will be concerned with the development of social classes and the organization of governments. It is always difficult to divide up a living organism. Yet the final differentiation of the old social classes, the emergence of a new class, the *bourgeoisie*, and the resuscitation of the authority of the State after long eclipse, coincided with the time when the most specifically feudal characteristics of Western civilization began to disappear; and this explains why, though no strictly chronological division has seemed possible, the first book is concerned above all with the birth of feudal society, the second with the way it developed, extended and declined.

But the historian is in no sense a free man. Of the past he knows only so much as the past is willing to yield up to

him. What is more, when the subject he is attempting to cover is too vast to allow him to examine personally all the sources, he is conscious of being constantly frustrated in his inquiry by the limitations of research. No survey will be made here of those paper wars in which scholars have sometimes engaged. History, not historians, is my concern. But whatever may be the reasons for them I resolved never to conceal the gaps or uncertainties in our knowledge. In this I felt I should run no risk of discouraging the reader. On the contrary, to impose an artificial rigidity on a branch of knowledge which is essentially one of movement—that would be the way to engender boredom and indifference. One of the men who have gone furthest in the understanding of medieval societies, the great English jurist Maitland, said that a historical work should make its readers hungry—hungry to learn, that is, and above all to inquire. If this book does that, I shall be well content.<sup>5</sup>

## NOTES

1. *Histoire de l'ancien gouvernement de la France avec XIV Lettres Historiques sur les Parlemens ou Etats Généraux*. The Hague, 1727. The fourth letter is entitled *Détail du gouvernement féodal et de l'établissement des Fiefs* (1, p. 286) and contains (p. 300) this sentence: 'Je me suis étendu dans l'extrait de cette ordonnance, la croyant propre à donner une idée exacte de l'ancienne Féodalité'.
2. Among the French people whose buttonholes are today adorned with a red ribbon or rosette, how many know that one of the duties imposed on their order by its first constitution of the 19<sup>th</sup> May 1802 was 'to combat ...any enterprise tending to re-establish the feudal régime?'
3. *Phaedo*, 109b.
4. *M.G.H. Auctores Antiquissimi*, XI, p. 362; Widukind, I. 19.
5. Every historical work, if it happens to be addressed to a relatively large public, confronts its author with a practical problem of the most difficult kind—the problem of references. Justice perhaps required that the names of all the learned works but for which this book would not exist be set out in full array at the foot of each page. At the risk of being thought ungrateful, I decided to

leave such references, for the most part, to the bibliography at the end of the book. I have, however, made it a rule never to cite an original source without affording every student with a little experience the means of finding the passage referred to and verifying my interpretation of it. If the reference is not given, the reason is that the information given in my text, supplemented by well-arranged tables in the publication in which the document appears, makes it easy to find. Where these are lacking, a note serves as a pointer. In a court of justice, after all, the status of the witnesses is much more important than that of counsel.

VOLUME I

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THE GROWTH OF TIES OF  
DEPENDENCE

*Part I*

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THE ENVIRONMENT: THE LAST INVASIONS



## MOSLEMS AND HUNGARIANS

### 1. EUROPE INVADED AND BESIEGED

'You see before you the wrath of the Lord breaking forth. ... There is naught but towns emptied of their folk, monasteries razed to the ground or given to the flames, fields desolated. ... Everywhere the strong oppress-set the weak and men are like fish of the sea that blindly devour each other.' Thus, in 909, the bishops of the province of Rheims assembled at Trosly. The literature of the ninth and tenth centuries, the charters, and the deliberations of councils are full of such lamentations. When all allowance has been made both for exaggeration and for the pessimism natural to religious orators, we are forced to see in this incessantly recurring theme, supported as it is by so much contemporary evidence, the proof of a state of affairs regarded as intolerable even in those days. Certainly it was a period when those who were capable of observing and making comparisons, the clergy in particular, felt themselves to be living in a hateful atmosphere of disorder and violence. Feudalism was born in the midst of an infinitely troubled epoch, and in some measure it was the child of those troubles themselves. But some of the causes which helped to create or maintain this disorderly

## THE NORTHMEN

### 1. GENERAL-CHARACTER OF THE SCANDINAVIAN INVASIONS

From the time of Charlemagne, all the populations of Germanic speech living to the south of Jutland, being thenceforward Christians and incorporated in the Frankish kingdoms, came under the influence of Western civilisation. But farther to the north lived other Germans who had preserved their independence and their own traditions. Their speech, differing among themselves, but differing much more from the idioms of Germany properly so-called, belonged to another of the branches that sprang properly so-called, belonged to another of the branches that sprang originally from the common linguistic stock; we call this today the Scandinavian branch. The contrast between their culture and that of their more southerly neighbours had been clearly marked after the great migrations which, in the second and third centuries of our era, had almost depopulated the German lands along the Baltic and about the mouth of the Elbe and thus removed many intermediate and transitional elements.

These natives of the far north formed neither a mere sprinkling of tribes nor yet a single nation. The following groups were distinguishable: the Danes, in Scania, on the

## SOME CONSEQUENCES AND SOME LESSONS OF THE INVASIONS

### 1. DISORDER

From the turmoil of the last invasions, the West emerged covered with countless scars. The towns themselves had not been spared—at least not by the Scandinavians—and if many of them, after pillage or evacuation, rose again from their ruins, this break in the regular course of their life left them for long years enfeebled. Others were even less fortunate: the two principal ports of the Carolingian empire on the northern seas, Duurstede on the Rhine delta, Quentovic at the mouth of the Canche, sank once and for all to the status, respectively, of a modest hamlet and a fishing village. Along the river routes the trading centers had lost all security: in 861, the merchants of Paris, escaping in their boats, were overtaken by the ships of the Northmen and carried off into captivity.

Above all, the cultivated land suffered disastrously, often being reduced to desert. In the Toulon region, after the expulsion of the bandits of Le Freinet, the land had to be cleared new, because the former boundaries of the properties had ceased to be recognizable, so that each man—in the

*Part II*

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THE ENVIRONMENT: CONDITIONS OF LIFE  
AND MENTAL CLIMATE

## MATERIAL CONDITIONS AND ECONOMIC CHARACTERISTICS

### 1. THE TWO AGES OF FEUDALISM

The framework of institutions which governs a society can in the last resort be understood only through a knowledge of the whole human environment. For though the artificial conception of man's activities which prompts us to carve up the creature of flesh and blood into the phantoms *homo oeconomicus*, *philosophicus*, *juridicus* is doubtless necessary, it is tolerable only if we refuse to be deceived by it. That is why, despite the existence of other works on the various aspects of medieval civilisation, the descriptions thus attempted from points of view different from ours did not seem to us to obviate the necessity of recalling at this stage the fundamental characteristics of the historical climate in which European feudalism flourished. Need I add that in placing this account near the beginning of the book there was no thought of claiming any sort of illusory primacy for facts of this kind? When it is a question of comparing two particular phenomena belonging to separate series—a certain distribution of population, for example, with certain forms of legal groups—the delicate problem of cause and effect undoubtedly arises.

## MODES OF FEELING AND THOUGHT

### 1. MAN'S ATTITUDE TO NATURE AND TIME

The men of the two feudal ages were close to nature—much closer than we are; and nature as they knew it was much less tamed and softened than we see it today. The rural landscape, of which the waste formed so large a part, bore fewer traces of human influence. The wild animals that now only haunt our nursery tales—bears and, above all, wolves—prowled in every wilderness, and even amongst the cultivated fields. So much was this the case that the sport of hunting was indispensable for ordinary security, and almost equally so as a method of supplementing the food supply. People continued to pick wild fruit and to gather honey as in the first ages of mankind. In the construction of implements and tools, wood played a predominant part. The nights, owing to the wretched lighting, were darker; the cold, even in the living quarters of the castles, was more intense. In short, behind all social life there was a background of the primitive, of submission to uncontrollable forces, of unrelieved physical contrasts. There is no means of measuring the influence which such an environment was capable of exerting on the minds of men, but it could hardly have failed to contribute to their uncouthness.

## THE FOLK MEMORY

### 1. HISTORIOGRAPHY

In feudal society many influences combined to encourage an interest in the past. Religion had books of history among its sacred writings; its feasts commemorate past events; in its most popular forms it drew sustenance from the stories that were told about the saints of long ago; finally, in affirming that mankind was soon to perish, it rejected the optimism which has caused other ages to be interested only in the present or the future. Canon law was founded on the ancient texts; secular law on precedents. The vacant hours of cloister or castle favoured the telling of long tales. History was not indeed taught *ex professo* in the schools, except through the medium of readings directed, in theory, to other ends: religious writings, which were read for the sake of theological or moral instruction, and works of classical antiquity, meant to serve as models of good style. In the common intellectual stock, history none the less occupied an almost predominant place.

What sources of information were accessible to people of education eager to learn about the past? Though known only through fragments of their writings, the historians of

## THE INTELLECTUAL RENAISSANCE IN THE SECOND FEUDAL AGE

### 1. SOME CHARACTERISTICS OF THE NEW CULTURE

The appearance of the great epic poems in eleventh-century France may be regarded as one of the signs that heralded the immense cultural development of the succeeding age. 'The twelfth-century renaissance' is the phrase frequently used to describe this movement; and with the necessary qualification that the word 'renaissance', literally interpreted, is apt to suggest a mere revival, rather than a new development, the formula is valid—provided that it is not understood in too exact a chronological sense. For though the movement only reached its full development in the course of the twelfth century, its earliest manifestations, like those of the demographic and economic changes that accompanied it, date from the two or three decades immediately preceding the year 1100. This was the really decisive period. To this time belong, to mention only a few examples, the philosophic work of Anselm of Canterbury; the legal work of the first Italian teachers of Roman law and that of their rivals, the canonists; and the beginning of the serious study of mathematics in the schools of Charters. No more in the

## THE FOUNDATIONS OF LAW

### 1. THE ASCENDANCY OF CUSTOM

If a judge, in the pre-feudal Europe of the early ninth century, had to say what the law was, how did he proceed? His first task was to examine the texts. These consisted of the following: Roman compilations, if the case had to be decided according to the laws of Rome; customs of the Germanic peoples, almost all of which had been gradually committed to writing; and finally those legislative edicts which the sovereigns of the barbarian kingdoms had issued in great number. In cases where these authorities returned a clear answer, there was nothing to do but obey. But the task was not always so simple. Let us leave aside those cases, in practice no doubt quite frequent, in which, since the manuscript was lacking, or—as with the massive Roman collections—inconvenient to consult the rule in question, although its source might have been the law-book, was in fact known only by usage. The most serious problem was that no book was capable of deciding everything. Whole aspects of social life—relations inside the manor, ties between man and man, in which feudalism was already foreshadowed—were only very imperfectly covered by the texts, and often not at all. Thus, by the side of the written

*Part III*

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**THE TIES BETWEEN MAN AND MAN : KINSHIP**

## THE SOLIDARITY OF THE KINDRED GROUP

### 1. THE 'FRIENDS BY BLOOD'

The ties based on blood relationship existed long before, and were by their very nature foreign to, the human relations characteristic of feudalism; but they continued to exert such an important influence within the new structure that we cannot exclude them from our picture. Unfortunately this is not an easy subject for study. It was not without reason that in old France the family community of the country districts was commonly described as the 'silent' (*taisible*) community. Intercourse between close relatives naturally dispenses with writing. Though it was resorted to in exceptional cases, these specimens of family correspondence, which come almost exclusively from the upper classes, have for the most part perished—at least, those earlier than the thirteenth century. For the ecclesiastical archives are practically the only ones preserved up to that date. But that is not the only difficulty. A comprehensive picture of feudal institutions can be legitimately attempted because, originating at the very time when a real Europe was taking shape, they spread without fundamental differences to the whole European world. But

## CHARACTER AND VICISSITUDES OF THE TIE OF KINSHIP

### 1. THE REALITIES OF FAMILY LIFE

In spite of the power of the family to give support to its members or impose restraints upon them, it would be a grave error to picture its internal life in uniformly idyllic colours. The fact that the family groups engaged readily in blood-feuds did not always prevent the most atrocious intestine quarrels. Though Beaumanoir finds wars between kinsmen distressing, he obviously does not regard them as exceptional or even, except when waged between full brothers, as actually unlawful. To understand the prevailing attitude it is enough to consult the history of the princely houses. If, for example, we were to follow from generation to generation the destiny of the Angevins, the true Atrides of the Middle Ages, we should read of the more than civil' war which for seven years embroiled the count Fulk Nerra with his son Geoffrey Martel; of how Fulk le Réchin, after having dispossessed his brother, threw him into prison—to release him only as a madman, at the end of eighteen years; of the furious hatred of the sons of Henry II for their father; and finally of the assassination of Arthur by his uncle, King John.

*Part IV*

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**THE TIES BETWEEN MAN AND MAN:  
VASSALAGE AND THE FIEF**

## VASSAL HOMAGE

## 1. THE MAN OF ANOTHER MAN

To be the 'man' of another man in: the vocabulary of feudalism, no combination of words was more widely used or more comprehensive in meaning. In both the Romance and the Germanic tongues it was used to express personal dependence *per se* and applied to persons of all social classes regardless of the precise legal nature of the bond. The count was the 'man' of the king, as the serf was the 'man' of his manorial lord. Sometimes even in the same text, within the space of a few lines, radically different social stations were thus evoked. An instance of this, dating from the end of the eleventh century, is a petition of Norman nuns, complaining that their 'men'—that is to say their peasants—were forced by a great baron to work at the castles of his 'men', meaning the knights who were his vassals.<sup>1</sup> The ambiguity disturbed no one, because, in spite of the gulf between the orders of society, the emphasis was on the fundamental element in common: the subordination of one individual to another.

If, however, the principle of this human nexus permeated the whole life of society, the forms which it assumed were none the less very diverse—with sometimes almost

## THE FIEF

## 1. 'BENEFIT' AND FIEF: STIPENDIARY TENEMENT

In the Frankish period, the majority of those who commended themselves sought from their new master something more than protection. Since this powerful man was at the same time a wealthy man, they also expected him to contribute to their support. From St. Augustine, who in the closing decades of the Western Empire describes the poor in search of a patron who would provide them with 'the wherewithal to eat', to the Merovingian formula which we have more than once cited, we hear the same importunate cry—that of the empty stomach. The lord, for his part, was not influenced solely by the ambition to exercise authority over men; through their agency he often sought to lay hold of property. From the outset, in short, protective relationships had their economic aspect—vassalage as well as the others. The liberality of the chief towards his war-companions seemed so essential a part of the bond between them that frequently, in the Carolingian age, the bestowal of a few gifts—a horse, arms, jewels—was an almost invariable complement to the gesture of personal submission. One of the capitularies forbids the breaking of the tie by the vassal if he has already received from his lord

## GENERAL SURVEY OF EUROPE

## 1. FRENCH DIVERSITY: THE SOUTH-WEST AND NORMANDY

It has been France's lot, since the Middle Ages, to bind together by evercloser ties of national unity—like the Rhône receiving the Durance, as Mistral finely says—a cluster of societies originally separated by strong contrasts. Everyone knows or is instinctively aware of this; yet no study has been more neglected than that of this social geography. It is therefore only possible here to offer a little guidance to students.

Let us take first the Aquitanian south—the Toulouse region, Gascony, Guienne. In these regions whose social structure was in every respect very distinctive and which had been influenced only slightly by Frankish institutions, the spread of protective relationships seems to have encountered many obstacles. The allods—small peasant holdings as well as manorial lordships—remained very numerous to the end. Though the concept of the fief was introduced in spite of obstacles, its outlines soon became blurred. As early as the twelfth century, 'fief' was the term applied, in the neighbourhood of Bordeaux or Toulouse, to all sorts of tenements, including those charged with humble rents in

## THE FIEF BECOMES THE PATRIMONY OF THE VASSAL

### 1. THE PROBLEM OF INHERITANCE: 'HONOURS' AND ORDINARY FIEFS

The establishment of the heritability of fiefs was numbered by Montesquieu among the constituents of 'feudal government' as opposed to the 'political government' of Carolingian times. This classification is correct, though it should be borne in mind that, in the literal sense, the term 'heritability' is inexact. Possession of the fief was never transmitted automatically by the death of the previous holder. But, except in certain rigorously prescribed circumstances, the lord had no power to refuse investiture to the natural heir, provided the latter did homage beforehand. The triumph of heritability in this sense was the triumph of social forces over an obsolescent right. In order to understand the reasons for this it is essential to form an idea of the attitude of the parties concerned. We shall confine our enquiry to the simplest case: that in which the vassal left only one son.

Even in the absence of any grant of an estate, the bond of fealty tended to unite not so much two individuals as two families, one of them pledged to exercise authority, the other

## THE MAN OF SEVERAL MASTERS

## 1. THE PLURALITY OF HOMAGE

'A samurai does not have two masters.' This old Japanese maxim, which as late as 1912 was invoked by Marshal Nogi to justify his refusal to survive his emperor, expresses the ineluctable law of any system of personal allegiance, strictly conceived. This was, beyond doubt, the rule of Frankish vassalage at the outset. Although not expressly formulated in the Carolingian capitularies, probably because it seemed self-evident, it is taken for granted in all their provisions. The commended man could change his lord, if the person to whom he had first sworn fealty agreed to release him from his oath. To pledge himself to a second master while remaining the man of the first was strictly forbidden. Regularly, in the partitions of the Empire, the necessary measures were taken to prevent any overlapping of vassal engagements, and the memory of this original strictness was preserved for a long time. About 1160, a monk of Reichenau, having set down in writing the rule regarding military service as required by the emperors of his time for their Roman expeditions, conceived the idea of falsely placing this text under the venerable name of Charlemagne. 'If by chance,' he says, in terms which no

## VASSAL AND LORD

## 1. AID AND PROTECTION

'To serve' or (as it was sometimes put) 'to aid', and 'to protect'—it was in these very simple terms that the oldest texts summed up the mutual obligations of the armed retainer and his lord. Never was the bond felt to be stronger than in the period when its effects were thus stated in the vaguest and, consequently, the most comprehensive fashion. When we define something, do we not always impose limitations on it? It was inevitable, nevertheless, that the need to define the legal consequences of the contract of homage should be felt with increasing urgency, especially in so far as they affected the obligations of the subordinate. Once vassalage had emerged from the humble sphere of domestic loyalty, what vassal thenceforth would have regarded it as compatible with his dignity if it had been frankly stated, as in early times, that he was compelled 'to serve the lord in all manner of tasks which may be required of him'?<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, could the lord continue to expect to have always at his beck and call persons who thenceforward—since they were for the most part settled on fiefs—lived at a distance from their master? In the gradual work of definition professional jurists

## THE PARADOX OF VASSALAGE

### 1. THE CONTRADICTIONS OF THE EVIDENCE

Beyond the numerous particular problems raised by the history of European vassalage there is one great human problem which dominates them all. What was it in the actions and the hearts of men that constituted the real strength of vassalage as a social cement? The first impression conveyed by the documents is of a strange contradiction, which must be squarely faced.

No protracted study of the texts is necessary in order to cull from them an eloquent anthology in praise of vassalage. First of all, it is extolled as the most cherished of bonds. A common synonym for 'vassal' was 'friend' (*ami*), and commoner still was the old word *dru* (probably of Celtic origin) which had almost the same meaning, but with a more definite suggestion of choice; for if it was sometimes applied to amorous relationships, it seems never (unlike *ami*) to have been extended to those of the family. Moreover, it was a term common to the Gallo-Roman and the German languages. 'In the last hour', said the bishops of Gaul to Lewis the German in 858, 'there will be neither wife nor son to aid thee; nor companionship of *drus* and vassals to bring thee succour.'

*Part V*

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**TIES OF DEPENDENCE AMONG THE LOWER  
ORDERS OF SOCIETY**

## THE MANOR

## 1. THE LORD'S ESTATE

The relatively high social circles of which military homage was a characteristic feature were not the only ones where 'men' of other men were to be found. But at the lower level relationships of dependence found their natural setting in an arrangement which was much older than vassalage and which was for a long time to survive it. This was the manor (*seigneurie*). Neither the origins of the manorial régime nor its role in the economy fall within the scope of the present work : we are here concerned solely with its place in feudal society.

Whereas the authority deriving from vassal homage became a source of profit only belatedly and by an undoubted deviation from its original form, in the manor the economic aspect was of primary importance. There, from the beginning, the object—if not the exclusive, at least the principal object—of the power enjoyed by the chief was to provide him with revenues by securing for him a portion of the produce of the soil. A manor was therefore first and foremost an estate (*terre*)—there was hardly any other word for it in spoken French—but an estate inhabited by the lord's subjects. As a

## SERVITUDE AND FREEDOM

1. THE STARTING POINT: PERSONAL STATUS IN THE  
FRANKISH PERIOD

Imagine the problem confronting a man in the early ninth century, trying to determine the differences in legal status among a group of assorted human beings in, say, the Frankish state. He might be a high official of the Palace on a mission in the provinces, a bishop counting his flock, a lord taking a census of his subjects. There is nothing fanciful in the situation; we know of more than one actual attempt of this kind, and the impression conveyed is that there was much hesitation and disagreement. In the same region, at more or less the same date, we almost never find two manorial surveys (*censiers*) employing the same criteria. Evidently, to contemporaries the structure of the society in which they lived did not possess clear-cut contours. The fact was that very different systems of classification cut across each other. Some, borrowing their terminology indifferently from Roman or from Germanic traditions—traditions that were themselves in conflict—were now very imperfectly adapted to the present; others tried their best to express the reality but did it clumsily.

One fundamental and very simple contrast prevailed; on

## TOWARDS NEW FORMS OF MANORIALISM

### 1. THE STABILISATION OF OBLIGATIONS

The profound changes which from the twelfth century onwards began to transform the relations of subject and lord were to extend over several centuries. It will suffice to indicate here how the institution of the manor emerged from feudalism.

After the Carolingian surveys had fallen into disuse, as being no longer practicable, and increasingly difficult to interpret, there was a danger that the internal life of the manors, even of the largest and least ill-administered, would henceforth be regulated only by purely oral rules. There was indeed nothing to prevent the drawing up of statements of property and of rights better adapted to the conditions of the time. This is, in fact, what was done by certain churches in regions like Lorraine where the Carolingian tradition had remained particularly vigorous; the practice of compiling these inventories was never lost. At an early date, nevertheless, attention was directed to another type of document which, in concentrating on questions of human relations rather than on the description of the land, seemed to correspond more exactly to the needs of a time when the manor had become

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