

## The Feudal System

By the 900s, Vikings and other invaders made it hard for governments to protect their citizens. People turned to local noblemen to protect them in return for service. This began a new political and social system called feudalism. Feudalism was the way of life for centuries in Western Europe.

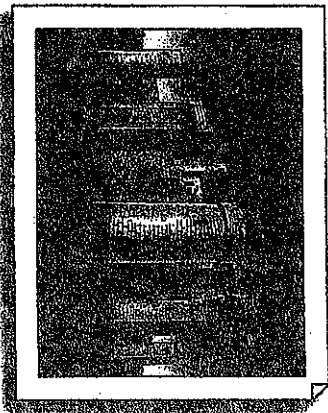
In the loosely organized system of feudalism, powerful lords divided their landholdings among lesser lords. In exchange, the lesser lords, or vassals, promised service and loyalty to the greater lord. The relationship between lord and vassal was set up by a pledge called a feudal contract. A lord gave his vassal a piece of land called a fief and promised to protect the vassal. The vassal gave the lord money payments, advice, and 40 days of military service per year.

The highest-ranking lord was a monarch, or king. Below the king were powerful lords. Each lord had vassals, and each vassal had vassals of his own. The people at the top of society had the most land, and the vassals below them had less. A man could be a vassal to a powerful lord and a lord to someone lower at the same time. Everyone had a place in feudal society.

Lords constantly battled each other for power. Warfare was dominated by knights. Men trained from an early age to become knights, or armored horsemen. Training was difficult. Knights-in-training learned to ride, fight, and keep their armor and weapons in good condition. To stay in shape for real battles, knights participated in tournaments. A lord would invite knights from surrounding areas to enter contests to show off their fighting skills.

Below lords and knights were peasants. Peasants worked on the lord's land, or manor. A manor often included a village and the surrounding area. Most peasants on a manor were serfs. Serfs were not slaves who could be bought and sold, but they were not free, either. Serfs could not leave the manor without the lord's permission. Peasants farmed, repaired roads and bridges, and did other work for the lord. In return, peasants had the right to farm several acres for themselves. They also got protection from Viking raids and other warfare.

Although the peasants had the hardest lives, feudal times were not pleasant for anyone. People lived in a state of constant warfare. If the lords were not fighting foreign invaders, they were fighting each other for power.



## Charlemagne

As the Western Roman Empire weakened, Germanic tribes moved in, took over areas, and started new kingdoms. One of these Germanic states was the kingdom of the Franks. The Frankish kingdom stretched from the Pyrenees Mountains through present-day France and Germany. In 768, Charlemagne took the Frankish throne.

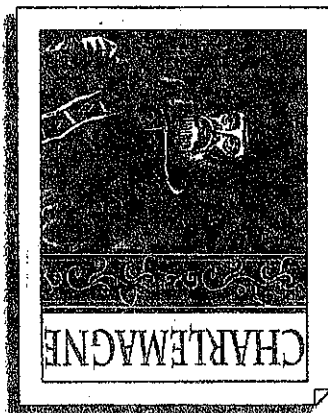
Also known as Charles the Great, Charlemagne was a powerful ruler. He led the Frankish kingdom from 768 to 814. During this time, Charlemagne expanded the territory of the Franks. He built an empire known as the Carolingian Empire. Covering much of western and central Europe, it was the largest empire of the time.

A fierce warrior and a strong statesman, Charlemagne knew how to delegate responsibility. This means he did not try to do everything himself but hired others to help him rule. He depended on counts, or German noblemen, to act as his chief representatives in the empire. Each count was in charge of a district, or local area of land. Charlemagne started the *missi dominici*, or "messengers of the lord king." Under this system, two messengers went out to local districts to check on the counts. These men would report to the king and let him know if the counts were carrying out his orders. This system limited the power of the nobles and strengthened Charlemagne's own power. Soon, he was the most powerful king in Western Europe.

Even though the Western Roman Empire had collapsed over 300 years earlier, Charlemagne became emperor of the Romans in 800. He was crowned emperor by Pope Leo III. The crowning of Charlemagne as leader of the Romans was symbolic. A German was crowned by the Pope to lead the Roman Empire. The coronation symbolized the coming together of Roman, Christian, and German ideas. A new Western civilization had begun.

Charlemagne thought it was important to promote learning in his kingdom. He wanted to make sure the government had literate officials and the church had educated clergy. His effort to promote learning is called the Carolingian Renaissance, or rebirth. People became interested again in Latin culture and the classic works of the Greeks and Romans.

The Carolingian Empire began to fall apart soon after Charlemagne died. Charlemagne is remembered as a great leader who expanded the Frankish kingdom and brought together Roman, Christian, and German ideas. Charles the Great set an example that later kings would follow.



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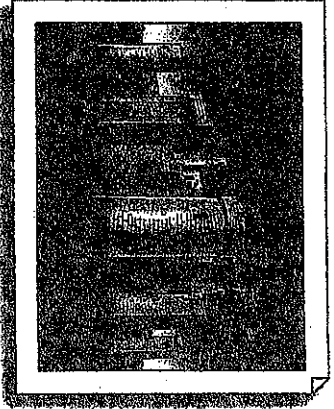
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