



The Feudal System

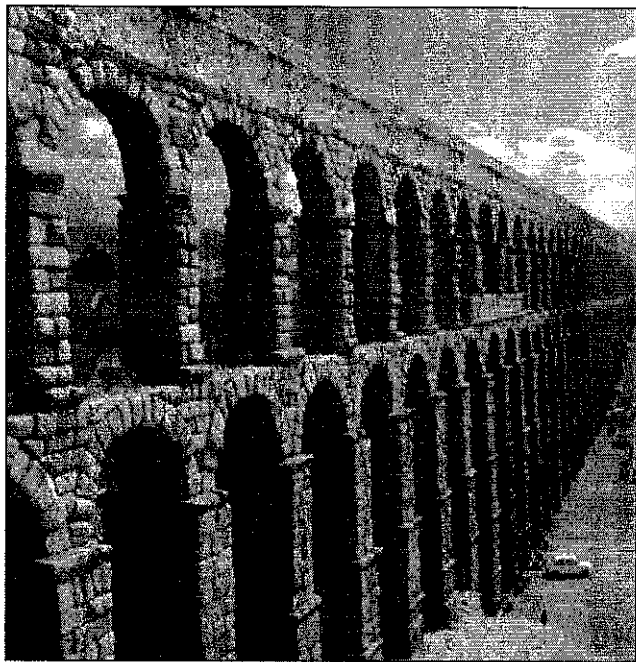
The year is 1015. You live with your family on a manor, or large estate, in rural France. Because it is a warm spring evening, you decide to hitch up a cart and visit a friend who lives on another manor a short distance to the south. You whistle happily as you wave good-bye to your parents and proceed down the cobblestone road.

What is wrong with the above scenario? Several things. If you guessed that no one—child or adult—would venture out alone in the year 1015, you are correct. If you further guessed that most people who lived on manors were serfs with neither access to a cart nor permission to leave of their own free will, you are right again. And if you pointed out that there may or may not have been a decent road, you are extremely clever!

There is nothing particularly significant about the year 1015. It was just one year in a period of the Middle Ages known as *feudal times*. The word *feudal* refers to “feudalism,” the economic, political, and social system that characterized medieval Europe from about 1000 to 1300. Here is how it all came about.

For more than a thousand years, a people known as the Romans controlled most of Europe and all the lands bordering on the Mediterranean Sea. They built magnificent buildings and constructed fine roads. Some of their roads are still in use today, as are some of the aqueducts they used to transport water. Aqueducts were bridge-like structures that carried water to cities throughout the far-flung world of the Romans.

The Romans were as skilled at government administration as they were at building things. From the city of Rome to the outlying provinces, efficient government and just laws made for an orderly society. This was particularly true during the first two hundred years of Rome’s empire period, extending from about 27 BC to AD 180. Taxes were collected and manufacturing and trade flourished. People in general were happy and traveled about the empire without fear for their safety.



One of many aqueducts constructed by the Romans. Some Roman aqueducts are still in use today.





But then, as the old saying goes, “the bottom fell out.” Within the Roman Empire, economic conditions deteriorated and citizens lost interest in civic affairs. Civil wars became the order of the day, and the army installed one emperor after another on the throne. Twenty-five emperors were murdered within one fifty-year period.

Outside the empire, the sinking of land in northern Europe and pressure from Asian peoples to the east set off mass migrations across the borders of the Roman Empire. It took more than two hundred years, but in AD 476, one tribe, the Visigoths, conquered the city of Rome. Although the eastern part of the Roman Empire continued for another thousand years, in the west the Roman Empire came to an end.

The fall of Rome led to the development of feudalism. Many Germans had lived under Roman rule or had been allies of the Romans against other invaders. In fact, the leader of the Visigoths who conquered Rome was Odoacer, a German who was serving as a general in the Roman army. But Europe was living in a state of almost continual warfare, and few people wrote accounts of the time. Because we know so little about this period of history, people call the period the *Dark Ages*.

For the most part, the Germans and Celts lived in tribes under local rulers. But in the eighth century, one Germanic king managed to bring much of Europe under his control. That king was Charlemagne, or “Charles the Great,” the first Holy Roman Emperor. Charlemagne was king of a German tribe known as the *Franks*. Does that name ring a bell? It should. It is from *Franks* that the name *France* is derived.

Charlemagne ruled from 768 to 814. During his long reign, there was stability in western Europe. But when Charlemagne died, his grandsons were unable to keep his empire together. The result was a breakdown in central government again, although Charlemagne’s laws survived as the basis for the medieval kingdoms of France and Germany.

Matters were made even worse by the regular invasions of the Vikings. Also known as the Northmen or Norsemen, Viking pirates swept out of Scandinavia (Norway, Sweden, and Denmark) in the ninth century, raiding and plundering. The accounts of the Vikings that survive come from the monasteries that were the targets of their raids. A common prayer of the time was, “From the fury of the Northmen, O Lord, deliver us!”

Although remarkably democratic and civil among themselves, the Vikings were very warlike, showing no sympathy for the people they attacked. They





another vassal. If his lord stopped by for a visit, the vassal had to provide food and shelter for his superior and all of his party. Not the least of the vassal's promises was to help pay the ransom demanded when his lord was unfortunate enough to get himself captured by an enemy.

The lord/vassal relationship was a serious arrangement not to be taken lightly. It was initiated with great ceremony at the castle or manor house of the lord. The vassal knelt before his lord and placed his hands between the hands of the lord. He then solemnly swore that he would honor all the commitments expected of a vassal. This formal acknowledgment on the part of the vassal was called "doing homage." At the lord's demand, this ceremony, with its accompanying promise of allegiance, was repeated.

Technically, the peasantry were not part of the feudal system, because they were not warriors. They lived a hard life under the manorial system, which existed even before feudalism. Some were serfs, who were actually bound to the land. If the land was sold, the serfs went along with it as part of the deal. Others were freedmen, tenant farmers who paid the lord in money and a portion of their crops for the right to work the land. The lord gave his serfs and tenants protection and they turned to him for justice. In exchange, the lord charged taxes, required labor, took some of the crops, and generally made sure that the peasants were too poor to leave the land.

Last, not every knight was a vassal to a lord. This was especially true toward the end of the feudal period. Some knights hired themselves out to the highest bidder for their services. They were known as mercenary knights. Mercenary knights were more professional soldiers than true knights. They became important toward the end of the feudal period when kings and lords started having difficulty rounding up enough knights to fight for them.

As you have seen, feudalism was a complicated system of agreements made between lords and vassals. But it served its purpose in an age characterized by a lack of government.



In this painting, King Charles V presents his sword to one of his vassals. A king's vassal was obligated to fight for his lord for a certain number of days a year.





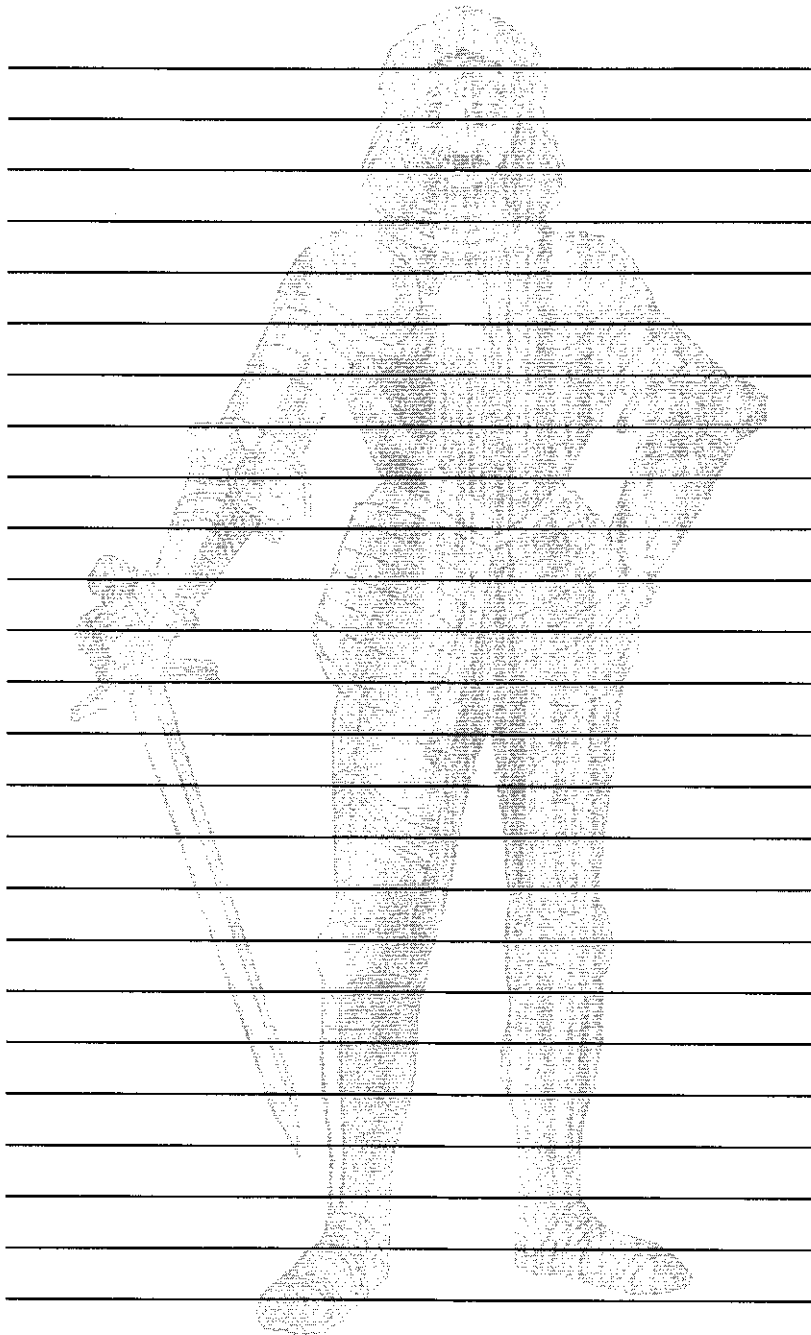
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Create a Dialogue

Our brave French knight, Sir Gallant, is faced with a dilemma. He has the misfortune of being a vassal to both the Count of Rouen and the Count of Amiens, who, as luck would have it, are about to settle an argument over a piece of land on the field of battle. Both counts send out a call for their vassals and their vassals' knights to assemble immediately for the purpose of forming an army.

What is Sir Gallant to do? Can he choose to support one count at the expense of the other? Can he somehow serve both? How is he to make use of the four knights in his service? He is, in modern slang terminology, "caught between a rock and a hard place."

On the lines opposite, create a dialogue between Sir Gallant and his wife, Jeanne, as they discuss what he should best do. Write any solution you may have to the problem into the course of their conversation.



Name _____ Date _____



Recall Information You Have Read

How well do you remember what you read? The ability to recall information is a learning skill that grows in importance as you advance from one grade to the next in school.

Without looking back over the packet, define or identify as best you can the names and terms listed below.

1. feudalism

2. vassal

3. overlord

4. fief

5. homage

6. Vikings

7. serf

8. aqueduct

9. Visigoths

10. Charlemagne





Name _____ Date _____

Solve a Feudalism Puzzle

Fill in the sentences for clues to complete the puzzle about feudalism.

F _____
 _____ E _____
 _____ U _____
 _____ D _____
 _____ A _____
 _____ L _____
 _____ I _____
 _____ S _____
 _____ M _____

1. A piece of land granted by one lord to another was called a _____.
2. A _____ was a peasant bound to the soil.
3. An _____ was a structure that carried water to a Roman city.
4. A lord who granted land to another lord was called an _____.
5. A _____ received land from another lord.
6. _____ was a famous king of the Franks.
7. The _____ who raided Europe came from Scandinavia.
8. Rome fell in the year 476 to a German tribe called the _____.
9. A vassal paid _____, or promised allegiance, to an overlord.



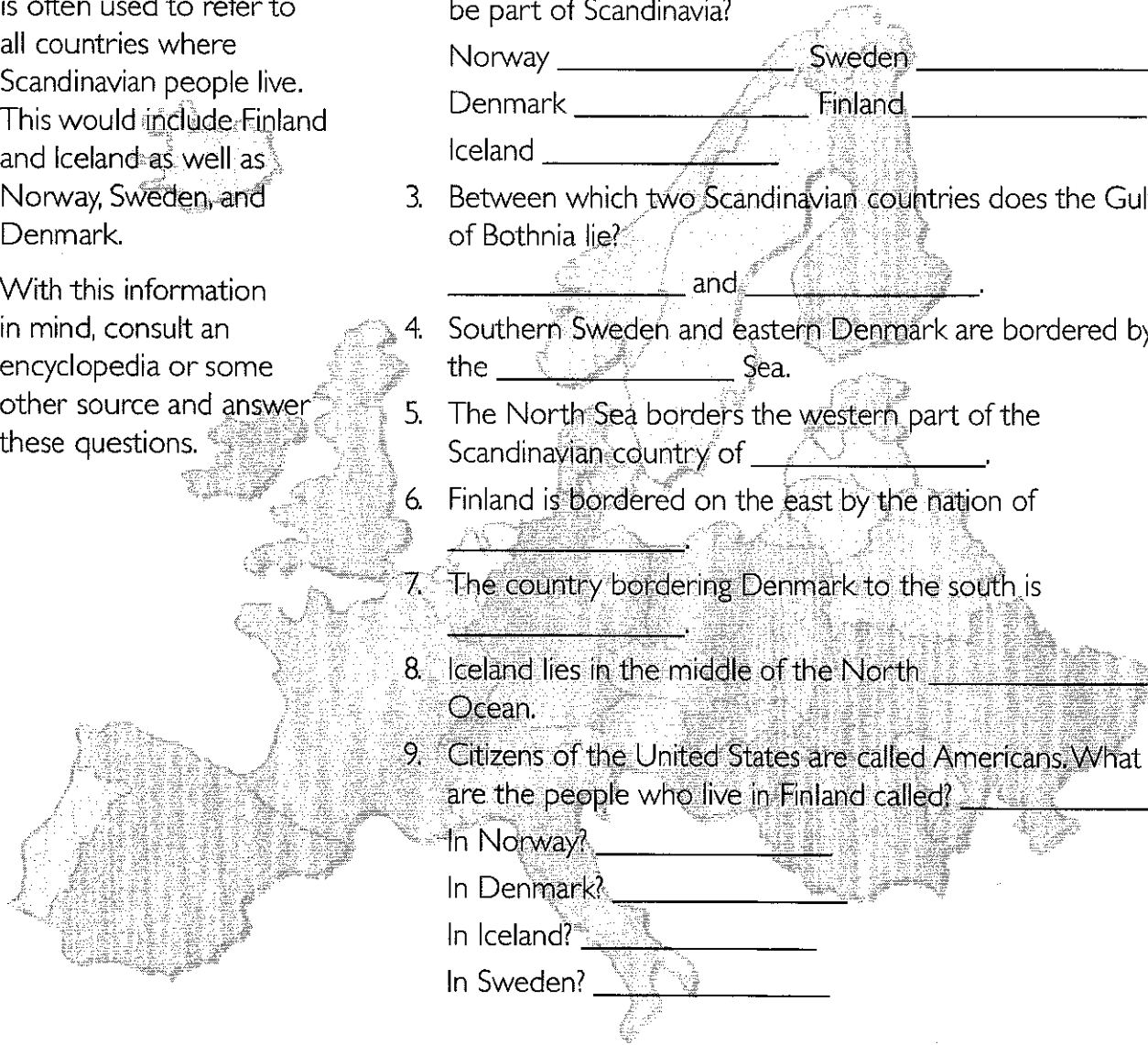
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Do a Scan of Scandinavia

You read in this packet that the Vikings came from the Scandinavian countries of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark. But the term *Scandinavia* is often used to refer to all countries where Scandinavian people live. This would include Finland and Iceland as well as Norway, Sweden, and Denmark.

With this information in mind, consult an encyclopedia or some other source and answer these questions.



1. What is the origin of the word *Scandinavia*?

2. What are the capitals of the five countries considered to be part of Scandinavia?
Norway _____ Sweden _____
Denmark _____ Finland _____
Iceland _____

3. Between which two Scandinavian countries does the Gulf of Bothnia lie?
_____ and _____.

4. Southern Sweden and eastern Denmark are bordered by the _____ Sea.

5. The North Sea borders the western part of the Scandinavian country of _____.

6. Finland is bordered on the east by the nation of _____.

7. The country bordering Denmark to the south is _____.

8. Iceland lies in the middle of the North _____ Ocean.

9. Citizens of the United States are called Americans. What are the people who live in Finland called? _____
In Norway? _____
In Denmark? _____
In Iceland? _____
In Sweden? _____

