

Fealty

Please observe that this is a personal note. It was also written some time ago (not that my opinions have changed on this). There are as many different conceptions of Fealty as there are of Chivalry. I believe that my conception is fairly close to a median West Kingdom opinion. This does not necessarily make it a common one in Lochac. My qualifications for writing this are that I have, at the time of writing, spent 23 years in the SCA. I have been a landed Baron and have been a Member of the Order of the Pelican for some 17 years. I have a Queen's Order of Grace and a whole pile of other awards. I have also spent a lot of time thinking, talking to others and arguing about this issue. Whether what I say is right for you, only you can judge.

In the SCA, you will often hear of people being 'in fealty' to another. The most visible people who are in fealty are Barons and Baronesses. They hold their lands from the Crown and must renew their pledges of fealty each reign. In a Coronation, they swear their Oaths before all others. Additionally all Knights and most other Peers are in Fealty to the Crown. In our Kingdom, as a token of this Oath all Peers may wear a chain around their neck. Knights wear an un-adorned chain with large open links. Other Peers wear the same chain, but adorned (usually it has a medallion of their Order hanging off it).

Fealty, however, is not about the jewellery you wear. For a Landed Baron or Baroness, being in Fealty means that you are in a direct personal relationship to the Crown. You have a right of access directly to the Sovereign's ear and they must listen to you. If they do not at least give you a hearing on an issue, it is them that is at fault, not you. By the same token, you must listen especially hard when the Crown speaks. You have to obey their words and advise them. Obedience is, however, not blind. If you see the Crown about to break a Law, or stumble over a precipice, it is your duty not to follow blindly, but to warn them of the consequences of their actions (after you have done this, you must still obey them). Because of their habit of advising the Crown (whether wanted or not), Barons and Baronesses will thus not always be popular with the Crown.

My Lady and I were Peers before we became Landed. We have always held that Peers have a similar relationship to the Crown. There is a big difference however in that for a Peer, the relationship is a personal one while a Baron and Baroness are in Fealty for, and on behalf of the populace of an area. Speaking historically, the personal nature of the relationship a Peer has is along the lines of the landless or household knights. They owed direct personal obedience to a Lord. Their only obligation to their Lord was for themselves. The landed nobility (in period this was Dukes, Counts, Earls, Barons, landed Knights) had, not only a personal obligation, but also a responsibility for the health of the Kingdom through their stewardship of a part of it.

In accordance with this, voluntary fealty may be sworn by the people of a Barony to their Baron and Baroness. Note that this cannot be compelled. Such an Oath carries the responsibilities of landed Fealty further down the chain. This relationship is summed up in the words of the Fealty Oath we used in Ynys Fawr which is (briefly) modelled on period examples.

Oath-taker(s) "Here do I (name) swear fealty to the Baron and Baroness Ynys Fawr, saving only any Fealty that I may have to the Crown of Lochac. I swear to defend the Barony by any means within my power, to obey the lawful commands of the Baron and Baroness, to advise the Baron and Baroness to the best of my ability, and to act in all ways as a true liegeman ought. This I swear until I formally revoke this oath or the Baron and Baroness depart from their thrones. So swear I, (name)."

Baron "In our part we swear to serve and protect you, our liegemen, to regard your council, and promote your good works to the Crown and always bear you in our minds. This we swear until we do formally revoke this oath or until we depart from our thrones. So say I (name), Baron Ynys Fawr."

Baroness "So also say I (name), Baroness Ynys Fawr"

On looking at this, you will note that Fealty is a two-way street. Not only do both sides swear an Oath, but both have obligations to the other. Period examples can go on for several printed pages, laying out each side's obligations in great detail. Much as we must advise the Crown and be mindful of the health of our group, a person who has sworn fealty to us has voluntarily assumed some of that burden. By placing themselves in Fealty, they swear to obey and to act "as a true liegeman ought". By implication, this includes a care for the lands of the Barony and the health of the group.

Peers may have other people in fealty to them as apprentices, proteges or squires. Unlike those in Fealty to a landed person, they swear Fealty to a Lord or Lady as a part of their household. Depending on what is sworn, this may mean obedience et al. This however is a personal alliegance (note that word) and the liegeman (there

is no ungendered expression) is only responsible for themselves and their acts. This is the text of the oath I use with my proteges. If anyone wishes this role, they must agree to accept my rules. I rarely ask them do things 'without question' and when I do it will usually be 'read this' and never 'clean my dishes'.

"Do you, (name), agree to become my liegeman and protégé, owing fealty and duty to me, saving only that you owe to your Crown and your Barony? (response)

Do you swear to obey me without question, to speak the truth to me at all times, however unpalatable this may be for either of us, to work hard, striving to serve others above all else and to treat all courteously, as behoves a student? (response)

Then in my part I swear fealty to you, to protect you and serve as your shield, to listen to your counsel, to tell you the truth in all matters, to have regard to the welfare of yourself and your house as if they were mine, to treat you fairly and to teach you as much as I am able.

This I swear to do until this agreement is dissolved, or death takes us, or the world does end.

So say I, Baron Hrolf Herjolfssen, Companion of the Order of the Pelican"

One period example of a fealty oath is 757 AD when Duke Tassilo swore homage to King Pippin:

'... and he commended himself into vassalage by his hands [*se commendans in vasatico per manus*] and swore many, indeed numerous oaths, placing his hands on relics of the saints. And he promised to be faithful to King Pippin and his aforesaid sons, the lords Charles and Carloman, as by law a vassal [*vassus*] of right intentions and steadfast loyalty ought to do, and as a vassal ought to be towards his lords.' (cited in Pullen p20)

What is more, it is possible to be relieved of your vows. He is one Carolingian list that we may perhaps not need to resort to: 'Supposing any wishes to leave his lord and can prove him guilty of one of the following offences: firstly, that his lord has attempted to reduce him wrongfully to servitude; secondly, that he has given him advice dangerous to his life; thirdly, that the lord has committed adultery with the vassal's wife; fourthly, that he has attempted wilfully to kill him with a drawn sword; fifthly, it shall be lawful for the vassal to leave his lord if the lord has failed to defend him, when capable of doing so, after the vassal has commended himself by placing his hands withing the lord's. If the lord has committed any of these five offences against his vassal, it shall be lawful for his vassal to leave him.' (cited in Pullen p32). Within the SCA we do see formal renouncements of vows, but often the association is dissolved more informally and symbolised merely by the return of tokens of fealty.

In conclusion, the giving and taking of an Oath of Fealty is the voluntary assumption by two parties of a series of relationships. It is a contractual arrangement and, as such, should never be entered into lightly. Both parties should be well aware of what they are involving themselves in. There are two levels of these Oaths. One is personal, to a Peer or the Crown. The other is an assumption of some of the corporate life of the SCA and as a member of the group. For those who have thought about what it means, and have had an opportunity to swear to the Crown or Coronet, the usual response is: "I now really feel a part of the Kingdom". I hope you have this opportunity, now, or as a Peer.

References: These are well written and will give you an idea of how the concept of fealty came about and how it tied in with the feudal system. They will be available in any good library.

Ariès, Phillipe and George Duby (general editors) *A History of Private Life Vol I From Pagan Rome to Byzantium* Paul Veyne (1992) (translated Arthur Goldhammer) Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, ISBN 0 674 39974 9.

Ariès, Phillipe and George Duby (general editors) *A History of Private Life Vol II Revelations of the Medieval World* editor Georges Duby (1992) (translated Arthur Goldhammer) Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, ISBN 0 674 40001 1.

Bloch, Marc, translated L. A. Manyon (1975) *Feudal Society, (2 vols)* London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.

Leach, Edmund, S.N. Mukherjee & John Ward (editors) (1983) *Feudalism: Comparative Studies* Sydney Association for Studies in Society and Culture, Sydney ISBN 0 949405 01 9

Pullen, Brian (editor) (1966) *Sources for the history of Medieval Europe from the Mid-Eighth to the Mid-Thirteenth Century* Basil Blackwell, Oxford.