

The Origins of Feudalism

The secular medieval notion of fealty was a natural development from the philosophical notion of the Great Chain of Being.

After the collapse of the Western Roman state, a void was left in the civic life of Europe. This area still relied on the Eastern Roman Empire as the source of culture and wealth. However, the indifference of the Byzantines to the military plight of much of the abandoned parts of the Empire, in particular those parts not on a Mediterranean coast (Lewis 1951), eventually led to a new independence of attitude. New rulers, such as Charlemagne, while slavishly aping Byzantine garb and manners, became very independent in other matters. When this was combined with the long-term attempts of the Bishops of Rome to gain more power for their office, the result was the birth of a new system (Duchesne 1972).

The main stimulus for this new system was military. Due to the usual pressures from central Asia, a whole series of barbarian cultures were again impacting on the West. The former barbarians (Visigoths, Franks and Burgunds for instance) had adopted as much of the paraphernalia of Rome as they could and now found themselves as representatives of 'civilised' culture attempting to hold on to land (Veyne 1992). At the same time, the Muslim tide was flowing up the Iberian peninsula and seemed unstoppable. The Vandals and Jews of North Africa and the Visigoths of Spain were both fast disappearing.

The maintenance of a military force is expensive. Few rulers had any standing forces at this time, and most campaigns in pre-modern times took place in times when people could be spared from harvest (Contamine 1984). However, neither non-horticulturally based barbarians nor religious zealots follow these schedules. This meant a permanent military force had to be raised in order for the European cultures to survive. Given the lack of a cohesive tax base, and indeed the lack of coinage and a money economy, this could not be done by a central government (even where this existed). Such economy as existed was tied to a local exchange circulation of goods on a village level. Thus the creation of a military force was achieved by grouping farmers together into an administrative unit that had a large enough surplus of production that it could afford to support and equip a single fighter. This man was their 'servant' of war – a knight (Bloch 1975, Reynolds, 1996 #224). He was paid a 'fee' for this service. Naturally, as time went by the new monopoly of violence that the knights enjoyed led them to reverse this status and to seek a justification for their role. This is naturally a very simplified view of this process.

The original collection of farmers who had been grouped together to support a knight became tied to the land that was connected to that knight. If any one of them were to leave, then the land may no longer be able to support the knight. Thus the 'fee' became what we now call the 'fief'. The professional military were dependant on the economic well being of 'their' peasants, and the wise among them worked hard at ensuring that those in their charge prospered. Unfortunately, there were not many feudal lords who fulfilled this criterion.

The new states that were springing up derived a common spiritual authority from the Church, which was rapidly leaving behind its Orthodox beliefs and striking out in new directions. One of these directions involved the notion of the Great Chain of Being (Lovejoy 1970)(see last issue). Whereas Orthodox Christianity (like the Celtic) relied heavily on the Synod (a council of Bishops) in decision making, the attempt by the

Bishops of Rome to hold temporal and spiritual power drew heavily on a notion of centralised power. Whilst the doctrine of Papal Infallibility was not yet fully accepted (indeed, it was often decreed as heretical) the Popes had begun to exercise strong control where they could. In particular, they wished to extend this over all of the Christian Ecumen. As a means of giving spiritual blessing to this control, they invoked the Great Chain.

Seeing that God stood above all, and a direct line extended down to the lowest plants, then Mankind had a distinct place in the Chain. However, as all could see, all Mankind was not equal. For a start Man was above Woman (Leyser 1995) – a position that they supported by scripture. As well, the spiritual was obviously above the temporal and the lord above the serf. Thus a chain of obligation and loyalty flowed from the Pope to the Kings, from them to their Lords and from them to the populace. This line of ties, bonds, and obligations was thus seen as being blessed by God. A breach of them thus involved a denial of God and, at least, severe censure. In the most extreme case, this meant excommunication (several monarchs received this penalty, John of England being one).

Note that this was not a one way street. Just as God had duty to man, the King had duty to his vassals. A breach either way was regarded seriously, although very few serfs had the means to pursue remedy.

Once the Great Chain began to be questioned by heretical sects, this also called into question ties of fealty. Many of the peasant movements of the Middle Ages were tied up in this double radicalism of spiritual and secular reformism (Lambert 1992, Le Roy Ladurie, 1978 #345). Once the Great Chain collapsed under the impact of secular humanism and Protestantism, support for the ideas of fealty and vassalage likewise evaporated. This was first to be observed in southern Germany (which started its conversion to a wage economy from the 13th century) (Cipolla 1976), but was not to be finally extinguished until the 20th century (in Russia).

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