

**Prof. John H. Munro**  
**Department of Economics**  
**University of Toronto**

[munro5@chass.utoronto.ca](mailto:munro5@chass.utoronto.ca)  
[john.munro@utoronto.ca](mailto:john.munro@utoronto.ca)  
<http://www.economics.utoronto.ca/munro5/>

**9 - 16 October 2013**

**Prof. JOHN H. MUNRO**

**ECO. 301Y1**

**The Economic History of Later Medieval and Early Modern Europe**  
**(European Economic History, 1250 - 1750)**

**LECTURE TOPIC NO. 5**

**III. BARRIERS TO ECONOMIC GROWTH IN THE MEDIEVAL ECONOMY:**

**A. Western European Feudalism and Agrarian as Barriers to Economic Development during the Medieval and Early-Modern Eras**

### **III. THE BARRIERS TO MEDIEVAL ECONOMIC GROWTH: THE STRUCTURE OF FEUDAL AGRARIAN SOCIETY**

#### **A. Western European Feudalism and Agrarian Institutions as Barriers to Economic Development during the Medieval and Early-Modern Eras**

##### **1. The Feudal Agrarian Barriers to Economic Development: Limitations Imposed on Capitalism and the Spread of a Market Economy**

###### **a) The Agrarian Barriers to Economic Development:**

###### **i) The primary role of the agrarian sector:**

**(1) To understand properly the nature of European economic development and its relatively slow pace during the late-medieval and early-modern eras -- i.e., during much of the four centuries preceding the Industrial Revolution --**

**(2) you must first comprehend the overwhelming weight of the agrarian sector, and the relatively low level of agrarian technology and thus of productivity, measured per person and per acre (or hectare, to be metric).**

**ii) Because of such primitive agrarian technology and low productivity, the agrarian sector**

**(1) employed about 85% -- or even 90% in many regions -- of the European population,**

**(2) simply in the task of extracting or eking-out a bare living from the soil, in feeding and clothing itself from agriculture itself (woollen clothing from sheep-raising).**

**(3) If man lives not by bread alone, people certainly had to begin by feeding themselves;**

**iii) Next: you must understand the nature of the major medieval feudal institutions, all of which were land-based or agrarian institutions:**

**(1) Feudalism itself: as a hierarchic military form of government, composed of military aristocrats**

**(2) Manorialism:**

■ a military lordship; a landed estate given to military lords for their service

■ the agrarian system of dependent peasant cultivation designed to support and sustain the feudal aristocracy: in terms of men (military manpower) and wealth

**(3) Serfdom: the varying social conditions of those dependent peasants who lived, worked on, and served these military lord.**

**iv) Finally, you have to understand why these feudal agrarian institutions**

**(1) were, to some considerable degree, responsible for the very low level of agricultural productivity during the Middle Ages**

**(2) and thus how and why they impeded the development of a market economy and economic growth**

**(3) neither labour nor other resources could be liberated from the land: not until productivity rose sufficiently to produce large surpluses to feed those employed outside agriculture, especially in towns.**

**v) By the late Middle Ages, by about 1300, only two regions in western Europe had succeeded in liberating themselves from feudal institutions and in raising agricultural productivity, so that they could break or remove that overwhelming dependence on the agrarian sector, by combining a superior**

agriculture with commercial and industrial expansion:

(1) the first was northern Italy: Tuscany (Florence), Liguria (Genoa), Lombardy (Milan), and Venetia (Venice): this region may have succeeded in becoming about 35%-40% urbanized

(2) the Low Countries, on the North Sea, principally the county of Flanders, and subsequently Holland:

- but as the most commercialized, industrialized and urbanized region of northern Europe, Flanders was only 35% urban (as late as the 15th century, when demographic data become adequate);
- Holland, while developing later, would become more than 50% urbanized by the 1550s.

(3) Meanwhile, England, the future homeland of the modern Industrial Revolution was no more than 5% - 7% urbanized by the late Middle Ages (15th century);

(4) and as a still backward fundamentally agrarian economy, England had a long, long way to go.

**b) Limitations on the extent of a market economy:**

**i) The dead-weight of the agrarian sector outside those two advanced zones of the European economy:**

(1) basically explains the chief limitations to the spread of the market economy and economic growth:

(2) because low productivity was reflected:

- in low levels of income and
- thus of aggregate demand.
- and also in low levels of savings and hence in capital formation

(3) As noted above, the reasons for this economic situation, with low productivity, has to be sought in part in analyzing the above named feudal institutions

**ii) In western Europe around 1300, only a minority of the population worked and lived totally by a market economy:**

(1) very few worked for money wages alone, since many artisans had their own small agricultural holdings;

(2) and much industrial employment was simply supplementary to agriculture.

(3) That larger majority of the population who were peasants and small free-hold farmers obviously grew much if not all of their own food;

(4) and many also supplied their own clothing from home-spun wool or from the leather of the sheep and cattle forming their livestock.

(5) But there was, on the other hand, no complete rural autarky or self-sufficiency.

- Most peasants had some access to markets to sell surplus products, if only to raise some cash -- coined money -- to pay their rents, taxes, and Church tithes; and also to buy such commodities as salt.
- After all, how many peasant farms produced salt; and who could live without using some salt -- as the universal preservative?

**iii) In eastern Europe, so much less developed and certainly less urbanized and commercialized than western Europe,**

(1) a much larger proportion of society lived without too much contact with markets;

(2) but again I doubt that many lived their lives totally untouched by markets.

**c) The nature and extent of capitalism in the late Middle Ages:**

**i) Capitalism -- however defined -- can operate only in the context of a fully monetized market economy -- indeed with credit institutions as well;**

**ii) and thus any impediments to the spread and vigor of market economies** would also provide impediment to the growth of European capitalism.

**iii) You certainly cannot have capitalism without a market economy:** i.e., the private ownership of the means of production and distribution (by means of private capital investment).

**iv) but a market economy does not in itself** guarantee the progress and vitality of capitalism.

**v) Nevertheless medieval Europe certainly did know capitalism,** which was far from being a modern creation or institution.

**vi) Medieval capitalism, however, differed from modern capitalism:**

(1) essentially in being primarily commercial and financial rather than industrial,

(2) reflecting the fact that the commercial sector was then far more powerful than the industrial sector and indeed

(3) so powerful, relatively speaking, that the financial sector was its handmaiden.

**v) In both western and eastern Europe,** during the later medieval and early modern eras, the chief barriers to the spread of both the market economy and capitalism are to be found, as I stated earlier, in those major institutions governing rural society: known as Feudalism, Manorialism, and Serfdom. **vi) I should also include the Church (but not now),**

(1) for in so many respects the Church is intertwined with Feudalism;

(2) and many church abbots and bishops acted like feudal aristocrats.

(3) But I shall leave the Church until we come to the financial sector of the European economy.

## **2. Western European Feudalism: as a Political, Military, Social, and Economic Institution**

**a) Feudalism: a Definition and a Model**

**i) Feudalism, strictly speaking, is not an economic but a military and political system or institution,** though one with very important, indeed crucial, economic links.

**ii) Feudalism, in its medieval heyday, was a militaristic system of government**

(1) that was designed to provide defence and protection at the local village level,

(2) in the absence of strong central government, and thus in the absence of any effective police agency, certainly with the decay of the Roman Empire in the West, from the 5<sup>th</sup> century.

**iii) It was a hierarchic system of military government:**

(1) in theory, at least, feudal society was organized into a pyramidal or hierarchic ordering of social ranks,

(2) with the peasantry -- the vast mass of the population -- at the bottom,

(3) and a feudal aristocracy, a military ruling class, at the top of that apex.

**iv) That feudal aristocracy, at the apex of this social pyramid, was itself hierarchic:**

(1) with the lowest level of nobles, the knight class, at the bottom of the aristocratic pyramid,

(2) they – the knights – served a hierarchic rank of superior nobles above them: barons, counts, dukes, kings, and the emperor.

v) **A simple equation explains the military nature of feudalism in its heyday:**

**feudal noble (aristocrat, by blood inheritance) = knight = cavalry horse-soldier<sup>1</sup> = a feudal vassal as a military servant holding a landed fief in payment for services**

(1) **The vassal:** was both a feudal noble and a feudal servant of some superior lord,

- providing that superior lord with military service as a horse-soldier (cavalry), and also with foot-soldiers under his command.
- Thus, as on the diagram, from the bottom up, a simple knight might be the vassal of a baron, who in turn was the vassal of a count, who in turn served a duke, who served the king or emperor (all as vassals).
- Hence the hierarchical chain of military service, from top to bottom

(2) **The fief:**

- was that income-producing landed property which the knight received from his superior lord in return for faithful rendering of that military service;
- it in fact provides the linguistic origins of the word *feudalism* : from the Latin word *feodum*, meaning, of course, a fief, as a form of payment for service rendered.
- also the origin of the English word ‘fee’: as a payment for professional services, e.g., those paid to a lawyer, architect, accountant, doctor, etc.

(3) **‘Bastard Feudalism and Fief-Rentes’:**

- later however, many so-called feudal fiefs that were granted to armed retainers or other servants were actually provided in the form of cash incomes,
- or in the right to collect cash incomes from certain taxes and commercial tolls or fines controlled by the feudal overlord -- and known as fief-rentes.

(4) Both the rendering of military service and holding the fief were conditional upon formal though verbal and sworn contracts; and that, I must stress, meant purely voluntary service.

(5) These fiefs were chiefly though not exclusively in the form of landed estates, known as manors; and many manors might make up a single fief.

(6) In this hierarchic model, the king or emperor (Carolingian) rewarded his immediate followers with vast tracts of land, which were further carved up into manors, which each of these leading military lords granted to his own vassals or military servants.

(7) For in this society land was the chief form of wealth and the chief source of income.

---

<sup>1</sup> Note the relationship between ‘cavalry’ and the French word for horse: le *cheval*, from which is derived the term *chevalier*, for a cavalry horse soldier or knight. The standard Latin word for horse is *equus* (hence: English equestrian); but there was another term: *caballus*, which meant a pack-horse, nag, or inferior riding horse. Why this should be source of *cheval*, *chevalier*, and of the English *cavalry* is not easy to determine. But the origin of the word *vassal*, as a feudal knight, feudal servant, but also aristocrat, was the Latin term *vassus*, which was in origin a contemptuous term for ‘boy’.

vi) **These feudal knights had formed a fully professional military aristocracy in earlier medieval society,**

- (1) i.e, after gaining a monopoly of superior, virtually invincible military power:
- (2) in the form of the cavalry: as horse-soldiers, acting as mounted shock combat troops,
- (3) this was of course a full time profession which was extremely expensive in both training and maintenance.

vii) **It was a very high cost-profession:** to be a professional horse-soldier, a member of the feudal cavalry, was an extremely time consuming and costly occupation in these respects:

(1) It required a long period of training and it involved full time military and political service, one that permitted the knight no free time to pursue another occupation.

(2) While most foot soldiers -- swordsmen, spear men, bowmen -- were normally only occasional and part time soldiers and generally full time farmers, the reverse was true of the knights.

(3) Knighthood also required very costly capital equipment in the form of:

- specially bred war-horses,
- costly saddles and metal stirrups,
- heavy armour, complicated military equipment,
- finally a retinue of servants (military and non-military)

(4) Because horses could easily be killed in battle, most knights owned at least two and usually more war-horses (as opposed to the much cheaper plough horses).

(5) Some estimates indicate that the cost of an English medieval knight's military equipment alone equalled the value of 20 oxen, or the plough-teams of ten peasant families (ca 1300).

(6) Therefore somebody else had to pay for all and pay the knight: and that payment came from the people, the peasants, who lived on the manors composing his fief(s).

(7) Hence once more the vital importance of landed estates, of those fiefs, to generate the incomes to sustain the feudal aristocracy; and the same was also true of the later medieval fief-rentes.

**b) The evolution of medieval feudalism:**

I cannot, unfortunately, take the time here and now to explain the origins and evolution of medieval feudalism, except briefly to note the following salient facts:

**i) Before the 'Birth of Europe':**

(1) I had earlier noted, in the very first lecture, in citing Lopez's article 'The Middle Ages: a Success Story', that Europe as we now know it, with a distinctly new and separate society and economy, was not born until the later 10<sup>th</sup> century (or just before the year 1000).

(2) The 'Birth of Europe' indeed could obviously have taken place only after:

- the civil wars, foreign invasions, chaos and insecurity had come to an end,
- to permit a renewal of demographic and economic growth

(3) But the new European economy then had to cope with the institutions that had arisen in those earlier centuries, from the 5<sup>th</sup> to 10<sup>th</sup> centuries, to cope with that chaos or insecurity, in the absence of well organized central rule, with its own military power.

ii) **Feudalism thus evolved slowly over several centuries of the early medieval era,**

- (1) from the decline of Roman Empire in the West, in the 5th century CE,
- (2) to the full flowering of the later Carolingian Empire in the 8th and 9th centuries (the empire of Charlemagne).

iii) **During this early medieval era,** as stressed earlier, the Germanic or Frankish kingdoms that replaced the Roman Empire in the West (beginning with the Merovingian kingdoms):<sup>2</sup>

- (1) failed to provide adequate security at the lower levels of society, because they lacked the resources and organization to create a national or imperial army (as the Romans had done so well);
- (2) in particular, they still lacked sufficient, or sufficiently overwhelming military power, which finally came in the form of the fully developed cavalry.
- (3) Furthermore, these Germanic-Frankish kingdoms – first the Merovingians and then their successors, the Carolingians – created further chaos, by subdividing their kingdoms by inheritance, i.e., by dividing them up amongst their surviving sons.
- (4) those sons and heirs inevitably quarrelled, so that, as a consequence, these kingdoms in the former western zone of the Roman empire were continually plagued by civil wars, rebellions, and anarchy – indeed up to the 10<sup>th</sup> century.
- (5) and, of course, also by wars with their neighbours

iv) **Even the Carolingian Empire, which witnessed the full flowering of feudalism,** failed to provide adequate security, and, as noted earlier, was beset by a three-pronged invasion during the 8th, 9th, and 10th centuries:<sup>3</sup>

- (1) by the Vikings or Norsemen from the north (Scandinavia), who seized the territory called Normandy;
- (2) by the Hungarians or Magyars from the east, chiefly via the Danube River basin (i.e., the heartland of

<sup>2</sup> Some authorities contend that the Merovingian era commenced in 465-66, when the Frankish leader Clovis (b. 466 - d. 511) displaced Roman rule in Gaul. In 481, he became King of the Salian Franks, and then king of all the Franks in 509, shortly before his death in 511. The first recognized Merovingian king, ruling over all of Gaul, was Childebert I (511-558); and the last was Childeric III (743-752) – as explained in the next note. The word ‘Frank’ – from which is derived the name of France – means ‘free’. Note that from ‘Clovis’ is derived the name ‘Louis’, a name for many subsequent French kings (including the last, Louis XVI, at the time of the French Revolution).

<sup>3</sup> The Carolingian Empire was first established, in effect, by Charles Martel (688-741), who had halted the Muslim invasions at the Battle of Poitiers in 732. He was the last ‘mayor of the palace’ for the final Merovingian king of the Franks (Childeric III); and became the effective ruler of the Franks, though never crowned king. He left the Frankish kingdom to his sons Carloman and Pepin III (the Short); and the latter was anointed the first Carolingian king in 751 (but not effectively displacing Childeric III until 752). His son, known as Charlemagne (Carolus Magnus, or Charles the Great) became King of the Franks in 771, and Emperor in 800, governing much of what became western Europe. Only one son survived him to rule the Empire, Louis I the Pious, who ruled as Emperor from 814 to 840. But with his death, his Empire was divided into three, and was beset then with civil wars and foreign invasions. In 987, Hugh Capet (d. 996) displaced the last Carolingian king (Louis V the Sluggard, 986-87) to become King of France, an entirely new kingdom, and thus founder of the Capetian dynasty. From the Treaty of Verdun in 843, Germany had become a separate kingdom as well, though lacking in any centralized rule (and thus failing to control Italy and what became the Low Countries).

modern Hungary);

(3) and by the Muslims or Saracens -- chiefly Arabs and Berbers – from the south, originally from Muslim Spain and later by their maritime attacks along the coasts of France and Italy.

v) **Thus powerful landed lords, operating at the local village level, who could command bands of armed followers and then knights by providing them land, did provide that protection;**

(1) but in many instances they provided peasant villages with protection not from foreign invaders

(2) but from other military lords or indeed -- Mafia style -- from themselves.

vi) **In this fashion, more or less, early-medieval feudalism spread by absorbing peasant villages,** either by conquest or by willing agreement of villages trading liberty for protection.

c) **Carolingian Feudalism, the Cavalry, and Technological Innovation: the Lynn White Debate**

i) **Technological innovation in the form of the metal and leather stirrup:**<sup>4</sup>

(1) The American medievalist and historian, Lynn White, a specialist in the history of technology, contended that the true emergence of cavalry-based feudalism came in the 8<sup>th</sup> century with the introduction (from Asia) and diffusion of the metal stirrup attached to the leather saddle.

(2) While certainly a cavalry existed before then, and while certainly many soldiers of the Roman and early medieval eras (and those of the Muslim world) had fought on horseback, their military effectiveness had been limited by the absence of the stirrup:

(3) so that, without this device, they could quite easily be knocked off their horses by a blow from an enemy spear or axe.

(4) Lynn White even argued that many or most of the soldier who rode to battle on horses, then dismounted to fight as infantrymen in the ensuing battle itself.

(5) The metal-and leather stirrup provided far greater resistance or resilience against such blows, allowing the mounted soldiers to remain on horseback: to act as ‘mounted shock-combat troops’.

(6) the evolution of effective shields and chain-mail armour, to protect the cavalry soldier, may have been just as important.

(7) The key point, however, was his argument, based on many literary and archaeological sources, that the diffusion of the metal stirrup (from Persia - Iran or Central Asia) came only in the 8<sup>th</sup> centuries (but some contend its introduction was in the 7<sup>th</sup>, or even the 6<sup>th</sup> century)

(8) As a consequence, he argued, the Frankish armies underwent a significant shift from:

- those essentially based on infantry-foot soldiers
- to those based essentially on cavalry,
- with all of the economic and social consequences discussed above.

(9) He maintained (with dubious proof) that the first Frankish military use of the cavalry, with this stirrup, came in the Battle of Poitiers-Tours, in October 732

- Charles Martel (‘The Hammer’, 688?–741), Frankish ruler of Austrasia (715-41), and ‘Mayor

---

<sup>4</sup> Lynn White, ‘Stirrup, Mounted Shock Combat, Feudalism, and Chivalry’, as chapter I in his *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), pp. 1-38.



- the Palace' (virtually 'prime minister) of the Merovingian kingdom,
- defeated a Moorish (Muslim) army, at the aforesaid Battle of Tours-Poitiers (south of Paris): one that seemed on the verge of conquering what is now France.
- Some historians contend that if the Moors had won that battle, Europe today would be Muslim and Arabic speaking! That seems, however, very doubtful.
- whether or not Charles Martel used the cavalry in this way to defeat a Muslim infantry army has never been proved.
- Furthermore, other historians contend that Muslim armies also used the horse stirrup
- Charles Martel was the father of Pepin III: who became the first Carolingian king, in 751-52
- and he was also the grandfather of Pepin's eldest son: Charlemagne (Charles the Great: 742 or 747 - 814): crowned Holy Roman Emperor in 800.
- certainly the later Carolingian empire was based on this form of cavalry

ii) **The White thesis soon encountered some fierce attacks in the literature:**<sup>5</sup> from those

(1) who argued that an effective cavalry had emerged well before this period, and did not need the stirrup, and from

(2) those who argued that the fully-fledged form of cavalry, linked to feudalism, came much later: that the early Carolingians, and Charlemagne himself, still depended on essentially infantry-based armies (i.e., with foot soldiers)

iii) **Bernard Bacharach** provided the most effective criticism against Lynn White,<sup>6</sup>

(1) sought to refute White's chief evidence: both the dating and the validity of his literary and archaeological sources, those for the 8<sup>th</sup> century,

(2) Contended as well that the stirrup was not necessary for cavalry: quoting from Answers.Com:

- In 1970, opposing Lynn White Jr.'s ideas, Bernard S. Bachrach's article titled 'Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup, and Feudalism', in *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, pointed out that stirrups are actually no advantage in shock warfare, but are useful only in allowing a rider to lean to the left and right on the saddle without falling off. [Munro: That seems to me to be a useful advantage!!]
- Therefore, they are not the reason for the switch from infantry to cavalry in Medieval militaries, and not the reason for the emergence of Feudalism.

(2) thus joining those who believed that the cavalry emerged later as the fundamental military force

(3) But, for another academic opinion in Answers.Com

- Braced against the stirrups, a knight could deliver a blow with a lance that employed the full weight and momentum of horse and rider together.

---

<sup>5</sup> For a summary of the debate and its wide-ranging literature, see Kelly De Vries, *Medieval Military Technology* (Peterborough, ON: Broadview Press, 1992), pp. 95-122.

<sup>6</sup> Bernard Bacharach, 'Charles Martel, Mounted Shock Combat, the Stirrup, and Feudalism', *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance History*, 7 (1970), 47-75. See also the previous note.

- Reacting to a sudden and urgent demand for cavalry, Charlemagne ordered his poorer vassals to pool their resources and provide a mounted and armed knight.
- The addition of stirrups also allowed a rider to use a longer (and vastly more powerful) bow by standing up on the stirrups.

iv) **the role of the stirrup itself remains unresolved:** was it the vital ingredient to ensure that the cavalry horse-soldiers were truly invincible ‘mounted shock combat troops’.<sup>7</sup>

v) **The iron horse shoe:** an issue involving far less debate:

1) Another impediment to the use of horses in either warfare or agriculture was the danger of injuring or damaging their sensitive hooves (easily chipped or torn)

(2) The solution came, perhaps in the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> centuries, in fastening U shaped iron horse shoes to the hooves, thus preventing such damages.

d) **The High Costs of Cavalry warfare: a far more expensive form of warfare** (a theme to be elaborated more fully in the following lecture on manorialism:

i) **A cavalry horse soldier was a full-time professional**, devoted singly and solely to warfare – in contrast to infantry, who were part time soldiers only and full time peasants (or urban militias)

ii ) **High costs of learning** and training over many years

iii) **High costs of war horses:**

- were especially bred, for speed and strength, for warfare
- as noted earlier, given the likelihood of the animal’s death in combat, most knights possessed at least two such warhorses.

---

<sup>7</sup> See also this entry in Answers.com: “The stirrup was invented surprisingly late in history, considering that horses were used for bareback riding and to pull carts or war chariots since the fourth millennium BC. They are mentioned in early Chinese literature and examples which must be earlier than the 7th century A.D. have been found in Japan; the true stirrup was apparently invented in northern China by the nomadic Turkic tribes in the first few centuries AD, although a simple loop through which the rider placed his big toe was already to be seen in India either by 4th century BC (Desmond Morris, *Horse Watching* 1998), or the 2nd century BC. It was invented at first as a single mounting stirrup only used in gaining the saddle; the first dependable representation of a rider with paired stirrups is in a Jin tomb of about 322 AD. The stirrup was spread throughout Eurasia by the great horsemen of the central Asian steppes. It is uncertain when it was first adopted by the nomads. The first attested use is by the Alans. The Greeks and Romans did not use them but mounted by vaulting or from a mounting block. Some historians believe the Huns must have used them to enable their conquests, but there is no evidence for this. Stirrups reached Sweden in the 6th century, leading to the establishment of mounted Thegns during the Swedish Vendel Age. From this period have been found rich graves of mounted elite warriors, which include stirrups [2]. The importance of the horse during this time is reflected in the later Norse sagas, where the 6th century Swedish king Adils is said to have been a great lover of horses and to have had the best horses of his days. Interestingly, all accounts of this king's warfare describe him as fighting on horseback, although the later Vikings never or rarely did so. To add a 6th century source, Jordanes claimed that the Swedes had the best horses beside the Thuringians, reflecting the importance of the horse during this time (see also the *Battle on the Ice*). Stirrups were first indirectly documented in Central Europe during the reign of Charles Martel in the 8th century, when verbs *scandere* and *descendere* among the Franks replace verbs denoting "leaping" upon a horse. A pair of stirrups have been found in an 8th century burial in Holiare, Slovakia. The stirrup of the early Middle Ages seems to have been light and semicircular or triangular in shape. By the 14th century the footplate became broader and the sides heavier and ornamented. By the 16th century this ornamentation increases and open metal-work is used.”

iv) **High costs of the other military equipment:** the armour – broadswords, axes, lances – helmets and chain mail, etc.

e) **Post Carolingian Feudalism: from 843 CE: Treaty of Verdun, splitting the Carolingian Empire into three kingdoms (France, Germany, Lotharingina – including Italy, Low Countries)**

i) **The real heartland of European feudalism was the heartland of the Carolingian Empire itself:** that territory between the Loire River in France, as the southern frontier, and the Rhine River in Germany, as the eastern and northern frontier (see the map on the screen).

ii) **From that Carolingian heartland,** feudalism spread by conquest and colonization, or by example,

- eastwards into eastern Germany;
- and southwards into Italy (whose northern part belonged to the Carolingian Empire), into Spain and Portugal;
- and then westward, by the Norman Conquest (1066), into England.

iii) **In England, Norman feudalism flowered even more effectively than within Normandy itself:** which was the conquered land of the free-born and freedom loving Norsemen who adapted ill to true feudalism;

iv) **but elsewhere,** feudalism was never as strong as within its original Carolingian heartland; and you must thus remember that this model of feudalism applies to only a small part of medieval Europe.

v) **In the Mediterranean regions --- in Europe south of the Loire and south of the Danube rivers,** medieval society differed considerably from that found in the north:

- (1) this southern region had been the true heartland of the old Roman Empire,
- (2) it thus better maintained urban societies, with the heritage of Roman civil law and of Roman customs and institutions,
- (3) and together those surviving institutions created a firm bedrock that northern feudalism found difficult to penetrate.

vi) **We shall see the significance of that difference:** in contrasting agrarian institutions and farming methods in northern and southern Europe.

vii) **Another related factor:** the northern advantage in producing horses, the vital ingredient for the cavalry and thus for full-fledged feudalism.

- (1) When we come to examine regional agrarian systems, we will discover that northern agriculture was able to produce a very important, relatively cheap fodder crop in feeding horses: namely oats
- (2) For reasons of climate and topography, oats cultivation was virtually impossible in southern and Mediterranean agriculture, virtually eliminating the use of horses as a source of animal power in agriculture: i.e., in pulling ploughs and carts
- (3) That problem may also have restricted the supply of horses (which could be fed by other means) for military power as well in Mediterranean Europe

### 3. **The Late-Medieval Challenges and Checks to Feudal Power:**

**As I said earlier,** the feudal cavalry had provided an almost invincible form of warfare and thus a true

military aristocracy from the 8th to 14th centuries, when it encountered some very severe checks:

a) **from national monarchies:**

i) **from organized and more centralized national monarchies**, especially in England and later in France (though not in Germany or Italy, both of which remained a collection of small principalities until the 19th century):

ii) **Thus a check to feudal power by kings:** those who came to organize their own national armies independently of feudal nobles and their military levies.

iii) **The feudal nobility was however a greater threat to the effective rule of the monarchy in France than in England:**

(1) In France, the power of the king, until the reign of Philip II Augustus (r. 1180 - 1223), the power of the king was largely limited to Paris, because powerful aristocrats ruled much of France in the form of virtually independent duchies and counties: e.g., Normandy, Burgundy, Flanders, Brittany, Anjou, Aquitaine

(2) In England, however, William the Conqueror, in 1066, had effectively prevented the creation of such principalities by rewarding his aristocratic followers with hundreds of manors scattered over England, and (later) Scotland and Ireland as well.

(3) England was effectively a unified, centralized national monarchy from the reign of Henry II (1154-1189): though indeed facing some feudal or aristocratic opposition, English kings were still less threatened in exercising power than were French monarchs.

b) **from towns and the urban mercantile bourgeoisie:** from an expanding class of the urban bourgeoisie, especially merchants and financiers:

i) **those who exercised a strong financial power:** in support of the monarchy,

ii) **especially those who lent kings both funds and expertise:** to combat their aristocratic enemies.

iii) **since the feudal aristocracy were – economically and socially - institutionally an integral part of rural society**, we would expect this conflict between agrarian and urban societies

iv) **some exceptions:**

(1) feudal lords, from the 12<sup>th</sup> century, founded many towns, hundreds of them, in eastern Europe, east of the Elbe river, beginning with Lübeck, on the estuary of the Trave River (near the Elbe), where flows into the Baltic.<sup>8</sup>

(2) Aristocrats who were also territorial princes usually lived in towns: e.g., the Count of Flanders, in Ghent; the dukes of Burgundy, in acquiring the Low Countries, in Brussels

(3) Italian nobles were generally required, by urban governments, to live in the towns that governed their *contado*, or countryside.

c) **from a new military technology:** during the early to mid-fourteenth century

---

<sup>8</sup> Lübeck, founded on a Slavic site in the 12<sup>th</sup> century, was destroyed by fire in 1138, but refounded in the 1143, and then acquired by Henry the Lion, duke of Saxony, in 1158, who gave the city a charter, which served as the model for hundreds of East Elbian towns in the next two centuries. In 1226, Emperor Frederick II made it an Imperial Free City, a status it kept until 1937, in the Nazi era.

i) **first, new forms of infantry formations:** armed with:

(1) pikes or long spears set in the ground: from the late 1290s

- Scotland: William Wallace and Robert the Bruce, 1297 - 1314: from the Battle of Sterling Bridge to the final battle of Bannockburn
- Flanders: Battle of Kortrijk (Courtrai): 1302: 'Battle of the Golden Spurs'

(2) bows and arrows: from the 1330s:

- the English long-bows and
- Genoese cross-bows (firing bolts)

ii) **second, artillery (from the 1330s):**

(1) iron (wrought iron) and then bronze cannons, both on land and sea (warships)

(2) artillery proved so effective in battering down castles and knocking the cavalry off their horses.

iii) **then from handguns (muskets and pistols)**, i.e., mobile small arms: if not so accurate, very often quite deadly (and again effective against cavalry).

d) **Feudal political and social powers nevertheless remained important in later medieval and even early modern Europe:**

i) **the feudal nobility were by no means excluded from government and from political power in Europe**, west or east; and in subsequent centuries they made some remarkable comebacks, even in the 18th century.

ii) **Indeed the feudal nobility**, especially by virtue of their still enormous landed wealth, remained a powerful force in European society up to (and even beyond) the French Revolution -- in Russia indeed until the Bolshevik revolution of 1917.

#### 4. The Feudal Impediments to Economic Growth:

a) **From the control of the feudal nobility (and the Church) over land and their predominance in landed wealth:**

i) **until modern times**, as just argued, the feudal aristocracy and the Church (and the aristocracy for a much longer period than the Church) did control a very sizeable portion -- a grossly disproportionate amount -- of landed wealth and thus of the agrarian economies in Europe, west and east.

ii) **Much of that land and the labour supplies on feudal lands were not really subject to the normal conditions and organisation of a market economy, as we now know it:** i.e., feudal laws and manorial regulations at least impeded the development and operation of a fully free market in land, labour, and capital.

iii) **Thus if land, in the form of feudal fiefs (manors), was acquired as a reward for military service**, and conditional on rendering that service,

(1) it could not legally be traded or sold

(2) though certainly by the later-medieval eras, many manors were being sold.

b) **The nobility and the Church: wealth and income effects**

i) **with such a highly skewed distribution of wealth**, they also commanded a grossly disproportionate

share of national income;

ii) **that had a very distorting effect on aggregate demand and thus on the market:**

- (1) especially in biasing the market towards the production and distribution of luxury goods,
- (2) which does not lead to economic growth.

iii) **Similarly and consequently the landed nobility and Church controlled a grossly disproportionate share of potential savings:** of potential savings for potential capital investments.

iv) **But they were not generally predisposed to invest such potential savings productively as capital.**

v) **Nor indeed were most of them so disposed to save:**

- (1) for most, their preferences lay in conspicuous consumption,
- (2) along with military expenditures, of course
- (3) often borrowing to achieve these ends.

vi) **If they had savings they were more often invested in more sterile assets:**

- (1) such as more land and buildings, especially resplendent castles (chateaux).
- (2) While that did create a demand for some industrial goods and services, it did not really do so in a productive growth-producing manner.

c) **Warfare and Taxation:**

i) **The whole feudal ethos**, as the ethos of a military and land aristocracy, produced a climate of military conflicts leading to wars, which in turn led to higher taxation.

ii) **But the nobility**, as perhaps the chief instigators of medieval warfare, did not normally bear the costs in the form of higher taxation: the nobility, with some exceptions, was generally free of direct taxes (though not consumption taxes);

iii) **when nobles were subject to such taxes**, they bore a disproportionately light burden:

- (1) on the grounds that they paid their taxes, in effect, through military or government service -- they had already 'paid their dues'.
- (2) A common viewpoint in medieval Europe was that society consisted of the Three Orders

- those who pray (the Catholic clergy)
- those who fight (the aristocracy – the knights and superior nobles)
- those work – and thus the only ones who had to pay taxes

(3) That meant a shift of the tax burden on to the bourgeoisie and especially the peasantry, creating often an extra heavy burden that restricted both market demand and capital investment.

d) **Social hostility to commerce and to capitalism:**

i) **With very few exceptions**, chiefly and most significantly found in England (which did not have a true feudal aristocracy), and to a lesser extent in Prussia (eastern Germany):

- (1) most of the feudal aristocracy were unsympathetic or openly hostile to the merchant classes, to the professions of commerce and finance, and more generally to what we call 'capitalism'.
- (2) That is hardly surprising when the chief challenge to feudal power did come from these very members of the bourgeoisie, the leading merchants and financiers.

ii) **For most feudal nobles, and certainly for continental aristocrats,**

(1) the only acceptable and noble occupations were warfare, government, and farming

(2) i.e., owning but not directly running a landed estate as a commercial farm;

(3) many English nobles however did do so.

iii) **With some notable exceptions (again chiefly English)**, a true-blood noble was in danger of losing his noble status and prestige -- in danger of suffering 'derogation' (loss of noble status) -- by actively engaging in commerce, industry, and finance.

iv) **One might argue that the feudal aristocracy**, helped to curb or restrict the evolution of European capitalism,

(1) by setting the social standards for the upper strata of society, including the upper bourgeoisie, (2) and especially therefore by making capitalism appear to be socially uncouth or reprehensible.

d) **political fragmentation of Europe and thus of European markets:**

i) **By exercising so much political and economic power at the local level**, some continental feudal aristocrats had managed to establish their own principalities in the form of counties and duchies, which were more or less independent of the monarch (kings or Emperors).

ii) **But even after the rise and consolidation of national monarchies**, many of these feudal or former feudal principalities continued to function with some considerable degree of political independence, especially if they had also established their own estates or parliaments.

iii) **In France, to be sure**, many of the feudal houses had died out or otherwise had disappeared by the 16th century,

(1) and when they did, feudal lordship over those principalities reverted to the crown;

(2) nevertheless these principalities still continued to exist as political units, thwarting complete unification.

iv) **For this reason, France and many other European countries did not become unified until modern times:**

(1) France: did not become a truly unified national state until the 1789 Revolution;

(2) Italy, not until the Union of 1870;

(3) and Germany, not until Imperial Union of 1871.

v) **That political fragmentation of continental Europe also meant fragmentation of the continental markets:**

(1) for most of these feudal principalities imposed tariffs and tolls on trade with their neighbours

(2) and even within the same kingdom (e.g. France) or Empire (the Holy Roman Empire).

vi) **Such fragmentation raised both transport and transaction costs,**

(1) which costs seriously limited the market

(2) and so restricted both commercial and industrial scale.

vii) **England was a major exception:**

(1) though England had a feudal aristocracy, with dukes and earls and barons, their feudal fiefs were scattered over the British Isles, as noted earlier, and never organized as separate principalities; and English counties -- 39 -- did not correspond to feudal political units.

(2) England was therefore the first important European country to enjoy both national and economic unification: effectively from the mid-12th century, from the reign of King Henry II (1154-1189), which followed the baronial civil war era of King Stephen (1135-54), whose rule had been contested by [Queen] Mathilda.

(3) Indeed Henry II was the first king effectively to impose a nationally uniform Common Law on England.