Feudalism in Medieval Europe

E.Q. What were the roles of the feudal system in Europe and how did the system affect the quality of life for people in each class?
Vocabulary

- **Vassal** – noble who served a lord of higher rank
- **Fief** – land granted to a vassal
- **Knight** – vassals who fought in wars
- **Serf** – peasants
- **Manors** – lands of the fief (estates) owned by lords
Feudalism

The chaos and disorder following the fall of Rome led to the creation of a political and social system throughout Europe known as Feudalism.

This system created a way for kings and nobles to hold onto their land during this time of constant warfare. Don’t forget: land = power!!
Feudalism is based on three principals:

- Ownership of land
- Service
- Loyalty
Kings and queens were at the top of the social structure.

Kings ruled over large areas of land or kingdoms.

Kings gave land called fiefs to vassals in exchange for loyalty (money and soldiers).

Kings could take away the land if the vassals were no longer loyal to him.
Nobles (Lords)

- Wealthy landowners who were loyal to king
- Were given land by king for their service
- Collected taxes and enforced laws on their estates
- Controlled all resources on the estate – natural (land, forests, water, etc) and the buildings, people etc.
- Provided protection for those living on his fief
- Different levels of nobles – higher nobles & lesser nobles – depending on how much wealth and land gained.
Church Officials

- Bishops and cardinals within the Roman Catholic Church
- Often of noble birth
- Just below pope in the hierarchy of church
- Had power within church and social structure
- Had same status as nobles

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Knights

- Warriors who pledged to defend their lords’ lands in exchange for a fief
- Were loyal to the nobles above them
- Different levels of knights – lesser knights and higher knights
- Lived by a code of chivalry – (expected to obey his lord, be brave, show respect to women of noble birth, to honor the church, and to help people)
Serfs (Peasants)

- The majority of the people were in this group.
- A few peasants were free and paid the lord for the right to farm the land.
- Most were serfs – could not leave land, own property, or marry without lord's approval.
- Worked at least 3 days a week for the lord. The other days could work to grow food for their families on small plots of land.
- Had to give a portion of their own crops to lord and pay him to use the estate's mill, oven, or other tools.
- Were provided protection by the lord of the estate.

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Kings and Queens
Kings and queens were the greatest lords of Europe, and all nobles and knights were their vassals.

Nobles
Nobles were vassals of kings and queens. Many were also lords of lower-ranking nobles and knights.

Knights
Knights served their noble lords in exchange for land.

Peasants
Peasants owned no land, so they were not part of the feudal system. But many peasants worked on land owned by nobles or knights.

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