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Pre-Modern World History

04 November 2025

The Rise of Feudal Oaths in Medieval Europe

With the fall of the Roman Empire around 500 CE due to invasions from many Germanic Kingdoms, there was a drastic shift in the correct way to establish order in society and government. The feudal system was on the rise by 800 CE and continued to flourish till around 1300 CE. Feudalism is a system in which security was provided to many in exchange for devotion and loyalty. The source, *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, contains two record-keeping documents that offer a great depth to what these oaths entailed and looked like. The first text, “How the Count of Flanders received the homage of his vassals”, was written in 1127 CE and describes what these oath-taking ceremonies would have looked like. The second document, “Pons of Mont-Saint-Jean becomes the man of the Countess of Champagne”, was written in 1219 and explains where this vassal's loyalties lie, as well as the various people he has made promises to. These contractual relationships formed a steady framework of power for some time and helped to fill the gap left by the Roman Empire’s power. Feudal oaths helped shape the societal organization of medieval European politics by leveraging personal loyalty to create a hierarchical social ladder while blurring the lines between religious obligations to their lords to have a stable and decentralized form of government. However, these loyalties had a way of causing overlapping conflicts of protection and alliances.

The social ladder was shaped around the vassals' loyalty and the promises from their lords in the form of a top-down system throughout Europe. The lords could provide for their vassals, which helped keep order in knowing who the local government was, "Did homage to the [new] count, taking up again their fiefs and offices and whatever they had before rightfully and legitimately obtained" (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, "How the Count of Flanders received the homage of his vassals", 2-4). Personal relationships form a new kind of formalized government. Protection and security come from the local lords because there is no way for the king to be able and support everyone. The lords will take the place as head officials in a way that makes their word more powerful than the king's. They provide safety, income, and shelter, which provides a different level of loyalty and respect as a superior. Political authority functioned through different levels of mutual relationships, not centralized laws, "Afterward the count, with a little rod which he held in his hand, gave investitures to all who by this agreement had given their security and accompanying oath" (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, "How the Count of Flanders received the homage of his vassals", 14-16). This exchange of wealth and future protection turned personal loyalty to the lords into law and property. The direct benefit that would be bestowed upon someone for the simple act of loyalty can persuade someone to follow anyone. The form of reciprocal relationships had a way of gaining more power in a local government. While the lords may be loyal to the kings, vassals prove to be loyal to the lords, and their only direct association with a king is the one their lord supports. In a feudal kingdom, loyalty and the social hierarchy are much more complex than a straight line down and more of a tiered pyramid effect.

These feudal oaths became intertwined with religious morals, making them even more binding and sacred because of the lack of separation of church and state in many empires and kingdoms. The vassals would give their loyalty not only by their words but by devoting their faith to God, “And, thirdly, he took his oath to this upon the relics of the saints” (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, “How the Count of Flanders received the homage of his vassals”, 13-14). By adding the extra insurance of religious proclamation, the oath became sinful to break. The power of the church during this era was extra powerful and tangled the lines of what it meant to be faithful. Swearing on one's loyalty seemed to become a holy act, assigning one's faith directly to their new political duties to their lords. Commitment of loyalty is brought to a new height when the idea of God watching over them is implied, “I swore by the saints that I would in good faith aid them and their heir with my people and fortifications” (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, “Pons of Mont-Saint-Jean becomes the man of the Countess of Champagne”, 5-6). Their service to the lords is completely aligned with religious devotion, which fuses faith and legal commitment. There is a high sense of moral sincerity expected in these feudal pledges, as loyalty could be considered a reflection of God's grace and honor. If he betrays his lord and his people, he carries the weight of betraying God as well. These feudal oaths created a system in which religious authority could legitimize law and order. This intertwining of faith and duty reinforced obligation and hierarchy, even if central institutions were weak.

Conflicting oaths would cross a fragile line, undermining political unity and creating tension between loyalties in different contexts, potentially harming the societal order in medieval Europe. A lot of the time, many vassals may have been promised and loyal to other lords, “Those

who had been previously enfeoffed by the most pious Count Charles” (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, “How the Count of Flanders received the homage of his vassals”, 1-2). This could generate political instability with overlapping and conflicting oaths. The shifting of loyalty muddies the waters of who aligns exactly with whom. With constant renewal of vows, alliances could shift easily, especially if the lords and vassals' mutual agreement wasn't being held up fairly. There are limits to how far loyalty can stretch, especially when it comes to family, “If necessary I will fight against Erard of Brienne and Philippa his wife, and against Adelaide, queen of Cyprus, and her heirs, and against all who would aid them; except that should the said countess or count or their people be against Milo of Noyers...neither I nor my people shall be held to go thither” (11.3 *Feudal Contracts and the Swearing of Fealty*, “Pons of Mont-Saint-Jean becomes the man of the Countess of Champagne”, 7-11). Blood is thicker than water and could also be thicker than any oath. It appears that if a lord requires action against a family member, the bounds of commitment seem to be weakened. If a family connection could override sworn loyalty to a lord, there is no way the system could be permanent in good standing. Feudal bonds are too flexible and prioritize certain loyalties over others in the face of conflicts. This shows how the feudal system relied on personal honor rather than institutional security, which could make it an unreliable form of government and unsuitable for sustaining that social order in the long term.

Overall, it is clear that the feudal oaths were important in providing a weak sense of stability during periods without a powerful government. Feudal oaths created the hierarchy of society in medieval Europe by using personal loyalty to establish the social ladder and keep local government more powerful than royalty. At the same time, the oaths confused the distinction

between laws and religious obligations owed to their lords, facilitating a decentralized form of government. Even so, these loyalties had a way of causing a tangled mess of oaths to multiple people and could lead to confusing boundaries of loyalty and faith because of personal relationships. As lords and vassals balanced competing loyalties, feudalism provided the necessary glue that held medieval society together, and the driving force that eventually tore it apart.