



# A Sweet Introduction to the Medieval Feudal System

A practical lesson teaching the key concepts of the medieval feudal system in a class role-play.

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## Links to the Victorian Curriculum

### CHRONOLOGY

Sequence significant events in chronological order to analyse the causes and effects and identify continuities and changes.

### HISTORICAL SOURCES AS EVIDENCE

Analyse the different perspectives of people in the past.

### HISTORICAL KNOWLEDGE

Significant beliefs, values and practices with a particular emphasis on changes to everyday life, cause and effect of warfare, and perspectives of death and funerary customs.

### MIDDLE AGES AND EARLY EXPLORATION

The significant social, cultural, economic, environmental and political changes and continuities in the way of life and the roles and relationships of different groups in society.

Perspectives of subject peoples and their interactions with power and/or authority of others.<sup>1</sup>

## Learning Intention

To gain a deeper understanding of the feudal system during medieval Europe.

## Success Criteria

I will be successful when I can:

- 1 Identify the relationship between the different levels of society within the feudal system of medieval Europe.
- 2 Explain how each level works.
- 3 Explain the overall benefit each level has to the society.

## Materials Required

- Character cards (see the Resources section later in this article).
- One envelope for each character card.
- Lollies – jelly babies or jelly beans work well due to their size. You will need approximately 250–300 lollies, depending on the size of your class.
- One cup per student.

OPPOSITE: Harvesting of wheat in medieval England, c. 1310–1320. (Queen Mary Master, British Library)

- Host script (see the Resources section later in this article).
- Reflection Sheet (see the Resources section).
- One seat per student.
- Large open area – you can use your classroom with the tables pushed to the side.

### Characters

- The Host (Teacher)
- The Monarch
- The Lord or Lady of the Land x 2 (A and B)
- The Bishop x 1
- Knights x 2 (A and B)
- Monks/Nuns x 4
- Free Serfs/Bound Serfs – however many students remain. Divide the remaining students so there are more ‘bound’ than ‘free’ serfs.

### Lesson Preparation

- 1 Print out character cards and place each of them in an envelope.
- 2 Name cups with character names – one cup per character.
- 3 Divide lollies into the following quantities:
  - Monarch: 0 lollies to begin with (but the student will need a cup)
  - Lord/Lady A: 25 lollies
  - Lord/Lady B: 20 lollies
  - Bishop: 15 lollies
  - Knight A: 10 lollies
  - Knight B: 10 lollies
  - Each Monk/Nun: 0 lollies to begin with (but each student will need a cup)
  - Free Serf: 10 lollies
  - Bound Serf: 7 lollies.

### Process of Lesson

This lesson works best when students have a basic understanding of the Middle Ages/medieval Europe.

Some good introductory video clips include:

- ‘The Middle Ages in 3½ Minutes’ – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6EAMqKUimr8>.

- ‘Medieval Europe: Feudalism’ – <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=HCPp7XWZfHo>. (This clip could also be used after this activity to cement key ideas of the lesson.)

### STEP 1

You can divide up the roles in one of two ways. Either by choosing students at random or predetermining which student will play each role.

### STEP 2

Hand out a character card to each student. Have students open their envelopes and arrange their chairs in the order below.

	Monarch	
	Bishop	
Monk/Nun		Monk/Nun
Monk/Nun		Monk/Nun
Lord/Lady A		Lord/Lady B
Knight of Realm A		Lord of Realm B
Free Serf		Free Serf
Bound Serf		Bound Serf

### STEP 3

The host (teacher) then reads out the script and the role-play progresses. Teachers should feel free to engage in any discussions that arise as the role-play progresses. Students may find certain elements unfair. These moments can often make for engaging and meaningful discussion.

### STEP 4

At the conclusion of the role-play, divide students into the following groups.

- Monarch and Bishop
- Lords
- Knights
- Monks/Nuns
- Free Serfs
- Bound Serfs.

Have students work in these groups to complete the Reflection Sheet. Engage in a discussion – this can happen as a whole class, in societal groups (from the role-play) or in randomly picked groups. Have students discuss the following questions:

1 Victorian Curriculum, ‘Levels 7 and 8,’ Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority, <http://victoriancurriculum.vcaa.vic.edu.au/the-humanities/history/curriculum/f-10#level=7-8&search=49b647b3-fcee-4d4c-8ea8-2e5fdf9c1d89>. Used under CC-BY-NC-SA 3.0 Australia.



LEFT: King John hunting a stag with hounds, c. fourteenth century. (British Library)

- How many lollies do you have left?
- Is this fair?
- What do you get in return for paying your taxes?
- Is this system fair? Why/Why not?
- Were you happy with the actions that the monarch took?
- Would you have replaced the monarch if you could?
- Why do you think people didn't simply 'replace' the king? (Teacher note: Discuss the idea of 'divine right' and 'absolute monarchy'.)

If students struggle to find discussion points, consider the following:

- Why does the bishop (i.e. the church) end up with so many lollies?
- Why do you think this was such a revolutionary model for society at the time?
- What benefits did the free and bound serfs have? (Further prompting about days working in the manor versus free days to work their own land may be needed.)
- How do the lollies represent power?

## Resources

### RESOURCE 1: CHARACTER CARDS

A template for character cards is provided at the following link: <http://www.htav.asn.au/documents/item/2633>

### RESOURCE 2: ROLE-PLAY SCRIPT

This is read by the host (teacher).

#### *Part 1: The Land*

*Monarch:* You prevail over all the land. You have all of its riches at your disposal: the land itself and the harvest it produces. However, there are barbarians all around you who are encroaching on every side of your kingdom, trying to take your land and dethrone you. In order to protect yourself, you decide to appoint tenants in chief. This takes the form of the two 'lords/ladies of the land.' You give one of them the better half of the land and the other the remaining lesser half. To assist you in maintaining your Christian faith and converting as many pagans as possible, Rome has appointed a bishop to take charge of the spiritual welfare of the land. You are to decide which side of the land he may build his cathedral on.

*Lord/Lady of the Land A:* You are in the king's good graces. You fought with him in the battle for his crown and his way of rewarding you is to give you the better half of the land in his kingdom. This land is worth 25 lollies.

*Lord/Lady of the Land B:* You are also in the king's good graces. You were his squire during the battle for his crown and his way of thanking you is to give you half the land in his kingdom and the title of lord/lady. You have received the worse half of the land. This land is worth only 20 lollies.

*Bishop:* You were the king's spiritual adviser during the campaign for his crown. Having successfully helped to place him on the throne and on orders from Rome, you receive land from the king to build your cathedral. This land is good land which can harvest excellent crops. This land is worth 15 lollies.

*Knights of the Realm:* You fought alongside the lord/lady of the land for many years. To reward you for your loyal service, you are bestowed with the honour of becoming a 'knight.' You also receive land and a title. This land is worth 10 lollies.

*Monk or Nun:* As you live in the monastery/convent you do not own any land and therefore have no lollies.

*Free Serfs:* You have been given land by the knights. As you are a free serf, you are able to work in your fields six days a week and reap the harvest. For your harvest, you receive 10 lollies.

*Bound Serfs:* As you are bound to your lord (knight), you must work his land or in his manor for three days of the week and may tend your own lands, which have been given to you by the lord, the other three. For your harvest you receive 7 lollies.

### *Part 2: Building Allegiances and the War Chest*

*Monarch:* You hear more and more about neighbouring kingdoms being invaded by barbarians. This frightens you and so you decide to make your lords swear fealty to you. You also need to fill your war chest and so you impose a tax of 5 lollies from each of your lords.

*Lord/Lady:* The king has requested that you swear fealty to him. You must repeat the following oath:

I promise by my faith that from this time forwards I will be faithful to his/her Majesty King/Queen \_\_\_\_\_ and will maintain towards him/her my homage entirely against every man, in good faith and without deception.

You are also required to pay an annual tax of 5 lollies.

You do not wish to give up your lollies, so you impose a tax of 7 lollies on your knights.

*Knights of the Realm:* If you pay your taxes from your own money, you will not be left with enough lollies to buy armour and feed your horses. You impose the taxes onto your serfs. They give you some of their harvest, which you are then able to sell and pay your taxes.

*Free Serfs:* In payment for the land that has been given to you, you are required to pay taxes in the form of crops from your field. You must pay 3 lollies in tax.

*Bound Serf:* Your lord (knight) has imposed a tax. You are required to surrender some of your crops in payment. You must pay 3 lollies as tax.

### *Part 3: Word from Rome*

*Monarch:* You receive word from Rome that you are being blessed with a cathedral. You are busy trying to raise money for your war chest. You decide to impose another tax on your kingdom to finance this cathedral. You impose a cathedral tax of 3 lollies on your lords.

*Lord/Lady:* Your king taxes you a further 3 lollies to raise money for his/her cathedral. You pass this tax onto your knights.

*Bishop:* In order to spiritually support your king/queen, you offer 5 lollies of the church's money. This money must come from the monks/nuns.

*Knights of the Realm:* If you pay your taxes from your own money, you will not be left with enough lollies to buy armour and feed your horses. You impose the taxes onto your serfs. They give you some of their harvest, which you are then able to sell and pay your taxes (1 lolly from each serf).

*Monk/Nun:* You receive word from the bishop that you are required to pay 6 lollies towards the king/queen's cathedral. You protest saying you have no money or goods. The bishop reminds you that the souls of those who do not support the king, ordained by God, will hang in the balance. To raise this money, you impose a tax on those who worship at your church. All the lords, knights and peasants worship in your church, and each pays 1 lolly.

*Free and Bound Serfs:* You are reluctant to attend church in order to avoid the tax. You receive a visit from the monks/nuns

reminding you that those who do not attend church are considered pagans and will be executed. You pay the 1 lolly tax.

*Part 4: Invasion and Famine*

*Monarch:* Famine hits the kingdom. The drought causes nothing to grow for six months. All members of the kingdom lose 2 lollies. Areas of your kingdom are being invaded by barbarians. You send the knights of the realm to stop the invasion.

*Knights of the Realm:* Your lands are attacked by barbarians. By order of the king/queen, you defend your land and the peoples who live and work on it.

*Free and Bound Serfs:* You are attacked by barbarians. Your lord (knight of the realm) comes and protects you. Your crops are safe and you do not lose any lollies.

REFLECTION SHEET 1

Which role did you have in the activity?
If you could have chosen, which role would you want to be and why?
How did you feel at the beginning of the activity?
How did you feel at the end of the activity?