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Feudal society—the feudal pyramid

The feudal pyramid

‘Feudalism’ is a term used to describe the way in which medieval society was organised. Feudal society was like a pyramid with the king at the top, followed by the nobles, and the peasants at the bottom. Feudalism developed slowly in Britain. The Anglo-Saxons had a form of feudalism based on loyalty to the ‘thegn’, or chieftan, but this changed after 1066 when William of Normandy brought European feudalism with him when he invaded England.

The king was at the top of the social pyramid. For most of the medieval period he had absolute power, which meant that he made all the laws and political decisions for his kingdom. He owned all the land but could not manage it all himself. He kept about a quarter of it and rented half to his chief nobles, or barons, who were called ‘tenants-in-chief’. In return, the nobles paid taxes to the king and provided him with soldiers during times of war. The king gave the other quarter of the land to the Church.

In order to prevent any one noble from becoming too powerful by owning a large area of land in one place, the king gave the nobles land that was scattered all over the country. This meant that the tenants-in-chief could not manage their land, so they rented their land to lesser nobles, the knights and gentlemen.

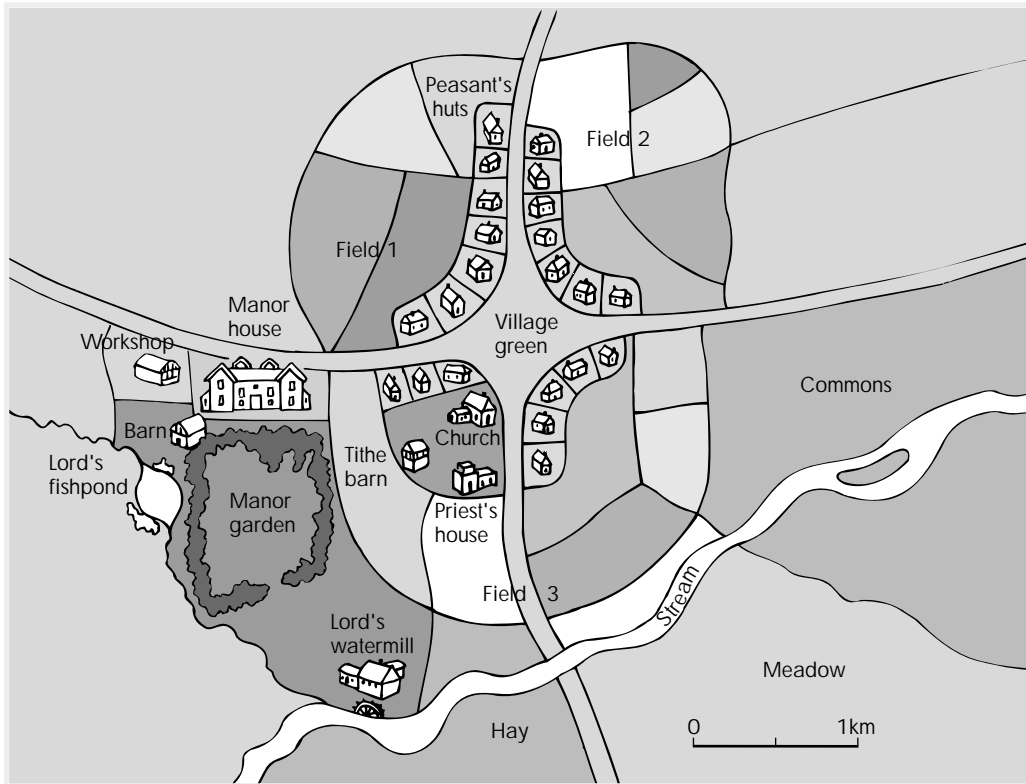
The knights could not manage all their land either, so they kept some for themselves and allowed the peasants to rent the rest. From the rents they collected from the peasants, the knights paid their rents to the tenants-in-chief.

The monks farmed some of the Church land but the rest was also rented to the peasants. Instead of having a knight as their lord, these peasants paid their rent to the Church.

The peasants made up the majority of the population. They were at the bottom of the social pyramid and they had few rights and no political power. They lived like slaves and were called ‘serfs’. They worked on the lord’s land and were not allowed to leave it. The three classes of serfs were the *villains*, who held up to thirty acres; *bordars*, who held between ten and fifteen acres; and *cottars*, who had a cottage and a small plot of land.

The duties of the peasant were to work on the lord’s land (called a *manor*) for three days a week and provide him with a certain amount of food, such as corn, meat, eggs, ale, as well as wool and wood, each year. The peasant was also obliged to pay the knight taxes on special occasions, such as marriage or the birth of child. In return, the peasant was able to use the knight’s mill, bread oven and brew house, but, of course, had to pay for their use. There were some advantages for the peasant. He was sure of having some land for planting his crops; a place to graze his cattle and sheep; and the lord was bound to protect him and his family.

The manors or areas of land owned by the kings and nobles were different sizes. Sometimes there were several villages in a manor. In the twelfth century England’s population was approximately three million people, and usually only about one hundred people lived on a manor. The serfs lived in one-room cottages built of wood and thatch. Around each village were three large open fields and woodland. The land held by the lord was called the *demesne*.



A medieval manor

- 1 Re-read the information about the structure of feudal society.
- 2 Write the names of the different groups in feudal society *inside* the pyramid below.
- 3 Redraw or cut out photocopies of the pictures of the different groups in feudal society and paste them in their correct position on the *left* side of the feudal pyramid.
- 4 Write summary notes about each group in feudal society on the *right* side of the feudal pyramid, making sure you mention the role these people played in feudal society.

Put pictures here ↓	Put names here ↓	Write information here ↓	
		<p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p> <p>.....</p>	 King Tenants-in-chief barons and archbishops Tenants abbots, knights Peasants

The feudal pyramid



Magna Carta is a Latin term that means 'Great Charter'. It is a famous legal document that was signed by King John at Runnymede in June 1215. The king was forced to sign it by a large group of rebel barons with whom he had been engaged in a civil war. The barons had come to resent the fact that the king held absolute power in the land and was forcing them to pay huge taxes to finance an expensive war against the French. Any baron who could not pay the tax demanded was severely punished.

Although the barons did not have the power to make laws and decisions for the nation themselves, they were rich and powerful in their own right because they had been given land by the king. They became rich from the money paid to them in rent by the peasants who lived on their land. They were powerful because they had private armies of soldiers that they used to serve the king in wartime.

A group of rebel barons became dissatisfied with their situation and demanded that the king listen to their complaints. The king ignored them so they decided to go against the king and force him to hear their story. It was not until they finally captured London that King John agreed to meet them to discuss their rights at Runnymede, a meadow by the River Thames.

After a week of talks, John reluctantly agreed to sign a charter, or agreement, which outlined the rules that governed the amount of power the king and the barons would share. It ended the absolute power of the King of England. With later charters, it formed the basis of government and English law. It abolished burdensome taxes and forced the King to declare:

No free man shall be taken, or imprisoned, or deprived of his land,
or outlawed, or exiled or in any other way destroyed, nor shall we go
against him or send him except by legal judgement of his peers or by
the law of the land.

Unfortunately, King John soon went back on his word and civil war broke out again. However, he died in the following year, 1216, and the *Magna Carta* did not become official until over eighty years later when it was made law by King Edward I in 1297.

The *Magna Carta* is an important historical document because it has come to symbolise freedom for many people. Although the *Magna Carta* was only the first step in the long journey towards democracy in Britain (extending over 700 years), many see it as the first declaration of the rights of the common people against the absolute power of the king. It is regarded by the English, (and people in other countries like Australia that have adopted English laws) as their chief defence against unjust rule and the abuse of power.

- 1 How well did you understand the text? Carefully read the information about the *Magna Carta* and make notes on the important details.
- 2 Without looking at the information sheet again, fill in the blank spaces in the following passage.

Magna Carta

Magna Carta is a Latin term that means _____. It is a famous legal document that was signed by _____ at Runnymede in June. The king was forced to sign it by _____. They had come to resent the king because he held _____ and he was _____.

Although the barons did not have the power to make laws and decisions for the nation themselves they were rich and powerful in their own right because they had been given _____ by the king. They became rich from _____. They were powerful because _____.

A group of rebel barons became dissatisfied with their situation and demanded that the king listen to their complaints. The king ignored them so they decided to _____. It was not until they finally captured _____ that King John agreed to meet them at _____, a meadow by the River Thames, to discuss their rights.

After week-long talks, John reluctantly agreed to sign a charter, or agreement, which outlined _____. It ended the _____ of the King of England. With later charters, it formed the basis of _____ and English _____. It also abolished _____ the king had forced the barons to pay.

Unfortunately, King John soon went back on his word and civil war broke out again. However, he died in _____, and the *Magna Carta* did not become official until over eighty years later in 1297 when it was made law by _____.

List two reasons why the *Magna Carta* is an important historical document:

- 1 _____
- 2 _____