

ESSAY QUESTION

20 minutes for one of these questions (60 points)

1. “The feudal system of the Middle Ages may seem restrictive and unfair to our modern minds, but it was a great improvement over the chaos of the early Dark Ages.” Support this statement with details about the way feudalism provided safety, social stability, and steadier food supplies.

Points an Excellent Answer Might Include

Benefits of Feudalism

- Protection from overlords against marauding barbarian or Viking tribes
- Castle as a place of public refuge in the event of an attack
- Organized for common defense
- Local rulers able to restore law and order
- Resurgence of justice, with someone to enforce the laws
- No longer a routine destruction of crops in wartime by pillaging armies
- Personal responsibility of lords to improve their lands
- Time to employ agricultural ingenuity: swamp drainage, rigid horse collars, etc.
- Social stability, with each person having a known place in society and faithfully filling that place, however lowly

Sample Answer

The feudal system of the Middle Ages may seem restrictive and unfair to our modern minds, but it was a great improvement over the chaos of the early Dark Ages. As it developed, feudalism provided safety, social stability, and steadier food supplies to many European people.

Safety was one of the biggest advantages that feudalism provided to the common people of Europe. Previously, ordinary people had no protection against marauding barbarians or Vikings. Under feudalism, however, noblemen pledged their services to a lord in exchange for his protection. When attacks came, they and the peasants who worked their land could hide in the castle and be safe. The lord promised to defend them, and they helped defend each other. Thus, feudalism greatly improved the general safety.

The social stability of feudalism was also a blessing after the chaos of the Dark Ages. Since the fall of Rome, social stability had greatly deteriorated. No longer did Rome make laws, enforce justice, or provide leadership. Rising to fill this social void, feudalism created a strict place for each person in society. Although the hierarchical system of feudalism was rigid, at least it made it clear who was ruling. Kings could make laws and enforce them. Nobles were responsible to provide for the welfare of their peasants. Because people understood their responsibilities and fulfilled them, the social stability of feudalism was definitely preferable to anarchy.

Increased safety and stability under feudalism led to a much steadier food supply. With order restored, crops were no longer constantly being trampled by invading armies. People had time to improve their farming techniques. The lords took charge of improving their manors by draining swamps and pursuing other developments. All of this allowed Europeans to enjoy a much steadier supply of food and a more comfortable life.

From a modern perspective, feudalism often looks like an unpleasant way to live. From the perspective of the times, however, the safety, social stability, and steadier food supply it provided made it a great improvement over the chaos of the Dark Ages.

2. Sir Robert is a hypothetical nobleman living in Normandy at the time of William the Conqueror. In a narrative essay, describe the ceremony by which Sir Robert becomes William's vassal, Sir Robert's role in helping William conquer England, and how Sir Robert becomes a lord after William is crowned king. Incorporate as many facts as you can about the way feudalism and the lord-vassal relationship operated during the Middle Ages.

Points an Excellent Answer Might Include

Investiture Ceremony

- A man places both of his hands between a lord's and does homage, swearing to be the lord's "man," to be loyal to him, and to fight for him.
- The lord promises to treat the vassal with honor, sometimes symbolizing this with a kiss.
 - The lord invests the vassal with a fief.
 - The gift of the fief is symbolized by a clod of dirt, a stick, a banner, or some other token.

Responsibility of Vassal to Lord

- A vassal must give his lord military support.
- A vassal owes his lord allegiance.
- A vassal may be an advisor or councilor to his lord.
- A vassal may become a lord himself, if another man swears fealty to him.

Responsibility and Rights of Lord to Vassal

- A lord provides a vassal with a fief.
- A lord often acts as a judge and receives taxes from his vassal.
- A lord has the rights of "wardship" (caring for a vassal's child if the parents die and choosing a spouse) and "aids" (being ransomed by his vassals, if he is captured).
- A lord rewards vassals who serve him with treasures and honor.

Sample Answer

On the morning of his investiture ceremony, Sir Robert rose early. On this day, he would pay homage to William, Duke of Normandy, and become his man. Sir Robert entered the Great Hall slowly, walking to the chair where William sat. Kneeling before his new lord, Sir Robert extended his hands, and the duke covered them with his own. Sir Robert promised to be loyal to his lord and pledged his own sword and the sword of ten knights to fight for the duke if he should call for them. With a smile, William accepted Sir Robert's homage, raising Sir Robert to his feet and kissing him. Turning, William took a clod of dirt from a page and gave it to Sir Robert to signify the fief which would be Sir Robert's to command, under William's authority.

Sir Robert had possessed his fief for a year when William called him to fulfill his promise of support. The duke was sailing to England to claim the English throne, and he required the service of his vassals. Eager to keep his promise, Sir Robert led his knights under William's banner. As William marched to Hastings, he consulted Sir Robert and his other vassals about a strategy for attack. When the lines were drawn at the Battle of Hastings, Sir Robert led his knights in a fierce charge. They fought courageously, breaking through the English lines and capturing several Anglo-Saxon lords. The enemy was defeated.

After being crowned king, William graciously rewarded his faithful vassals. To Sir Robert, he granted power over ten fiefs, which Sir Robert in turn gave to his knights, who became his vassals, as well as liege men of King William. As a new lord in England, Sir Robert acted as a judge for his people and received taxes from his vassals. He exercised the right of wardship over his vassals' children and sought to reward his men when they served him faithfully and valiantly. To the end of his days, Sir Robert fulfilled his oath of fidelity to King William and left his lands and position to his son after him.

ALTERNATE QUESTION

NOTE: If your student is studying Government as well as History, you may wish to assign this essay to your student instead of the essays above.

3. “Although the feudal system often interfered with kings’ efforts to unify their people, in England it actually contributed to the rise of a centralized state.” Support this statement with details about the feudal system and the specific governmental developments in England.

Points an Excellent Answer Might Include

Feudalism Generally

- Feudalism tended to strengthen local lords at the expense of kings.
- Local lords administered justice and had the direct loyalty of their subjects.
- Local lords also provided immediate protection to their subjects and were visible people who commanded their subjects’ allegiance.

Feudalism in England

- Feudalism strengthened William the Conqueror because the lords all swore allegiance directly to him.
- Norman kings guaranteed justice for the whole realm through the “king’s court.”
- Englishmen paid taxes to the same king.
- Englishmen had a common allegiance to one king.
- England’s geographic position protected it somewhat from invasions, making it easier for a strong, central government to develop.

Sample Answer

Although the feudal system often interfered with kings’ efforts to unify their states, in England it actually contributed to the rise of a centralized state. As English history shows, a strong feudal government could help to consolidate power in the hands of one king by making the nobles accountable to him, making him the ultimate judicial authority, and giving the people a common allegiance.

The English feudal system helped the king to consolidate power in his hands. After the Norman invasion, King William the Conqueror made all the landholders in England swear allegiance directly to him. Their power was not their own. This gave the English kings strong, centralized control over their kingdom.

Another strength of English feudalism was the king’s control over the judicial system. The Norman kings established “king’s courts” to try serious crimes. This guaranteed justice to the whole realm. It also gave the people a sense of being Englishmen, responsible to the king. This helped to further unify the country under the king.

The effect of the kings’ centralized power was to give the English people a sense of common allegiance. All Englishmen paid taxes to the same king. They received justice in the king’s court. They had a much closer connection to their king than existed in most other feudal societies. This played a critical role in England’s development as a nation-state.

As England’s experience shows, the feudal system could contribute greatly to the development of a modern nation-state. Direct royal control over the landholders, king’s courts, and a common sense of allegiance to the king helped unite all of England into one strong kingdom.