

The Feudal System

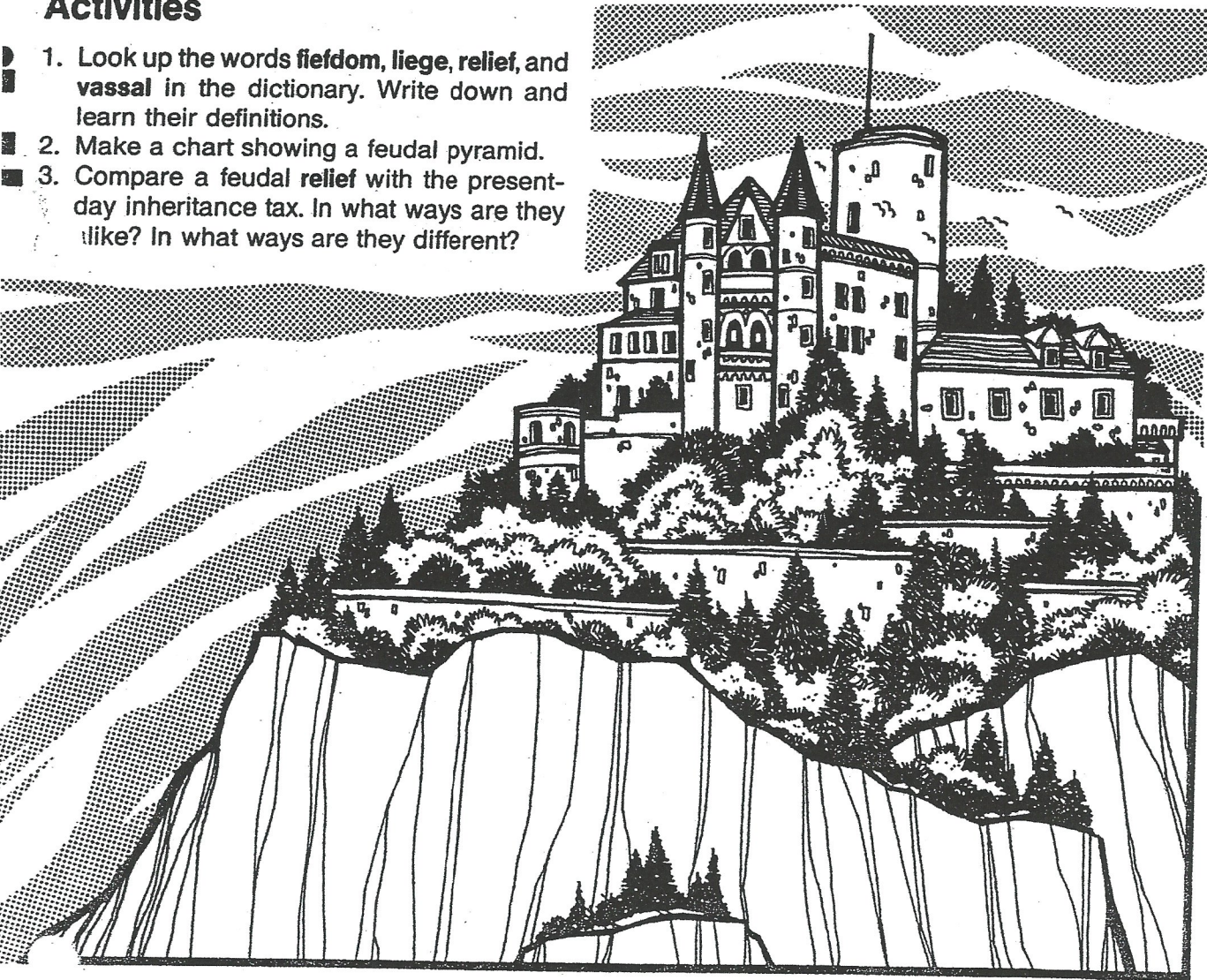
The feudal system was much like a pyramid. At the top was a king or a very powerful lord. Under him were a number of **vassals**, lower lords who owed loyalty and service to him. Each of the king's vassals was also a lord with vassals of his own. Sometimes, there were many levels of **liege lords**—lords who had the right to feudal allegiance—and vassals.

Each lord was in charge of a **fiefdom**, which belonged to a more powerful lord or to a king and usually consisted of a castle or fortress and enough surrounding land and forest to supply the needs of the castle. The lord was given the right to collect tolls and taxes from those living on or crossing over his land.

Vassals were required to pay for several items: the cost of any war waged by the lord; the ransom if the liege lord or any members of his family were captured; the cost of knighting the lord's first son; and the expenses associated with the marriage of his eldest daughter. When the lord died, his eldest son inherited his title and control over the fiefdom, but he did have to pay a huge death tax, or **relief**, to his father's liege lord. There were also great payments to be made to the church.

Activities

1. Look up the words **fiefdom**, **liege**, **relief**, and **vassal** in the dictionary. Write down and learn their definitions.
2. Make a chart showing a feudal pyramid.
3. Compare a feudal **relief** with the present-day inheritance tax. In what ways are they alike? In what ways are they different?



Knighthood

Knighthood was an enviable rank that could not be inherited; it had to be learned and earned. Only the eldest son of a noble had to prove himself worthy of this rank, and only the sons of nobles and knights were allowed to enter training for it.

Knighthood training was begun when boys were only eight or nine years old. All of their games were planned to prepare them for a life of fighting. They practiced archery, fencing, and horsemanship in mock battles with other boys. They were not taught to read, to write, or to work math problems, because none of these skills was necessary to a fighter.

When a knight-in-training turned fifteen, he was sent away from home to the castle of a friend or relative to begin his formal training as a **page**. There, an older knight taught him battle techniques and the code of chivalrous behavior. He learned the customs of the tournament, and he learned to be gentle and polite. A knight was always supposed to behave like a gentleman.

At the age of eighteen, the youth became a **squire**. He was allowed to wear silver spurs and, for the first time, to go into combat with the knight to whom he was assigned. He served his master as a bodyguard and carried his master's armor and shield.



Knighthood

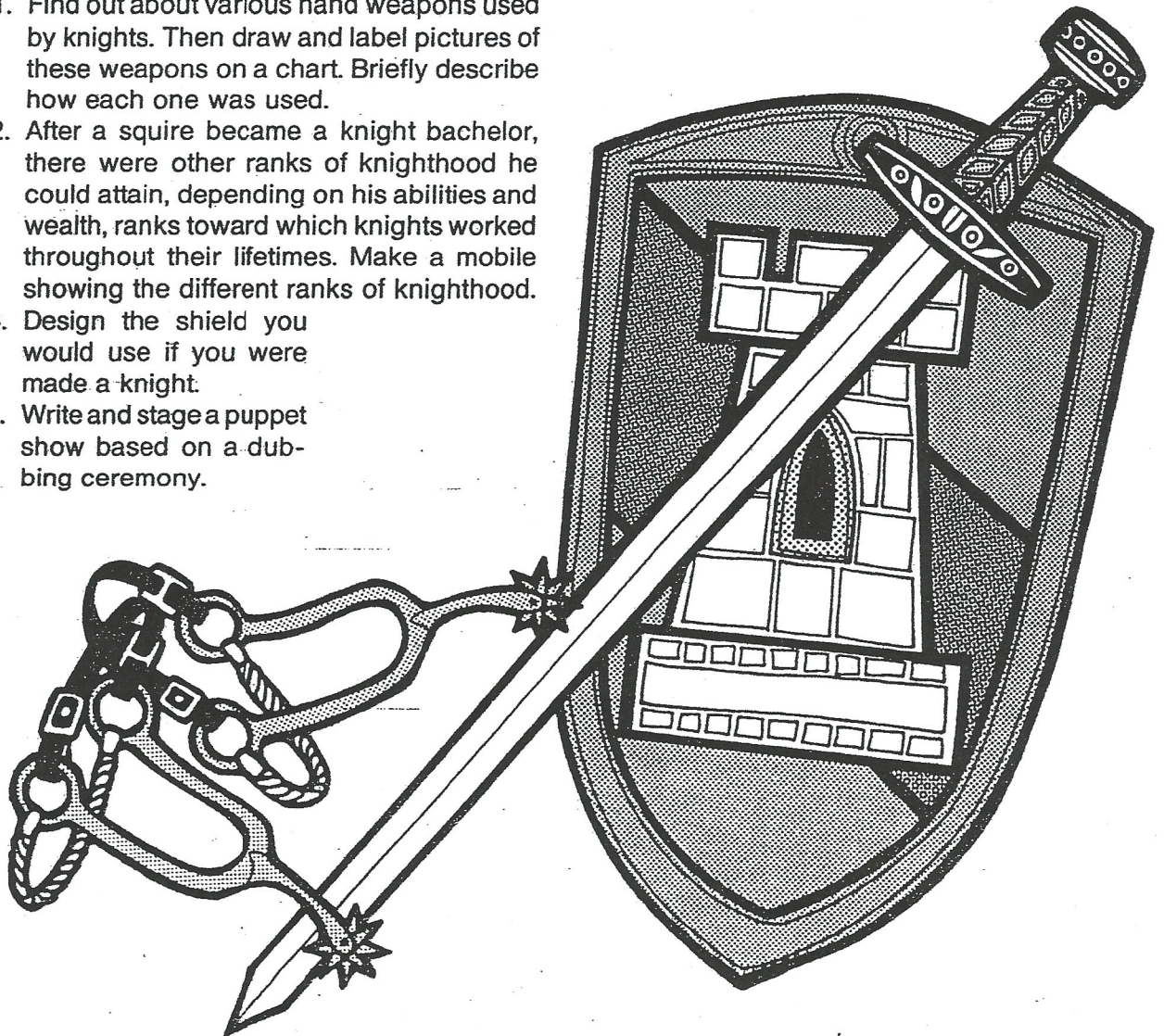
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When it was determined that a squire had learned his lessons well and was ready for knighthood, a simple ceremony was held in which he was **dubbed**, that is, officially made a knight. In preparation for this ceremony, the squire was bathed and then robed in white to symbolize the purity of his life as a knight. He knelt before his lord, who tapped him on each shoulder with the blade of his sword and said, "I dub thee knight." The former squire was now a **knight bachelor**.

The new knight received a variety of gifts. He was presented with a pair of golden spurs, which only knights could wear. He also received a new suit of armor, a sword, and a new shield emblazoned with his coat of arms. After the dubbing ceremony, he was the guest of honor at an elaborate banquet, which was held in the great hall to celebrate the occasion.

Activities

- 1. Find out about various hand weapons used by knights. Then draw and label pictures of these weapons on a chart. Briefly describe how each one was used.
- ▲ 2. After a squire became a knight bachelor, there were other ranks of knighthood he could attain, depending on his abilities and wealth, ranks toward which knights worked throughout their lifetimes. Make a mobile showing the different ranks of knighthood.
- 3. Design the shield you would use if you were made a knight.
- 4. Write and stage a puppet show based on a dubbing ceremony.



You Had to Be Smart to Play a Fool

Jesters were professional “fools” or jokesters whose job it was to amuse kings, nobles, and their families. Originally they were troubadours who sang and told gestes or stories of heroic deeds. As time went on jesters became buffoons or tellers of jokes. They began to be identified with a special type of suit made of half one color and the opposite half of another color. On their caps they sewed bells. They also wore long pointed shoes. Some jesters went to extremes to attract attention by shaving one half of their heads and half of the opposite side of their beards.

In some households the royal jesters became almost part of the family, and no doubt many of them were influential enough to give advice to kings.

In Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*, he immortalized a court jester in a scene where the skull of Yorick, court jester to Hamlet’s father, is dug up by gravediggers. Hamlet refers to Yorick as “a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.”

Questions:

1. What did jesters originally do? _____

2. Why do you think jesters wore unusual clothing? _____

3. Why were some jesters more important than just “fools”? _____

4. What was the name of the jester immortalized in Shakespeare’s play, *Hamlet*? _____

5. Do you think Hamlet was fond of his father’s jester? Why or why not? _____

6. Who would be considered the jesters of today? _____

7. What modern jesters wear costumes similar to medieval jesters? _____

8. How has the audience of the “tellers of jokes” changed since medieval times? _____

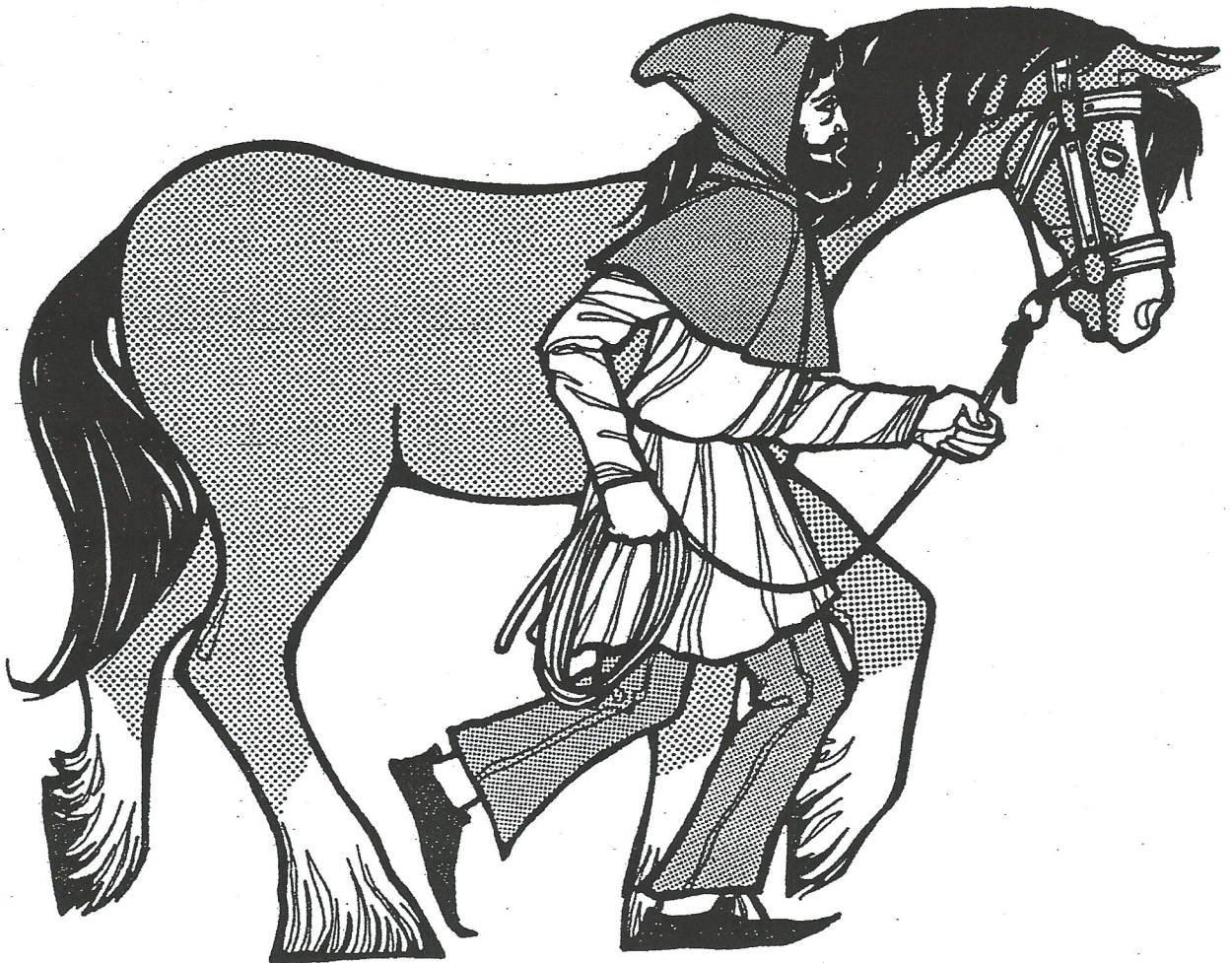
To make a jester of your own follow the directions on the next page.

Commoners

Commoners were those people who were not part of the nobility or of the church. They were divided into several classes. The **bailiff** was the agent of the lord. His duties included collecting the taxes and managing the fiefdom. The skilled **craftsmen** did all of the production work of the fief and included armorers, bakers, blacksmiths, carpenters, gardeners, horse trainers, leatherworkers, tailors, and weavers. The castle **servants**, including butlers, cooks, maids, pages, and valets, kept the castle running smoothly. The lowest of all commoners were the **peasants**, who were also called **villeins** or **serfs**. Similar to slaves, they were bound to the fief.

Activities

- 1. Compare the life of a medieval villein, or serf, with the life of an American slave before the Civil War.
- 2. There are many similarities between the life and social structure of a southern plantation and the life and social structure of a feudal manor. Do some research to learn more about both. Then write a paper in which you compare them. In what ways were they alike? In what ways were they different?
- ◎ 3. Write an editorial either for or against the feudal system. Justify your position.



People of the Middle Ages

Write the names of the people of the Middle Ages on the blanks provided on the next page. When you have finished, answer the questions at the bottom of this page.

1. *Knights-Crusaders*. Noblemen who sought to help recapture the Holy Lands from the Turks were Knight-Crusaders. *Crusader* comes from the Latin word *crux*, meaning cross. Crusaders often used the cross as a symbol.
2. *Serfs*. The serfs owned nothing. They lived on the lord's land, grew their own food and worked for the lord of the manor in his fields. They had no freedom. When necessary they fought the lord's battles. For all this they received protection.
3. *Nuns*. Religious women who left their homes to live together in order to save their souls were called nuns. The church welcomed all and no doubt many women entered nunneries to escape poverty.
4. *Shepherds*. Tending the sheep of the manor was the job of the shepherds. It was lonely and often unrewarding work.
5. *Noblewomen*. The ladies of the castle supervised the upbringing of their children, gave instructions to their servants on the day-to-day running of the castle. They spent some time making medicines from herbs and tending to the poor. If they were able to read, they taught reading to the pages. In their spare time they sewed or worked on tapestries.
6. *Monks*. Men who left the company of ordinary men to live together away from worldly temptations and affairs were called monks. They took vows of obedience, poverty and chastity. Their first concern was to save their own souls. Many became well educated, and as time went on monasteries became centers of learning.
7. *Pilgrims*. Medieval Christians made pilgrimages to the Holy Land to visit the places where Jesus lived and died. The travelers who made their way to these lands were called pilgrims. They traveled great distances to receive special blessings and to ask forgiveness for their sins.
8. *Troubadours*. No one is certain when troubadours began to appear. We know that most of their songs dealt with love between knights and ladies, of gallant deeds the knights performed and the inspiration of their ladies for those deeds.
9. *Bishops*. The Bishops were noblemen of the church. They sometimes ruled over large land holdings and had knights under them. The Church stood for mercy, piety and dignity of all before God. For many of the poor, rising in the ranks of the church was their only chance to become the equal of a noble.

Questions:

1. Compare three of the depicted people of the Middle Ages to their modern-day types and tell how their roles have changed.
2. Describe how a modern nun might be dressed.
3. List by name some current and popular "troubadours." Compare their position in society and how they work to the troubadours of the Middle Ages.