Experiencing European Feudalism
Experiential Exercise

This Experiential Exercise introduces students to the basic elements of European feudalism. Students assume the role of an individual in feudal Europe—a monarch, a lord, a knight, or a serf. Then, they go through a six-step process in which they divide land, establish loyalties, and negotiate the exchange of services for land. In doing so, students will understand the needs and responsibilities represented by each level of this land-based system. In addition, students will appreciate the relationships and inequalities that existed in feudal Europe.

Procedures at a Glance

Before you begin this activity, use Placards 3.1A to arrange your classroom into a "feudal kingdom." Project Slide 3.1A: Viking Invasion. As students enter the classroom, randomly give each student a Role Card 3.1B and tell them they are members of European society during the 12-century. Project Overhead Transparency 3.1C. Have students go through the six-step process outlined on the transparency. Remind students to follow the directions on their Role Card for each step. After students finish with the six steps, hold a class discussion to debrief the experience and compare it to feudal Europe.
Procedures in Detail

1. Before class, arrange the classroom into a "feudal kingdom" as diagramed on the previous page. Place one desk at the front of the class as the throne. Then create four manors by placing two desks together in four different areas of the room. Put the remainder of the desks on the periphery of the classroom. Use Placards 3.1A to label the throne and Manors A, B, C, and D. Also, make copies of Role Cards 3.1B in these quantities:

- 1 Monarch
- 4 Lords
- 10 Knights
- 5 Serfs: Manor A
- 5 Serfs: Manor B
- 5 Serfs: Manor C
- 5 Serfs: Manor D

(Note: With larger classes, increase the number of serfs. With smaller classes, decrease the number of knights and serfs. In all cases, this exercise must have one monarch and four lords.)

Idea for Student Response: To preview this activity, have students write a one-paragraph response on the left side of their notebooks to this prompt:
Define loyalty, and describe a situation in which it is important for someone to be loyal. Have three or four students share their responses. Afterward, explain that in this activity, students will learn how bonds of loyalty held European society together during the Middle Ages.

2. Meet your students at the door when the bell rings. As they enter the classroom, randomly give each student a Role Card 3.1B and tell them they are members of European society during the 12-century. (Option: You may want to roll each Role Card into a "medieval scroll" for students to read.) Have students stand around the periphery of the classroom.

3. Once students are standing quietly, tell them that this activity is designed to introduce them to the society that developed in western Europe after the fall of the Roman Empire. Project Slide 3.1A, which depicts a Viking invasion. Explain to students that after the fall of the Roman Empire, there were various waves of barbarians who attacked Europe from every side except the west, where the Atlantic Ocean afforded protection. Most feared of all were the invaders who sailed down from Scandinavia in the north to raid the coasts of England and France. These fierce warriors were known variously as Norsemen, Vikings, or Danes. They stole everything they could carry off and destroyed what they could not.
Because there was no central government to provide protection against these invasions, people looked to powerful lords and their bands of knights for security.

4. Next, project **Overhead Transparency 3.1C: Experiencing European Feudalism**. Cover it so that only “Step 1” is showing. This transparency outlines the six steps of the activity. The information on the **Role Cards**—organized step-by-step—directly corresponds with the six steps outlined on **Overhead Transparency 3.1C**. As you reveal each step of the activity, students simply read the corresponding “step” on their Role Card to find out what action they need to take. Here are guidelines for you to follow to ensure that each step of the activity unfolds smoothly:

**Step 1: Read the background information on your card.** As students read the description of the role they are playing—either monarch, lord, knight, or serf—circulate throughout the room to answer any questions they have. Do not proceed further until all students have a basic understanding of their role.

**Step 2: Monarch assumes the throne.** Tell the “monarch” to assume the throne. Before you reveal this step to the rest of the class, you may want to remind the monarch privately to walk in a stately manner when he/she assumes the throne. The rest of the class should watch quietly as the monarch assumes the throne.

**Step 3: Serfs go to their designated manor, sit on the floor, and bind themselves to the “land.”** Tell all “serfs” to go to the appropriate manor, which is indicated on their Role Card. Assist them in locating their manors. Have serfs quickly bind themselves to the “land” (desk). They must do this by holding a desk leg with one hand. Remind serfs that they will remain bound to the land for the rest of the activity. If students complain, tell them there is nothing that can be done to change their destiny. The rest of the class should watch quietly.

**Step 4: Lords approach the monarch and negotiate the exchange of fealty (loyalty) for land.** Tell the four “lords” to approach the monarch in a respectful manner. Insist that the lords kneel before the monarch—even if they are reluctant to do so. Direct each lord to make his/her request—“Oh powerful monarch, I humbly request land for my family”—to the monarch.

Next, have the monarch take the hands of one of the lords between his/her hands. Tell the monarch to dictate the following oath so that the lord can repeat it: “In taking this oath of fealty, I swear to be loyal to you all the days of my life, and I swear never to make war against you.” Have the monarch repeat this with each of the other lords. After the four lords have taken the oath, tell the monarch to tear off the “Fief Tokens” from his/her Role Card and give one to each lord. The rest of the class should watch quietly throughout this portion of the activity.
Step 5: Lords go to their manor and collect food payments from each serf. Allow the four lords to go to the manor that is designated on the “Fief Token” given to them by the monarch. Have them sit on top of one of the desks at the manor.

Tell the lord of Manor A to read to the serfs on the manor the statement that appears on his/her Role Card. It reads: “I have allowed you to live on and farm the land of my manor. In exchange for this privilege, you must give me a large portion of the food you have grown. In return, you can farm and live on this land safely, as I promise to protect you from harm. Give me three food tokens now.” Afterward, make sure all serfs in Manor A give the lord three of their “Food Tokens,” which appear on the bottom of the serfs’ Role Card. If serfs refuse, tell them that they will lose all points for this activity.

Have the lords of Manors B, C, and D repeat this process as the rest of the class quietly watches.

Step 6: Knights seek land and food by offering their military service to the lords. Tell the knights to go from lord to lord to try gain permission to live on a manor. Remind them that they must find a place to live and food to eat in exchange for their military service. At the same time, point out that the lords must have military protection for their manors. Tell both knights and lords to read “Step 6” on their Role Card for pointers in the negotiation process. Lords will offer “Food Tokens”—as many as they deem appropriate—for the knights’ military service. Knights are free to choose which manor they want to live on.

Allow knights and lords three to five minutes to negotiate. Make sure knights accept “Food Tokens” from only one lord. Once an agreement has been reached by a knight and a lord, have the knight to kneel next to the lord until the end of the negotiation period. (Note: Some lords will be skillful negotiators and may attract more knights to their manor than others. If a lord is having trouble attracting knights to his/her manor, suggest that he/she offer more food tokens to attract the knights.)

Once all knights have reached an agreement with a lord, tell the lord of Manor A to dictate the following oath so that the knight can repeat it: “In exchange for the food and land given to me, I promise to always be loyal to you. I swear to fight to the death in defense of this manor and the kingdom.” Repeat this process for Manors B, C, and D.

5. After the completion of “Step 6,” have students remain at their manors for the debriefing session.
Connecting the Experience with History

1. Hold a class discussion to debrief the experience. Center your discussion on these questions:

   • How does it feel to be a monarch? A lord? A knight? A serf?
   • How does it feel to be "born" into a role you could not change?
   • What appear to be the basic needs of all groups in this society? Who provided the land? The military protection? The food?
   • In what ways are the lord, knight, and serf dependent on each other?
   • Why do you think the loyalty oaths were necessary? What do you think would happen if someone broke a loyalty oath?
   • Who has the most power in this society? Who has the least?
   • What are some of the advantages of organizing a society in this way? What are the disadvantages?
   • Why do you think western European societies developed this system after the fall of the Roman Empire?
   • What factor(s) do you think could destroy the security of this society?

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Idea for Class Notes: On the right side of their notebooks, have students create a T-chart that compares their experience in this activity with what historians know about European feudal society. A completed chart might look like this:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Classroom Experience</th>
<th>Historical Reality</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>role in activity randomly determined by teacher</td>
<td>social class determined by birth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students could not trade or switch roles</td>
<td>no social mobility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the student playing the monarch controlled all of the desks in the classroom</td>
<td>monarch controlled all of the land in the kingdom</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students playing lords received land tokens after kneeling at feet of the student playing the monarch</td>
<td>monarch rewarded loyal supporters with land</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students playing serfs were required to tie their shoelaces to desks</td>
<td>serfs not free to leave lord's manor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students playing serfs had to give their food tokens to the lords</td>
<td>serfs produced food for manor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>students playing knights promised to protect the manors of lords in exchange for food tokens</td>
<td>knights offered military services to lords in exchange for land and food</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Idea for Student Response: On the left side of their notebooks, have students create an annotated diagram that describes feudal society in western Europe. The diagram should be labeled with these words: monarch, lords, knights, serfs, loyalty, and protection. Arrows should be used to show the relationships that existed among the different social groups. A completed diagram might look like this:
Throne
Monarch

Step 1: Read this background information: You are the monarch (a king or a queen). You own all the land in the kingdom. You will give away four pieces of your land, called fiefs, to the four most powerful nobles—called "lords"—in the kingdom. These fiefs are called Manors A, B, C, and D. These are represented by the four "Fief Tokens" at the bottom of this card. In return, the lords will promise their loyalty to you and will provide protection for you with knights (soldiers) who can be used to defend the kingdom.

Step 2: When your teacher directs you to, walk in a stately manner (like a king or a queen) and sit in the desk that is labeled as the throne.

Step 3: Quietly watch as the serfs go to their designated manor, sit on the floor, and bind themselves to the "land."

Step 4: The four lords will approach you, kneel before you, and make a request. They are seeking land grants—called fiefs—from you. In order for the lords to receive the land, you need a guarantee from them that they will be loyal to you and provide you with knights to protect your kingdom upon your request.

When your teacher directs you to, complete the following ritual with each lord. Place his/her hands in your hands. Then have the lord repeat after you this oath: "In taking this oath of fealty (loyalty), I swear to be loyal to you all the days of my life, and I swear never to make war against you."

Finally, after the oaths of fealty have been taken, tear off the "Fief Tokens" and give one to each lord.

Step 5: Quietly watch the lords collect food payments from their serfs.

Step 6: Quietly watch the knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords.

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Step 1: Read this background information: You are a powerful and wealthy noble. Your family has found favor with the monarch. As a result, you have the opportunity to obtain large land grants by promising loyalty to the monarch and providing knights (soldiers) to protect the kingdom.

Step 2: Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

Step 3: Quietly watch as the serfs go to their designated manor, sit on the floor, and bind themselves to the "land."

Step 4: When your teacher tells you to, approach the monarch in a respectful manner. Kneel before the monarch. When your teacher tells you to, say: "Oh powerful monarch, I humbly request land for my family."

In order to obtain the land from the monarch, follow his/her commands exactly.

Step 5: Look at your "Fief Token," and go to the appropriate manor—either Manor A, B, C, or D. Sit on top of one of the desks with the "Manor" sign on it.

When the teacher tells you to, say to the serfs: "I have allowed you to live on and farm the land of my manor. In exchange for this privilege, you must give me a large portion of the food you have grown. In return, you can farm and live on this land safely, as I promise to protect you from harm. Give me three food tokens now." Then collect three food tokens from each serf on your manor.

Step 6: The knights (soldiers) will circulate throughout the room to look for a place to live and a source of food. They will do this by offering their military service to you and the other lords. Since you need knights to defend your manor in case of attack by outside invaders, you must try to attract them to your manor by offering them food tokens and a place to live on your land.

Each knight may accept land and food from only one manor. Thus, you need to try to convince the knights to live on your manor. The more knights you can attract, the stronger your manor will be. You may offer a knight as many food tokens as you want, but remember, you must save some food tokens for yourself. Remember that a knight must find employment with a lord to survive.

Once you have reached an agreement with one or more knights to defend your land, have the knight(s) kneel next to you.

When your teacher tells you to, have your knight(s) repeat this oath after you: "In exchange for the food and land given to me, I promise always to be loyal to you. I swear to fight to the death in defense of this manor and the kingdom."
Step 1: Read this *background information*: You are a knight. You have been trained since your childhood to be a soldier. You need land where you and your family can live, and you need someone to grow your food because most of your time and money is devoted to maintaining your warhorse, armor, and weapons.

Step 2: Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

Step 3: Quietly watch as the serfs go to their designated manor, sit on the floor, and bind themselves to the “land.”

Step 4: Quietly watch the lords negotiate the oath of fealty with the monarch.

Step 5: Quietly watch the lords collect food payments from their serfs.

Step 6: You must gain permission from one of the lords to live on a manor. When your teachers tells you to, offer your military service to the lords in exchange for food and a place to live. Remember, the lords need military protection against outside invaders. And they have land and food—in the form of “Food Tokens.”

Approach each lord. Listen to what each lord has to tell you about his/her manor. Find out how many food tokens each lord is willing to give you in exchange for your services. You want to be able to provide well for your family, so try to get as many “Food Tokens” from a lord as you can. You may only accept land and food, however, from one lord.

Decide which manor you want to live on and defend. Kneel next to the lord until the teacher signals that it is okay to begin the final phase of this step.

To formalize your agreement, follow your lord’s commands exactly.
Serf: Manor A

**Step 1:** Read this *background information:* You are a serf. You are a member of the lowest class of society. You are not free, but you are not quite a slave either. Unlike slaves, you cannot be bought, sold, or traded. However, you cannot lawfully leave the manor on which you are born. You are bound to the land. Your life will be spent farming the land.

**Step 2:** Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

**Step 3:** When your teacher tells you to, go to "Manor A." Sit on the floor near the desks of your manor. Bind yourself to the "land" by holding one of the desk legs with one hand.

You must remain in this position throughout the rest of this activity.

**Step 4:** Quietly watch the lords negotiate the oath of fealty with the monarch.

**Step 5:** Your lord will come to your manor. Listen carefully to what he/she has to say to you.

When you are told to, tear off three of your four "Food Tokens." Give them to your lord. This is your food payment for the privilege of living on his/her land. You have no choice in this matter—if you do not pay, you will be executed.

**Step 6:** Quietly watch as knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords.
Serf: Manor B

Step 1: Read this background information: You are a serf. You are a member of the lowest class of society. You are not free, but you are not quite a slave either. Unlike slaves, you cannot be bought, sold, or traded. However, you cannot lawfully leave the manor on which you are born. You are bound to the land. Your life will be spent farming the land.

Step 2: Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

Step 3: When your teacher tells you to, go to “Manor B.” Sit on the floor near the desks of your manor. Bind yourself to the “land” by holding one of the desk legs with one hand.

You must remain in this position throughout the rest of this activity.

Step 4: Quietly watch the lords negotiate the oath of fealty with the monarch.

Step 5: Your lord will come to your manor. Listen carefully to what he/she has to say to you.

When you are told to, tear off three of your four “Food Tokens.” Give them to your lord. This is your food payment for the privilege of living on his/her land. You have no choice in this matter—if you do not pay, you will be executed.

Step 6: Quietly watch as knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords.
Serf: Manor C

Step 1: Read this background information: You are a serf. You are a member of the lowest class of society. You are not free, but you are not quite a slave either. Unlike slaves, you cannot be bought, sold, or traded. However, you cannot lawfully leave the manor on which you are born. You are bound to the land. Your life will be spent farming the land.

Step 2: Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

Step 3: When your teacher tells you to, go to “Manor C.” Sit on the floor near the desks of your manor. Bind yourself to the “land” by holding one of the desk legs with one hand.

You must remain in this position throughout the rest of this activity.

Step 4: Quietly watch the lords negotiate the oath of fealty with the monarch.

Step 5: Your lord will come to your manor. Listen carefully to what he/she has to say to you.

When you are told to, tear off three of your four “Food Tokens.” Give them to your lord. This is your food payment for the privilege of living on his/her land. You have no choice in this matter—if you do not pay, you will be executed.

Step 6: Quietly watch as knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords.
Serf: Manor D

Step 1: Read this background information: You are a serf. You are a member of the lowest class of society. You are not free, but you are not quite a slave either. Unlike slaves, you cannot be bought, sold, or traded. However, you cannot lawfully leave the manor on which you are born. You are bound to the land. Your life will be spent farming the land.

Step 2: Quietly watch the monarch assume the throne.

Step 3: When your teacher tells you to, go to “Manor D.” Sit on the floor near the desks of your manor. Bind yourself to the “land” by holding one of the desk legs with one hand.

You must remain in this position throughout the rest of this activity.

Step 4: Quietly watch the lords negotiate the oath of fealty with the monarch.

Step 5: Your lord will come to your manor. Listen carefully to what he/she has to say to you.

When you are told to, tear off three of your four “Food Tokens.” Give them to your lord. This is your food payment for the privilege of living on his/her land. You have no choice in this matter—if you do not pay, you will be executed.

Step 6: Quietly watch as knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords.
Experiencing European Feudalism

STEP 1

Role Card 3.1B

Read the background information on your card.

STEP 2

Monarch assumes the throne.

STEP 3

Serfs go to their designated manor, sit on the floor, and bind themselves to the "land."
STEP 4
Lords approach the monarch and negotiate the exchange of fealty (loyalty) for land.

STEP 5
Lords go to their manor and collect food payments from each serf.

STEP 6
Knights seek land and food by offering their military service to lords