



The Feudal Revolution and Beyond: New Directions in Medieval Studies

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ABSTRACT

The concept of a “feudal revolution” refers to the significant transformation in medieval European society between the 10th and 12th centuries, marked by the decline of centralized royal power and the emergence of localized seigneurial authority. Georges Duby highlighted how changes in landholding, social obligations, and military roles altered the structure of rural communities. This interpretation is examined alongside earlier views such as Henri Pirenne’s focus on the decline of Mediterranean trade, Marc Bloch’s emphasis on personal dependence and kinship, and Lynn White Jr.’s arguments about the role of agricultural and military technologies. Marxist historians like Perry Anderson analysed feudalism as a system of production shaped by class relations and economic control over land. In contrast, more recent scholars such as Susan Reynolds and Elizabeth Brown have questioned whether “feudalism” accurately describes the diversity of medieval experience, pointing out inconsistencies in its usage across time and place. The article draws on these perspectives to explore how newer approaches—particularly those grounded in regional studies and interdisciplinary methods—are offering alternative ways to study medieval social and political organization.



INTRODUCTION

The concept of feudalism has long served as a central framework in understanding the political, social, and economic organization of medieval Europe. Traditionally viewed as a hierarchical system based on land tenure and reciprocal obligations between lords and vassals, feudalism has been defined and redefined through competing scholarly interpretations. Early historians such as F. L. Ganshof (1947) approached feudalism narrowly, emphasizing legal and military obligations within a structure of personal bonds. In contrast, Marc Bloch (1961) expanded the scope by exploring feudalism as a broader social system rooted in ties of dependence and kinship, reflecting the complexities of medieval rural life.

A turning point in this discourse came with Georges Duby's (1978) proposition that the rise of local lordship and the imposition of new social relations in the 10th and 11th centuries represented a profound restructuring of society. Duby's notion of a "feudal revolution" shifted attention to the dynamics of seigneurial control and the transformation of peasant life. His work encouraged historians to consider not only institutional change but also ideological and cultural patterns, including the formation of aristocratic lineages and the emergence of the tripartite model of medieval society (Duby, 1980). Other interpretations have emphasized different causal factors. Henri Pirenne (1939) attributed the origins of feudal organization to the disruption of Mediterranean trade following the Islamic expansion, while Lynn White Jr. (1962) argued that technological advancements—such as the stirrup and heavy plough—played a crucial role in shaping medieval society. Marxist scholars, including Perry Anderson (1974), framed feudalism as a mode of production driven by class relations and surplus extraction through extra-economic coercion. In recent decades, critical voices like Susan Reynolds (1994) and Elizabeth Brown (1974) have questioned the coherence of feudalism as a category, arguing that it imposes artificial unity on highly diverse social practices. These debates continue to shape medieval studies, pushing scholars toward more localized and flexible approaches.

Research Objectives

The objective of the study is to critically examine the evolving definitions, causes, and interpretations of feudalism in medieval Europe by analysing key historiographical debates. It aims to

assess contrasting scholarly frameworks—legalistic, economic, ideological, and technological—while also exploring how recent research challenges the coherence of feudalism as a universal category.

Methodology

The study adopts a historiographical and analytical methodology, examining primary and secondary scholarly interpretations of feudalism across different periods. It engages with legal, economic, technological, and ideological frameworks, drawing on comparative textual analysis to trace shifts in academic discourse. The research relies on critical evaluation of established historians and evolving debates within medieval studies.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The earliest scholarly interpretations of feudalism were grounded in a narrowly legalistic framework that viewed it as a system of land tenure, military service, and lordly jurisdiction. Historians such as F. W. Maitland characterized feudalism as a political arrangement defined by the fragmentation of authority and the delegation of military obligations through private, personal contracts (Maitland, 1897). This understanding confined the concept to elite circles, focusing on voluntary ties between lords and vassals, and excluded the unfree peasantry, whose obligations were instead subsumed under the separate domain of manorialism. Such a definition, while technically precise, imposed strict boundaries that ignored the broader socio-economic conditions shaping medieval life.

The legalist view linked the origin of feudalism to the collapse of Roman imperial authority and the rise of Germanic tribal structures in the fifth century. Scholars like Max Weber described the resulting society as a "natural economy," lacking commercial integration and marked by self-sufficient households. Karl Bucher similarly described this phase as a "closed house-economy," reinforcing the notion of post-Roman economic regression (Bucher, 1901). By the end of the nineteenth century, this narrative of decline began to be reconsidered. Fustel de Coulanges proposed a theory that located the roots of feudal institutions in late Roman administrative and agricultural practices, particularly the *mansi* and *villa* systems (Coulanges, 1891). This argument gained support in the early twentieth century from



historians such as Henri See, Otto Seeck, and Alfons Dopsch, who emphasized continuity between Roman and medieval structures. Dopsch, in particular, rejected the notion of a wholesale collapse, arguing that trade persisted via Roman roads and that urban life and local markets remained functional even during the so-called barbarian invasions (Dopsch, 1904).

Even Ferdinand Lot, though he maintained that Antiquity's end was damaging, acknowledged the gradual nature of the transition and the sustained fusion between Roman and Germanic elements (Lot, 1927). These reassessments challenged the assumption of a sharp rupture and laid the foundation for more integrated models of medieval transformation.

THE PIRENNE THESIS

Henri Pirenne challenged the traditional explanation that attributed the origins of feudalism to the collapse of the Western Roman Empire at the hands of Germanic invaders. Instead, between 1922 and 1935, he argued that the Merovingian world retained many features of classical civilization well into the eighth century (Pirenne, 1937). Trade routes remained active, particularly through Syrian merchants who transported oriental luxuries—spices, fine textiles, wine, and papyrus—from the East to the ports of Gaul. The Roman gold solidus continued in use, symbolizing the survival of a unified Mediterranean economy. Indirect taxes on commerce (*tonlieu*) formed a substantial part of royal income, and the Mediterranean still served as a conduit of communication between the Frankish kingdoms and the Byzantine Empire.

Pirenne identified the disruption of this continuity with the rapid Islamic expansion in the mid-seventh century. As Muslim forces gained control over the Mediterranean coasts—from Gaul to Sicily—they severed the commercial links between Western Europe and the eastern Mediterranean. The economy of the Frankish territories, once dependent on external trade, turned inward. Cities declined, professional merchants disappeared, and gold currency was replaced by a silver-based economy. Contractual exchange gave way to subsistence agriculture, and payments shifted from money to kind (Pirenne, 1937). This economic isolation, Pirenne contended, led to the emergence of a land-based order where political authority was localized and personalized—conditions he identified as the foundation of feudalism.

The claim that Islamic expansion caused the fragmentation of Western Christendom attracted both support and criticism. Many historians, including R. S. Lopez (1967), disputed the notion that Arab conquests intentionally disrupted Mediterranean trade, pointing instead to continued activity in several ports. M. Sabbe's research into luxury commodity circulation suggested that trade persisted more than Pirenne allowed. F. L. Ganshof (1971) also questioned Pirenne's linkage between economic contraction and institutional change, proposing that internal dynamics of the Carolingian realm played a more decisive role. Despite such objections, Pirenne's thesis reframed medieval historiography. His insistence on economic causality and Mediterranean unity shifted scholarly focus from abrupt tribal invasions to gradual systemic changes. Though many of his conclusions have been revised or rejected, his methodology opened new lines of inquiry into the relationship between commerce, power, and institutional transformation in early medieval Europe.

The Pirenne thesis drew attention to external factors in the formation of feudalism but did not engage with the definitional structure of the term itself. As debates progressed in the early twentieth century, historians confronted the need to determine whether feudalism should be treated as a narrowly defined set of legal institutions or as a wider social and economic condition. Two major lines of interpretation emerged, each offering contrasting approaches to the subject. Historians such as F. L. Ganshof and F. M. Stenton advanced a legal-institutional model grounded in the post-Carolingian context. In this view, feudalism operated through voluntary and reciprocal obligations between free individuals—specifically, vassals and lords. The fief, or *feodalis*, functioned as the core instrument of this arrangement, facilitating military service and loyalty in exchange for protection and economic support (Ganshof, 1971). This framework reduced feudalism to a contractual system limited to the ruling elite and rejected any application of the term to relationships involving unfree or servile classes. It relied on documentation and terminology drawn from a specific legal tradition, thus narrowing its scope to a relatively restricted segment of society.

Marxist and Soviet scholars offered a different explanation, rooted in Karl Marx's theory of historical materialism. They viewed feudalism as a mode of production structured by class relations and defined by the absence of commodity exchange.



According to this approach, hierarchical ties among the military aristocracy were not autonomous institutions but rather expressions of deeper economic structures. These historians treated the personal and unequal bonds of dependence as by-products of an agrarian economy reliant on surplus extraction and constrained by the lack of a unified market (Dobb, 1946). Marc Bloch rejected both the contractual and the strictly economic explanations. Instead, he approached feudalism as a system of human relationships shaped by the disintegration of centralized authority. His emphasis fell on what he described as “ties between man and man”—interpersonal bonds that spanned across social strata and permeated every aspect of medieval life (Bloch, 1961). Protection and subordination became central organizing principles, not only within the aristocracy through vassalage but also among the peasantry through networks of servitude. Bloch noted the role of kinship and collective responsibility, as evidenced by the formation of peasant brotherhoods that jointly cultivated land and fulfilled feudal obligations.

In Bloch’s interpretation, feudal society was not static. He argued that the eleventh century marked a moment of transformation, giving rise to what he called the “second feudal age.” Demographic expansion, urban development, improved communications, and currency stabilization altered social values. Kinship groups contracted, and individual identity began to assert itself in both economic and legal settings. These developments were accompanied by cultural shifts, such as the revival of Roman legal principles and the consolidation of Latin Christianity. Despite its influence, Bloch’s model has faced criticism. Scholars have noted the absence of a clear mechanism explaining structural change. His chronological framework has also been questioned for lacking consistency, and his understanding of the state has been viewed as outdated. While Bloch’s contribution remains foundational, particularly for its focus on the human dimensions of feudal relationships, subsequent research has challenged the completeness of his analysis and called for more precise identification of the forces driving historical development.

Georges Duby sought to shift the focus of feudal historiography by rejecting narrowly economic or institutional explanations and turning attention toward the ideological and social foundations of medieval society. Drawing inspiration from Marc Bloch, Duby argued that

feudalism should be understood as a set of evolving relationships grounded in authority, kinship, and symbolic order. His landmark study of the Maconnais region, published in 1953, examined the transformation of local power from the tenth to the twelfth century. Rather than centering his analysis on the legal institution of the fief, Duby maintained that it played only a marginal role in the broader restructuring of medieval life (Duby, 1953). According to Duby, the real shift occurred when royal power weakened and castellans consolidated local control. Lesser landlords were subordinated through newly imposed vassalage, while peasants, regardless of previous status, were subjected to a form of lordship based on taxation rather than traditional tenure. This development, known as *seigneurie banale*, erased previous distinctions between freemen and serfs. All villagers now carried the burden of seigniorial levies. At the same time, lay-clerical distinctions grew more pronounced, as ecclesiastical elites defended their privileges from fiscal encroachment. Social hierarchy became increasingly defined by the right to bear arms, with mounted knights constituting a distinct rank within the lower aristocracy.

The term “feudal revolution” thus encapsulates not a sudden political event but a gradual realignment of social, familial, and ideological structures. The older economy of raids and tribute gave way to a land-based society where authority rested in inherited rights and kin-based inheritance. Aristocratic families reorganized themselves as patrilineages, and perceptions of order were reshaped in tandem with the changing realities of power and production. Duby’s model of decline avoided external shocks—such as Crusades or urban migrations—and instead traced internal pressures within the rural economy that slowly eroded traditional arrangements. In his later works, Duby expanded on these ideas through investigations into the symbolic and mental frameworks that governed medieval institutions. He studied family structures, marital customs, and the tripartite ordering of society into those who pray, those who fight, and those who toil. These inquiries reflected his interest in how imagined ideals shaped practical governance and social relations. Duby referred to these structures of perception as the “mental attitudes” of the medieval period (Duby, 1978).

Despite its influence, Duby’s framework has faced rigorous critique. Dominique Barthélemy challenged the very foundation of the feudal



revolution model, arguing that what Duby interpreted as major shifts in society may have stemmed from changes in documentary practices rather than real structural transformation (Barthélemy, 1993). Theodore Evergates questioned Duby's insistence on a binary between independent castellanies and centralized monarchies, pointing out that medieval political authority varied widely depending on local configurations. Feminist scholars such as Constance Bouchard raised concerns about Duby's limited treatment of women. They observed that his analysis failed to account for the diverse roles women played in transmitting property, forming alliances, and shaping religious and familial life. Moreover, Duby's tendency to rely primarily on ecclesiastical sources has drawn criticism for neglecting administrative documents produced by secular authorities. Despite these objections, Duby's model expanded the scope of medieval historiography by examining how ideology, kinship, and daily practice operated alongside law and economy. His analysis encouraged scholars to reconsider not only the mechanics of feudal society, but also the underlying mental frameworks that sustained it.

The Plough and the Stirrup Thesis

Lynn White Jr.'s contribution to medieval historiography shifted the debate on feudalism toward the role of technology, an area largely neglected by institutional and economic historians. In his 1962 work, White argued that technological innovations not only enabled the feudal system to function more efficiently but also directly influenced its development. His interpretation rested on the claim that agricultural and military tools transformed both the economic base and the structure of medieval society.

White grounded his analysis in the Christian valorization of labour, which, according to him, fostered an environment conducive to technical innovation. Agricultural advancements such as the iron plough, the crank, the water mill, and marling techniques for soil improvement increased productivity, even in the absence of centralized political authority and declining trade networks. Among these, the development of the heavy wheeled plough in northern Europe proved especially influential. Fitted with a mouldboard, horizontal share, and coulter, this implement made deep tillage of heavy clay soils possible. Its operational demands led to collective labor

arrangements, with peasants pooling their oxen—an arrangement that became foundational to the manorial system. The transition from the two-field to the three-field system marked another structural shift. This allowed for more efficient crop rotation and enabled the use of horses instead of oxen for traction. To support this change, new equipment such as the horse collar, tandem harness, and horseshoe emerged by the ninth century. The outcome, White asserted, was a measurable rise in labour productivity by the later Middle Ages (White, 1962).

In addition to agriculture, White explored military technology, most notably the stirrup. He contended that its adoption by the Carolingians enabled shock combat cavalry to become a dominant force. The stirrup stabilized the rider, improving both endurance and striking power. According to White, the need to support this elite cavalry class led to a reorganization of landholding and political structures, fostering a society dominated by mounted aristocrats who held land in return for military service. He concluded that this innovation shaped not only warfare but also the broader framework of feudal society. Critics have identified several problems in White's argument. Historians such as Rodney Hilton and Paul Sawyer contended that White relied too heavily on technical determinism, attributing structural social change to technology without adequately accounting for economic or political context. Perry Anderson raised further objections, observing that the existence of a technology does not ensure its immediate or uniform adoption. He noted the gap between the invention of tools and their integration into social systems, pointing to the uneven implementation of these innovations over two or three centuries (Anderson, 1974).

Military historians have also challenged White's claim about the stirrup's role in feudalization. Evidence from regions outside France shows the use of heavily armoured cavalry without stirrups well before 700 AD, and conversely, the continued use of stirrups in societies that did not develop feudal structures. Scholars such as Ian Heath, Philip Barker, and David Nicolle have credited the Avars and Lombards with introducing the stirrup to Europe and emphasized its use in the Byzantine and Islamic worlds. These findings weaken the argument that the stirrup was uniquely responsible for the emergence of feudal society in the West. Despite its limitations, White's work introduced a new dimension to the analysis of



feudalism. His focus on material conditions, particularly technological shifts, expanded the historical field beyond legal and institutional narratives and prompted further exploration into the interplay between technical change and social organization.

FEUDALISM AS MODE OF PRODUCTION

Marxist historians have consistently examined feudalism through the lens of production, class relations, and surplus extraction. Within this tradition, feudal society is not treated merely as a political or legal arrangement but as a mode of production rooted in land-based control, natural economy, and extra-economic coercion. Perry Anderson developed this interpretation with greater theoretical clarity in *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (1974), constructing a model that integrated historical materialism with comparative analysis across Europe. He sought to move beyond the fragmented legalist or ideological accounts by grounding feudalism in its economic foundations and structural contradictions.

Anderson challenged the notion that feudalism represented a decline from classical civilization. He instead argued that it was a more advanced mechanism for increasing agricultural productivity and surplus generation than the slave economies of antiquity. Lords extracted surplus from peasants through compulsory labour, rents in kind, and customary dues. These exactions were not economic in a market sense but enforced through juridical authority. The integration of political power with economic exploitation created a system where the peasant was legally subordinated and territorially bound, yet remained the direct producer. The structure of lordship was not static; each lord held obligations to a superior and rights over a subordinate, creating a multilayered chain of tenures culminating in the monarch, who in principle held sovereignty over all land. The absence of centralized sovereignty was not a flaw but a constitutive feature. According to Anderson, feudalism operated through what he termed the "parcellisation of sovereignty," where power was diffused but embedded at every level of local society. Political and economic authority were interwoven, yet sovereignty was never fully concentrated in a central state (Anderson, 1974). This framework helped explain why state functions were exercised locally and why the peasant's obligations were shaped more by lordly jurisdiction than by any centralized legal system.

Rather than tracing feudalism to a single origin, Anderson approached it as the product of overlapping transitions. He rejected the idea of pure modes of production and instead identified the European feudal formation as a synthesis of elements arising from the simultaneous breakdown of slave and primitive communal systems. His model was not uniform. Drawing on Soviet historians like Liublinskaya and Gutnova, Anderson identified three distinct zones of feudal development. The first, located in northern France and the Carolingian heartland, displayed a balanced combination of Roman and Germanic features. The second, in southern Europe, preserved stronger Roman legal and institutional traditions, especially in Italy and Spain, where freehold tenures and urban landholding persisted alongside manorial structures. The third, comprising England, Germany, and Scandinavia, experienced a much slower and often imposed transition due to the persistence of allodial peasantry and communal institutions. In regions such as Saxony, serfdom was only introduced in the late twelfth century, and in Sweden, it never became fully institutionalized.

Anderson insisted that the tension between lords and peasants was not merely exploitative but also productive. Lords sought to increase extraction through intensified demands, while peasants resisted or adapted through collective arrangements, technical adjustments, and localized negotiation. The productivity of the noble demesnes often exceeded that of peasant holdings, but the cumulative surplus eventually allowed producers to retain more for themselves. Customary limits on dues and the slow erosion of arbitrary exactions gave rise to conditions where peasants could secure improved economic terms.

Urban centres, which have often been portrayed as remnants of a declining Roman economy, were reinterpreted as dynamic components of the feudal formation. Anderson rejected the notion of medieval urban stagnation. Though smaller than their ancient predecessors, towns played an advanced role by developing commodity exchange systems that challenged the rural economy's reliance on natural exchange. A tension emerged between the fragmented rural structure and the increasingly organized urban economies. This contradiction facilitated a transition in which urban actors, especially merchants and guilds, supported processes like the commutation of dues and the absorption of runaway serfs into wage labour. Urban political autonomy



was made possible because of feudalism's inability to centralize sovereignty, thereby allowing towns to assert independent jurisdiction and promote legal reforms beneficial to trade and manufacture. Anderson identified the decline of feudalism not as an abrupt rupture but as the outcome of internal stagnation. From the mid-thirteenth century, rising population combined with limited technological advances led to falling yields and overexploitation. Lords intensified exploitation to preserve incomes, but this produced social unrest and labour shortages. The Black Death exacerbated the crisis, and attempts to reimpose servile conditions triggered widespread peasant resistance. Towns became active agents in undermining feudal ties by supporting the mobility of labour and the spread of money rents. As the capacity of feudal structures to organize production declined, the conditions for its dissolution were produced within the mode itself. Despite the analytical strength of Anderson's model, critics have pointed out its rigidity. The focus on class conflict as the primary driver risks flattening the diverse institutional and cultural variations that shaped feudal societies. His portrayal of feudal decline as a structurally inevitable consequence of productive limitations overlooks the unevenness of historical change. Nonetheless, Anderson's synthesis remains one of the most methodologically rigorous applications of Marxist theory to medieval Europe.

The debate on feudalism is far from being closed. In fact, in the recent years the debate on feudalism has taken another interesting turn. In a 1974 essay Elizabeth Brown has severely criticized the unthinking use of the term 'feudalism' to describe heterogeneous phenomena in medieval Europe and argued that attention must be paid to the shifting meanings of the key jargons (like fief and vassal) as well as to the diverse social realities they represented. Building on the work of Brown, the historian Susan Reynolds has questioned the validity of not only the term 'feudalism', but also the system it claims to represent. Reynolds argued that the previous historians had been too ready to read back the eleventh and the twelfth century legal terminology onto the much more variegated ninth and tenth century societies. This had ended up

creating a 'feudal world' which simply did not exist, or which, at most, described only small parts of France for short periods. The enormity of the claim has predictably led to a re-evaluation of the existent historical literature on feudalism.

CONCLUSION

The historical study of feudalism has produced a wide range of interpretations, each grounded in distinct methodological frameworks and analytical priorities. From its earliest conceptualizations as a form of decentralized government to more expansive readings of it as a social formation or mode of production, feudalism has resisted singular definition. Legalistic scholars initially framed it as a political solution to fragmented sovereignty, centred on vassalage and fiefs as instruments of governance. Henri Pirenne redirected attention to long-distance trade, proposing that the decline of Mediterranean commerce following the Islamic expansion prompted Western Europe to reorganize itself into a land-based, self-sufficient economy. Marc Bloch shifted focus toward interpersonal relationships, framing feudalism as a web of personal dependencies shaped by kinship and localized authority. Georges Duby interpreted feudalism as a social transformation rooted in the disintegration of royal power and the restructuring of lordship, which he termed a "feudal revolution." Lynn White Jr. placed technological innovation at the core of feudal development, particularly the adoption of the heavy plough and the stirrup, which he linked to agricultural cooperation and military specialization. In contrast, Perry Anderson examined feudalism as a historically specific mode of production based on class relations, surplus extraction, and the parcellisation of sovereignty, offering a model shaped by internal contradictions and structural change. These varied interpretations not only reflect the diversity of feudal experience across time and space but also raise key questions about power, economy, and social order. The debates surrounding the origins, operations, and transformation of feudalism remain central to medieval historiography and continue to inform broader inquiries into historical change.



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