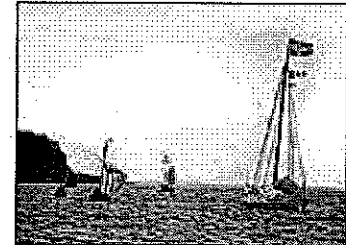


## Surviving the Viking Invasions (Overview)

Perhaps the best-known event of the early Middle Ages was the dramatic entry of Scandinavian peoples into the kingdoms of Europe. Beginning in the eighth century AD and continuing into the 11th century AD, the Vikings, in sleek, fast-moving ships, landed on the shores of France, England, Spain, the Mediterranean, and down the rivers of Western and Eastern Europe. Vikings are often viewed as savage and unsophisticated plunderers, but that is only part of their story—they were also settlers, traders, and explorers. In many ways, the explosion of Scandinavian peoples into Europe constituted a second major "folk movement," that is, a large migration of people from one area into another.

The first Germanic folk movement occurred in the fourth through seventh centuries AD and did much to transform the Roman Empire. Much like the earlier migration of the Germanic peoples, the Viking invasion was sometimes violent, sometimes peaceful. In either case, the invaders left home for complex reasons; while they often battled with settled peoples, both the early Germans and the later Vikings were more than "bloodthirsty barbarians." Frequently, they sought new homes and new trade contacts. In their search for new land and commerce, the Vikings also encountered new lands, most famously the northeast corner of North America.



### Into the Long Ships: Explanations for Expansion and Invasion

Scholars continue to explore the reasons for the arrival of the Vikings in Europe. One of the key reasons appears to have been overpopulation. With little arable land to sustain large numbers, many Scandinavians were forced to look for new homes. Another pressure was a consolidation of power among a few ruling families, the success of which pushed out other, lesser lords. Many of those petty chieftains found new sources of revenue and prestige in raiding. Others plied the waters of Europe as merchants. Still others packed up and looked for land that was either unoccupied or which they might take by force. In some cases, the chieftains were raiders, traders, and settlers all in one. For example, Danish Vikings not only preyed on English monasteries and villages but also settled in England and created the Danelaw. From there, they raided, traded, and lived.

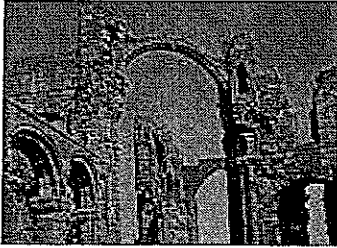


Some Vikings are best known as explorers. Leif Ericson, son of Eric the Red, may have been the first European to land in North America. On a return voyage from Greenland, Leif's ship encountered a storm and was blown off course. Instead of reaching Norway, he landed in the northeast corner of North America. A later saga mentions that Leif founded a colony, Vinland, and fought against the peoples who lived there, whom he called "Skraelings." Archaeologists have uncovered the remains of a Viking camp at L'Anse aux Meadows, Newfoundland, which gives credence to the fact that the Vikings visited North America around 1000.

### The European Reaction

While archaeology continues to add to our knowledge of the Vikings, much of what we know comes from surviving written accounts. The earliest accounts are largely hostile, and it is not hard to see why. For example, the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, one of the chief sources for early medieval Britain, describes raid after raid. To the English, the Vikings were heathen pirates bent on theft and murder. To be fair, there were numerous attacks, and the Vikings were especially adept at quick, brutal assaults. Monasteries that housed valuable books, reliquaries, and such sacred vessels as chalice, paten, and pyx, had little defense and were easy targets. The story was similar

elsewhere; France, Ireland, Italy, and Spain all suffered similarly. To make matters worse, Europe was also host to other invaders in the ninth and 10th centuries: the Magyars and Saracens. Like those raiders, the Vikings plundered churches, towns, and monasteries, carrying off and often selling the slaves and valuables they obtained.



Reaction to the Viking invasions combined horror with frustration. Because the attacks happened quickly, it was often difficult to react. By the time soldiers arrived to repel the invaders, the Vikings had already left. Many towns and monasteries began to fortify themselves. Vikings preferred easy targets, and fortified towns did prevent many attacks. There were limitations, however; some Vikings could besiege cities, as demonstrated by the siege of Paris in 885. Carolingian, Irish, and English sources all indicate that the kingdoms of Europe improved their defensive capabilities as the years passed. In addition, many Vikings tended to settle in areas

they had attacked, which did two things. First, it meant that some raiders became settlers and not predators. Second, it meant that Vikings began to rely on diplomacy as well as the sword. It was easier, once settled, to live by treaty than by combat.

### Attack & Assimilation

Raids on Ireland, France, and England were frequent for much of the late eighth and ninth centuries, but in each of those places, the Vikings settled. In time, they became more and more like those around them and, in some cases, were completely assimilated. The horrible depredations of Scandinavian warriors in Ireland, for instance, gave way to Ireland's first real cities, like Dublin, and to the eventual mixing of Irish and Scandinavians. Archaeology, historical sources, and linguistics all reveal a melding of people. Many of the Irish words for nautical terms, to give one example, are in origin Norse. Of note, however, the Vikings and their descendants increasingly spoke Irish, rather than Old Norse or Danish.



Similar patterns of accommodation occurred elsewhere. For example, the Viking chief Rollo, who had plundered the French cities of Chartres and Paris, ended up making a treaty with King Charles III of France and became the first duke of Normandy. The name "Normandy" refers to those settlers, the "Northmen." Both sides benefited: the king found a strong warrior who could defend his north coast, and Rollo gained new land. In addition, Rollo became a Christian, which helped reduce the differences between the French and himself.

Vikings followed the great rivers in modern Russia, founding such cities as Novgorod and conducting trade between northern Europe and the Balkans. Some, like the Varangian Guard, found service as bodyguards with the Byzantine emperor. Settlement, assimilation, and the slow but steady conversion of the Scandinavians to Christianity, all contributed to the transformation of the medieval cultures of Denmark, Iceland, and Norway and to the blending of Viking and native population in Ireland and France.

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[back to top](#)

### Surviving the Viking Invasions: Discussion

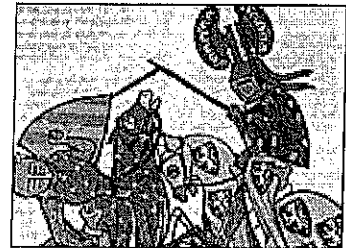
1. In what ways can the Viking invasions be viewed as a second "folk movement" from Scandinavia?
2. Do you agree with the idea that the Viking impact in Europe was not wholly negative? In what ways did the Vikings contribute to the cultures into which they assimilated?
3. How did King Alfred the Great of Wessex defend his kingdom against the Vikings? What worked, what did not work, and why do you think he was successful?

## Feudalism and the Three Orders (Overview)

The organization of medieval society owes much to the political fragmentation that followed the Roman Empire and produced early medieval kingdoms like those of the Franks. Rome's successor states were intensely local, small communities tied together through hierarchy and mutual obligation. The backbone of medieval society was a system of allegiance between lords and vassals, the character of which varied from place to place, but which generally meant a grant of land given by a lord to a vassal in exchange for military service. However, that system of allegiance only refers to the actions within one group of the three main orders of medieval society—those "who fought." There were also those "who prayed," the clergy and monastic organizations, and those "who worked," the peasant farmers who made up the vast majority of the population. These three groups, those who fought, those who prayed, and those who worked, came to be known as the "three orders" (or "three estates").

### Feudalism

The term feudalism derives from the Latin word for fief (*feudum*) and was used in the 17th century to generally define such relationships as those between lords and vassals in medieval society. In its most extensive definition, feudalism refers to all "interwoven" aspects of medieval society. However, most scholars use the narrower definition of the term that relates to land given by a lord to a vassal in return for military service. Since the idea of feudalism was developed after the Middle Ages and was a concept unknown to medieval people, some modern historians have ceased to use it to define medieval life. In 1974, the historian E.A.R. Brown questioned the concept of feudalism and whether it was actually representative of medieval life. In 1994, the historian Susan Reynolds argued that a fief had too many definitions to be accurately used as a basic characterization of feudalism. Historians continue to debate the definition of feudalism, though it is still often used to describe medieval life.



The origins of feudalism most likely arose during the invasions of the ninth and 10th centuries, when local warriors took up their own defense because kings lived too distant to respond to every invader. The formalities that sealed the feudal pact originated with the oaths sworn by Frankish warriors to their chief, but also with the old Roman practice of granting benefices (estates) in exchange for a service. Over time, the relationship between lord and vassal grew more complex. Theoretically, the king was at the top, though often he was not the most powerful lord in his kingdom; below him were the great lords, then their vassals, all the way down to the humble knight. Within a short time, that hierarchy developed independent branches: vassals might have more than one lord to whom they owed allegiance, as well as vassals of their own. Naturally, this could cause problems—a vassal sometimes found himself stuck in the middle of a conflict between his two lords. Contracts between lord and vassal thus grew more complicated as those new relationships developed.

While each pact varied, the concept of feudalism rests upon the idea that a vassal owed his lord military aid in exchange for land. Economic power rested in land and what it could produce. Generally, a vassal had enough land, and thus wealth, to outfit himself for war and feed himself, his family, and servants. Depending on the amount of land, a vassal might be expected to raise troops of his own to supplement his lord's strength. Vassals sometimes provided other services: housing the lord and his retinue, joining the lord as he traveled, giving gifts for important occasions within the lord's household (such as when the lord's eldest son became a knight), serving at the lord's court, and if need be, contributing money for ransom should his lord be taken prisoner in battle.

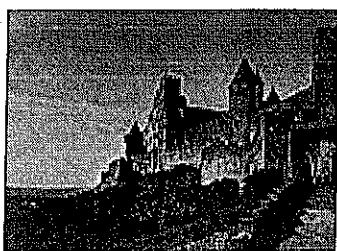


## The Three Orders

Medieval society has often been simplified, even by medieval sources, into three orders, or estates. Feudalism describes only one major relationship in the order of those "who fought" (called *bellatores* in Latin). There were also those "who prayed" (*oratores*) and those "who worked" (*laborares*). Like the warrior class, those who prayed were often from aristocratic backgrounds, though not always. They enjoyed many of the same rights and privileges as the knightly order, not only because they often came from the same families, but because as landholders, they had much in common with lay lords. As educated men, clergy sometimes served at court. Monastic houses, which prayed for the kingdom, community, and individuals, comprised another branch of those who prayed. Medieval writers conceived of those who prayed as first in rank of the three orders—medieval society was a religious society, and clergy and monks held a special place because they served God.

Those who worked comprised the third order, the lowest rung of the three, and were by far the most numerous. While some peasant farmers were free, many were serfs who were tied to the land they farmed. While some serfs had their own fields, their crops were normally mixed in with those of their lord. The demesne, as this conglomeration of fields came to be known in French and English law, required communal effort to till and harvest. Though it varied considerably by kingdom, serfs normally owed their lord periods of work and an agreed upon amount of produce or skilled labor. By the 11th century, some serfs had land of their own, but they still paid the lord rent or dues for the use of his mill or kitchen ovens. The lord also had responsibilities: he offered protection, and as the legal figure on his fief, he arbitrated any dispute within the village. Most serfs had little legal standing, but wise lords generally followed existing custom, and for the most part, serfs were sure of food and protection. This relationship, which worked in conjunction with feudalism, was called manorialism.

## Urbanization and a Changing Medieval World



As Europe recovered from the ninth- and 10th-century invasions, and as commerce increased over the next several centuries, towns and cities grew. Traditional crafts continued to be an important part of medieval life, particularly on the manor, but those emerging urban centers became hubs of production and trade and home to a group of people who did not fit squarely within the "three orders." These shop owners, master craftsmen, and traders made up the urban middle class, a section of society that, in time, would do much to transform medieval kingdoms into the giant commercial states of the Renaissance.

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[back to top](#)

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### CITATION: MLA STYLE

"Feudalism and the Three Orders (Overview)." *World History: Ancient and Medieval Eras*. 2008. ABC-CLIO. 3 Nov. 2008 <<http://www.ancienthistory.abc-clio.com>>

## Feudalism and the Three Orders: Discussion

1. Does the idea of the "three orders" accurately describe medieval society? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Mutual obligation was an important part of medieval social life. How does the idea of the "three orders" illustrate that?
3. Marc Bloch advocated employing not only the tools of the historian, but also the economist, social scientist, and geographer. Do you think that his approach is valid? Why or why not?