

## *The Pyramid Structure of Feudal Society*

'Feudalism' is a term used to describe the way in which medieval society was organised. **Feudal** society looked like a pyramid with the king at the apex. The lower levels were made up with nobles and knights, with the peasants at the base. Feudalism developed slowly in Britain. The Anglo-Saxons had a form of feudalism based on loyalty to the 'thegn', or chieftain, but this changed after 1066 when William of Normandy brought European feudalism with him when he invaded England.

The **king** was at the top of the social pyramid. For the greater part of the medieval period he had absolute power, which meant that the king made all the laws and political decisions for his kingdom. He owned all the land but could not manage it all himself. He kept about a quarter of it and rented half to his chief nobles, or **barons**, who were called '**tenants-in-chief**'. In return, the nobles paid **geld or taxes or tribute** to the king and also provided him with soldiers during times of war. The king gave the other quarter of the land to the Church. The gift of land by the king in return for feudal services was called a **feudal grant**, and the land so given was termed a "**feud" or "fief."** In the course of time fiefs became hereditary.

In order to prevent any one noble from becoming too powerful by owning a large area of land in one place, the king gave the nobles land that was scattered all over the country. This meant that the tenants-in-chief were unable to manage their all their land holdings, so they rented their land to lesser nobles, the **knights and gentlemen**. The knights did not manage all their land either, so they kept some for themselves and allowed the peasants to **rent** the rest. From the rents they collected from the peasants, the knights paid their rents to the tenants-in-chief who from these rents in turn, paid their tribute due to the king.

The **monks** farmed some of the **Church** land but the rest was also rented to the peasants. Instead of having a knight as their lord, these peasants paid their rent to the Church.

The **peasants** made up the majority of the population. They were at the bottom of the social pyramid and they had few rights and no political power. They lived like slaves and were called '**serfs**'. They worked on the lord's land and were not allowed to leave it. They were bound to the land and dependent on their lord, and the lord depended on them for the manpower of his private army. The three classes of serfs were the (1.) **villeins, (or villani)** who held up to thirty acres; (2.) **bordars**, who held between ten and fifteen acres; and (3.) **cottars**, who had a cottage and a small plot of land.

The duties of the peasant were to work on the lord's land (called a **manor**) for three days a week and provide him with a certain amount of food, such as corn, meat, eggs, ale, as well as wool and wood, each year. The peasant was also obliged to pay the knight **taxes** on special occasions, such as marriage or the birth of child. In return, the peasant was able to use the knight's mill, bread oven and brew house, but, of course, had to pay for their use. There were some advantages for the peasant. He was sure of having some land for planting his crops; a place to graze his cattle and sheep; and the lord was bound to protect him and his family.

The manors or areas of land owned by the kings and nobles were different sizes. Sometimes there were several villages in a manor. In the twelfth century England's population was approximately three million people, and usually only about one hundred people lived on a manor. The serfs or villani lived in one-room cottages built of wood and thatch usually collected together in a **village**. Around each village were three large open fields and woodland that as tracts of public land were known as **common**, but later, particularly between 1750 and 1850 subjected to the final and most contentious practice of **enclosure**. The land held by the lord was called the **demesne**.

**Carucates** was a unit of land measurement, varying from 60-160 acres (25-65 hectares). **Virgate** was a measure of land, varying greatly in extent, but very frequently averaging 30 acres (12 hectares), and equal to a quarter of a *hide*. The Anglo-Saxon word **hide** meaning "family" or "household" was considered a measure of land that could be ploughed to support a family and equalled roughly 60 to 120 acres (25-50 hectares) depending on the quality of the land.

One hectare is equal to about 2.5 acres

One acre is equal to 4840 yards<sup>2</sup>, or 4047 metres<sup>2</sup>.