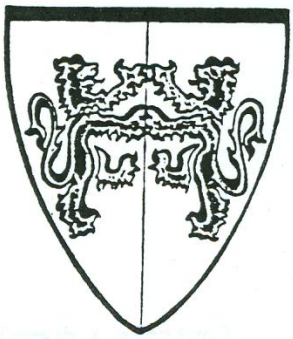
## The Feudal System—A Way of Organizing Society



The feudal system was based on the ownership of land. As the feudal system developed, most of the land in Western Europe came under the control of lords. During the early years of the feudal system, nearly all the lords had once been knights. They became lords simply by becoming more powerful than other knights. They used their power to claim land and the title of lord. Then, as time went on, most lords were lords by birth. They gained their lands and titles through their families.

When a lord had become powerful enough, he set up his own government. All over Western Europe, there were hundreds of such governments. Each lord had his own army of knights. The lord and his knights defended the land against raiders.

The highest duty of a knight was to his lord. He swore that he would be loyal to his lord. He swore that he would help him whenever he was needed. In return, the knight usually received a piece of land from his lord. This land was called a **fief** (fēf).

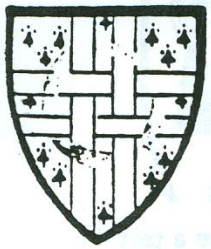
The lords and the ladies lived in stone castles. Most often, a lord built his castle for defense. He had to be able to protect himself against attacks from his enemies. That is why he would build his castle with towers and thick stone walls. Many of his knights lived at the castle and helped to defend it.

The peasants lived in villages close to the castle. Their homes were small, crude huts. The peasants farmed the land and were very poor. Sometimes enemy knights would come to rob their villages. When that happened, the peasants would hurry to their lord's castle. There, behind the stone walls, they were better protected. They had to pay for protection from the lord and his knights, however. The peasants had to obey their knight or lord. Since they had very little money, they paid in goods and services.

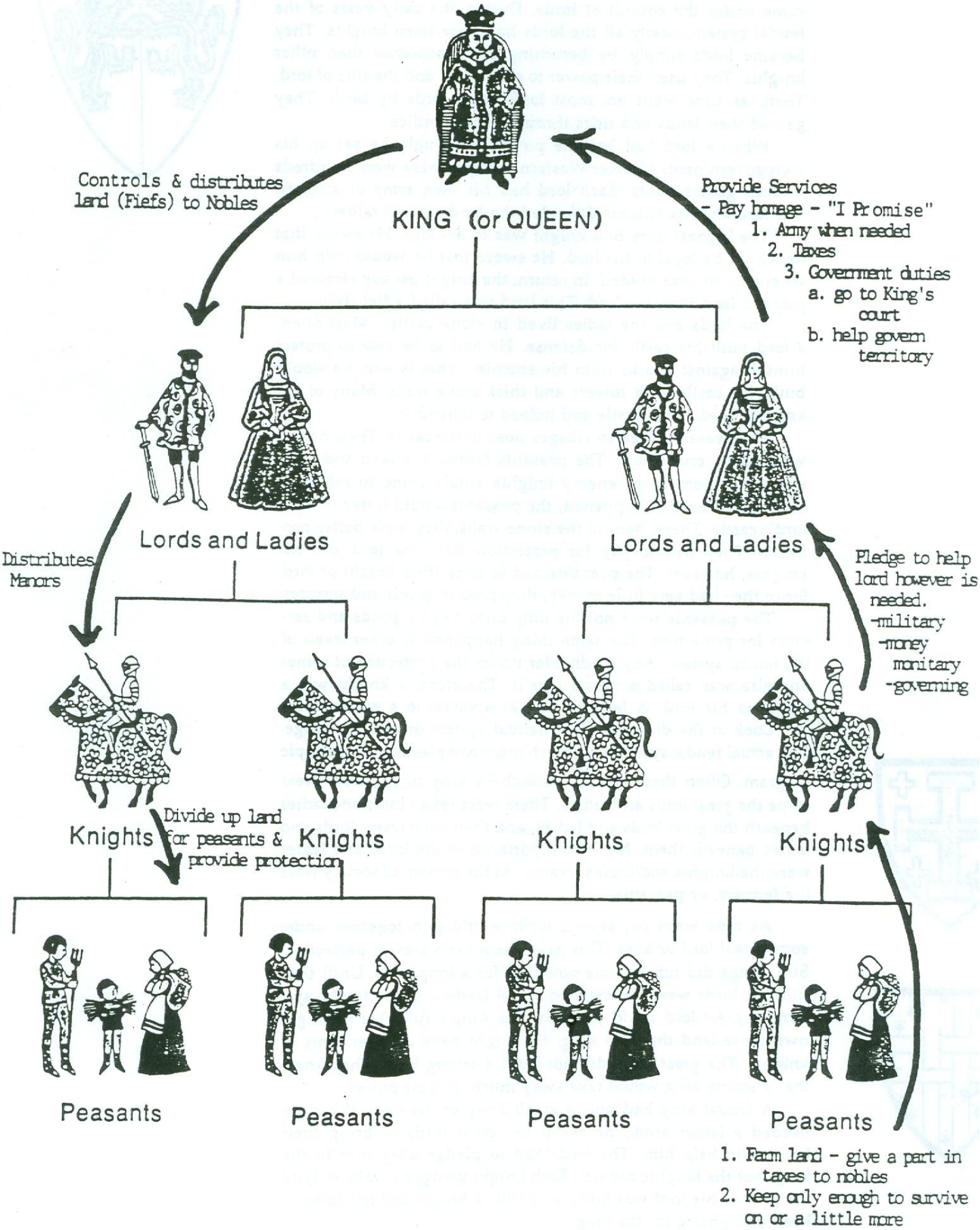
The peasants were not the only ones to give goods and services for protection. The same thing happened at other levels of the feudal system. Any landholder under the protection of someone else was called a **vassal** (vas'l). Therefore, a knight was a vassal to his lord. A lesser lord was a vassal to a greater lord.

Look at the diagram of the feudal system on the next page. The actual feudal system was much more complex than this simple diagram. Often there was a monarch—a king or a queen. Next came the great lords and ladies. There were lesser lords and ladies beneath the great lords and ladies, and then even lesser lords and ladies beneath them. Next in importance to the lords and ladies were the knights and their servants. At the bottom of society were the farmers, or peasants.

As time went on, several lords would join together under some great lord or king. This gave them even greater protection. Still, kings did not become powerful for a long time. Until they did, the lords were the most powerful leaders in the feudal system. A great lord could be under the king's rule. Yet he might own more land than the king. He might have a larger army of knights. The great lords did not want a strong king. They knew that a strong king would take away much of their power.



A feudal king had only a small army of his own. When he needed a larger army, he asked the great lords to bring their knights to help him. The lords had to pledge allegiance to the king, but the knights did not. Each knight pledged loyalty only to his lord. If his lord was killed in battle, a knight did not have to keep on fighting for the king.


KING (or QUEEN)
Controls & distributes land (Fiefs) to Nobles
Provide Services
- Pay homage - "I Promise"
1. Army when needed
2. Taxes
3. Government duties
a. go to King's court
b. help govern territory
Lords and Ladies
Lords and Ladies
Distributes Manors
Pledge to help lord however is needed.
-military
-money
monitary
-governing
Knights
Knights
Knights
Knights
Divide up land for peasants & provide protection
Peasants
Peasants
Peasants
Peasants
1. Farm land - give a part in taxes to nobles
2. Keep only enough to survive on or a little more