

Original Article

Legal Studies In Medieval Europe

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Abstract:

In the early middle ages, after the fall of the western roman empire, there was a blending of two major legal systems that influenced the development of law in europe: roman law and germanic law. Although these two legal systems were fundamentally different, they interacted and adapted under the influence of the barbarian kingdoms, particularly within the frankish kingdom. This article examines the comparison between roman law, based on written principles, and germanic law, which was more customary and oral, and how both were applied and synthesized under the rule of charlemagne. By analyzing the influence and implementation of these two legal systems, this study shows that while roman law was more structured and systematic, germanic law played an important role in maintaining social balance through community-based dispute resolution mechanisms. Through charlemagne's efforts to codify laws in the capitularies, which incorporated elements from both legal systems, a legal synthesis was created that influenced the formation of modern legal systems in europe, including the civil law tradition. This research aims to provide insight into how these two different legal traditions interacted and contributed to the development of a more organized legal structure in the frankish kingdom, as well as their long-term impact on European.

Keywords: roman law, germanic law, middle ages, frankish kingdom,

Introduction

In the Middle Ages in Europe, there was a significant development of religion, resulting in religion influencing nearly every aspect of human activity, including governance. One of the impacts of religious dominance during the Middle Ages was that emerging knowledge and science were marginalized and regarded as forms of witchcraft that distracted humans from divine contemplation. All human activities were required to follow church regulations; anyone who differed from church doctrine would face punishment. This condition led Europe into what is known as the Dark Ages. The term

“Dark Ages” refers to a period of decline in intellectual life and knowledge among European society. This situation reflected the strong control and rigid authority of religious elites, particularly the Christian Church. Politics and public opinion were regulated by priests and the church, which claimed to be the only institution qualified to make decisions regarding life, thought, politics, and science (Putra, Alin, 2020, p. 23).

Historically, the division of the Roman Empire into the Western Roman Empire and the Eastern Roman Empire resulted in separate centers of power following the collapse of the Roman Empire in the 5th century AD (Room, 2006, p. 34). A new social order, feudalism, emerged throughout Europe, including France. The king, as the sole owner of land, granted land loans to individuals considered to have rendered services or loyalty (Djaja, 2012, p. 110). Over time, these land grants developed into a ruling class, later known as the nobility, alongside the royal family. In pursuit of their own interests, they continuously sought to limit the authority of the king (Soebantardjo, 2012, p. 8).

Land became the primary factor of production in feudal society in medieval Europe. Consequently, those in power were landowners who occupied the upper levels of the social structure, supported by peasants at the lowest level. Merchants and feudal officials constituted the middle class. It can be concluded that land, as the place where humans live, became the central focus of feudalism from various perspectives. In the feudal era, land played a crucial role because individuals were considered powerful if they possessed land as the main form of capital, which eventually developed into territorial control. The history of feudalism, like the history of human civilization as a whole, reflects humanity’s continuous desire for power and status (Putra, Alin, 2020, p. 57).

Methods

Historical research methods provide an introduction to historical writing and research techniques. They begin with the selection of topics, followed by source collection, internal and external analysis, verification, translation, and written presentation (kuntowijoyo, 1995, p. 64). In this context, the historical method can be regarded as a means of determining whether historical accounts are valid or not. This study employs the historical research method, which requires the critical examination and evaluation of historical documents and artifacts using data gathered through historiography. There are four main stages in historical research: heuristics, source criticism, interpretation, and historiography.

Heuristics, or data collection, constitutes the first stage. The purpose of this stage is to locate and collect various historical documents related to the topic “the history of feudal society in medieval europe.” As this research is based on a literature review, the data used are derived from sources such as books, papers, research journals, articles, and online resources.

Source criticism is the second stage of historical research. It refers to the process of assessing the credibility and reliability of sources. Source criticism involves selecting and examining historical sources or traces to be used as historical facts, both in terms of their physical form and their content. This stage includes both external and internal criticism (kartodirjo, 1992, p. 16). External criticism is used to evaluate the authenticity and validity of existing sources, while internal criticism aims to determine whether the content of the sources is relevant and credible in relation to the research problem.

The third stage is interpretation, which represents a step toward verifiable

analysis. Interpretation is the process of identifying relevant facts and drawing objective and logical conclusions based on the aspects of the problem under study. During this stage, research approaches and hypotheses are applied. Role theory and sociological approaches are employed as analytical frameworks in this study.

Historiography constitutes the final stage of historical research. It refers to the process of describing, presenting, or reporting the results of historical research in written form. The historiography of this study is based on information concerning “the history of feudal society in medieval europe from the 5th to the 15th century.”

Results

Sub 1 Background of the Fall of the Western Roman Empire and Barbarian Invasions

the roman empire was one of the greatest empires in history, renowned for its contributions to civilization, knowledge, and world heritage. the romans are even mentioned in the qur'an, specifically in surah ar-rum. founded in the 8th century bc, rome developed into a powerful civilization but eventually experienced division and decline. the split into the western and eastern roman empires became a major factor leading to the dark ages in europe. in 286–293 ad, emperor diocletian divided the empire through the tetrarchy system to manage its vast territory. the western empire was ruled by maximian with constantius chlorus as caesar, while the eastern empire was governed by diocletian with galerius as his deputy. diocletian introduced economic and administrative reforms, including new currency, tax restructuring, and military strengthening.

despite these reforms, the western roman empire faced serious internal problems such as heavy taxation, declining population, political instability, and the spread of christianity, alongside external pressures at its borders. competition among emperors weakened military defenses, making the empire vulnerable to foreign invasions. the fall of the western roman empire was largely caused by invasions of barbarian tribes, especially germanic groups such as the franks, visigoths, vandals, and others. pressured by the huns, these tribes migrated into roman territory. in 376 ad, the goths entered the balkans with roman permission but later rebelled, leading to the death of emperor valens at the battle of adrianople in 378 ad. in 410 ad, the visigoths successfully captured rome. later, in the 430s, the huns under attila the hun invaded the empire during a period of instability. after attila's death, the huns fragmented, and eventually odoacer emerged as ruler, marking the end of the western roman empire.

Sub 2 Factors Triggering the Dark Ages

Historians generally agree that the european middle ages, often called the dark ages, began with the fall of the western roman empire in the 5th century. The term dark ages was first used by the italian scholar francesco petrarch. This period was marked by significant decline in knowledge, culture, population, and economic life across europe. One major cause of the dark ages was the collapse of the western roman empire. After its fall, roman law lost its status as imperial law, but many of its principles survived, especially in the frankish kingdom. Although germanic customary law became dominant among barbarian societies, roman legal traditions were adapted and revived under rulers such as charlemagne, who sought to establish a more structured legal system across his realm. Another key factor was the invasion of barbarian tribes. While the eastern roman empire managed to stabilize itself despite invasions and internal challenges, the western empire was severely affected by germanic migrations and the formation of new

kingdoms. In the east, threats from persia and internal unrest were handled through diplomacy and military defense, particularly under emperor marcian (450–457). Religious conflicts, however, remained a major challenge.

The rise of christianity also played a crucial role. After the fall of rome, germanic tribes such as the franks, vandals, and goths became dominant. Although many initially followed arian christianity, roman culture, latin language, and catholicism remained symbols of civilization. A turning point occurred when clovis, king of the franks, converted to catholicism around the late 5th century, gaining support from the church and unifying gaul. Similar conversions followed, including that of king reared of the visigoths in spain. The growing power of the church shaped european politics and society. The papacy was strengthened under pope gregory the great (590–604), who expanded missionary work and formed alliances with the frankish rulers. This alliance reached its peak when charlemagne was crowned emperor by pope leo iii in 800, symbolizing the revival of the roman imperial tradition within a christian framework. Charlemagne became a central figure of the carolingian renaissance, promoting christian culture, education, and church architecture.

Finally, the dominance of the church during the middle ages deeply influenced european life. Religion shaped nearly all aspects of society, including governance, culture, and thought. Feudalism emerged as the dominant social system, dividing society into landowning elites and dependent laborers. Scientific inquiry and independent thinking were often suppressed, as ideas conflicting with church doctrine were considered heretical. This strong control of religious authority over politics and knowledge is a key reason why the period is remembered as the dark ages.

Sub 3 Impacts of the Late Middle Ages Crisis (1300–1500)

The black death was the deadliest epidemic of the middle ages, emerging in the mongol khanates and spreading westward into europe in the mid-fourteenth century. Its impact was especially devastating due to widespread famine, poor harvests, and the lack of practical medical knowledge, which weakened the population's immunity. Between 1348 and 1351, the plague killed between one-third and one-half of europe's population, causing an unprecedented demographic collapse. Cities and villages were depopulated, sometimes leaving only a single survivor. Quarantine was the most effective response, though its success was limited. More commonly, people turned to prayer and scapegoating, leading to violent anti-semitic persecutions in which jews were falsely accused of spreading the plague. Religious movements such as the flagellants also emerged, and many europeans believed the plague signaled the approaching end of times. Although outbreaks continued periodically until the early eighteenth century, the long-term economic effects were often positive due to labor shortages, which increased wages and improved the social and legal status of peasants and women. Culturally, the constant presence of death reshaped european art and thought, emphasizing mortality and the futility of worldly status.

At the same time, europe was engulfed in the hundred years' war between england and france from 1337 to 1453, driven by dynastic rivalries and territorial claims, particularly over aquitaine. English kings, descended from norman rulers, claimed rights to french lands, leading to prolonged conflict. England achieved several early victories, most notably at the battle of agincourt in 1415, after which many french nobles recognized henry v of england as king of france. However, henry v's death reignited internal divisions, and shifting alliances weakened english control. France's fortunes changed dramatically with the emergence of joan of arc in 1429, a peasant girl who

claimed divine visions and inspired french forces to rally behind charles vii. By 1453, france expelled the english, ending the war. Despite victory, france suffered massive population loss, economic devastation, and heavy taxation, while england gradually severed cultural ties with france and developed a more distinct national identity.

Meanwhile, the catholic church experienced deep crisis during the babylonian captivity and the great western schism. Beginning in 1305, the papacy relocated from rome to avignon under strong french influence, undermining its perceived independence and moral authority. Corruption and political interference damaged the church's reputation, leading critics to compare the period to the biblical exile in babylon. In 1378, rival papal elections resulted in multiple competing popes, dividing europe and weakening papal control for nearly forty years. The crisis ended in 1417 through church councils that elected a single pope and asserted the authority of councils over the papacy. Although papal supremacy was later restored, the schism permanently weakened the church's moral and spiritual authority, encouraging the view of the papacy as a political institution and laying the groundwork for future religious criticism and reform movements.

Sub 4 The Role of the Church and Religion in Medieval Europe (5–15M Century)

The history of the church demonstrates its crucial role in the development of christianity and in shaping social, political, and spiritual life in medieval europe. The relationship between the church and the state evolved over time, beginning with periods of persecution against christians and later transforming into an era in which the church became a dominant force within political power structures. After christianity was legalized by emperor constantine in the fourth century, the church's influence expanded rapidly, extending into governance and public policy. During the middle ages, the roman catholic church emerged as one of the most powerful institutions in europe, with popes exercising significant authority over kings and states, often providing moral and spiritual legitimacy to rulers through religious rituals and doctrines such as the divine right of kings.

The close connection between spiritual and secular power, however, also generated conflicts and abuses of authority, leading to tensions between monarchs and the church. These problems eventually contributed to criticism during the protestant reformation in the sixteenth century, when reformers such as martin luther challenged the church's political involvement. as a result, new protestant churches emerged and the idea of separating church and state gradually developed, laying the foundation for modern secular thought. over time, the church's role shifted away from direct political control toward moral guidance and spiritual leadership.

Beyond politics, the church played a central role in medieval culture, education, and social welfare. It acted as the primary guardian of knowledge, with monasteries and churches serving as centers of learning that preserved, translated, and transmitted classical texts. Education was largely controlled by religious institutions, shaping intellectual life through curricula based on christian teachings. In addition, the church provided extensive social services, including charity, care for the poor, hospitals, and shelter for the needy, strengthening its moral authority and close relationship with medieval communities.

Conclusion

Based on the research findings presented above, several conclusions can be drawn to address the research questions. First, life in medieval europe was often referred to as the "dark ages" because society was strongly dominated by the church. Religious

authority controlled almost all aspects of life, and ideas that differed from church teachings were often punished. This domination led to social stratification, deviations in religious practices, and limited scientific and intellectual development.

Second, the emergence of feudal society was closely linked to the collapse of the roman empire and the fusion of roman and germanic cultures. Feudalism was a system in which land-owning nobles held power over workers and servants, creating two main social classes: the ruling landowners and the laboring class. Although exploitation was common, feudal relationships also provided mutual dependence and stability in a time of political insecurity. Third, feudal society was centered on the manor system, where the lord acted not only as a landowner but also as a ruler, protector, judge, and authority figure.

Peasants and serfs often suffered under this system, yet they were generally able to sustain themselves through the land they worked. Knights played a crucial role in maintaining power and order, serving as the military foundation of feudal rule. Finally, feudal society experienced cultural development, particularly in the fields of architecture, visual arts, literature, and music, which reflected the values and structure of medieval european life.

Suggestion

Based on the discussion of feudal life in medieval europe, future research is suggested to explore more deeply the variations of the feudal system across different european regions and periods. Further studies may also examine the role of the church not only as a dominant institution but as a contributor to cultural and intellectual development. In addition, comparative research between feudal societies in europe and other regions could provide a broader understanding of how feudalism shaped social structures, culture, and daily life during times of political instability.

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