

# The Feudal Mutation: Military and Economic Transformations of the Ethnosphere in the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries

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THIS essay will argue for a renewed appreciation of the importance of feudalism in world history. It will argue that many of the Europe/Asia distinctions in which Europe is feudal and Asia is not are really cases of mistaken identity. What feudalism in Europe was about is often not what is seen as such in the writing of comparative history or comparative sociology.

The ascent of feudalism in Europe in the tenth century (the “feudal mutation”) in this light can well be perceived as part of a wider process of military and economic changes in the much larger ethnosphere of which Europe was part. Realizing this, however, necessitates departing from normal historical concepts. The feudal mutation should be understood as a dialectic process and as a “real type” rather than an “ideal type.” Process signifies that the various linked elements cannot be arbitrarily separated to isolate the defining element in feudalism; dialectic entails that the various elements are linked and influence each other. They thus cannot be arbitrarily separated to distinguish *the* defining process. Real type implies that such a process is not constructed by linking a kit of metahistoric concepts in the researcher’s mind, applicable to any place or any time—the common procedure in comparative studies—for these concepts are not things but relation-

ships between people that can be found only in a concrete historical period.<sup>1</sup>

And while denying links between areas in the same period the anticomparativists all too often instead take recourse to a similar set of abstract metahistoric or ontologic concepts (the state, the law) proposed to be transcendent rather than questioning the concepts themselves, which they use as conceptual tools. The use of such metahistoric concepts is a major obstacle to the study of world history, I would argue.

## FEUDALISM

The words “feudal” and “feudalism” are essentially late seventeenth to eighteenth century inventions, coming into the English language in the late eighteenth century from the German “*Feudalismus*.”

It had two functions. In Germany the word *Feudalismus* was invented by the lawyers connected to the imperial diet, where it served as a historic precedent to defend the sovereignty of the small German princes (the *Landeshoheit*) against the centralizing impetus of the Roman law in sway in the Empire, in Bavaria, or in Prussia. In France the word came in use in the early eighteenth century to serve the so-called “noble reaction”: an attempt of clergy and nobility to reassert their patrimonial rights against the centralizing impact of local *lits de justice*. Many of the *philosophes* strongly opposed the noble reaction, so the words “feudal” and “feudalism” began to signify much more than merely a bundle of patrimonial rights connected to the noble “allodium.” Instead it began to cover a system of seigniorial landownership and seigniorial dues on the peasantry in general and, in the widest sense, anything thought contemptible in the *ancien régime* in general.<sup>2</sup> The word “feudalism” in this philosophical use was then enshrined through the proclamation of the abolition of feudalism by the *Assemblée Nationale* on 5 August 1789.

With the use of the word “feudalism” thus sanctioned by the French Revolution it was subsequently adopted by the European radicals of 1848, among them Friederich Engels and Karl Marx. To Marx and Engels the 1848 uprisings were the completion of the French Revolution—a bourgeois revolution against the *ancien régime* and against seigniorial ownership of the land: “feudalism.”

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<sup>1</sup> Where I follow N. Elias's (*Über den Prozess der Zivilisation 2. Wandlungen der Gesellschaft: Entwurf zu einer Theorie der Zivilisation* [Frankfurt a.M., 1969/1980], p. 458) central criticism of Otto Hinze.

<sup>2</sup> J. Mackrell, *The Attack on Feudalism in Eighteenth Century France* (London, 1973).

Departing from their experiences in 1848 Engels and Marx elaborated upon this to construct a stage theory in which all European societies had to pass through a feudal stage in order to achieve a bourgeois revolution and hence the transition to communism. Because societies necessarily had to go through all three stages, the possibility of achieving communism was made dependent on the existence of feudalism. Much of the twentieth-century debate on feudalism either has been inspired by Marx or has tried to contradict Marx, focusing on what has proven to be ultimately sterile exercise in building stage theories applicable to all different societies in the world.

If only western Europe had experienced feudalism (or at least “real” feudalism) only western Europe could produce “real” capitalism and only it could bring forth the “real” socialist/communist utopia. This was not only much resisted in other parts of the world, but appeared to be contradicted by the experience of the twentieth-century revolutions, which occurred in “backward” peasant regions rather than in western Europe. The word “feudalism” hence came to be used to cover an ever widening array of meanings and a wider and wider area. In Soviet/Marxist writing of the 1950s, “feudal” meant something like the “agrarian residual” left upon subtracting the slaveholder and capitalist societies.<sup>3</sup>

Part of the western European dissent against the hegemony of dialectical/historic materialism in the CPSU and communist parties in general in the 1960s and 1970s was a revolt against this use of “feudalism” in which all except western European societies were again refused the label “feudal.” Instead of “feudal” Islam, India, or Byzantium, “Asian modes of production” or “tributary mode of production” were cherished by Western Marxism. If only Europe produced capitalism, only western Europe must have been really feudal; the rest constituted an agrarian residual of one kind or another.

This is a bit of a caricature, but it seems much of the broader comparative writing on feudalism is implicitly (whether in writers of Marxist persuasion, like Perry Anderson’s,<sup>4</sup> or of broadly Weberian, like Michael Mann’s,<sup>5</sup> writings) teleological. The essential interest of such professedly comparative historians is not so much in feudalism per se but to discern those elements in feudalism that ultimately must have given rise to capitalism.

<sup>3</sup> See L. V. Cherepin, ed., *Voprosy metodologii istoriceskije issledovanija: teoreticeskie problemy istorii feodalizma (Sbornik, stateji)* (Moscow, 1981).

<sup>4</sup> *Passages from Antiquity to Feudalism* (London, 1978).

<sup>5</sup> M. Mann, *The Sources of Social Power, Volume I: A History of Power from the Beginning to A.D. 1760* (Cambridge, 1986).

Because of this teleological slant of much of the professedly comparative theory on feudalism, medievalists have, and I think rightly, been constantly protesting against this word feudalism. Not only does it risk discerning merely those elements of feudalism that must have given rise to capitalism (negating other elements that might have been equally significant but did not contribute), but it also risks grouping the bewildering variety of political formations in medieval Europe under a single word of opprobrium. Furthermore, if too broadly defined the feudal mode of production is too general a concept to be of much use to study any concrete social formation whatsoever.

One may grant all this to the anticomparativists. Yet the normal procedure followed instead is then to enumerate a long series of separate characteristics of medieval societies. Each of these characteristics would apply to one region but might equally well not apply to others. Urging for the abolition of the word "feudalism," one tends to lose site of the fact that the various elements involved were part of an interconnected historic process.

Suppose, for example, one substitutes feudalism with "a system of raising troops in which a lord grants a fief—typically a piece of land—to a vassal in return for a defined term of military service." Such a system can certainly be found in the High Middle Ages, but it can also be found in the *timars* of the Ottoman Empire in the fifteenth century or in the Hittite kingdom in seventh century B.C. Such arrangements were far less common in tenth century Lombardy and Venice though, where land was not primarily bestowed on *milites*; the documents that we have on gifts of land concern mainly monasteries. And the process of the rise of a consolidated nobility consisting of mounted warriors and entertained through grants of land is much less pronounced in Venice than it is elsewhere. We would hence reach the strange conclusion that the Hittite state was feudal and the tiny territory of eleventh century Venice was not.<sup>6</sup> And what is here said for gifts of land would equally well apply to other separate characteristics.

Focusing on separate elements, one tends to lose sight of feudalism as a process rather than a steady state. That means it is made up of a number of interlinked and interrelating developments. Each of these can be found at other places and times, but it is the link between these developments that make them unique. There is thus a precedent to perceiving feudalism as a linked process in the tenth through twelfth

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<sup>6</sup> G. Rorsch, *Die venezianische Adel bis zur Schleissung des grossen Rats: zur Genese einer Führungsschicht* (Sigmaringen, 1989).

centuries rather than through an abstract definition, singling out a single element, which amounts to perceiving society as a steady state rather than constantly in flux, namely J. P. Poly and A. Bournazel's classic study "La Mutation féodale" (Paris, 1982).

In the paradigmatic case of the rise of feudalism studied by Poly and Bournazel, namely that of tenth century France, the power of the Capetinian crown was increasingly hollowed out, until the king held little more than the immediate territory around Paris. Sovereignty was parcelled out over the counts and—within many of the counties—was lost by the counts too and further divided over a host of smaller landlords. Linked to this, there was an ascent of a class of mounted and armored warriors. The tenth and eleventh centuries may to some extent be seen as the age of the rise of a new aristocracy. Some of those barons no doubt descended from the *milites* families of the Carolingian empire, yet most of them were new men.

Poly and Bournazel thus do not study feudalism through a predefined set of definitions, applying to any time and place, but as a unique and single process evolving in northern France in the tenth century. And while all elements may be found earlier, the process itself is new and unique. This view has the merit of doing away with an older one still vexing the study of the Middle Ages, namely the debate on the primeval German origins of medieval institutions (like the jury or the mark).

"German origins" is the problem with Perry Anderson's writings on feudalism, for example; he perceives European feudalism as a synthesis between the Roman "slave mode of production" and the Germanic "egalitarian mode of production." If what is unique to it results out of a mixture of Roman and "barbarian" institution, then, of course, feudalism can have existed only in Europe and only in a place where the mix was just about right: France. This also holds true for the classic study of Otto Hinze, "Wesen und Verbreitung des Feudalismus,"<sup>7</sup> who sees feudalism as occurring where a more advanced urban economy is overrun by "barbaric" tribes.

Such a view on medieval institutions as a mix of Roman and German elements may be of use in studying the seventh century. It is, however, of little use in studying developments in the tenth. Feudalism, to repeat, was essentially a new system, arising out of military changes and tensions within the agrarian economy and society in the tenth century

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<sup>7</sup> O. Hintze, *Gesamelte Abhandlungen vol. I, Staat und Verfassung* (Göttingen, 1962), pp. 84–119.

rather than being a synthesis of spurious Roman and German elements —“spurious” because if you look long enough you are always able to trace any and all tenth-century institutions back to older Roman or Germanic ones. The problem is that because ninth and tenth century chancelleries used a strongly archaic or “romanizing” Latin it is very easy to infer from the words used that the same institutions are meant.<sup>8</sup>

But if it is essentially a new tenth/eleventh-century process, then why should it have been confined to western Europe?

#### FEUDALISM: A EURASIAN PROCESS?

Many processes occurring in western Europe appear to have been occurring in Central Asia, the Byzantine Empire, West Africa,<sup>9</sup> and India as well. And, maybe, though perhaps less strongly so, similar processes were taking place in China, Korea, and Japan, too.<sup>10</sup> Is it a coincidence that parallel to the breakdown of royal authority in the Carolingian Empire in the tenth century, in several other locations there also took place a comparable decline in royal authority and often a comparable parceling out of sovereignty?

One case is the breakup of the Tang empire in the late eighth century, and the devolution of power in China in the tenth century to a whole series of contending generals and conquering horse-nomadic dynasties from Central Asia, such as the Tanguts and later the Ching in Northern China. Thus, too, in the ninth and tenth centuries the former Cök-Turkic empire in the Altai began to break down into a series of smaller chieftaincies and individual tribes.

In the tenth and eleventh centuries the khalifate at Baghdad began to fall apart too, with the khalifal institutions really keeping a hold over only parts of Iraq. Power elsewhere, in Syria and Fars, was devolving to a host of smaller emirates, not much larger than the European duchies. And in Khorasan, power was by the late eighth and early

<sup>8</sup> P. Claessen, *Diplomatische Studien zum Problem der Kontinuität zwischen Altertum und Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1977).

<sup>9</sup> As has been argued by G. E. Brooks, *Landlords and Strangers: Ecology, Society and Trade in Western Africa 1000–1630* (Oxford, 1996), pp. 97–121.

<sup>10</sup> I will not deal with Japan here. Japan is the classic case of the kind of comparative history in which feudal societies are compared rather than linked, so that vast amounts of ink has already been spilled over an issue that in my view is an apples-and-oranges comparison. Japanese feudalism in its classic form only took shape in a much, much later period (the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries), so it also needs different explanations than the European feudalism of the tenth century. By any criterion (trade, agricultural productivity, urbanization, etc.) Japan was a far more developed society than Europe in the tenth century.

ninth centuries devolving still further down the line to small local lords: the *dehqans*, some of them still tracing their descent down to the landlords of the Sassanid Empire.<sup>11</sup>

Again, in the tenth and eleventh centuries the power of the khalifs at Cordoba was shattered—power was devolving from Cordoba to the *taifas*, small kingdoms in many cases smaller still than the French duchies.

Then, again, although the Byzantine Empire still stuck to at least a fictional central authority, by 1040 it was also plagued by incessant faction fighting at court and provincial uprisings and rebellions. Those rebellions were led by an essentially new class of great provincial landlords (*oi donatoi*) who disposed of large estates in the provinces allowing them to maintain their own armies.<sup>12</sup>

And finally there is the paradigmatic case of tenth-century India where power, just as in Europe, also devolved to a host of small provincial dynasties and where parallel to this we see the formation of a provincial “warrior nobility”; mostly, of course in the Indian form of a subcaste. The most important of these groups were the Rajputs of northern India. Just as with the European nobility, the lines of descent of Rajput lineages may generally be traced back to the ninth and tenth centuries. Is this a mere coincidence or is it a process linked to the rise of the new European warrior nobility? For the Rajputs were, just like the European *milites*, mounted warriors.<sup>13</sup>

And, indeed, if the word “feudalism” is much contended in European historiography, in India the ninth through thirteenth centuries is generally called the “feudal period” and Indian medievalists use the word “feudalism” without any of the obligatory hesitations of their European colleagues. Though the notion of India as feudal is far older in its present form, it essentially dates back to D. Kosambi’s pathbreaking “An Introduction to Indian History.”<sup>14</sup> Kosambi argued that the formation of subcastes (*jati*) in India from the fourth century initiated the formation of a feudal system as power began to devolve from Brahmin/Ksatria kingdoms down to local *jati* lineages. The problem is to explain why this process occurred in India as well as in Europe.

The best explanation so far has been that of R. S. Sharma,<sup>15</sup> who

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<sup>11</sup> M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History: A New Interpretation II* (Cambridge, 1976), pp. 115–159.

<sup>12</sup> M. Whittow, *The Making of Orthodox Byzantium* (Hampshire, 1977).

<sup>13</sup> B. Chattopadhyaya, *The Making of Early Medieval India* (Delhi, 1997).

<sup>14</sup> Bombay, 1957.

<sup>15</sup> *Indian Feudalism c. A.D. 300–1200* (Basingstoke, 1980).

explains the rise of Indian feudalism through a kind of Pirenne thesis in reverse. Feudalization in his view took place because of the same general decline of trade that afflicted Europe post-700. Just as the Arabs closed off the Mediterranean, they closed direct links from India to the Byzantine Empire as well. This caused a general decline of commerce, manufacturing, and urban life in India, forcing the Indian kings to turn to granting land to local temples, lords, and lineages.

There is no really convincing empirical proof for this thesis, though. If archaeology definitely points toward a decline of big urban centers, such as Kanauj, in the seventh and eighth centuries, the Arab sources from the tenth century make it quite clear that India was still a major centre of trade and industry. Although some major cities were declining, the smaller ones appear to have thrived.<sup>16</sup>

If Sharma's explanation of the rise of feudalism doesn't appear to hold, does that mean he is altogether wrong in using the word "feudalism" and that we should replace it instead with some alternative like the "medieval Indian mode of production"? H. Mukhia<sup>17</sup> argues so. But the problem with his denial of the existence of feudalism in Indian history is that he essentially follows M. Postan on European feudalism, whose definition—focusing on the manor—is very biased toward Norman England. Let us turn, instead, to the broader definition of M. Bloch,<sup>18</sup> which is generally accepted in comparative sociological work on feudalism:<sup>19</sup>

A subject peasantry, widespread use of the service tenement (i.e. the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question, the supremacy of a class of specialized warriors, ties of obedience and protection which bind man to man and, within the warrior class, assume the distinctive form called vassalage, fragmentation of authority leading inevitably to disorder and, in the midst of all this, the survival of other forms of association, families and the state, of which the latter, during the second feudal age was to acquire renewed strength. Such then seem to be the fundamental features of European feudalism.

Peasant subjection in Bloch's definition means something other than what Mukhia argues. It does *not* necessarily mean that the peas-

<sup>16</sup> For example, S. Maqbul Ahmad (ed.), *India and the Neighbouring Countries in the Kitab Nuzhat al-Mustaq fi-Khitaq al-Afq* (Leiden, 1960), p. 57.

<sup>17</sup> H. Mukhia, "Was There Feudalism in Indian History?" *Journal of Peasant Studies* 8, no. 3: 273–310 and reprinted in *Perspectives in Medieval History* (Delhi, 1994).

<sup>18</sup> M. Bloch, *Feudal Society* (New York, 1971), 2 vols., II, p. 446.

<sup>19</sup> Thus in S. Sanderson, *Social Transformations: A General Study of Historical Development* (Oxford, 1995).

antry is reduced to villain status; what it entails is that the peasantry is bought under the seigniorial jurisdiction (the *banum*). And there is evidence in the inscriptions that land grants in India did involve transfers of judicial rights over the peasants too. This was a very major shift for the peasants even if they still owned the means of production. Medieval definitions of class essentially revolved around judicial autonomy rather than around property, as I will argue later on.

Bengali copperplates from the tenth century, deeds where judicial immunity is transferred upon the recipient (mostly Brahmin assemblies and temples), are then not only comparable to similar deeds from the German Empire, transferring the seigniorial ban, in form but they are comparable in content, too, as S. Bhattacharya<sup>20</sup> has recently argued.

### *Military Elements of the Process*

The second element to the definition is the “supremacy of a class of specialised warriors and personal links tying men together, particularly among the warrior class.” The feudal process can be perceived as a specific world historic juncture in which peasant societies were subjugated by an aristocracy of mounted warriors that became more powerful than any central institution and increasingly appropriated the jurisdiction over the peasants, and thus the land revenue.

Feudal armies were predominantly instruments for the subjection of the peasantry. European feudalism, medievalists have recently been arguing, largely arose out of internal causes to western European societies rather than of any Viking or Magyar onslaught. Most of those true symbols of feudalism, the illegally erected castles, were not so much built to withstand invasions but to subdue the peasantry by “plunder, rape and armed assault” (as the sources say). “Amateur,” infantry, peasant armies without steel armor and weapons had by the year 1000 not a chance against professional armies of ironclad knights.<sup>21</sup>

Such a particular juncture of wealth accruing to the local landlords and of the rise of an independent class of mounted warriors occurred at several places at the same time in the tenth and eleventh centuries: northern China, western Europe, the Byzantine Empire, Syria, North

<sup>20</sup> S. Bhattacharya, *Landschenkungen und staatliche Entwicklung im frühmittelalterlichen Bengalen (5 bis 13 Jahrhundert)* (Wiesbaden, 1984).

<sup>21</sup> Compare, for example, C. Gaier, “La Cavalerie lourde en Europe occidentale du XII au XVIe siècle” in *ibid.*, *Armes et Combats dans l’univers médiéval* (Brussels, 1995), pp. 299–311.

India, Afghanistan, the Altai in Central Asia and—maybe—in North and West Africa (and Ethiopia).<sup>22</sup>

This is not to deny there are differences within such a general process. And since much of the fascination of history is to study difference rather than sameness the literature tends to stress what's different rather than what is the same. Yet a focus on difference often tends to obscure what is alike: as Chamberlain<sup>23</sup> rightly argues, the tenth and eleventh centuries may be perceived as the period of the horse-warrior revolution in which highly specialized horse warriors turned to the paramount military force throughout Eurasia and were able to assert elite positions, whether in western Europe, Byzantium, Islam, northern China, or northern India.

In Islam the rise of such an aristocracy of professional mounted warriors was somewhat counteracted by the continued importance of slave soldiers.<sup>24</sup> Because of the existence of these slave soldiers the state could still overwhelm the forces of the warrior nobility. Such was the case in Fatimid Egypt where most of the army was still made up of (African) slaves. However, outside of Egypt—because of its booming trade and cash-based land revenue far from typical for Islam as a whole—the fighting forces of Islam were increasingly made up of professional nonslave recruits skilled in mounted warfare. The forces of the sultanate of Ghazni, for example, were by and large made up of professional Turkish and Pathan horsemen and—although Ghazni had its *ghulam* elite forces—these professional horsemen were its shock troops rather than the *ghulam*. Ghazni's forces almost entirely consisted of cavalry—admittedly more lightly armored than European knights—flanked by new horse archers enlisted (or captured) from Afghanistan and the steppes. And although Ghaznavid cavalry was cheaper than Europe's extremely expensive knights, so that Ghazni could afford larger forces than any European army, the core of the Ghaznavid army consisted of a quite small force of something like fifteen thousand men, of whom only three thousand were *ghulam*.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> The problem of course being that for West Africa written sources almost do not exist and far too little archaeological research has been conducted to allow for any generalization. Note, however, that the Hausa states—granted, much, much later—did have a body of heavily armored cavalry, which shows suspicious resemblances to the *kataphraktoi* (J. P. Smaldone, *Warfare in the Sokoto Caliphate: Historical and Sociological Perspectives* [Cambridge, 1977], pp. 20–23).

<sup>23</sup> M. Chamberlain, *Knowledge and Social Practice in Medieval Damascus* (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 28–36.

<sup>24</sup> P. Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge, 1986).

<sup>25</sup> C. E. Bosworth, *The Ghaznavids: Their Empire in Iran and Eastern Afghanistan* (Edinburgh, 1963), p. 113.

Of course, the Islamic countries also differed from Europe in that they had a large reservoir of mounted warriors nearby in Central Asia. The tenth century was a period of mass migration and mass conversion of Oguz-Turks to the lands of Islam and of the mass absorption of Turkish warriors into the armies of Islam. One could use one group of Turkish mercenaries to fight other Turkish groups, instead of completely relying on a single tribe. Some states (e.g., Samanid Bukhara, which disposed of an open steppe frontier) thus preserved substantial central power by exploiting inner-Turkic tribal differences both within their own army and with the tribes on its border. Yet, with all its differences one might perceive those Turks as the Islamic military equivalent to the European *militēs*.<sup>26</sup>

To take another case, the Byzantine Empire had the funds available to hire professional mercenary armies from abroad. The bodyguards of the emperor, the *tagmata*, consisted largely of foreigners. It was hence less forced to rely on internal recruitment and giving away land than other states in Europe. But if the forms somewhat differed (if only because the Byzantines had to fight mainly horse archers, so that archery was far more important to Byzantine *kataphraktoi* than it was to European knights—by and large lancers), the “new” Byzantine cavalry forces, which were mounted since the mid-tenth century, also consisted of heavily armored horsemen, much like the *militēs*.<sup>27</sup>

Despite such differences it might still be warranted to speak of a “warhorse revolution” in the tenth century then: a situation whereby cavalry could overcome infantry forces by the force of shock on its own. And in South Asia there was a decline of the role of the war elephants. This was due to advances in arms—the further refinements of the compound bow on the steppes in the tenth and eleventh centuries, armor plates, steel swords, and steel battle-axes—but it was related to the horse itself, too.

As the hippographic literature has shown,<sup>28</sup> the medieval warhorse, the destrier, was a much taller and stronger horse than modern horses. The destrier may have resulted out of a lengthy process of specialized

<sup>26</sup> On the rise of the Oghuz Turks as a central reservoir for Islamic “mounted horse” power in the ninth through eleventh centuries, see S. G. Aghazanov, *Očerki istorii Oguzov i Turkmen srednii Assii IX–XIII vv.* (Ashkhabad, 1969).

<sup>27</sup> W. Treadgold, *Byzantium and Its Army 284–1081* (New York, 1986), p. 179. For a thorough treatment of the armament of Byzantine forces—which for the *kataphraktoi* was not really very different from European knights—see G. Kolias Taxarias, *Byzantinische Waffen* (Vienna, 1988).

<sup>28</sup> R. H. C. Davis, *The Medieval Warhorse: Origins, Development and Redevelopment* (London, 1989).

breeding from at least the sixth century in—probably originally—Turfan and then spreading along the steppe routes into western Europe—in which particularly the Avars may have played a critical role.<sup>29</sup>

It seems likely the “blood-sweating,” “heavenly horses” of Turfan depicted in Tang poetry and statues—or the Mengit horses on which the elite forces of the Mongol forces were mounted—are biologically akin to both the European destriers and to the Afghan warhorses.<sup>30</sup>

The destrier was raised and trained to withstand the peculiar conditions of a medieval battlefield. A good destrier was, hence, worth more than an entire farm and medieval knights were expected to have three or four of such horses.<sup>31</sup> Throughout the ethnosphere only magnates with large amounts of land could afford such expensive horses. Modern horses will not charge into a dense crowd of people and they will certainly not ride straight into a row of sharp objects pointed right at them. But that’s exactly what medieval horses apparently did. European knights, Byzantine *kataphraktoi*, and lancers under the Delhi sultanate, “their lances dense like a forest of bamboo,” were expected to break closed enemy lines with an initial charge in which the lances of the knights would outrange the lances of the infantry. Horses were expected to charge straight into sharp objects and that was to happen in closed formation, without this apparently normally leading to collisions between the horses.<sup>32</sup>

If we find it hard to imagine how this was done, that is precisely because modern horses and cavalry lack the lengthy specialized training of such knights and lancers, which might take decades of practice. It takes centuries of specialized breeding to get horses accustomed to these conditions, too. Thus the importance of special horse breeding areas for procuring the “blood-sweating” horses from abroad—for example, Turfan, Afghanistan, or Shiraz for India and China; Spain and North Africa for Europe; Kurdistan, Arabia, and the Sudan for Islam; northern Syria and eastern Anatolia for the Byzantine Empire.

Thus, too, the special lands put aside for horses in western Europe or—but under a very different arrangement, namely primarily in revo-

<sup>29</sup> W. Pohl, *Die Awaren: Ein Steppenvolk im Mitteleuropa 567–822 N. Chr.* (Munich, 1988).

<sup>30</sup> P. Poucha, *Die geheime Geschichte der Mongolen als Geschichtsquelle und als Literaturdenkmal* (Prague, 1956), p. 56.

<sup>31</sup> J. F. Verbruggen, *De krijgskunst in West Europa in de Middeleeuwen (IX tot het begin van de XIVe eeuw)* (Brussel, 1954), p. 234.

<sup>32</sup> M. Prestwick, *Armies and Warfare in the Middle Ages (The English Experience)* (New Haven, 1996), p. 37; G. T. Dennis, “The Byzantines in Battle,” in K. Tsiknas (ed.), *To emπολεμο βυζαντιο (90ξ–120 αι)* (Athens, 1997), pp. 173–176.

cable service-tenures or *iqtas*—in Islam.<sup>33</sup> Of course, such arrangements were very varied and differed between Latin Christendom, Central Asia, Byzantium, and Islam. In Islam the horse warriors were often nomadic, so that *iqtas*—particularly in Iran—tended to focus more on the use of pastures, while in Europe these centered on the setting-apart of arable land for grassland.

This new class of mounted warriors was—as Bloch insisted—tied together by links of obedience and protection linking the warrior class to the king and peasants to the warriors. Vassalage was part of a much wider nexus of links of allegiance between the king and his trustees, between the warrior bands themselves, and between the warrior bands and the peasants.

The act of entrusting oneself was thus critical to feudalism rather than the enfeoffment of land *per se*.<sup>34</sup> Land was important only because Europe was to a large extent a natural economy in which the gifts exchanged during ceremonies in which one entrusted oneself consisted primarily of land.

Elsewhere there was more money circulating (and taxes were often expressed in cash rather than in commodities). Therefore, the gifts and countergifts involved in the oaths when entrusting oneself more often consisted of cash and goods (e.g., the ubiquitous Islamic robes of honor) rather than in pieces of land.

Roy Mottahadeh<sup>35</sup> has tried to show for Buyyid Iraq, for example, how the solemn oath was by the tenth century the central mechanism by which the Buyyid elites were linked. These had so far only loosely been tied to the Khalifate. Mottahadeh argues that the role of the khalif was by the tenth century that of an arbiter in a comprehensive web of oaths tying the various and mostly deeply divided segments within Islamic society together. The Abbasid Khalifate had been closely tied to a single ethnic group, the Bedouin, whereas in the tenth century there was a slow absorption of other groups: of Daylamite and Kurdish elites.<sup>36</sup>

Mottahadeh reasons that such a parceling out of sovereignty where

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<sup>33</sup> There is a large literature on what *iqta* precisely means, the touchstone of which is still the basic article of C. Cahen, “L’évolution de l’*iqta* au IX au XIII<sup>e</sup> siècle,” *Annales E.S.C.* viii (1953): 23–52, the outcome of the debate on the *iqta* would seem to be that what an *iqta* is very much depends on which time and place one is talking about.

<sup>34</sup> As is also brought out in F. L. Ganshof’s classic study, *Qu’est ce que la féodalité* (Brussels, 1968), p. 139: “l’engagement personnel du vassal prend dans ces conditions, presque l’allure d’une formalité préalable et nécessaire à l’obtention d’un fief.”

<sup>35</sup> *Loyalty and Leadership in an Early Islamic Society* (Princeton, 1980).

<sup>36</sup> J. Lassner, *The Shaping of Abbasid Rule* (Princeton, 1980).

the king acts as supreme arbiter for a system of divided allegiances is typical for Islamic society. But was the position of the khalif in that respect really so different from that of the German Emperor? By the Buyyid period the khalif had become a virtual shadow king and power in Iran and Syria had largely devolved to local emirs or sultans in Syria or to the urbanized elites of western Iran. The German emperor was likewise an arbiter between various noble factions, which in this case would have styled themselves Bavarian, Swabian, and so on: new elites of horse warriors like the Khalifate's Daylamites and Kurds. Though the administrative idioms might differ, emperor and khalif were facing similar problems.

To pursue Bloch, alongside this rise of ties of dependency went the persistence and growth of the family. And, indeed, researchers after Bloch have increasingly tended to stress the importance of the family as the central building block of medieval society.<sup>37</sup>

*Familia* should not be seen here in the sense of the extended household—that is, only the noble or his knightly house—but in a much larger sense: *familia* included the knightly households, who had taken the oath, its cadets, and its dependent peasants. Regarding the peasants, *familia* referred to what in the German literature is called the “*Schutz und Schirm*”: the right to retain and to exercise rights on a bundle of claims of the house on jurisdiction, hence on the land revenues and the labour of peasants on these plots. The lords essentially took upon themselves the obligation to protect the peasants from feuding and unrest, whereas the peasants swore themselves to their lords.<sup>38</sup>

As O. Pritsak (and earlier A. Prisiakov)<sup>39</sup> already noted, *familia*-like institutions can be found elsewhere throughout Eurasia and the resemblances may not be coincidental. The constituent fiscal unit of Kievan Rus, the *votchina*, may well be considered as the *familia* of a chiefly family: armed retainers and peasants under the protection of the household of chieftains. Again, the great noble families of the Byzantine Empire (the Comeni, the Doukai, the Malenoi) constituted not so much a family as an *oikos*, a noble “house” consisting of the

<sup>37</sup> See G. Althof, *Verwandte, Freunde und Getreue: Zur politischen Stellenwert der Gruppenbildung im frühen Mittelalter* (Darmstadt, 1990).

<sup>38</sup> But see the sharp criticism of G. Algazi, *Herrengewalt und Gewalt der Herren im späten Mittelalter* (Frankfurt a.M./New York, 1993). What Algazi's material seems to indicate is, however, not so much that *Schutz und Schirm* did not exist but that it was to a large extent imposed upon the peasant communities.

<sup>39</sup> *The Origins of Rus Volume I. Old Scandinavian Sources Other than the Sagas* (Harvard, 1986); A. P. Prisiakov, *Knaznoe pravo v drevnei Russii (Ocerki po istorii X–XII stoletii)* (Moscow, 1993), pp. 155–160.

family, cadets, retainees, and peasants, all under the protection of the *oikos*.<sup>40</sup>

As a further non-European parallel to the *Schutz und Schirm*, let me suggest that the term “*parijana*” (lit., the offspring) of Indian inscription, particularly used in eastern India—which becomes common in tenth-century inscriptions to designate particularly low caste group of villagers—refers to something akin to the European *Schutz und Schirm*. The *parijana* fell under lordly protection and so to say fictionally became the offspring of the grantee.

### *Economic Elements*

This extension of seigniorial protection of the peasantry was not merely related to the military changes I have outlined above, but also to the increasing benefits from trade and agriculture accruing to the landlords. As the *Taktika* of the Byzantine emperor Leo IV put it, horse warriors “should be rich men, so that they, when engaged in military service, have at their own home others working for them, who are able to supply the full military equipment of a soldier.” Increasing wealth enabled provincial courts and smaller nobles alike to build up both military and economic power. Feudalism was then not a system linked to a declining trade and agriculture—as Pirenne and Sharma argued—but may rather have spread because of tenth-century advances in population and agriculture.

The tenth and eleventh centuries witnessed a great jump forward in trade, agricultural techniques, the diffusion of crops, and an overall rise of agricultural productivity, in western Europe,<sup>41</sup> in (at least parts of) Islam, in (at least South) India, in China, in (but with many reservations) the Byzantine Empire,<sup>42</sup> in Central Asia (at least in Mawarannahr),<sup>43</sup> and (maybe) in West Africa. And a rapid growth of trade occurred from the tenth century to the thirteenth century throughout

<sup>40</sup> J. L. Cheynet, *Pouvoir et contestation à Byzance (963–1204)* (Paris, 1990).

<sup>41</sup> *La croissance agricole du haut Moyen Âge. Chronologies, modalités, géographie* (Auch, 1990).

<sup>42</sup> A. Harvey, *Economic Expansion in the Byzantine Empire 900–1200* (Cambridge, 1989), but not merely in the borderlands. For further evidence for rapid progression of a settlement in a region very far from the Byzantine border indeed (Boethia), see J. T. Bintliff, “Reconstructing the Byzantine Countryside: New Approaches from Quantitative Landscape Archeology,” in K. Belke (ed.), *Byzanz als Raum. Zu Methoden und Inhalte der historische Geographie des östlichen Mittelmeerraumes* (Vienna, 2000), p. 43.

<sup>43</sup> B. G. Gafurov e.a., *Istorija tadzikskogo naroda (v kratkom islosjeniji)*, 6 vols. (Leninabad, 1952–1954), I, pp. 166–168.

Eurasia. Much of Eurasia and Africa were much less isolated than one is inclined to think, being connected through a wide network of trade diasporas—Arab and Viking of course, but also Zoroastrian, Manichean, Nestorian, and Jewish. Such groups were tied together in a number of world cities and world fairs, stretching from Cordoba in the west, over Byzantium and Baghdad, Itil (on the Volga), Dunhuang (on the Silk Road) to Sian, Delhi, or Tanjore in the east. Such commercial centers and trade diasporas served as conduits for the diffusion of plants and agricultural techniques as much as of military technology.<sup>44</sup>

The societies we are studying here had certain common economic characteristics that make them different from capitalist societies, from hunter-gatherer bands, or, indeed, from the societies in late antiquity, such as the Roman, Sassanid, Harsha, or Gupta empires.

To explain change, rather than focusing upon the mode of production, where the way surplus value is extracted is the defining factor, one ought to focus on the production itself instead. Trade, which world historians such as A. Gunder Frank and W. H. McNiel<sup>45</sup> see as the central engine of world-historic cycles of growth and contraction, was undoubtedly important. And I would immediately concede that it was rising in importance. Yet to focus on production itself rather than on the institutions through which the production was then redivided (which most Marxist writers really mean when they speak about the mode of production) entails that one has to focus on the land where roughly 95% of the population lived and whose revenues entirely dominated those from trade. Even in the case of Byzantium (still a funnel of East-West trade where commerce was far important than in western Europe) agrarian revenues made up 95% of all incomes.<sup>46</sup>

Focusing on production itself rather than on how it was divided, medieval societies could be seen as part of a Eurasian (West/East) African ethnosphere, to borrow a term from L. N. Gumilev.<sup>47</sup> The ethnosphere was a certain common way of adapting to and evolving with the environment. It was characterized by two main means of produc-

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<sup>44</sup> Two classic studies may be specially quoted in this respect, namely W. Hertzog, *Geschichte Zentralasiens und der Seidenstrasse in islamischer Zeit* (Darmstadt, 1982), and M. Lombard, *L' Islam dans sa première grandeur (VIII–XIe siècle)* (Paris, 1971).

<sup>45</sup> See, for example, B. K. Gillis, "Capital and Power in the Process of World History", in S. K. Sanderson (ed.), *Civilizations and World-Systems. Studying World-Historical Change* (Walnut Creek 1995), p. 139 and W. H. McNeill, "The Rise of the West after Twenty-Five Years" in *ibid.*, p. 315.

<sup>46</sup> W. I. Treadgold, *The Byzantine State Finances in the Eighth and Ninth Centuries* (New York, 1982), p. 93.

<sup>47</sup> L. N. Gumilev, *Etnosfera: Istorija ljudje i istorija prirody* (Moscow, 1993).

tion: peasant production centered on the household, organized in class societies; and nomadic cattle-herding centred on a market. The ethnosphere, nomadic and peasant production encompassed in class societies, was in the tenth century still intersected by vast swaths of land that did not belong to it, though (which is why I prefer this term to McNeil's "ecumene," which is not specific enough).

Next to peasant production in class societies with some form of a state—which to many theoretists encapsulates military agrarian or even preindustrial societies at large—there still stood an alternative: more egalitarian peasant societies, hunter-gatherers, fishermen, or nomads producing for their own consumption. And I think the basic divide in the tenth century was not between these various class and state-organized societies but between the ethnosphere and the very different acephalous (stateless) societies surrounding them.

The feudal process was tied to a dialectic of adaptation and expansion of the ethnosphere from the early tenth century to the thirteenth century, both as to its size and as to its compass. "Settled" agriculture was displacing various forms of shifting and slash-and-burn agriculture. That is true in Europe, as much as in West Africa, in Central Asia, Russia, and probably in parts of India too, such as in the Sundarabans of Bengal or in the river valleys of Assam. The subject races' land grants from Bengal sometimes referred to as being assigned to a territory, for example, probably implies tribal groups (so far slash-and-burn cultivators) assigned as serfs to the colonizers of the land.

What this also entailed was that hunter-gatherers or smaller "tribal" peasant groups were increasingly pushed out of agrarian core lands. This, for example, happened with speakers of various Finugric languages in Russia, which as the Slavonic colonization proceeded, were gradually being pushed farther and farther into the Siberian and North Russian forests.<sup>48</sup>

And it entailed the replacement of acephalous, classless peasant societies. In Europe the Carolingian class society was in the ninth century still directly confronting a vast swath of land under "peasant freedom."<sup>49</sup> In the tenth and eleventh centuries this world of peasant freedom was slowly being subdued or pulled into the ethnosphere by a gradual process of further class differentiation and state formation.

That might occur through the direct invasions by the armored cavalry from the agrarian core territories, as happened in Ireland and

<sup>48</sup> V. V. Kliucevskii, *Kurs Russkoi Istorii* 5 vols. (Moscow, 1937), I, p. 25–27.

<sup>49</sup> B. H. Slicher van Bath, "Boerenvrijheid" (inaugural lecture, Groningen, 1947).

during the eastward German expansion, where such acephalous societies were overrun and parcelled out in fiefs for noble adventurers.<sup>50</sup>

It might also happen as a result of an—often quite rapid—ascendancy of rich farmers, leaders of particularly successful war bands, to paramount chiefs, monopolizing the gift economy, and—by the redivision of land to their retinue—power over the peasants, as happened in Denmark and Sweden in the late tenth and eleventh centuries.<sup>51</sup> And it finally might happen through the more gradual formation of a class of wealthy farmers, who gradually absorbed and then monopolized the rights to jurisdiction. Such acephalous regions were for ecological regions much more numerous outside of Europe; thus, much of the Eurasian steppes, the Sahara, the Rub al-Khalil, Malwa, or the mountains of Afghanistan constituted acephalous regions, though all of these, or most of them, were in very close contact with the ethnosphere through both trade and military recruitment.

The ethnosphere was characterized by peasant household production: that is, a way of agrarian production where the family is the basic unit of production, where each family has its own plot of land to cultivate, where the village is the basic mode of settlement, and where the main—and often the only—pursuit of the peasant is agriculture. Peasant household production indubitably has many characteristics in common across cultures. Household production, for example, is essentially premised on risk reduction rather than on obtaining a profit, hence the tendency of peasants throughout Eurasia to scatter their plots over wide areas, which may be conceived as a form of risk reduction. Given different qualities of the soil and microclimatic vagaries, it was far too risky to wager everything on a single plot of land. There was equally a tendency of landlords throughout the ethnosphere to concentrate their holdings, though, as it was not cost-efficient to collect rent from scattered plots.<sup>52</sup>

Yet I would hesitate to replace the feudal mode of production (in the Soviet-Marxist sense of the agrarian residual) with an equally metahistoric notion of a peasant or domestic mode of production as

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<sup>50</sup> We now have a brilliant description of this process in Europe in R. Bartlett, *The Making of Europe: Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1300* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> B. Sawyer and P. Sawyer, *Medieval Scandinavia from Conversion to Reformation* (Minneapolis, 1993), pp. 80–99.

<sup>52</sup> For a good topographic treatment of this tendency of peasants to scatter holdings and for landlords to consolidate them for one region in Europe (Hainault), see L. Verriest, *Institutions médiévales (Introduction au corpus des records des coutumes et des lois du chef de lieu de l'ancien comté de Hainault)* (Brussels, 1946), pp. 111–142.

M. C. Sahlins does.<sup>53</sup> Unlike in the acephalous small self-sufficient peasant communities, which existed outside of the ethnosphere, medieval villages were nothing like the self-contained, self-sufficient, undifferentiated, “windowless monads” they are characterized as in much theoretic writing on the domestic mode of production.

Not just the military/fiscal/judicial superstructure was able to introduce change in peasant societies (as is implied by the theoreticians of the feudal mode of production), but population pressure and changes in agrarian production within the rural society were inducing changes in the military/fiscal superstructure as well: it was a dialectic process. As R. Mendras and M. Jollivet<sup>54</sup> have been warning rural sociologists, too much literature on European peasants (and even more so non-European peasants) tends to perceive an inseparable dualism between the “peasant sphere” and external forces, or—as in Indian studies—to distinguish a cleavage between the state and the locality, where the state has quite different laws of development than the locality.<sup>55</sup>

But villages, whether in Europe, in the Byzantine Empire, in Islam, or in India, comprised a high percentage of outsiders: the village cleric, or rural moneylender (in India), the watchmen, fishermen, or craftsmen.<sup>56</sup> On India, for example, take the Candella (Bundelkhand area, Uttar Pradesh) copperplate of 1189 where the population of an assigned villages is divided in “*sa karu kursaka vanig vastanyam*,” that is, cultivators, artisans, and merchants. In this case as in many western European villages, the peasant community was not an undifferentiated mass but consisted of different population segments whether it be as to their occupations or their wealth, caste, and judicial status.

### *The Feudal Mutation as a Class Struggle*

Now, it may seem strange to be using the word “class” in a medieval context. But unlike what Bison argues—that the feudal mutation was exclusively a struggle for power within the elites—it was not merely that but a struggle between opposed classes, too.<sup>57</sup> *Class an sich* is not

<sup>53</sup> M. D. Sahlins, *Stone Age Economics* (London, 1947), pp. 47–154.

<sup>54</sup> R. Mendras, *Sociétés paysannes: Élément pour une théorie de la paysannerie* (Paris, 1976); M. Jollivet, *Sociétés paysannes ou lutes des classes au village: Problème méthodologiques et théoriques de l'étude locale en sociologie rurale* (Paris, 1974).

<sup>55</sup> B. Stein, *A History of India* (Oxford, 1997).

<sup>56</sup> On Byzantium, see Angelika E. Laiou-Thomakadi, *Peasant Society in the Late Byzantine Empire* (Princeton, 1977), pp. 120–141.

<sup>57</sup> T. N. Bison, “The Feudal Revolution,” *Past and Present* 142 (1994): 42.

necessarily confined to capitalism and medieval writers were acutely aware they were living in a society consisting of different social layers. It is sometimes argued that medieval ideas of class revolved around the idea of the “estate,” where society is defined by a number of judicially delimited groups. But in its mature form this is really a late medieval idea.<sup>58</sup> In the eleventh century the realities of power were much too brutal to fit any such neat judicial delimitation.

Contrary to G. Dumézil<sup>59</sup> and—following Dumézil—G. Duby,<sup>60</sup> it seems the High Medieval idea of *ordines* does not refer to some ancient Indo-Aryan political theory but reflected actual realities of power. The problem with Dumézil’s idea is that the *ordines* were absent from Carolingian political thought and were newly invented at the end of the tenth century, particularly in writers related to the Clunesian reforms, as Cluny tended to stress the clergy as a separate order, distinct and independent from the worldly authorities.<sup>61</sup>

Apart from the *tres ordines* distinction, which may privilege the priesthood too much, there was another three-order distinction made by Thomas of Aquino in the thirteenth century. This may better reflect the medieval class system. Aquinas distinguished between *milites*, *optimates*, and *humiliores*—that is, the ruling class of warriors, the middle class (the “honourable people”), and the working class (the “humble people,” by and large peasants of course).<sup>62</sup> But while this Thomasian definition of class may sound deceptively modern, it proceeds from a mental and social universe that is different from our own.

The middle class, the “honourable people” or the “free men” (*liberi homini*) referred to in the eleventh century are those who are not under any form of legal trusteeship, but who do not have the right to exercise any form of *Schutz und Schirm*, either. Rather than involving any economic distinction, this entails a distinction in power. But power over men is by no means less real than ownership of the means of production, which in the Middle Ages merely consisted of a few basic agricultural implements. The basic question was who could legally dispose of labor power: “land was to rule” in both India and Europe.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>58</sup> P. Blicke, *Deutsche Untertanen. Ein Widerspruch* (Munich, 1981), pp. 86–92.

<sup>59</sup> G. Dumézil, *Mythe et épopées I: L'idéologie des trois fonctions dans les épopées des peuples Indo-Européens* (Paris, 1968).

<sup>60</sup> *The Three Orders: Feudal Society Imagined* (Chicago, 1980).

<sup>61</sup> J. Flori, *Préhistoire de la chevalerie: La doctrine de la gleive* (Paris, 1986).

<sup>62</sup> O. Brunner, *Sozialgeschichte Europas im Mittelalter* (Cologne, 1972), p. 25.

<sup>63</sup> This is mainly based on a local study: J. Jarnut, *Bergamo 568–1098: Verfassung, Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte einer lombardischen Stadt im Mittelalter* (Wiesbaden: Beiheft Vierteljahrsschrift für Sozial- und Wirtschaftsgeschichte, 1996), pp. 153–167.

The extension of the seigniorial *banum* over the peasantry by the eleventh century was both causing and caused itself (it is once again a dialectic process) two developments: the slow rise of a class of professional merchants and a relative leveling of social differences within the peasantry both from below and from above. Large farmers were increasingly either absorbed into the landlord class or brought into the seigniorial *familia*.

But this tendency was by no means confined to western Europe, for in the Byzantine law of the seventh and eighth centuries a similar distinction is used between officials of the state on one hand and free and unfree peasants on the other. And in the tenth and eleventh centuries we see on the one hand a similar leveling of distinctions between free and unfree peasantry, and on the other the rise of a diffuse class of *donatoi* who had personal protection over a retinue of peasants and townsmen. Furthermore we also see a gradual disappearance of the gentleman farmers/warriors who formed the backbone of Byzantine military strength in the eighth and ninth centuries and the ascent of professional mercenary forces, rewarded with land, and of private military forces grouped around the *donatoi*.<sup>64</sup>

There was thus a creeping social revolution concomitant to the rise of feudalism in the tenth and eleventh centuries: a leveling of professional differences within the peasantry. This was related to an increasing specialization of the peasantry on agriculture and on a decreasing amount of time spent on seminomadic activities: food gathering, herding cattle and pigs, and so on. This process in German is nicely called *Vergetreidigung* and proceeded apace in Europe from the ninth century onward, together with a regional growth of cash crop agriculture.<sup>65</sup>

At the moment it is difficult to say whether a similar shift toward *Vergetreidigung* outside of Europe took place, though this would stand to reason as peasants, because of global population growth, shifted from activities demanding a low population-to-land ratio to those demanding a higher population-to-land ratio: hunter-gatherer pursuits need more space than full-time agriculture. Of course, something very much alike certainly did happen in Russia since ancient Slavonic peasant agriculture was, even more than European agriculture, mixed. By 980

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<sup>64</sup> J. F. Haldon, *Recruitment and Conscription in the Byzantine Army ca. 350–950: A Study on the Origins of the Stratiotika Ktemata* (Vienna, 1979).

<sup>65</sup> R. Hodges, *Dark Age Economics. The Origins of Towns and Trade A.D. 608–1000* (London, 1982), pp. 136, 142; V. Roesener, *Bauern im Mittelalter* (München, 1987).

though—because of the increasing population pressure—peasants in Russia also began to shift toward relying on barley and rye.<sup>66</sup>

In India there is some evidence for a local differentiation in cash crop production. Particularly parts of Bihar and of the Punjab appear to have specialized in sugar in the ninth and tenth centuries and Gujarat appears to have specialized increasingly in growing cotton, whereas such products were widely grown throughout India in the sixth century. Those products were exported in bulk to Iran and to the Persian Gulf. Furthermore a process similar to *Vergetreidigung* appears to have taken place in Bengal and Orissa, where by the tenth century the peasantry increasingly specialized in growing rice—apparently often exported to Southeast Asia.

However, such a process whereby the peasants increasingly shifted toward cultivating single crops, often directed toward distant markets, certainly did not occur everywhere. Byzantine *pragmata* make it clear that Byzantine peasants resisted such specialization.<sup>67</sup> Not only was Byzantine agriculture threatened by erratic rainfall, but it was also plagued by erosion—a paramount problem, of course, in an area such as Asia Minor and the Greek islands, where, unlike in western Europe, the bulk of fertile land had already been under cultivation for more than thousand years. Likewise in the Central Islamic land agrarian specialization had already reached a limit by the tenth century where there were few agrarian fringe lands left (and those fringes were occupied by nomads producing for markets in the towns).

#### FEUDALISM AS A “REAL TYPE”

Feudalism should thus be perceived as a unique ninth century through twelfth century process rather than comprehending it through a set of static ideal types standing outside of history. Comparative military, social, and economic pressures were giving rise to comparable forms of social organization. We can comprehend these only by looking to them as a whole and as historic phenomena rather than through a set of ideal types standing outside of history.

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<sup>66</sup> V. A. Artsikhovskiy and B. A. Kolchin, *Novgorod the Great: Excavations at the Medieval City* (London, 1967), p. 89.

<sup>67</sup> See J. W. Nesbitt, “Mechanisms of Agrarian Production on Estates of the Byzantine Pragmata” (Unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Wisconsin, 1972).

If with M. Weber's ideal type of feudalism<sup>68</sup> we focus on a single narrow definition of feudalism, a lord-vassal relationship as a hierarchical system in which the granting of a fief is seen as a private juridical transaction and as private property, and the relations between lord and vassal as a hierarchic pyramid, we will not find any such "ideal type" in tenth-century France, as Susan Reynolds<sup>69</sup> pointed out. Nor will we find such a system anywhere else in medieval Europe.

For power was not a pyramid; it was scattered. One might be in a position of vassal toward one lord, of lord toward somebody else; seigniorial banes overlapped and there was a multiplicity of authorities to apply to, rather than there being a single high court for appeal. The fief was not seen as a single piece of property but rather as a diffuse bundle of loose claims on rights and *ad hoc* acts of submission.

The normal opposition between European feudalism, which was based on "property of the fiefs" versus the supposed *ad hoc* submission of warriors and the alienable service tenure of the Orient is therefore—if one follows Reynolds—spurious, too. In the East as much as in the West the fief was not a single piece of land but above all a diffuse bundle of rights. One obtained a right to participate in the game of power by a fief.

To consider the classical case here: there is no denying the differences between the Byzantine *pronoia*—spreading from the late eleventh century onward—and the Western fiefs. This is really a difference between a system where much of the fiscal apparatus of the state had collapsed with one where it was still extant, so that holders of a *pronoia* were in the Byzantine system perceived as salaried officials. But *pronoia*s did look upon it as an inalienable bundle of rights belonging to the same families for generations. And *pronoia* fulfilled many of the same functions as Western fiefs did. They were, like Western fiefs, essentially a plot of land assigned to feed iron-clad mounted warriors and constituted a right, or a stake, to participate in the local and imperial game of power.

O. Brunner has classically argued that the critical question in studying feudalism is what we mean by "the state."<sup>70</sup> In a modern context,

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<sup>68</sup> *Wirtschaft und Gesellschaft. Grundriss der verstehende Soziologie*, 2 vols. (Cologne, 1964), I, p. 189–192.

<sup>69</sup> *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994).

<sup>70</sup> *Land und Herrschaft: Grundlagen der territorialen Verfassungsgeschichte Österreichs im Mittelalter* (Vienna, 1943; Darmstadt, 1970).

the state has a monopoly on the use of violence, it is a judicial person incorporating the will of its citizens, and the law adopted by the state is the only law ruling in the land.

The medieval state, however, did not have such a monopoly on violence. Subjects reserved a legitimate right to the use of violence and to resist authority if it clashed with “divine justice” and infringed on their legitimate sphere of jurisdiction. In that case, after solemnly abdicating from one’s lord and announcing one’s right of resistance against tyranny, one could proclaim a feud. One could resist with plunder and burning against both dukes or kings and the right to a feud belonged to tiny chieftains as much as to nobles.

While Brunner himself opposed such a freedom to chose allegiances to “the oppressive power of the oriental state,”<sup>71</sup> such a system of choosing and renouncing allegiances of the warrior bands was in fact not confined to Europe. The defining element of the hero in the Rajput epics, for example, the *khyats*, is the right to denounce the king at Delhi and pronounce war against him. Rajput history is made up of lengthy feuds between ruling lineages and kings, and among themselves. Again, it is the defining element of the Byzantine epic of Digenes Akritas: the hero is a free man because he can choose and denounce allegiance and declare a feud. Surely that was a frontier epic, but then much of the Byzantine countryside was an “inner frontier.”<sup>72</sup>

And the state’s authority was, and had to be, severely circumscribed by customs. Next to the constitutional law of the state stood a private law defined by and exercised by private landholders or village communities. Medieval kingdoms or duchies were seen not strictly like states in the modern definition at all then, but dominions: spheres of rule. The king could legitimately dispose of a bundle of rights in order to assert his authority but could not legally transgress beyond these.

But to the Marxist and Weberian writers on feudalism the state is an “ideal type”: the existence of a centralized and clearly defined authority of the state is the natural order of things. Such an emphasis, perhaps outside of the Confucian world order, is—following Brunner and Reynolds’s writings—not so much wrong as beside the point, since it derives from a twentieth-century concept of what a state is, a definition that is then accepted without questioning.

<sup>71</sup> *Neue Wege der Sozialgeschichte, Vorträge und Aufsätze* (Göttingen, 1978).

<sup>72</sup> C. Jouanno, ed., *Digenes Akritas: Le héros des frontières une épopée Byzantine* (Turnhout, 1989); N. P. Ziegler, “Some Notes on Rajput Loyalties during the Mughal Period,” in J. F. Richards (ed.), *Kingship and Authority in South Asia* (Madison, Wis., 1978), pp. 215–251.

C. Wickham,<sup>73</sup> for example, writes that in the West power was “privatised” whereas in the East it remained “public property.” Such a focus on the central authority and public versus private property, however, suggests that in the East law was ultimately derived from the state’s sovereignty, expressing either the will of the people or “despotic power of the king, unhampered by legal constraint.”

But either way of perceiving the state is derived from a modern context: both in the shari’a and in shastric legal thought, authority is ultimately divine, too. There is a sacred and transcendent law, which is immutable and given, from which the law here on earth is derived, and which it is the *dharma* of the king to carry out.

There was therefore, and could not be, either in Islam or in Hinduism, a single authority from which the law derived, since the authority of the state was always circumscribed by divine law (as interpreted in India by the Brahmin assemblies) and all royal power was in the last instance illegitimate. Power and authority was derived from *smṛti*. Outside of the sphere where the king had authority there was hence a plethora of other sovereign authorities. Indian legal texts from the tenth and eleventh centuries tended to distinguish several spheres of *dharma*, putting *gav-dharma* (“village” law) and *sreni-dharma* (“guild” law) next to the *raj-dharma* as a separate fount of authority. To the Indian jurists and political theorists, any small *raja* or any village assembly had as much his own justified place in the “circle of kings” as had the Chola “emperor.”

Because the law was not seen to proceed from the state but to derive from *smṛti*, any local authority could define its own law, if sanctioned by the ultimate authority of divine law and by force of customs. Also, there was no authority that could make new law—law had always to be derived from the preceding corpus of law.

Taxes were linked to sovereignty and the right to levy these was, hence, not derived from the constitution—as in the modern state that most comparative writings take as the general measure—but derived from this divine law. Although the ownership of land is a contested issue in the Sanskrit legal texts, the lawyers and inscriptions of tenth century India generally distinguished a *rajbogha* or—in inscriptions—*bhagaghogakhara*. *Rajbogha* is in shastric texts the right of the king to levy mostly one-sixth of the revenue. But there were a host of other taxes, much of them not being in the power in the king to levy. In the language of the Bengal inscriptions these were *bhumichchidra* (rights):

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<sup>73</sup> “The Other Transition: From the Ancient World to Feudalism,” in C. Wickham, *Land and Power: Studies in Italian and European History* (London, 1994), pp. 7–43.

local taxes belonging to the tiller of the soil or the landlords. In Bengal, as in Europe, there was thus a well-defined sphere where the state had a right to exact taxes, another sphere where the seigniorial *banum* applied and/or where landlords could exact rent, and a third sphere where village autonomy applied.

## CONCLUSION

Thus, “the state” did not survive in the East, whereas its power in the West became privatized—rather the concept of the state as ideal type should be replaced by the concept of the state as a real type. “The state” is not an ontology but exists only in a given time and context.

Yet the supposed contrast both Wickham and Mukhia make between India—where levying land revenues was a monopoly of the state, hence rent—and Europe—where this right became private ownership of the landlords, hence tax—precedes from such an ontological conception of the state. The tax/rent dichotomy between the supposed feudal mode of production in Europe and the tributary elsewhere is largely a nonissue, as it equates the “tributary, oriental state” with the modern state that has a right to levy taxes because of its sovereignty “undivided and single.” Such a spurious tax/rent dichotomy is, however, presently the dominant way in comparative sociology to study feudalism. And it is basic for attempts to substitute for the word “feudalism” another even broader concept: the “tributary mode of production.”

The tributary mode of production is presumably a predominantly agrarian way of production in which the agrarian surplus is creamed off as tribute by either landlords or a state bureaucracy, and where the peasants rather than the landlords own the means of production. It is then contended that European feudalism is only a particularly decentralized variant of this tributary mode of production.

Now, a concept that applies equally to the sultanate of Sokoto in West Africa in the early nineteenth century and to the Tang Empire in the seventh should sound the alarm bells: something applying to totally incompatible units twelve centuries apart seems no more than a substitute for feudalism in its vaguest Soviet-Marxist sense of the “agrarian residual.”

But worse—both in Eric Wolff’s<sup>74</sup> and in Samir Amin’s writings<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> *Europe and the People without History* (Berkeley, 1982), pp. 79–82.

<sup>75</sup> S. Amin, *Unequal Development* (Sussex, 1976), pp. 13–58.

—the concept as it is used now has a double ontological status. On the one hand, like Wickham, Wolff and Amin use the ontological concept of the state to distinguish a dichotomy between centralized and decentralized systems. This dichotomy makes no sense in a situation in which sovereignty is scattered and has to be scattered because sovereignty does not derive from the state but from divine law. On the other hand, its concept of the peasants is ontological, too. It presupposes a self-sufficient agricultural sector that is stagnant by nature and where the only dynamic element through which change may be introduced is the way in which surplus value is creamed off by the ruling class. It by and large denies any form of dynamism to peasant production itself. The peasants are, ironically for the theorists of the tributary mode of production (who would generally conceive themselves as “emancipatory historians”), “the people without history.” History proceeds through elites.

Yet rapid change, particularly in the way peasants organize their production, is intrinsic not merely to capitalism and industrial society but to preindustrial peasant societies as well. Tenth-century European peasant production was not merely quantitatively but also qualitatively very different from that in first century Europe, in spite of both being preindustrial and noncapitalist societies.<sup>76</sup>

Medieval studies (more so than modern studies where the intercontinental contacts are far clearer) above all is a celebration of the beauty of historical difference. When arguing, we should focus at least as much on sameness as on difference. I do not want to diminish the importance of studying difference on a world or very local level. Of course, it is important to know in what respect Knutsford-upon-Thames differs from all surrounding villages. Yet I wonder whether medieval studies since Bloch have not imposed a self-chosen isolation upon themselves by a refusal to use explicit comparisons and to distinguish broad processes throughout Eurasia like the one argued for here.

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<sup>76</sup> A point rightly emphasized by F. Tökei, *Marxistische Geschichtstheorie 2: Antike und Feudalismus* (Budapest, 1976).

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