

A “Feudal Mutation”? Conceptual Tools and Historical Patterns in World History

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WAS there a “feudal mutation” in world history, a common process that affected much of the Eurasian “ethnosphere” between approximately 900 and 1200? R. J. Barendse says there was, and argues in addition that “feudalism” is a useful term for world historical analysis. I argue, first, that “feudalism” is not a useful term and concept in analyzing any aspect of world history, and, second, that the mutation Barendse describes, whatever we call it, did not actually happen.

“FEUDALISM”

Barendse’s Claims

Barendse makes three sets of broad claims about what he variously calls the “feudal mutation” or “feudalism as a process”: claims about peasant production, about warriors and horses, and about the results for sociopolitical structures. First, the feudal mutation was an internal transformation caused by an upsurge in agricultural productivity, colonization, and trade between 900 and 1200. Second, a “warhorse revolution” brought a new class of rural warrior aristocrats, bound together by oaths, to power across Eurasia at the expense of both peasant freedoms and central authority. The result? He claims that “The feudal process can be perceived as a specific world historic juncture in which peasant societies were subjugated by an aristocracy of mounted war-

rriors that became more powerful than any central institution and increasingly appropriated the jurisdiction over the peasants, and thus the land revenue." Thus, "the feudal mutation" consisted of changes in peasant production and in warhorses and warrior roles, the combination producing societies that had "certain common economic [and by inference sociopolitical] characteristic that makes them different from capitalist societies, from hunter-gatherer bands, or, indeed, from the societies in late antiquity, such as the Roman, Sassanid, Harsha, or the Gupta empires."¹

Two questions stand out from this summary. First, did changes in peasant production create the "horse revolution" and the resulting dominance of warriors over peasant society? If so, how? This question is particularly pressing when one considers the central role of steppe nomads in many of the areas Barendse discusses. How did changes in peasant production affect the motives and actions of these nonagrarian societies? Second, what exactly was the result, and can we describe it as "feudal societies," the linguistic implicand of the "feudal mutation" as a process?

"Feudalism" in Medieval Historiography

This last question is especially pressing since the term is in rapid decline among specialists in medieval European history, especially military historians,² because "feudalism" is a term that is paradoxically both too vague and too precise. Though based on the medieval word "*feudum*," the Latin for "fief," the word "feudalism" was coined by

¹ R. J. Barendse, "The Feudal Mutation: Military and Economic Transformations of the Ethnosphere in the Tenth to Thirteenth Centuries," *Journal of World History*, this volume, (pp. 511, 518).

² Elizabeth A. R. Brown, "The Tyranny of a Construct: Feudalism and Historians of Medieval Europe," *AHR* 79 (1974): 1063–1088, first raised the problems with this term; her critique is still vital. Constance Bouchard, *Strong of Body, Brave and Noble: Chivalry and Society in Medieval France* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1998), pp. 35–38, summarizes the historiography of the term nicely and re-urges its abandonment. Examples of significant works of medieval history that manage perfectly well without the term include Frank Barlow's biography of an erstwhile "feudal monarch," *William Rufus* (London: Methuen, 1983), and Bernard Hamilton's *The Leper King and His Heirs: Baldwin IV and the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). John France's survey of western European warfare between 1000 and 1300 mentions some form of the term only three times. Two of these imply the term's growing obsolescence: "This military-tenurial system, which we often call 'feudal,' provided the best soldiers of the age" and "the bonds that tied these *mouvances* together were what we call feudal oaths." The third discusses "feudal adjustments," that is, warfare that affected in minor ways the landholdings and ties of warrior aristocrats. John France, *Western Warfare in the Age of the Crusades, 1000–1300* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), pp. 7, 47, 56.

reformers in the eighteenth century to describe (unfavorably) the system of rights and privileges enjoyed by the French aristocracy, especially with regard to landholding and their peasant tenants. This broad socioeconomic meaning was taken up and extended by Marxist historians, for whom the “feudal mode of production” succeeded the classical mode and preceded the capitalist mode.³ For military historians, this has always been far too broad a definition, for if a privileged landholding class and a subject peasantry constitutes feudalism, then most civilizations before the industrial revolution were feudal and the term loses any real analytic usefulness.

Military historians have usually taken a more restricted view of feudalism. For them, it is the system of raising troops in which a lord grants a fief—typically a piece of land—to a vassal (Latin *vassus*) in return for a defined term of military service.⁴ But these conceptions of feudalism tended to be misleading, as they always contained a specious precision. In the period 900–1100, “*feudum*” and “*vassus*” were vague and mutable terms, while military systems from the ninth to the fourteenth centuries were far more varied, flexible, and rational than conventional interpretations have allowed.⁵ Since “feudalism” has long since become shorthand for these conventional interpretations, the term in its restricted military sense is as misleading as in its broad Marxist sense.

Should we then define feudalism more generally as a landed support system for unpaid military service? There are several problems with this. First, in western Europe individuals and groups also served for pay from an early date, wherever economic conditions made it possible and even when they owed “feudal” service. Paid service became increasingly common in the period after 1050. Second, in a global context there have been many forms of “soldiers’ lands” in different

³ See the references cited by Barendse, notes 1–8. A good example of this use of “feudal” is Robert S. Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), where “feudal” describes the rights to income exaction that landlords exercised over tenants: “most [lordly estates] had feudal (seigniorial) rights attached as well” (p. 15).

⁴ This is the “military-tenurial system” referred to by John France; see note 2. Barendse appropriates this definition (Barendse, p. 506) in order to show that it doesn’t work. My point exactly, and one reason the term is now out of favor.

⁵ See especially Susan Reynolds, *Fiefs and Vassals: The Medieval Evidence Reinterpreted* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). For a case study and further discussion of this problem, see Stephen Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings, 1066–1135* (Woodbridge: Boydell, 1994). In that study I used the term “feudalism” in a restricted and carefully defined way, but have since decided that even this carefully circumscribed usage has caused more confusion than it was worth in terms of convenience.

times and places, in combination with paid service and not. To call all these feudal is to arrive at a uselessly broad definition again. To try and distinguish some as feudal has inevitably involved the privileging of the European model, for no reason than that it was studied first. Many medieval military historians have therefore decided that the term is probably best avoided, to be replaced by functional descriptions of the world's (and Europe's) varied military systems of landed support, militia service, and the social hierarchies that accompanied them.⁶

Given this historiography, will Barendse's definition clear up the confusion that every other definition has simply added to? Such definitions include Marc Bloch's, upon which Barendse depends most, even though he never explains why this definition among many is most correct. But even his reliance on Bloch is qualified, for he is forced in the course of his analysis to modify it significantly. The second of Bloch's "fundamental features" of European feudalism is "widespread use of the service tenement (i.e., the fief) instead of a salary, which was out of the question."⁷ Yet Barendse must claim that "The act of entrusting oneself was thus critical to feudalism rather than the enfeoffment of land per se,"⁸ indicating that agreement on fundamental features of anything called "feudalism" is well nigh impossible.

⁶ Legal historians of Europe have of course come to a different conclusion. In the more settled European conditions of the twelfth century and later, the informal arrangements of an earlier age tended to crystallize into formal legal arrangements with defined terms of service and defined inheritance rights on the part of the vassal. This process marked the emergence of feudalism in the narrow meaning of "fief holding" (Bouchard, *Strong of Body*, p. 36) as a fundamental legal system. Indeed, the lord-vassal tie of landholding became crucial as one of two key bonds (with marriage, which it resembled) among the European aristocracy. The twelfth century English system of fief law became the basis of most later English estate law and thence of modern American property law. See S.F.C. Milsom, *The Legal Framework of English Feudalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1976) and the review by Robert C. Palmer, "The Feudal Framework of English Law," *Michigan Law Review* 79 (1981): 1130–1155; also Palmer's "The Origins of Property in England," *Law and History Review* 3 (1985): 1–50; and more recently (with greater emphasis on the developments in the Anglo-Norman period), John Hudson, *Land, Law, and Lordship in Anglo-Norman England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994). Thus, "feudal" property law has a definite history. The mistake is to read this very European legal history back into the military sphere of Europe or, even more, the rest of the world.

⁷ Marc Bloch, *Feudal Society*, trans. L. A. Manyon (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1961), II, p. 446. Bouchard, *Strong of Body* (p. 39), points out that "it is now clear that the period before the eleventh century, Bloch's 'first [feudal] age,' was not in any definable sense 'feudal.'"

⁸ Barendse, p. 515. Cf. France, *Western Warfare*, p. 56: "But the oath in itself did little—what mattered was who had real power in a relationship." And cf. Hamilton, *Leper King*, p. 46, who notes, *pace* Barendse's emphasis on bundles of rights, that many of the holders of military tenures under Baldwin "only held money fiefs, which conferred no jurisdiction."

Furthermore, Dr. Barendse's construction of the concept itself suffers from two significant theoretical flaws. First, it leads us right back to nineteenth century historiography, with Europe as the model for analyzing the rest of the world. The very problem Barendse started with is "a case of mistaken identity" concerning what feudalism in Europe was.⁹ In other words, getting European feudalism right allows us to see the "feudal mutation" more broadly. The result is shoe-horning: fitting the evidence of other societies into a preexisting model derived from European history. To paraphrase Barendse's argument, we should first look at what happened in Europe. Then, we should see if it happened in India. And if our definitions are broad enough and our comparisons are loose enough, so as to take account of the variations that will inevitably exist in a "real" as opposed to an "ideal" type, we find that the same "feudal mutation" happened in India, too. This, I would argue, is what the most damaging forms of Eurocentrism are about.¹⁰

The second is that, despite his attempt to distance himself from the teleology of the Marxist historiography of feudalism, Barendse's concept of "feudalization" partakes heavily of the Marxist notion of "modes of production," which promotes confusion not just over "feudalism" but over explaining its Marxist sequel. In other words, it leads to the question "If there was no feudalism, how do we explain the rise of capitalism?"¹¹

The problem with the formulation of this question is twofold. First, it asks for an explanation of the wrong thing, for it is not capitalism (which has existed in various forms in many different societies across both the traditional and, obviously, the modern worlds¹²) but industrialization (which has not) that needs explaining. Second—and this is the problem embedded in the term "feudalism"—it asks, in effect, how an economic system (whether capitalism or industrialism) arose from a political system, for if there is a center of gravity around which

⁹ Barendse, p. 503.

¹⁰ I outline an alternative method and explore the historiographical problems with feudal terminology further in S. Morillo, "Guns and Government: A Comparative Study of Europe and Japan," *Journal of World History* 6 (1995): 75–106.

¹¹ This was brought home to me forcefully when Barendse and I delivered our papers in a session of the World History Association conference in Boston in June 2000. One of the first questions I received was this very question.

¹² For the traditional world see, for example, the evidence in Janet Abu-Lughod, *Before European Hegemony. The World System A.D. 1250–1350* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989). For a general overview in the context of world-systems theory, see Christopher Chase-Dunn and Thomas D. Hall, *Rise and Demise: Comparing World Systems* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1997).

all the non-Marxist conceptions of medieval European feudalism orbit, it is that feudalism was a set of political and military arrangements that tied together the warrior aristocracy and their dependants. It was, in other words, a political system separate from the economic systems (usually but certainly not always manorialism) that supported it.¹³ Clearly, the political, economic, and social spheres are linked in important ways in all societies, but they are distinct even if linked. Using the term “feudalism,” especially if it contains elements of the “modes of production” idea complex, elides the distinctions in ways that hinder clear analysis.¹⁴

“Feudalism”: Conclusion

Thus, regarding the question of whether “feudalism” is a useful term and concept in analyzing world history, I remain inclined to reject it on linguistic, historiographical, and theoretical grounds alone. Neither the term nor the concept help Barendse’s analysis, because he has to spend so much time keeping his own definition of it afloat in the historiographical whitewater (including defending it as a “real” rather than an “ideal” type) that he can’t focus fully on the historical process he wants to describe.

HORSES, WARRIORS, AND PEASANTS

What about that process? In order to assess whether a transformation such as Barendse describes actually took place, we must analyze three major topics—a warhorse revolution, the relationship of warrior elites to their states and societies, and peasant production—across the major sedentary states and nomadic powers through several centuries. Obviously, an article of this length can only sketch the outlines of such a survey. Still, a survey even at this level shows Barendse’s claims to be untenable.

¹³ Note, for example the nonmanorial economic arrangements that supported the warrior elite of the Crusader Kingdom of Jerusalem: Hamilton, *Leper King*, p. 51–54.

¹⁴ Ultimately, the answer to this question is that there are many ways to explain the rise of industry or industrial capitalism (see Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism*, and, for an excellent comparative world-historical analysis, Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* [Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2000]), but that isn’t the project of this article (nor of Barendse’s), nor are the topics even closely connected.

A Warhorse Revolution?

There is no real evidence for a warhorse revolution in the period 900–1200, either in terms of the capabilities of horses themselves or in terms of tactics.

Selective breeding did not produce bigger horses across Eurasia. Northwestern European destriers may have been bred in part for size, but even there size varied considerably.¹⁵ Fine Spanish horses were lighter than their northern cousins, and the evidence of the Crusades is that near-eastern horses also remained lighter and faster than Crusader steeds that furthermore did not prosper in the Palestinian climate.¹⁶ Above all, the horses of steppe nomads remained smaller than those of sedentary warriors, as references to Mongol “ponies” in the thirteenth century show.¹⁷

Nor did medieval horses have genetically better combat capabilities than ancient or modern horses: only training and conditioning over the first few years of a horse’s life (not “decades,” as Barendse seems to claim, as the useful span of a warhorse’s life is less than a decade) can inure horses to the sights and sounds of the battlefield, and medieval horses were just as unwilling to impale themselves on a solid line of spears as any other horses ever were.¹⁸ To claim that they were misunderstands the dynamics of medieval tactics. The heavy cavalry charge was a psychological weapon that had to intimidate the

¹⁵ R.H.C. Davis, “The Warhorses of the Normans,” *Anglo-Norman Studies* 10 (1987): 80, who also points out that minimal selective breeding could affect the quality of warhorses very rapidly (pp. 71–73)—centuries of selection were not necessary. See also Ann Hyland, *The Medieval Warhorse from Byzantium to the Crusades* (Conshohocken, Penn.: Combined Books, 1994), passim, and, for example, p. 146: “early medieval destriers were of a very moderate size.”

¹⁶ R. C. Smail, *Crusading Warfare 1097–1193* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1956), p. 77.

¹⁷ Hyland, *Medieval Warhorse*, pp. 125–139; David Morgan, *The Mongols* (Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1990).

¹⁸ John Keegan, *The Face of Battle: A Study of Agincourt, Waterloo and the Somme* (London: Penguin, 1976), pp. 154–160, is fundamental to understanding the dynamics of infantry versus cavalry combat. Keegan’s study shows that horses in Napoleonic warfare and in World War I were just as capable of withstanding noise and terror as medieval horses—indeed, gunpowder battlefields must have been *more* noisy than medieval ones. See also Frank Tallett, *War and Society in Early Modern Europe, 1495–1715* (London: Routledge, 1992), pp. 30–31, extending the principles outlined by Keegan to early modern warfare. And the history of Alexander the Great’s cavalry tactics proves that the basic capabilities of heavy cavalry had existed since classical times: Robin Lane Fox, *Alexander the Great* (London, 1974), pp. 72–80. Regarding Barendse’s claim (p. 514), Carroll Gillmor, in an unpublished paper delivered at the International Medieval Congress at Kalamazoo in May 2002, pointed out that the usual age range of active warhorses was about 3 to 10 or 12.

opposing infantry into breaking ranks to succeed.¹⁹ Success, in other words, depended on the quality of the opposing infantry and cavalry (men as crucially as horses in the latter case), as a steady mass of infantry had always been able to hold off shock cavalry, and continued to be able to do so in this period.²⁰ As a result, almost all medieval armies outside purely steppe forces contained significant infantry components, and it was in fact extremely rare for unsupported heavy cavalry to be able to defeat infantry. European-style heavy cavalry were, furthermore, both a tactical anomaly²¹ and far less numerous than cavalry forces elsewhere,²² for most cavalry forces, especially from the steppe tradition, contained more horse archers than shock cavalry. Horse archery was neither dependent on the size of horses for its effectiveness nor was it newly effective after 900; it had been and continued to be effective against sedentary armies in the right circumstances.²³

Thus, there was no pattern of rising cavalry dominance militarily. Steppe nomads had been formidable for a millenium already. Their cyclical pattern of activity may have waxed around 1000, but their fundamental capabilities had not changed. Elsewhere, good infantry

¹⁹ For an extended analysis of this problem see Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings*, pp. 150–162; the tactics described in tenth-century Byzantine military manuals support this analysis, stressing steadiness and not breaking ranks for the infantry and a slow, controlled approach by the *kataphraktoi* against enemy heavy infantry, during which the cavalry “must not be afraid”: Eric McGeer, *Sewing the Dragon’s Teeth: Byzantine Warfare in the Tenth Century* (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks, 1995), pp. 104–105, 103, and *passim*; a cavalry charge was in essence a battle of wills between cavalry and infantry that genetic horse quality had little effect on, though training of horses and men did matter.

²⁰ See Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings*, pp. 156, 169–174, on the effectiveness of Anglo-Norman infantry, including the frequent dismounting of knights in Anglo-Norman battles. Examples of successful medieval infantry stands, as at Legnano in 1176, could be multiplied endlessly; while tenth-century Byzantine military manuals assume and explain a central role for infantry that can resist cavalry charges (McGeer, *Sewing the Dragon’s Teeth*) in both Byzantine and Arab practice. See Smail, *Crusading Warfare*, pp. 202–203, on the crucial role of infantry in Crusader armies against horse archers.

²¹ Their charges caused astonishment to Byzantines and Muslims alike: Anna Comnena, *Alexiad*, trans. E.R.A. Sewter (London: Penguin Books, 1969), p. 416, says famously “A mounted Kelt is irresistible; he would bore his way through the walls of Babylon.” But she also details numerous ways of stopping such charges (pp. 164–165, 415–416, and elsewhere), which had to succeed at first go or not at all.

²² The western European climate and geography could support only limited numbers of horses compared to the steppes of Asia: Davis, “Warhorses,” p. 75; Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium, 600–1025* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), pp. 19–25.

²³ Note, just as an example, the battle of Carrhae (53 B.C.) where Parthian horsemen surrounded and annihilated an army of Roman legions: R. Ernest and Trevor N. Dupuy, *The Encyclopedia of Military History from 3500 B.C. to the Present*, 2nd edition (New York: Harper and Row, 1986), p. 117.

continued to be able to hold its own against good cavalry, as the fundamental mechanics of combat and the capabilities of horses remained essentially what they had been and would continue to be for centuries more. There was no “horse revolution” between 900 and 1200.

Arguing from a horse revolution to a newly prominent warrior aristocracy, furthermore, conflates the distinct military and social roles of horsemen: European knights did not necessarily act as cavalry, for example, and their military dominance was socially based, not vice versa.²⁴ And only by eliding the distinction between social and military roles can nomadic steppe conquerors be treated as the equivalent of a home-grown aristocracy who happen to ride horses. Thus, a “horse revolution” argument slides toward a simple technological determinist account of a complex social phenomenon, with horses as the technology. Such an explanation of “feudalism” has been tried before in European medieval history, with a narrower focus on the stirrup, and failed.²⁵ It is even more problematic on a global scale.

Warriors, States, and Societies

The technological argument also explains a nonexistent phenomenon, for there was no general rise of warrior aristocracies across Eurasia between 900 and 1200, as a survey of warrior roles and whether they changed during this period will show. For the purposes of this survey, I will distinguish the “state,” which can be thought of as elites acting through formal institutions of power, from “society,” which includes elites as social groups acting outside the confines of formal institutions.²⁶ The relationship of state to society varied significantly across Eurasia in this period. I will also distinguish “warriors” from “soldiers.” The former are fighting men who are part of a social elite, whose profession of arms either creates or contributes to their social prestige.

²⁴ See note 20.

²⁵ Lynn White, *Medieval Technology and Social Change* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1962), chapter 1, popularized a theory of the origins of feudalism based on the introduction of the stirrup; see Kelly DeVries, *Medieval Military Technology* (Lewiston N.Y.: Broadview Press, 1992) for a good summary of the historiography of the “stirrup thesis,” tending toward its dismissal. See also Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings*, pp. 150–162. The general consensus noted in DeVries that the stirrup was widely adopted long before 900 forces recourse to a vaguer “horse revolution” for a technological determinist explanation of feudalism.

²⁶ I fully accept Barendse’s caveats regarding the definition of the “state”: medieval states anywhere were not modern states. But this does not make “feudal” a useful description of some of them; indeed, it makes more problematic a clear, functional description of such states.

The latter are fighting men who are not socially elite and do not derive prestige from bearing arms, such as conscript infantry.²⁷

By global standards, western Europe was underorganized in 900. As a result, social structures tended to determine political arrangements. A tiny mounted warrior elite already dominated this society; the spread of the private castle prompted a reorganization of this aristocracy toward patrilineal lineages based in local castles and estates.²⁸ Informal relationships of kinship and lordship held this class together and formed the building blocks of the rudimentary state structures regional leaders began to build after 1000, as the economy expanded and external invasions ended. Warriors therefore came to occupy more of the power structure, at the expense of the Church, partly by a process of mutually exclusive self-definition embodied in the investiture controversy. Military values and prestige came to dominate this society: kings showed themselves on their coinage as conquerors on horseback, and the Church justified its claims to power with a “two swords” theory of legitimacy, indicating that in a sense they’d already lost the symbolic struggle. Note also that the high points of Church prestige derived from papal leadership of a military venture, the Crusades. Underneath the aristocracy, society became even more widely militarized than it had before 900. Urban troops, drawn from largely self-organized militias and communes, formed the third part, with castles and knights, of an emerging sociomilitary system that proved internally contentious, externally expansive, and subject only with difficulty to large-scale central control.²⁹ In short, the transformation of western Europe between 950 and 1100 was social in character and saw a significant rise in warrior prestige and dominance.

²⁷ The order in which I survey various societies—especially the fact that western Europe comes first—carries no particular significance. Europe is not the model for other areas.

²⁸ Robert Bartlett, *The Making of Europe. Conquest, Colonization and Cultural Change 950–1300* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1993), p. 66; C. Warren Hollister, “The Decline and Fall of the Middle Ages: Reperiodizing European History” in *Chinese University Bulletin Supplement*, Wei Lun Lecture Series, ed. Amy K. Y. Leung (Hong Kong: The Chinese University of Hong Kong, 1996), p. 34. See also Georges Duby, *The Chivalrous Society*, trans. Cynthia Postan (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979), pp. 59–80, 134–157; Bouchard, *Strong of Body*, p. 39.

²⁹ Cf. Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, pp. 60–84, who, however, sometimes does not sufficiently distinguish between knights as a social and military elite and knights as cavalry. On this terminological point, cf. Morillo, “*Milites*, Knights and Samurai: Military Terminology, Comparative History, and the Problem of Translation,” in *The Normans at War: Essays in Honor of C. Warren Hollister*, eds. Richard Abels and Bernard Bachrach (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2001), pp. 167–184.

In Byzantium, by contrast, the stronger survival of Roman institutional frameworks meant that a centrally organized state shaped society rather than the other way around: Court appointments and prestige, along with a cycle of circulation of gold coinage, focused the loyalties and ambitions of Byzantine provincials of all types, including the soldiers recruited into the Byzantine army, on the state.³⁰ Two groups dominated this structure, the civil aristocracy of the capital and the military aristocracy of the provinces; their interests were held together by the external pressure of Arab invasions until 900. But the end of that threat and subsequent Byzantine expansion introduced tensions that were only resolved in the civil wars at the beginning of Basil II's independent rule in the 990s. Despite his martial reputation, Basil actually settled this tension in favor of the civil aristocracy. The military families lost power and influence thereafter. Meanwhile, both the demands of offensive warfare after 900 and the dynamics of internal politics meant that the indigenous Byzantine units the aristocracy led were increasingly replaced after 900 by foreign mercenaries—partly heavy cavalry but even more heavy *infantry* such as Basil II's Varangian Guard—who were (theoretically) more politically loyal to the emperors who hired them.³¹ Military values were therefore steadily partitioned off from society, and society itself was widely demilitarized.³² The transformation of Byzantium between 900 and 1050, therefore, was a political one that reduced both the role and prestige of warriors. Though a military family, the Komnenoi, led the revival of Byzantium after the disasters of 1071–1081, their rule remained state-centered, their military largely foreign and separate from society.³³ There was no revival of the role or prestige of a native warrior aristocracy after 1081.

Yet a third relationship between state and society appears in the Islamic world: radical separation. Born of sudden conquest, the Umayyad caliphate garrisoned its armies in conqueror enclaves. Though consciously separated from the old elites of the areas they conquered, the Arab tribes gradually became connected to the lower strata of the conquered societies through patronage that often led to conversion of the clients. The unity, cultural identity, and even religious doctrine of this scattered ruling army of tribal, nomadic Arabs emerged from a

³⁰ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*, pp. 104–134.

³¹ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*, pp. 310–390.

³² John Haldon, "Military Service, Military Lands, and the Status of Soldiers: Current Problems and Interpretations," *Dumbarton Oaks Papers* 47 (1992): 66.

³³ Paul Magdalino, *The Empire of Manuel I Komnenos, 1143–1180* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

process of definition by distinction; that is, in effect, a dialogue with their surroundings whose starting point was the assertion “we are not Byzantine (or Jewish, or Persian)” and “we are wanderers from the desert.” This attitude became enshrined in the emergent religion through the influence of the *ulema*, the urban-based scholar-priests who increasingly acted as the arbiters of Muslim history and doctrine. The result was a deep distrust of the mechanisms of imperial states that eventually brought down the Umayyad caliphate. The new Abbasid caliphate attempted to seize control of Islam from the *ulema*, but lost. Having based government on Persian models, the loss meant that the Abbasid caliphate suffered from a critical lack of legitimacy within the very society it ruled. The most swift and immediate result, and the key transformation of Islam after 900: the appearance of slave soldiers at the heart of the Abbasid polity. As both slaves and (almost always) foreigners (especially Turkish steppe nomads), servile armies were doubly outside the structures of mainstream Islamic society. Slave armies gave to the Abbasid caliphate the appearance and function of a conquest state: an occupier (who though native might as well be foreign) separate from the society it ruled. The taint of illegitimacy, the consequent use of slave soldiers, and the conquest nature of Islamic state-society relations continued to be central features of the various pieces of the Abbasid caliphate after it fragmented and of almost every Islamic polity in the traditional world.³⁴ Military values and prestige lost out to the *ulema*-created vision of Islam; warriors, either slaves or tribal *ghazis*, were marginalized; and society was almost completely demilitarized.

China resembled Byzantium in that a powerful state dominated and shaped social arrangements. The Tang dynasty, under the leadership of strong emperors and an elite military aristocracy, operated a strong, centralized state staffed by a trained Confucian bureaucracy. But the military aristocracy self-destructed in the civil wars that brought the Tang to an end around 900. Nomadic conquerors replaced them in the north; in the south, the new Song rulers adopted aggressively civilian policies designed to curb any resurgence of independent military leaders. The result was a total eclipse of warrior prestige as Song emperors designed armed forces built for political reliability more than for effectiveness. Confucian-inspired civilian—indeed, antimilitarist—values

³⁴ Patricia Crone, *Slaves on Horses: The Evolution of the Islamic Polity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980); Crone, “The Early Islamic World,” in Kurt Raaflaub and Nathan Rosenstein, eds., *War and Society in the Ancient and Medieval Worlds*, pp. 309–332, especially pp. 326–327 for separation of state and society and the nonfeudal (“lord and vassal”) nature of the settlement.

triumphed: if European rulers showed themselves on horseback, Chinese emperors heeded the old saying that you can conquer a kingdom on horseback, but you can't rule it from there, and so presented themselves as scholars. Reinforcing the decline in warrior prestige at the top, a shift from conscription under the Tang to recruitment of long-term professionals drawn from the dregs of society under the Song pushed the military profession further into disrepute even if society was not completely demilitarized.³⁵

Long development had produced a close congruence of Indian society and states. Warriors had a relatively high place in a class and caste system that was becoming increasingly elaborated. But warfare was characterized by contests for prestige more than conquest, and shifting alliances made many large-scale political conquests or combinations unstable, which limited both the impact of war on society and the spread of warrior values to the rest of society.³⁶ Muslim raids, increasing in scale and effectiveness after 900, introduced a new element into this world, but it was not a socially revolutionary one.³⁷ Militarily, the Muslim shift from Arab lancers to nomadic horse archers did make the raiders far more effective—it is this shift that some scholars call a “horse revolution” in Indian military history³⁸—but it depended on new tactics, not new horses, and most crucially had little effect on sociomilitary arrangements. Hindu kingdoms might come under foreign rule, but Hindu warriors neither gained nor lost in prestige or social position as a general result of Muslim raids, while Muslim warriors, whether raiders or conquerors, remained outside the Indian social system in this period. It is possible, however, that the failure of the native warrior class to deal effectively with the raids contributed to an increasing distancing of Indian religious values from politics and so from warrior activity.

³⁵ *The Cambridge History of China*, vol. 3: *Sui and T'ang China 589–906*, Arthur Wright and Denis Twitchett, eds. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979), is a good general survey of these two dynasties with a great deal of specific information on Chinese military institutions and their evolution; see also E. G. Pulleyblank, *The Background to the Rebellion of An Lu-shan* (London: Oxford University Press, 1955); John Haeger, ed., *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1975).

³⁶ Stanley Wolpert, *A New History of India*, 5th edition (Oxford, 1997). The divergent paths taken by precolonial Indian and medieval European processes of state formation are explored in the papers of the first section of Martin Doornbos and Sudipta Kaviraj, eds., *Dynamics of State Formation: Europe and India Compared* (London: Sage Press, 1998).

³⁷ Peter Jackson, *The Delhi Sultanate: A Political and Military History* (Cambridge, 1999).

³⁸ Jos Gommans, “Warhorse and Warfare in India c. 1000–1850” in Jeremy Black, ed., *War in the Early Modern World 1450–1815* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1999), pp. 109–112.

To borrow a Buddhist phrase, state and society evolved in Japan in a state of dependent co-origination, each affecting the other. After 1150, warriors asserted an increasing role in society, state, and culture. Perhaps it is this late date that leads to Barendse's odd avoidance of the rich comparative literature on Japanese feudalism, for it was only from the end of his period that the elements in Japanese civilization that others have called feudal began to develop. I have analyzed Japan-Europe comparisons in detail elsewhere; my basic conclusion about "feudalism" in Japanese history is that it has been a damaging construct because of shoehorning.³⁹ Briefly for this survey, warriors gained in authority at the expense of civil aristocrats, and military values became increasingly central to this civilization, though legitimacy continued to derive from the nonmilitary figure of the emperor. At least until after 1477, however, a wide gulf separated warriors and the rest of society. Warfare was the near exclusive preserve of a particular class: *bushi* means "warrior class" and though they rode horses, the tactics of the *bushi* were even more flexible than those of European knights. Similarly, *ashigaru*, the word for non-*bushi* soldiers, meant not "infantry" but "lower-class fighter." Thus class, not tactics, marked Japanese military terminology, serving as a reminder elsewhere that "horse revolutions" (even if they existed) and warrior social roles need not be linked.⁴⁰

What this survey shows is that there is no discernable pattern that could possibly characterize a "feudal mutation." There is no general rise in warrior prestige—indeed, the separation of warriors and their values from society seems to be a more general trend. Warriors do not consistently play a greater role in states or societies in 1050 (or 1200) than they did in 900. Nor is there any consistent restructuring of states or societies in response to warrior roles or actions—certainly there is no pattern of decentralization.⁴¹

³⁹ Morillo, "Guns and Government." A good example of shoehorning is when J. R. Strayer wrote, "Japanese feudalism had to be more structured, more impersonal, more bureaucratic than European feudalism. At least it had to have these qualities from the middle of the sixteenth century, when we have evidence of huge armies and large numbers of retainers under a single lord." J. R. Strayer, "The Tokugawa Period and Japanese Feudalism," in John W. Hall and Marius Jensen, eds., *Studies in the Institutional History of Early Modern Japan* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1968), p. 6. As I noted in "Guns and Government," "bureaucratic feudalism" is hardly worth the conceptual effort, and points to the bankruptcy of the term. See also John Whitney Hall, "Feudalism in Japan—A Reassessment," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 5 (1962).

⁴⁰ Morillo, "Milites, Knights and Samurai."

⁴¹ There were of course broad similarities in the social and political organizations of these societies. But—and this is an important qualification—this similarity extends to all

There is, perhaps, greater impact, positive and negative, of horse warriors on a range of societies in this period, but in almost every case, from Byzantine and Chinese mercenaries and allies to Islamic slave soldiers and raiders of Hindu kingdoms, the warriors involved are steppe nomads with little or no social connection to the peoples they impacted. The fundamental confusion in Barendse's argument between nomadic horsemen, an external factor in the evolution of these societies, and sedentary warrior classes who happened to ride horses, an internal factor, is vividly highlighted by the fact that the only two societies in which warrior prestige rose in this period (and the only two that have consistently drawn attention as "feudal"), western Europe and Japan, were the two *least* affected by nomadic contact.⁴²

Warriors, Peasants, and Economics

Economic transformations are an even larger topic than warrior roles, and there is even less space to consider them here. But as with warrior roles, even a telegraphic survey undermines any picture of a consistent Eurasian socioeconomic "mutation" between 900 and 1200.

To begin with, I doubt whether any transformation of the organization or productivity of agricultural production could have effected a mutation as significant as Barendse portrays, a point illustrated by the graph in Figure 1, which plots human population over time on a logarithmic scale so as to equalize scales of change.⁴³

As every society in this period lies along the relatively flat section of the graph between the dramatic increases of the agricultural and industrial revolutions, I take that to mean that variations in "modes of

preindustrial societies: see Patricia Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1989). This is the problem with Barendse's emphasis on oaths among horse warriors in this period, as well as with notions of honor and so forth: these characteristics do not distinguish the period 900–1200 from any earlier or later period. They are well-nigh universal among warrior societies. Achilles would certainly recognize oaths binding men into fighting groups; he lived and died by notions of honor. There is nothing in Dr. Barendse's description of the societies of the "feudal mutation" that would distinguish them from similar societies in earlier or later periods, especially in terms of the role and status of warriors.

⁴² On the roles and impact of nomads generally, see Thomas D. Hall, "Civilizational Change: The Role of Nomads," *Comparative Civilizations Review* 24 (1991): 34–57; Thomas Barfield, *The Perilous Frontier* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1992); Mark Whittow, *The Making of Byzantium*, pp. 19–25; Morgan, *The Mongols*.

⁴³ Modified from Edward S. Deevey Jr., "The Human Population," *Scientific American* 262 (Sept. 1960): 194–204, using Colin McEvedy and Richard Jones, *Atlas of World Population History* (New York: Penguin, 1978) and the World Population website at <<http://metalab.unc.edu/lunarbin/worldpop>>.

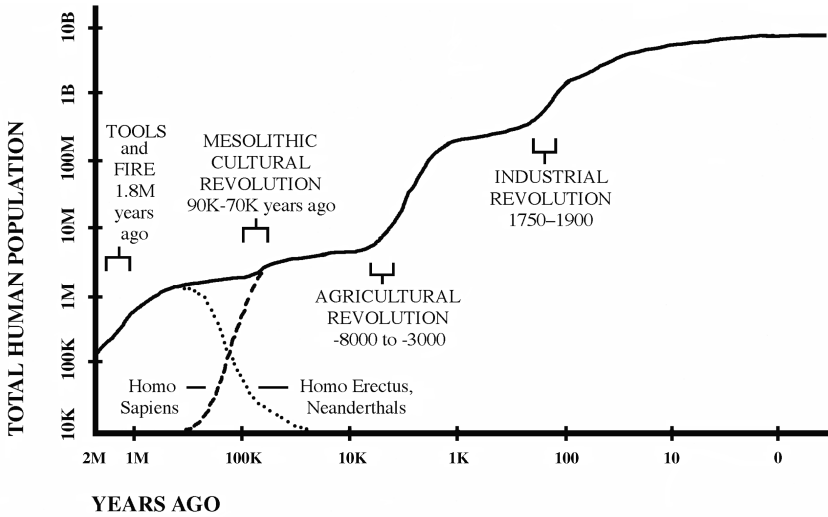


FIGURE 1.

production” between those two revolutions were fairly insignificant.⁴⁴ Furthermore, any “mode of production” argument must ignore the dominance of political arrangements over economic ones in the preindustrial world.⁴⁵ Even taken on its own terms, however, the evidence for Barendse’s economic transformation, especially its connection with warrior activity, is highly inconsistent.

Western Europe began this period poor and disorganized. It got considerably richer and more organized over the next three centuries, in part because of the warrior aristocracy. Because their wealth and social position rested ultimately on intensive estate management of personally held land, they acted as private entrepreneurs in encouraging agricultural and commercial expansion.⁴⁶ The end of a period of invasions by Vikings, Magyars, and Saracens, around 950, further facilitated economic growth. Warrior possession of landed estates (some of which were fiefs) that carried jurisdiction over peasant farmers was thus

⁴⁴ The graph is the basis for my contention that there have been three basic “modes of production” in human history: hunter-gatherer, agricultural, and industrial, with nomadic pastoralism as a dependent subtype of agricultural.

⁴⁵ Crone, *Pre-Industrial Societies*, pp. 13–35.

⁴⁶ Georges Duby, *The Early Growth of the European Economy*, trans. Howard B. Clarke (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974); Bartlett, *Making of Europe*, esp. chapters 1, 2, and 5–7.

socially (though not militarily) central to a system of warrior economic support that was social first and governmental only second. But it should be noted that as Europe got richer and its economy more monetized, “feudal” forms of military organization as classically understood actually declined: paid service increasingly replaced unpaid service in exchange for land, and formal financial contracts replaced (or at least supplemented) customary ties of vassalage.⁴⁷ This, of course, runs counter to Barendse’s basic causal argument.

Byzantium before 900 was also poor but was centrally organized. It too got somewhat richer after 900, largely as a result of a shift in the tide of success in the border wars between Byzantium and Islam. Byzantine strategy had previously sacrificed prosperity for security.⁴⁸ The fragmentation of the caliphate gave Byzantium the chance to go on the offensive, to the benefit of Anatolian agricultural production. In other words, external military circumstances played a major role in fostering economic growth, as in western Europe, but the response was centrally directed as opposed to the free enterprise nature of western European expansion. This is reflected in the Byzantine system of military economic support, which remained centered on government salaries. There was growth in “soldiers lands,” but such lands were centrally controlled, did not provide jurisdiction over cultivators, and thus cannot be equated to Western practices.⁴⁹ Later eleventh- and twelfth-century grants of *pronoia* were more influenced by Western fiefs, but as the grants carried little legal jurisdiction and were made primarily to foreign mercenaries, they reflect the increasing separation of Byzantine

⁴⁷ A classic study is B. D. Lyon, *From Fief to Indenture* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1957); see also, for example, Morillo, *Warfare under the Anglo-Norman Kings*, chapter 3, on the role of paid service as early as the eleventh and twelfth centuries in rich England. I won’t even get into the vast and now somewhat dated literature on “bastard feudalism.” It is also not at all clear that economic growth led to a leveling of peasant status, as Barendse claims (p. 523). Many studies show the opposite across many cultures: that the penetration of market economics into peasant societies leads to greater stratification of village society, as different peasant families show differing abilities to take advantage of market opportunities. See for example James Masschaele, *Peasants, Merchants and Markets: Inland Trade in Medieval England, 1150–1350* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1997), esp. pp. 33–55; Judith M. Bennett, *A Medieval Life: Cecilia Penifader of Brigstock, c. 1295–1344* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1999), chapters 7 and 8; in early modern Europe, Duplessis, *Transitions to Capitalism*, passim.; and in Muromachi Japan, Nagahara Keiji with Kozo Yamamura, “Village Communities and Daimyo Power,” in John W. Hall and Toyoda Takeshi, eds., *Japan in the Muromachi Age* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1977), pp. 107–124.

⁴⁸ Whittow, *Making of Byzantium*, pp. 310–357.

⁴⁹ Warren Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State and Society* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 680, who specifically denies any Byzantine “feudalism.” See also Haldon, “Military Service.”

army and society that contrasts so sharply with the organic connection of military force and social organization in western Europe.⁵⁰

Islam, by contrast with the Christian world, was already rich and prosperous before 900. Islamic expansion had even spread the wealth, as diffusion of agricultural techniques contributed to what has been called a "Green Revolution."⁵¹ But this was offset to some extent by the dynamics of Islamization of the peasantry, which tended to draw peasants from the countryside dominated by pre-Islamic elites to the cities where Arab garrisons were stationed.⁵² And the story after 900 is increasingly one of decline related directly to the increased activity of nomadic horsemen, both as invaders and as slave soldiers within Islamic polities. Significant areas reverted from cultivation to pasture, as reflected in grants of *iqta* to warriors that contained pasture rights, not agricultural estates. The division between pastoralist warriors and an agricultural peasantry simply widened the gap between Islamic state and society noted above, and acted to the long-term detriment of agricultural production in the Islamic world.

China, too, was rich and prosperous before 900, but unlike Islam continued to gain in productivity. In fact, the agricultural improvements introduced under the Song, including a faster-ripening strain of rice that virtually doubled cereal harvests by allowing two plantings a year, not to mention thriving Song industry and overseas trade, made China the biggest winner in Eurasia in terms of peasant production.⁵³ Here above all one should expect a "feudal mutation" on Barendse's terms, yet China is undoubtedly the least feudal area on the continent. Warriors played no role in the economic expansion, nor was anything even remotely resembling warrior estates used to support military forces, which were instead raised, paid, and supported out of centrally controlled tax revenues.

India also began this period in prosperity, and seems to have remained so with little change save for the damage done by Islamic raiders.⁵⁴ It is, in other words, hard to see much impact of warriors (especially Hindu warriors) on the economic base, or of developments in the economic base upon warriors. Warriors may have held lands that

⁵⁰ Mark Bartusis, *The Late Byzantine Army: Arms and Society, 1204–1453* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1992).

⁵¹ Andrew Watson, *Agricultural Innovation in the Early Islamic World: The Diffusion of Crops and Farming Techniques, 700–1100* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

⁵² Crone, *Slaves on Horses*.

⁵³ Haeger, *Crisis and Prosperity in Sung China*.

⁵⁴ Such raids foreshadow the economic disaster that was the Delhi sultanate, starting just after 1200: Jackson, *Delhi Sultanate*, pp. 238–255.

gave them “bundles of rights” over cultivators, but it is not clear that there was any significant change in such arrangements dating to the period in question.

Finally, Japan, like western Europe, was relatively poor in 900.⁵⁵ It gained slowly in productivity through this period, though not as dramatically as Europe did, in part because land for expansion was much more limited. But the highly indirect relationship between the agricultural base of this society and the warrior class that came to rule it mitigated any influence in either direction. *Shoen*, the estates granted to warriors and civil aristocrats alike by the central authority, illustrate this. Despite a superficial resemblance to Western fiefs, what Japanese warriors got were grants of *shoen* income that might come from a variety of estates whose output also supported other warriors and civil officials. Neither “bundles of rights” nor estate management was involved.⁵⁶

The results of this survey are as easily summarized as those concerning warrior roles: there is no pattern. Initial conditions varied widely across Eurasia, the direction of change also varied, and the connection to warriors and their horses and social roles varied even more. Indeed, it is hard to see what direct causal connection could have existed between changes in peasant agricultural production and the activities of pastoral nomads who formed the bulk of cavalry warriors across Eurasia in this period. That “population pressure and changes in agrarian production within rural society were inducing changes in the military/fiscal superstructure”⁵⁷ in any consistent way that can be called “feudal” is not only unproven but, in my opinion, impossible to prove.

CONCLUSION

My overall conclusions should be obvious from the results of these surveys. If, as I have shown, there was no warhorse revolution, no pattern of increasing warrior dominance socially, and no pattern of changing peasant production across Eurasia between 900 and 1200, never mind

⁵⁵ Contra Barendse (note 10), Japan in 900 was *less* developed, though perhaps (because smaller and more unified) more organized, than Europe in every way he mentions: “trade, agricultural productivity, urbanization, etc.”

⁵⁶ Morillo, “Guns and Government,” pp. 86–87; John Whitney Hall, *Government and Local Power in Japan, 500 to 1700* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1966), pp. 99–128.

⁵⁷ Barendse, p. 521.

any consistent connection among these elements, then there was no mutation, transformation, or process that can be called “feudal,” or that can be called anything else for that matter, and so no such thing as “feudalism” in world history between 900 and 1200. Such a conclusion simply reinforces the philosophical and historiographical reasons adduced earlier for rejecting the term “feudalism” as a tool for the analysis of world history.

A negative conclusion is of course emotionally less satisfying than a positive one. The reader may be tempted to ask, if there wasn't feudalism, then what was there? This is a legitimate question, and my negative conclusion in this case should not be taken as precluding a search for larger patterns and connections. The way forward for world history, however, lies in other directions than the recycling of an outdated Eurocentric concept whose meaning no one can agree on.

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