CONTACT  
BETWEEN A VASSAL AND  
LORD  Agreement from the 600s

During the Middle Ages, many Europeans lived in fear of attack from invaders and from each other. To protect themselves, Europeans developed a system known as feudalism. Under feudalism people provided certain services to each other in exchange for protection. Kings granted large estates to nobles, or lords, who promised to defend the king’s territory. In turn the lords made contracts with less powerful nobles called vassals. When a vassal and lord exchanged vows, they often marked the occasion with a grand ceremony. Below is a standard contract between vassal and lord dating from the 7th century. As you read this contract, notice what vassal and lord promise each other. What do you think are some of the benefits and drawbacks of taking such an oath for both lord and vassal?

VASSAL:

I ________, Since it is known familiarly to all how little I have whence to feed and clothe myself, I have therefore petitioned your Piety, and your good will has permitted me to hand myself over or commend myself to your guardianship, which I have thereupon done; that is to say, in this way, that you should aid and succor me as well with food as with clothing, according as I shall be able to serve you and deserve it.

And so long as I shall live I ought to provide service and honor to you, suitably to my free condition; and I . . . must remain during the days of my life under your power or defense.

LORD:

It is right that those who offer to us unbroken fidelity should be protected by our aid. And since ___________, a faithful one of ours, by the favor of God, coming here in our palace with his arms, has been fit to swear trust and fidelity to us in our hand, therefore we herewith decree and command that for the future ___________, above mentioned, be reckoned among the number of the antrustions.

vassal: a person, especially a knight, who agrees to provide military service in return for a grant of land.
prince: a vassal's feudal lord.

Life in Europe during the Middle Ages was often harsh and brutal, especially for serfs—the least powerful members of feudal society—who lived and worked on the land belonging to the nobles. Unlike the lords and vassals, serfs were not protected by any written contracts. Serfs had to follow the rules of the nobles.