

DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

European Feudalism and the Chinese Imperial Order

During the Middle Ages, Europe's fragmented feudal society differed greatly from China's mainly united imperial order.



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Debating the DOCUMENTS

Interpreting Alternative Viewpoints
in Primary Source Documents

European Feudalism and the Chinese Imperial Order

The 2017 World History Course and Exam Description of the College Board Advanced Placement Program* lists five themes that it urges teachers to use in organizing their teaching. Each World History *Debating the Documents* booklet focuses on one or two of these five themes.

The Five Themes

- 1. Interaction between humans and the environment.** (demography and disease; migration; patterns of settlement; technology)
- 2. Development and interaction of cultures.** (religions; belief systems, philosophies, and ideologies; science and technology; the arts and architecture)
- 3. State-building, expansion, and conflict.** (political structures and forms of governance; empires; nations and nationalism; revolts and revolutions; regional, transregional, and global structures and organizations)
- 4. Creation, expansion, and interaction of economic systems.** (agricultural and pastoral production; trade and commerce; labor systems; industrialization; capitalism and socialism)
- 5. Development and transformation of social structures.** (gender roles and relations; family and kinship; racial and ethnic constructions; social and economic classes)

This Booklet's Main Themes:

- 2** Development and interaction of cultures.
- 3** State-building, expansion, and conflict.

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Teacher Introduction

★ Using Primary Sources

Primary sources are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past era or historical event. They are the raw materials, or the evidence, on which historians base their “secondary” accounts of the past.

A rapidly growing number of history teachers today are using primary sources. Why? Perhaps it's because primary sources give students a better sense of what history is and what historians do. Such sources also help students see the past from a variety of viewpoints. Moreover, primary sources make history vivid and bring it to life.

However, primary sources are not easy to use. They can be confusing. They can be biased. They rarely all agree. Primary sources must be interpreted and set in context. To do this, students need historical background knowledge. *Debating the Documents* helps students handle such challenges by giving them a useful framework for analyzing sources that conflict with one another.



*“Multiple,
conflicting
perspectives are
among the truths
of history.
No single
objective or
universal account
could ever put an
end to this endless
creative dialogue
within and
between the past
and the present.”*

From the 2011 Statement on Standards of Professional Conduct of the Council of the American Historical Association.

INTRODUCTION

★ *The Debating the Documents Series*

Each *Debating the Documents* booklet includes the same sequence of reproducible worksheets. If students use several booklets over time, they will get regular practice at interpreting and comparing conflicting sources. In this way, they can learn the skills and habits needed to get the most out of primary sources.

Each *Debating the Documents* Booklet Includes

- **Suggestions for the Student and an Introductory Essay.** The student gets instructions and a one-page essay providing background on the booklet's topic. A time line on the topic is also included.
- **Two Groups of Contrasting Primary Source Documents.** In most of the booklets, students get one pair of visual sources and one pair of written sources. In some cases, more than two are provided for each. Background is provided on each source. *Within each group, the sources clash in a very clear way.* (The sources are not always exact opposites, but they do always differ in some obvious way.)
- **Three Worksheets for Each Document Group.** Students use the first two worksheets to take notes on the sources. The third worksheet asks which source the student thinks would be most useful to a historian.
- **One DBQ.** On page 20, a document-based question (DBQ) asks students to write an effective essay using all of the booklet's primary sources.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. Have students read “Suggestions for the Student” and the Introductory Essay.

Give them copies of pages 5–7. Ask them to read the instructions and then read the introductory essay on the topic. The time line gives them additional information on that topic. This reading could be done in class or as a homework assignment.

2. Have students do the worksheets.

Make copies of the worksheets and the pages with the sources. Ask students to study the background information on each source and the source itself. Then have them take notes on the sources using the worksheets. If students have access to a computer, have them review the primary sources digitally.

NOTE: If you are using these materials with an AP world history class, an honors class, or some other group of advanced and/or more knowledgeable students, you may want to make more written sources available to them on this topic. Do a basic Internet search for sources that provide additional perspectives and then add to the sources provided here.

3. “Debate the documents” as a class.

Have students use their worksheet notes to debate the primary source documents as a class. Urge students to follow these ground rules:

- Use your worksheets as a guide for the discussion or debate.
- Try to reach agreement about the main ideas and the significance of each primary source document.
- Look for points of agreement as well as disagreement between the primary sources.
- Listen closely to all points of view about each primary source.
- Focus on the usefulness of each source to the historian, not merely on whether you agree or disagree with that source’s point of view.

4. Have students do the final DBQ.

A DBQ is an essay question about a set of primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, students write essays using evidence from the sources and their own background knowledge of the historical era. (See the next page for a DBQ scoring guide to use in evaluating these essays.)

The DBQ assignment on page 20 includes guidelines for writing a DBQ essay. Here are some additional points to make with students about preparing to write this kind of essay.

The DBQ for this Booklet (see page 20):

What were the strengths and weaknesses of the political systems of feudal Europe and imperial China in promoting order and justice? Compare and contrast them on these two points.

- Analyze the question carefully.
- Use your background knowledge to set sources in their historical context.
- Question and interpret sources actively. Do not accept them at face value.
- Use sources meaningfully to support your essay’s thesis.
- Pay attention to the overall organization of your essay.

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★ *Complete DBQ Scoring Guide*

Use this guide in evaluating the DBQ for this booklet. Use this scoring guide with students who are already familiar with using primary sources and writing DBQ essays.

Excellent Essay

- Offers a clear answer or thesis explicitly addressing all aspects of the essay question.
- Does a careful job of interpreting many or most of the documents and relating them clearly to the thesis and the DBQ. Deals with conflicting documents effectively.
- Uses details and examples effectively to support the thesis and other main ideas. Explains the significance of those details and examples well.
- Uses background knowledge and the documents in a balanced way.
- Is well written; clear transitions make the essay easy to follow from point to point. Only a few minor writing errors or errors of fact.

Good Essay

- Offers a reasonable thesis addressing the essential points of the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least some of the documents and relates them to the thesis and the DBQ.
- Usually relates details and examples meaningfully to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some relevant background knowledge.
- May have some writing errors or errors of fact, as long as these do not invalidate the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Fair Essay

- Offers at least a partly developed thesis addressing the essay question.
- Adequately interprets at least a few of the documents.
- Relates only a few of the details and examples to the thesis or other main ideas.
- Includes some background knowledge.
- Has several writing errors or errors of fact that make it harder to understand the essay's overall argument or point of view.

Poor Essay

- Offers no clear thesis or answer addressing the DBQ.
- Uses few documents effectively other than referring to them in "laundry list" style, with no meaningful relationship to a thesis or any main point.
- Uses details and examples unrelated to the thesis or other main ideas. Does not explain the significance of these details and examples.
- Is not clearly written, with some major writing errors or errors of fact.

Suggestions to the Student

★ *Using Primary Sources*

A primary source is any record of evidence from the past. Many things are primary sources: letters, diary entries, official documents, photos, cartoons, wills, maps, charts, etc. They are called “primary” because they are first-hand records of a past event or time period. This *Debating the Documents* lesson is based on two groups of primary source documents. Within each group, the sources conflict with one another. That is, they express different or even opposed points of view. You need to decide which source is more reliable, more useful, or more typical of the time period. This is what historians do all the time. Usually, you will be able to learn something about the past from each source, even when the sources clash with one another in dramatic ways.

★ *How to Use This Booklet*

1. **Read the one-page introductory essay.**

This gives you background information that will help you analyze the primary source documents and do the exercises for this *Debating the Documents* lesson. The time line gives you additional information you will find helpful.



2. **Study the primary source documents for this lesson.**

For this lesson, you get two groups of sources. The sources within each group conflict with one another. Some of these sources are visuals, others are written sources. With visual sources, pay attention not only to the image’s “content” (its subject matter) but also to its artistic style, shading, composition, camera angle, symbols, and other features that add to the image’s meaning. With written sources, notice the writing style, bias, even what the source leaves out or does not talk about. Think about each source’s author, that author’s reasons for writing, and the likely audience for the source. These considerations give you clues as to the source’s historical value.

3. **Use the worksheets to analyze each group of primary source documents.**

For each group of sources, you get three worksheets. Use the “Study the Document” worksheets to take notes on each source. Use the “Comparing the Documents” worksheet to decide which of the sources would be most useful to a historian.

4. **As a class, debate the documents.**

Use your worksheet notes to help you take part in this debate.

5. **Do the final DBQ.**

“DBQ” means “document-based question.” A DBQ is a question along with several primary source documents. To answer the DBQ, write an essay using evidence from the documents and your own background history knowledge.

Feudalism and Empire

By around 600 CE, what some historians call the Classical Age was over. The Roman Empire had split apart; the western half of it no longer existed at all. Only the eastern half continued, as the Byzantine Empire. In China, meanwhile, the powerful Han Dynasty had collapsed even earlier. A confusing array of smaller states arose at both the eastern and western ends of the great Eurasian land mass. Life was insecure. Warfare and plague reduced populations in some places. It was a time of trouble and uncertainty. Many felt that society's best days had passed.

For the next 600 years, Europe and China took two very different paths. China's path led it to great accomplishments in trade, industry, technology, and science. In time, Europe's would also. But for several centuries, things did not look promising for that region. As China built a powerful, unified state, Europe remained divided and weak. Yet out of its divisions, it also began to revive and grow strong by the end of this period.

In any case, these civilizations created two very different kinds of political order. It is not just that their forms of government differed. They differed in the very way they thought about social and political authority. We use the terms "empire" and "feudalism" for these two different kinds of political order. These differences explain a lot about the way each of these regions developed in this period and later in the modern era as well.

The Tang Dynasty (618–907) and the Song Dynasty (960–1279) kept China united for much of this era. It is not just that a single emperor ruled most or all of China. Even when the emperor was weak, or when divisions arose, China was ruled by a vast bureaucracy of officials who were loyal

to the emperor and a single, central state. These bureaucrats often came from wealthy families. However, they were also chosen on the basis of merit. That is, they had to prove they had talent and were entitled to their positions. They did this through an examination system that tested their knowledge of the great Confucian literary classics. In other words, they were scholar-bureaucrats who shared a broad social and political philosophy. That philosophy was based on the teaching of Confucius. It stressed order, respect for parents, moderation, and obedience to authority. It was an ideal moral system for training officials of a powerful centralized state.

Meanwhile, in Europe, divisions among kingdoms were made even worse by more than a century of random attacks by Vikings, Muslims, and Magyars. In this chaotic world, military and political power came to be lodged with local rulers. These rulers in turn relied on knights, or armed horsemen, whom they could assemble quickly when needed.

It was this context that gave rise to what many historians call "feudalism." The term refers to a mutual relationship between lord and vassal. In it, the lord bestows land or some other good (a "benefice") on the vassal, who in turn pledges loyalty and readiness to follow his lord into battle. A lord could also be the vassal of a more powerful lord, and a vassal could have vassals of his own. In this complex and shifting set of personal relationships, authority was less centered on one ruler. In fact, this system planted the first seeds for the idea that every individual shared a right to rule.

Two very different notions of political and social order: Was one more effective than the other? That's what the sources for this lesson will help you discuss and debate.

Feudalism and Empire Time Line

200 BCE–550 CE

China: The Han Dynasty rules China in these centuries. It creates a more centralized state than China has yet known. Trade is opened up along the “Silk Road,” a network of routes across Central Asia north of the Himalayan Mountains. The Han Dynasty collapses in 220 CE and is followed by four centuries of disorder and civil war.

Europe: Meanwhile, the Roman Republic is replaced by the Roman Empire in 27 BCE. It reaches its largest extent in the next two centuries. Christianity spreads, and by the end of the fourth century CE it has become the official religion of the Roman Empire. In the fourth century, various Germanic peoples begin to attack and soon invade the western parts of the Empire. By 600 CE, only the eastern half of the Empire remains. Western Europe is now made up of a variety of Germanic kingdoms.

600–950 CE

China: The short-lived Sui Dynasty (581–618) unites China. Its work on the Grand Canal especially helps link southern and northern regions of China. This dynasty is followed by the Tang, which lasts from 618 to 907. A more unified central government revives the civil service examination system based on Confucian, Buddhist, and Taoist teachings. The exams are used to select government officials, though wealthy aristocrats also still hold great power.

Europe: The Catholic Church and its leader, the Pope, are the only unifying power for Western Europe. Saint Benedict’s rules for monastic life gain acceptance, and monks spread Christianity throughout the region. Charlemagne (768–814) builds a large empire centered on France and Germany. However, it soon splits apart as his sons fight one another and as other local counts gain in power. Also, in the ninth and tenth centuries, constant invasions by Vikings, Muslims, and Magyars force people to rely on local counts, dukes, and other princes to provide protection. This encourages the development of feudal political and military institutions.

950–1250 CE

China: This is the era of the Song Dynasty. The central state is greatly strengthened by a huge growth in the numbers of officials recruited through a complex examination system. The exams are now based entirely on the Confucian classics. Trade and industry expand, making China the economic powerhouse of all of Eurasia. The Indian Ocean and Silk Road trade networks thrive on the basis of widespread demand for China’s porcelain, silks, and other goods.

Europe: An era of greater stability and reviving trade and agriculture begins. The Roman Catholic Church asserts its power over secular rulers during and after the “Investiture Crisis” of 1075–1122. Meanwhile these secular rulers build their own more organized states based on feudal ties between kings, princes, and lesser lords. An early notion of separation of church and state starts to evolve. Trade revives and cities grow. Merchants, guilds, universities, and other groups assert the privileges and rights of their urban groups and communities against local princes and lords. By 1250, Europe is made up of many independent centers of power.

DOCUMENT 1

Visual Primary Source Document 1



The Granger Collection, New York

Information on Document 1

The Normans (from “Norsemen”) were descendants of Vikings who settled in a region of France. They created a feudal kingdom which continued to engage in military ventures in other parts of Europe. In 1066, for example, William the Conqueror invaded and took over England. One Norman military leader, Robert Guiscard, helped carve out a Norman kingdom in

southern Italy and Sicily. In this painting, he is being invested in 1059 by Pope Nicholas II as Duke of Apulia, Calabria, and Sicily. This basically means the Pope was granting him the right to those lands. This is not exactly the feudal ceremony by which a vassal pledges loyalty and honor to his lord. However, it is very similar in meaning and spirit.