

# Fire and Blood

## Feudal Lords in a [GURPS Fantasy](#) or [Middle Ages](#) Campaign

by S.A. Fisher

The real nobility of the Middle Ages lived a life of political intrigue and bloody battles. Leading their forces to war, putting enemy villages to the torch, and defending their lands from rival lords was a nobleman's way of life. They were a rough and brutal lot, all too accustomed to the fire and blood of medieval warfare; in fact, it was their reason for existence in the feudal triangle. The peasants worked, the clergy prayed, but the nobility *fought*.

This article presents players with the chance to play feudal rulers of great influence and power, with armies standing at the ready (and the responsibility and danger that comes with that power). The following rules can be used to create noble PCs for a [GURPS Middle Ages](#) or [Fantasy](#) campaign.

### Character Creation

The suggested level for land-holding feudal lords is 200 to 300 points, depending on the campaign's power level. This high point total is to compensate for various advantages required of a noble PC. A starting point total of 200 points works well for low-level knights and barons, while dukes and kings require 300 points or more.

The most important advantage for feudal lords is Status; it determines income and station in society, as well as raw political power. The lowest noble is the landed knight, Status 3, and the highest is the king, with Status 7. The higher the noble's Status, the more land and people he rules - landed knights hold the smallest fiefs, while more powerful nobles hold immense fiefdoms (duchies, earldoms or baronies) as large as a quarter of the kingdom.

In addition to Status, other advantages are necessary to recreate the sweeping powers of a feudal noble. The 15-point level of Legal Enforcement Powers is required; nobles could search and seize property, conduct a trial and even execute commoners and freemen. Feudal lords should also have the Legal Immunity advantage (see [GURPS Compendium I](#), p. 27) at the 15-point level. Nobles did not answer to common courts, but only to special trials held by other nobles, or the king.

Another item of concern for noble characters is Wealth. A feudal lord could be a poor knight with a few hundred acres of land and a shabby, timber tower, or a rich duke with hundreds of square miles in his domain, with several stone castles and a walled city or two. Noble PCs should be Wealthy or better. A knight of merely Comfort-able wealth would be considered poor by his peers! The more powerful nobles of a kingdom should have Very Wealthy, Filthy Rich or Multimillion-aire, since

they must buy great castles and fortresses with their starting wealth.

A character's wealth level should also fit the player's character concept. The GM and player should work together to provide a good reason if there is great disparity between Wealth and Status.

Besides the above requirements, the player has other advantages to consider. Voice, Charisma, Empathy, Reputation (good or bad), Ally or Ally group (such as a circle of knights, a loyal squire or a competent wife), Patron (the noble's liege lord, or a powerful clergyman such as a Bishop or Archbishop) would all be quite useful. Appropriate disadvantages include Ignorance or Uneducated (for commoners who were knighted on the field of battle and haven't been taught noble skills yet, or for lords who cannot fight or ride), as well as Duty. The noble's foremost Duty is to his liege lord. This is a -5 to -10 point disadvantage, depending on the frequency of the call for military service (GMs may adjust this point level if they feel that feudal duty would be different in their campaign). Almost any other disadvantage will work for noble characters, though particularly nasty ones will cause many problems. A noble with Sadism and a dungeon full of prisoners is just asking for trouble! Other appropriate disadvantages for feudal lords include Bad Temper, Bully, Code of Honor, all the various Compulsive Behaviors (Compulsive Spending was very common), Megalomania, Enemy and Dependents (which could be squires, children, wives, younger siblings, etc.).

Skills useful to a lord include Diplomacy, Intimidation, Tactics, Strategy, Savoir-Faire, Riding, Administration, various Languages, Heraldry, Law, Area Knowledge of personal lands, Leadership, Fast-Talk, Merchant, Bard and Interrogation. Skills such as Falconry, Dancing, Poetry, Gambling, Carousing, Chess, Theology, Philosophy, Calligraphy, Writing, Gardening, History, Appreciate Beauty (horses, armor, and weapons were common specializations), Literature, and Natur-alist might be included in a nobleman's courtly training.

Players and GMs are encouraged to see other [GURPS](#) worldbooks. Some that might help are [Arabian Nights](#), [Fantasy](#), [Middle Ages](#), [Vikings](#) and [Camelot](#). These can add ideas on creating noble characters.

## The Fiefdom and the Feudal Lord

In the [GURPS Basic Set](#) it is assumed that at a certain Status level the character has a fiefdom (that is, the character's *title* has lands, not the character himself). This was not always the case in history. Not all lords had the same amount of land; some barons had three times as much land as other barons, and a much higher income as a result. To simulate this, GMs may allow noblemen to buy more land than the default level presented in the Job Table. This should be treated as a special case of the optional temporary wealth rule (see sidebar, p. C118). For every 15 character points spent, the lord's land holdings are increased by 20%. Thus, for a landed knight with two levels of extra land, his total land holdings would be 2,800 acres of productive land, instead of the default level of 2,000, and his income would be \$5,600 a month, not \$4,000. This increases the lord's income, but not starting wealth. The GM may also allow nobles to select a similar disadvantage, worth -10 points per level.



## Economy, Income and Expenses

The income of a medieval lord depended almost entirely

on the produce of his fiefdom. The income levels presented in this article assume that each acre of productive land (whether it be forest for wood and game, fields for agricultural produce, bog for peat or mountains for stone) will produce roughly two [GURPS](#) \$ a month in various rents and taxes for the lord; the exact source of monthly income, such as taxes from gristmills, bridges, bakeovens, wine presses, etc., will be left for the GM to determine, if he so desires. In the [Basic Set](#), one [GURPS](#) \$ is the equivalent of one copper farthing (at four farthings to a penny, 12 pennies to the shilling and 20 shillings to the pound). Use this conversion rate, rather than the one presented in [GURPS Middle Ages I](#), as it simulates the inflated, high-demand, low-supply economy of the mid-13th and 14th centuries better.

## Economics 101

By comparing the Job Table presented here with the one in [GURPS Fantasy](#) or [Middle Ages](#), it is obvious that there is a *tremendous* difference in income between the peasant and his lord, or even a baron and his king. This is historically accurate. The disparity between the poor and the rich has always existed, and is one of the reasons that rebellion was so common. Comparison of the average family income of today with the salary of a multinational, corporate CEO echoes the difference between the peasant and his lord during the Middle Ages.

### Expenses: Taking it All Away

The Cost of Living table on p. B191 lists the minimum amount that the lord can spend and still maintain his Status level. This includes the cost for appropriate food and clothing, church tithes, taxes and so on, for the noble and his immediate family. The GM is the final authority on what is or is not included in the listed Cost of Living. If the PC does not pay the Cost of Living for his Status level, the GM should assign the character a Reaction penalty until the minimum can be paid again. This Reaction penalty should apply to most everyone that knows about the lord's situation, even those of lower Status. Rich merchants will sneer, serfs will be embarrassed or disgusted with their lord's lack of management skills (which almost always means more taxes and work for the serfs), and soldiers may seek employment elsewhere. Eventually the noble's Status will drop permanently if the proper Cost of Living is not paid.

Once the Cost of Living is subtracted from the noble's monthly income, the remainder can be used to pay retainers, soldiers/men-at-arms, bureaucrats and scribes, and for improvements and repairs of the lord's castle or manor house, or for ransoms of captured liege lords, gifts to well-serving friends, dowries for daughters, inheritance for younger sons (or to cover the spending habits of a wife with Compulsive Spending or Generosity), and basically anything else that the GM can come up with. GMs are encouraged to work hard at draining a noble's coffers, and exploiting the economic, social or organizational flaws that a lord may create by refusing to spend income on necessary expenses (like town guards for keeping the peace, or clerks and bureaucrats for collecting taxes and keeping accounts).

A powerful lord will have a great many servants working for him, and will spend most of his income on these servants. Cooks, grooms, blacksmiths, soldiers and so on must be fed and provided for. Serfs and peasants don't count though - only those individuals that work directly for the lord. The lord must pay the Cost of Living for each person that works for him. Ten knights are much more costly to the lord, for instance, than 10 common soldiers; the knights are nobles themselves, and will

require the added expense of meat and spices, fine clothes as gifts, and better lodging and mounts. GMs may require that the PC use the wages listed on the various Job Tables as a guide for further compensation as well. The GM is the final authority on this subject, however, because a famine, plague or war in the realm could drive the prices up or down accordingly.

Costs for large purchases should be determined by the GM on a case-by-case situation. A manor house or castle should be paid for from the lord's starting wealth; even though the PC may have inherited the structure, the character must still pay for it from his starting wealth. A timber-framed, wattle and daub peasant house with a thatched roof (perhaps 15' by 45') would cost about \$2,500. A large manor house of similar construction, with a timber barbican and various outbuildings, a barn, smokehouse, hen house and so on, might cost \$10,000. Lead, slate or tile roofs, stone walls, and glass windows could drive the cost to two or three times this. As a rule, local resources and labor are cheap, but shipping expenses will drive the cost of imported construction materials up very quickly. A large, extensive stone castle should cost at least \$50,000, while a simple, three-story stone tower with a slate roof might cost \$20,000. Monthly maintenance costs would be about 5% of the total cost of the structure. Furnishings, livestock and tools will cost an additional 50% to 100% of the cost of the structure. Great lords usually had two or three stone castles and several smaller timber forts scattered across their lands.

Those wishing to purchase or build sailing vessels should see the campaign chapter in [\*GURPS Vehicles\*](#), or the chapter on sailing vessels in [\*GURPS Swashbucklers\*](#).

GMs should note that regardless of the character's wealth level, no more than 20% of his starting wealth may be spent on adventuring gear. This can still be spent quite easily. A fine warhorse, a suit of plate and a good sword can be very costly. The use of a character point for a month's income should be a rare occurrence during the campaign, and no more than two points should be allowed during character creation.

## Campaigns

With mighty dukes and earls as characters, the GM must have exciting, well-planned adventures, and a long-term story in mind. The stick-and-carrot approach, using treasure as a lure, will not work with rich nobles. They have almost everything money can buy already! However, the promise of more power and respect, and a larger fiefdom, works just fine. The GM must remember that the PCs *are* the power in the realm. Open threats of force will not scare them, and other blatant, strong-arm tactics are likely to be met with brutality. A subtle game of political cat and mouse, with more lands as the prize, is sometimes a welcome change from open warfare, and a mixture of warfare and political intrigue works best. Below are just a few suggestions for campaign ideas and themes. For other ideas, see the various [\*GURPS\*](#) worldbooks.

**A Few Good Men:** One of the PCs is a baron or duke, and the rest of the party is made up of his liege men, stewards, sergeant-at-arms or other leaders. These lower-level PCs will act as counselors and military commanders, and assist the liege lord in making and enforcing hard decisions. The campaign should center around the interaction of the various characters as they deal with the adversities of the campaign, which could range from peasant rebellion to bandit raids.

**The Conquest:** In this type of campaign, the players are low-level barons or landed

knights marching off to invade another land. This could be for religious reasons, such as the Crusades, or for more profitable or personal reasons, such as the Hundred Years' War. The GM should become familiar with [GURPS](#) Mass Combat System before beginning this type of campaign. Characters may face ambush, turncoat rebels, plague, famine, massive bloody battles and deadly skirmishes on an almost daily basis.

**Rebellion:** The lord's lands are in turmoil. Perhaps several castles have been put to the torch in neighboring fiefs, and now an uprising has begun in his own lands. The lord must decide how to deal with the rebels, and then enforce his decision.

**Intrigue:** The PCs learn of a plot to overthrow the king, but do not have enough information to act on. Should they investigate until they find the truth, or just solidify their position and try for the throne themselves? If they do discover the truth, should they go to the king, or just accept the bribes and keep quiet?

## Job Table

All these positions are considered Wealthy jobs, and monthly income will vary with the lord's wealth level.

|  | <i>Success<br/>Roll</i> | <i>Critical<br/>Failure</i> |
|--|-------------------------|-----------------------------|
| <b>Landed Knight</b> (Status 3, any weapon skills totaling 60+, Legal Enforcement Powers (15), Legal Immunity (15), Claim to Hospitality (10), appropriate Duty, Wealthy+, 1,200 acres or more), \$2 x acres owned | Best PR                 | 2d/3d, C, lose horse, armor |
| <b>Baron</b> (Status 4, any weapon skills totaling 60+, Legal Enforcement Powers (15), Legal Immunity (15), Claim to Hospitality (10), appropriate Duty, Wealthy+, 20,000 acres or more), \$2 x acres owned        | Best PR                 | -4i, 2d/3d, C, lose title   |
| <b>Earl</b> (Status 5, any weapon skills totaling 60+, Legal Enforcement Powers (15), Legal Immunity (15), Claim to Hospitality (10), appropriate Duty, Wealthy+, 100,000 acres or more), \$2 x acres owned        | Best PR                 | -4i, 2d/3d, C, lose title   |
| <b>Duke</b> (Status 6, any weapon skills totaling 60+, Legal Enforcement Powers (15), Legal Immunity (15), Claim to Hospitality (10), appropriate Duty, Wealthy+, 300,000 acres or more), \$2 x acres owned        | Best PR                 | -4i, 2d/3d, C, lose title   |
| <b>King</b> (Status 7+, any weapon skills totaling 60+, Legal Enforcement Powers (15), Legal Immunity (15), Claim to Hospitality (10), appropriate Duty, Filthy Rich, 1.2 million acres+), \$2 x acres owned       | Best PR                 | -4i, 2d/3d, C, lose title   |

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