


Unit
1

From Legend to History

A.D. 449–1485





The Old English and Medieval Periods

“Who pulleth out
this sword of this stone
and anvil, is rightwise
king born of all England.”

—Sir Thomas Malory,
from *Morte d'Arthur*

◀ This illustration
from a manuscript
of *Sir Gawain and
the Green Knight*
illuminates the text
with ornate
borders, and letters.

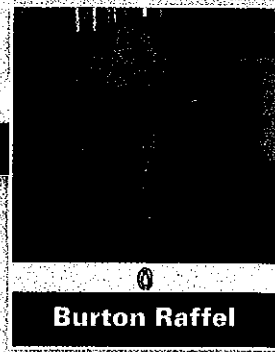
Setting the Scene

The literature in Unit 1 introduces the rich cultural heritage that lays the foundations for *The British Tradition*. The following essay by translator Burton Raffel describes the people who first called England their home. Later, the unit introduction and the literature that follows present the writing that these early settlers contributed to the immense canon, or collection, of works called British Literature.



From the Translator's Desk Burton Raffel Talks About the Time Period

Introducing Burton Raffel (b. 1928) Born in New York, poet and scholar Burton Raffel has translated such classics as *Beowulf*, *Don Quixote*, and Rabelais' *Gargantua and Pantagruel*. He is currently a professor of English at the University of Louisiana.



With Rain Comes Life

We tell jokes about the rainy English climate. A warm ocean current brings that moisture, and makes England the green, fertile land it still is. When the last ice age ended, some three thousand years ago, all across Europe easy hunting ended with it, and people without rich pasturage and easy farming went hungry. The English Channel was not as broad as it is today, and wave after wave of immigrants came pouring across.

Daily Life Life for England's earliest settlers was in many ways much like that still lived in England, as recently as the early nineteenth century. Cities were, for the most part, a thing of the future, though London was even then beginning to become a rich, bustling port. People lived on and by the land, which was worked by both men and women. Sheep were kept for their wool, pigs for their meat, chickens for their eggs. Most people raised a large percentage of the food they ate. There were no shops where one could buy such necessities as clothing (woven and sewn by hand), though artisans like blacksmiths made tools and other metallic items. Most of the land was owned by nobles, both hereditary and newly created aristocrats, having been made counts and earls as kingly rewards. There were many kingdoms on the island now called England and a good deal of quarreling between and among them.

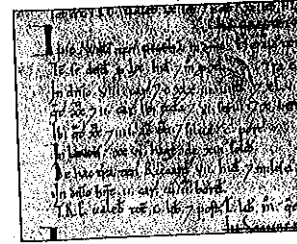
Kings, Lords, Knights, and Peasants Society was hierarchical—that is, very little moved upward from the peasant level, and virtually everything proceeded downward from the nobility. No one imagined questioning the necessity for these largely fixed relationships. Without leadership, no community would function, and no stability would have been possible. These were matters as much taken for granted as, today, automobiles and television sets. Most of what we would call "work" was performed by those at the lower levels of society. We have no direct testimony from them, but

from drawings and paintings, and surviving documents written by clergy or the minority of aristocrats who could read and write, there is a sense of relatively prosperous busyness. England was a rich habitat, as its inhabitants well knew. What overseas trading there was usually involved costly goods that only a few could afford. There was a good deal of local trading, most of which was conducted on the barter principle. Aristocrats dressed elaborately and expensively; most others dressed very plainly, both men and women wearing loose-fitting garments very like what we today call "smocks."

People not only worked, but they played. There was a good deal of group dancing: the songs we call "carols" in fact began as dance music. There were harvest and other agricultural festivals, and there were more solemn religious festivals. For both the secular and the holy festivities, there were other entertainments, from storytelling to dramatic presentations.

From Many Kingdoms to One Nation By the ninth century, some unification of the country's many kingdoms had occurred. Alfred the Great was the most notable English ruler, though still not entirely in control. Immigrants and Anglo-Saxon "natives" pulled and tugged at one another, and continued to fight over the prosperous green land. It was William of Brittany (in France) who finally created as much unity as England was to know for almost another five hundred years. In 1066, at the Battle of Hastings, William the Conqueror defeated an Anglo-Saxon opponent and became the increasingly powerful king of England. The kind of feudal structure he enforced was based on a close accounting of wealth, as reported, at William's direction, by the famous Domesday Book. William's England, now a Norman French "colony," was officially a French-speaking land: indeed, English law courts employed French until the sixteenth century.

But toward the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, we do not know exactly when, someone, somewhere, produced a poetic narrative, probably meant as a guide to proper kingship. This famous book is known as *Beowulf*.



▲ Critical Viewing
What items of value might be listed in the Domesday Book, shown here? [Speculate]

Go Online Author Link

For: A video clip of
Burton Raffel
Visit: www.PHSchool.com
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For: More about
Burton Raffel
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Reading the Unit Introduction

Reading for Information and Insight Use the following terms and questions to guide your reading of the unit introduction on pages 6–14.

Names and Terms to Know

Celts and Anglo-Saxons
Alfred the Great
Norman Conquest
William, Duke of Normandy
Magna Carta
Feudal System
Gutenberg

Focus Questions As you read this introduction, use what you learn to answer these questions:

- What impact did Alfred the Great have on the development of England?
- In what ways did literature keep history alive in Anglo-Saxon and medieval England?

British and World Events

449

600

900

- 449 Anglo-Saxon invasion. ▼



- 597 St. Augustine founds Christian monastery at Canterbury, Kent.
- 653 Celtic church begins to spread Christianity among people living in Severn Valley.

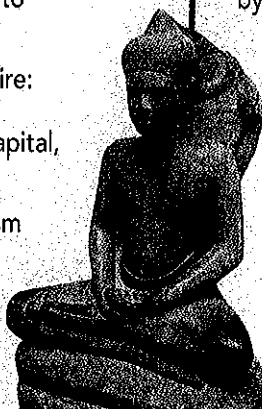
- 664 Synod of Whitby establishes Roman Church in England.
- 731 **Bede** completes *A History of the English Church and People*.
- c. 750 Surviving version of *Beowulf* composed.
- 793 Vikings attack Lindisfarne.
- 871 Alfred the Great becomes King of Wessex. ▼



- c. 975 Saxon monks copy Old English poems into *The Exeter Book*.
- 991 English defeated by Danes at Battle of Maldon.
- 1040 Macbeth kills Duncan I.
- 1042 Edward the Confessor becomes king of Saxons.
- 1066 Normans defeat Saxons at Hastings; William the Conqueror becomes king of England. ▲

WORLD EVENTS

- 476 Western Europe: Fall of Western Roman Empire.
- 496 France: Clovis, king of Franks, converts to Christianity.
- 542 Byzantine Empire: Plague kills half the population of the capital, Constantinople.
- 552 Japan: Buddhism introduced. ►
- 591 China: Beginning of book printing.

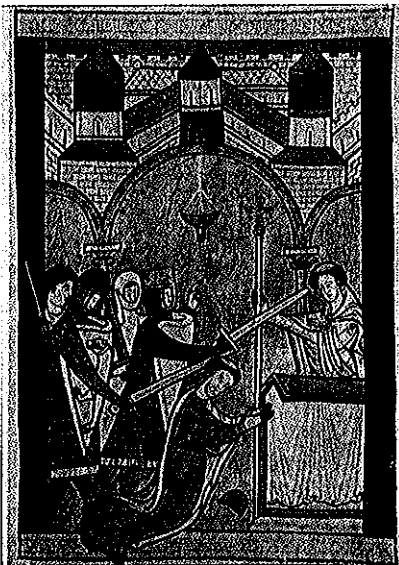


- 637 Middle East: Jerusalem conquered by Arabs.
- 712 Spain: Seville conquered by Moors.
- 732 France: Charles Martel defeats Moors.
- 771 France: Charlemagne becomes king.
- 800 Peru: Incas build city of Machu Picchu.
- c. 810 Baghdad: Algebra devised.
- 861 North Atlantic: Vikings discover Iceland.

- c. 900 Western Europe: Feudalism develops.
- 911 France: Normans establish Normandy.
- 982 Greenland: Eric the Red establishes first Viking colony.
- c. 1020 America: Viking explorer Leif Ericson explores Canadian coast.
- 1045 Spain: Birth of El Cid, national hero who fought Moors.
- 1053 Italy: Normans conquer Sicily.
- 1096 Europe and Middle East: First Crusade begins.

1070

- 1073 Canterbury becomes England's religious center.
- c. 1130 Oxford becomes a center for learning.
- 1170 Thomas Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, murdered. ▼
- 1215 King John forced to sign Magna Carta.



- c. 1100 France: *Song of Roland* written.
- 1139 Portugal: Afonso I defeats Moors and assumes title of king.
- c. 1150 Spain: First paper made.
- 1192 Austria: Duke Leopold imprisons Richard I of England.
- 1194 Iceland: *Elder Edda*, a collection of Norse myths and legends, first appears.
- 1214 China: Mongol leader Genghis Khan captures Peking.

1220

- 1233 First coal mined at Newcastle.
- 1258 First commoners allowed in Parliament.
- 1272 Edward I becomes king.
- 1277 England conquers Wales.
- 1295 Edward I assembles Model Parliament.
- 1337 Beginning of the Hundred Years' War with France.
- 1348 Black Death begins sweeping through England.
- c. 1375 Surviving version of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* written.

- 1275 China: Marco Polo visits court of Kublai Khan.
- 1291 Europe and Middle East: End of Crusades.
- 1307 Italy: Dante begins writing *The Divine Comedy*.
- 1325 Mexico: Aztecs establish Mexico City and create a dating system with a solar year of 365 days. ►
- 1341 Italy: Petrarch crowned poet laureate of Rome.

1380

- 1381 Bible first translated into English.



- 1381 Peasants' Revolt.
- 1386 Chaucer begins writing *The Canterbury Tales*. ▲
- 1455–1485 The Wars of the Roses.
- c. 1470 Thomas Malory writes *Morte d'Arthur*.

- 1429 France: Joan of Arc leads French in breaking siege of Orléans.
- 1453 France: Hundred Years' War with England ends.
- 1453 Germany: First Gutenberg Bible printed.
- 1461 France: François Villon writes *Grand Testament*.
- 1484 Italy: Botticelli paints *Birth of Venus*.
- 1485 Peru: Incan Empire reaches its zenith.

From Legend to History (A.D. 449–1485)

Historical Background

The Conquest of Britain Between 800 and 600 B.C., two groups of Celts from southern Europe invaded the British Isles. One group, who called themselves Brythons (now spelled "Britons"), settled on the largest island, Britain. The other, known as Gaels, settled on the second largest island, known to us as Ireland.

The Celts were farmers and hunters. They organized themselves into tightly knit clans, each with a fearsome loyalty to its chieftain. When these clans fell into disagreement with one another, they often looked to a class of priests known as Druids to settle their disputes.

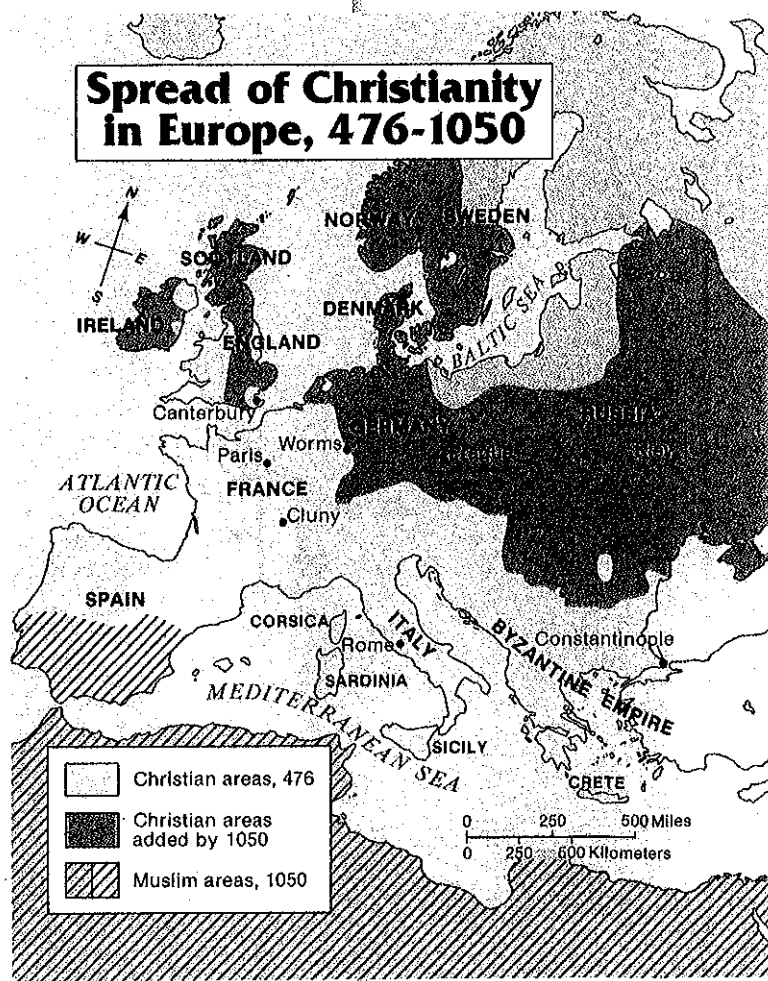
The next conquerors of Britain were the far more sophisticated Romans. In 55 B.C. and again the next year, the Roman general Julius Caesar made hasty invasions. The true conquest of Britain, however, occurred nearly one hundred years later. Disciplined Roman legions spread over the island, establishing camps that soon grew into towns. The Roman rule of Britain lasted for more than 300 years. It ended only when northern European tribes invaded Italy and increased pressure on Rome itself. The last Roman legions departed from Britain to defend Rome in A.D. 407. By that time, the Britons faced a new set of invaders.

These invaders were the Anglo-Saxons, from what is now Germany. Some Anglo-Saxons appear to have been deep-sea fishermen; others seem to have been farmers, perhaps seeking soil richer than the sandy or marshy land at home. Gradually, the newcomers took over more and more of what today is England.

The Coming of Christianity By the fourth century, the Romans had accepted Christianity and had introduced it to Britain. A century later, when the Celts fled the Anglo-Saxons, they took their Christian faith with them. Although Rome fell to barbarian tribes in A.D. 476, the Celtic Christian Church continued to thrive.

In the late sixth century, a soldier and abbot named Columba, along with some monks, gained converts to Christianity and established monasteries in the north. In 597, the Roman cleric Saint Augustine (not the early Christian Church father) arrived in southeast England and converted King Ethelbert of Kent to Christianity. Augustine set up a monastery at Canterbury in Kent and began preaching his faith to other rulers as well.

Spread of Christianity in Europe, 476-1050



▲ Critical Viewing

This map shows the spread of Christianity throughout Europe. What effects might this religious conversion have had on daily life? [Analyze Causes and Effects]

By providing counsel to quarreling rulers, the Church promoted peace and helped unify the English people.

Danish Invasion In the ninth century, the Norse of Norway and the Danes of Denmark were pressured by their own rising populations and took to the seas. These Vikings carried their piracy to the British Isles. The Norse set their sights on Northumbria, Scotland, Wales, and Ireland, whereas the Danes targeted eastern and southern England.

The Viking invaders sacked and plundered monasteries, destroyed manuscripts, and stole sacred religious objects. They burned entire communities and put villagers to the sword. Although the English fought back valiantly, the Danes made broad inroads. By the middle of the ninth century, most of northern, eastern, and central England had fallen to the invaders.

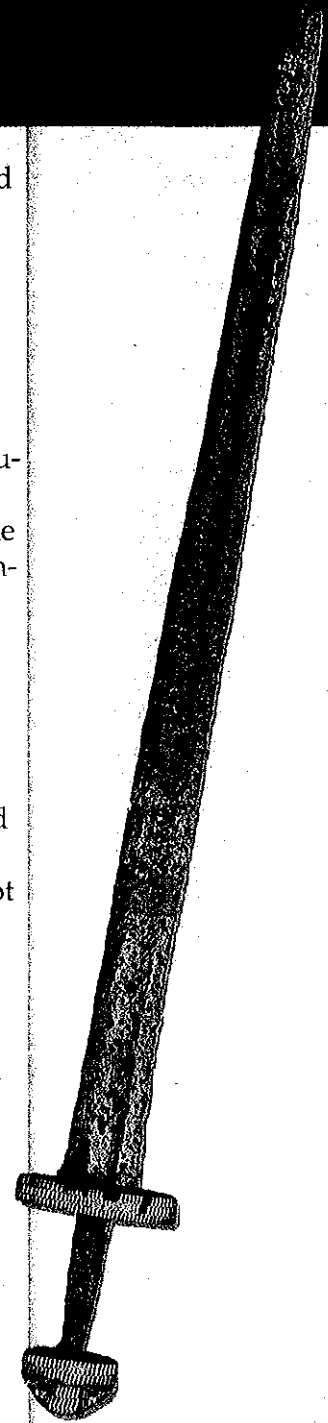
In 871, a king ascended to the Wessex throne who would become the only ruler in England's history ever to be honored with the epithet "the Great." This king was Alfred, and he earned the title partly by resisting further Danish encroachment. Under a truce concluded in 886, England was formally divided: The Saxons acknowledged Danish rule in the east and north, and the Danes agreed to respect Saxon rule in the south. Alfred the Great became a national hero.

Alfred's achievements went far beyond the field of battle, however. Not only was he instrumental in preserving the remnants of pre-Danish civilization in Britain, but he encouraged a rebirth of learning and education.

Toward the close of the tenth century, however, more Danes from Europe attempted to recapture and widen the Danelaw, the eastern and northern sections of England under Danish control. Once they succeeded, they forced the Saxons to select Danish kings. Then, in 1042, the line of succession returned to a descendant of Alfred the Great. This king, Edward, had acquired the title "the Confessor" because he was a deeply religious Christian. His death in 1066 led to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period of history.

The Norman Conquest The Normans, or "north men," were descendants of Vikings who had invaded the coast of France in the ninth century. William, Duke of Normandy, had family ties to Edward the Confessor, the English king. When Edward died in 1066, the Saxon council of elders chose Harold II to be king. William of Normandy, however, claimed that Edward had promised the throne to him, and he crossed the English Channel to assert his claim by force. At the Battle of Hastings, near a seaside village in southern England, Harold was killed, and William emerged victorious.

Over the next five years, William suppressed the Anglo-Saxon nobility and confiscated their lands. He saw to it that Normans controlled the government and that business was conducted in Norman French or in Latin. The Normans gradually remade England along feudal lines. Feudalism had taken root on the European continent at a time when no central



▲ Critical Viewing
What can you infer about Viking society and technology by studying this sword? [Make an Inference]

government was strong enough to keep order. The feudal system involved an exchange of property for personal service. In theory, all the land belonged to the king, who parceled it out among his powerful supporters. He gave these supporters noble titles—usually “Baron”—and special privileges. As a vassal of his overlord, each baron paid certain fees, or taxes, and supplied a specified number of knights—professional soldiers—should the king require them. In return for their services, knights usually received smaller parcels of land, called manors. The peasants who worked these manors were the lowest class in the feudal system, the serfs.

The Reign of the Plantagenets Although Norman influence continued for centuries, Norman rule ended in 1154 when Henry Plantagenet, Count of Anjou, came to the throne as Henry II. Henry founded the royal house of Plantagenet and established a record as one of England’s ablest kings.

Henry’s concern with legal matters led him into direct conflict with the Church. When the archbishop’s seat at Canterbury fell vacant, he appointed his friend Thomas Becket to the position, expecting Becket to go along with royal policy. Instead, Becket defied the king and appealed to the Pope. The Pope sided with Becket, provoking Henry to rage.

Some of Henry’s knights misunderstood the royal wrath. In 1170, four of them murdered Becket in his cathedral. Henry quickly condemned the crime and tried to atone for it by making a holy journey, or pilgrimage, to Becket’s tomb. Thereafter, a pilgrimage to Becket’s shrine at Canterbury became a common English means of showing religious devotion.

The Magna Carta The next king, Richard I, spent most of his reign staging military expeditions overseas. His activities proved costly, and his successor, King John, inherited the debts. John tried to raise money by ordering new taxes on the barons. The barons resisted these measures, bringing England to the brink of civil war. To avert further trouble, King John at last agreed to certain of the barons’ conditions by putting his seal on the Magna Carta (Latin for “Great Charter”).

In the Magna Carta, the king promised not to tax land without first meeting with the barons. Although the document produced no radical changes in government, many historians believe its restrictions on royal power marked the beginning of constitutional government in England.

Lancasters, Yorks, and Tudors In 1399, the House of Lancaster replaced the Plantagenets on the throne. The Lancastrian kings were Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI, all of whom later became central figures in the



▲ Critical Viewing

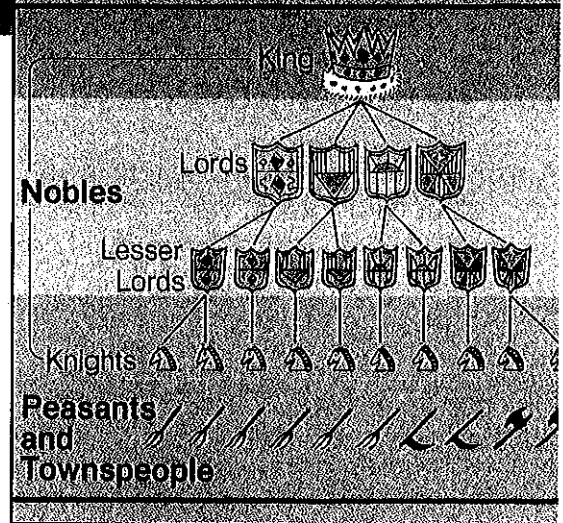
The Bayeux Tapestry is a piece of embroidered linen (231 feet by 19 ½ inches) that tells the story of King Harold’s defeat at Hastings in 1066. This small section of the tapestry shows the Normans preparing a meal after their Channel crossing. What conclusions can you draw from this scene about the Normans and their way of life?

[Draw Conclusions]

historical dramas of Shakespeare. Through the fifteenth century, however, the House of York contested Lancastrian rule. The conflicts known as the Wars of the Roses (1455–1485) pitted York against Lancaster. First one house, then the other ruled as they fought over the throne. Eventually, Henry Tudor, a distant cousin and supporter of the Lancastrian kings, led a rebellion against the unpopular Yorkist king Richard III and killed him in battle. Tudor, crowned Henry VII, later married Richard's niece, uniting the houses of York and Lancaster and ending the Wars of the Roses.

Decline of the Feudal System While royal families struggled for supremacy, the social structure of England was changing. After the great plague, called the Black Death, swept across England in 1348 and 1349, a massive labor shortage increased the value of a peasant's work. Landowners began paying their farmers in cash, giving these workers a greater sense of freedom. Along with freedom went frustration, as peasants began to complain about discriminatory laws and heavy taxes. In 1381, peasants in England staged a revolt against serfdom. The revolt was crushed, but many of its causes continued, and so did the peasants' discontent. Gradually, a free peasantry replaced the serfs of the Middle Ages. However, the question of social justice for the lower classes would arise again.

The Structure of Feudal Society



▲ Critical Viewing

- (a) What aspects of feudal society, as diagrammed here, are similar to aspects of modern-day America?
 (b) What class of modern people is equivalent to the class of knights in feudal society? [Relate]

The British Tradition

Point/Counterpoint

The Middle Ages: 1000 Years of Darkness?

The Middle Ages are sometimes pictured as a glittering time of chivalrous knights and daring deeds. Were they actually centuries of brutality and chaos? Two historians express opposing points of view.

YES! "It says much about the Middle Ages that in the year 1500, after a thousand years of neglect, the roads built by the Romans were still the best on the continent: . . . The level of everyday violence—deaths in alehouse brawls, during bouts with staves, or even in playing football or wrestling—was shocking. Tournaments were really occasions for . . . mayhem."

—from *A World Lit Only by Fire*
 by William Manchester

NO! "In the development of single communities and groups of communities there occurs now and again a moment of equilibrium, when institutions are stable and adapted to the needs of those who live under them; when the minds of men are filled with ideas which they find completely satisfying. . . . Such a period were the Middle Ages. . . ."

—from *Medieval Europe*
 by H.W.C. Davis