

III. MEDIEVAL ENGLAND

The period between A.D. 1066, the date of the Norman Conquest, and the fourteenth century, the age of Chaucer, was a time of change. It was a transitional period in English literature, containing the last works in Anglo-Saxon, many Latin works, some Anglo-Norman works, and the first works in Middle English, the language that finally emerged as Norman language and culture blended with English language and culture.

This period between 1066 and 1300 also saw the rise of feudalism, the increase of church influence and power, and the gradual emergence of trade, of towns, and of a middle class.

In this section, you will briefly review the historical changes. You will learn more about the influence of feudalism and the church. You will examine the changes brought about as towns and trade began to grow. Finally, you will look at some of the literary forms that were used at this time.

SECTION OBJECTIVES

Review these objectives. When you have completed this section, you should be able to:

6. Explain the impact of the Norman conquest upon Anglo-Saxon society, language, and literature.
7. Identify the importance of feudalism and the church as reflected by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
8. Describe the types of literature that dominated the transitional period between A.D. 1066 and 1300.

VOCABULARY

Study these words to enhance your learning success in this section.

| | |
|-------------|-------------|
| demesne | investiture |
| feudalism | manorialism |
| fief | vassal |
| folk ballad | |

ENGLISH HISTORY (1066-1300)

English history between A.D. 1066 and A.D. 1300 is often referred to as the High Middle Ages. This period reflects the changes that England underwent as a result of the Norman Conquest.

Norman Conquest. Edward "The Confessor" was the king of England from A.D. 1042 to A.D. 1066. During his reign, many decisions of government fell to the nobles, because King Edward concentrated on the church and on the building of Westminster Abbey. After his death, the throne was claimed by two men: William of Normandy, Edward's nephew, and Harold Godwinson, a Saxon earl. Although the English supported Harold's claim, William invaded England in A.D. 1066, defeated the Saxons, and established himself as king.

The Normans virtually took over the land and the government. William the Conqueror awarded half of England to his Norman nobles, keeping one-fifth for himself. He set up a council of advisors and converted the Anglo-Saxon *witan* into a Great Council. Positions on this council were awarded to many Norman nobles. He named a Norman archbishop of Canterbury. He prevented conspiracy by requiring every lord to recognize him as supreme ruler. He also compiled a list of holdings for eleventh-century England. This list, called the *Domesday Book*, insured that all property holders were known for tax collection purposes.

Early kings after William. William's son, William II, was a poor ruler. He was succeeded by his brother, Henry "Beauclerc" (good clerk). Henry was an educated man and began to grant certain rights to nobles. He secured the support of the church. By marrying a Saxon princess, he also gained peasant support. He set up a more effective legal system.

Another period of struggle for power followed Henry's death. His grandson became King Henry II. He set up the forerunner of the modern grand jury. Common law based upon legal precedents began to be upheld. Henry II appointed his friend Thomas à Becket, archbishop of Canterbury. Becket resisted attempts by the king to gain control of the church and was assassinated in Canterbury cathedral by the king's men. Becket became known as a martyr—the "holy blissful martyr" whose shrine is the object of Chaucer's pilgrimage.

Henry's son, Richard the Lion-Hearted, took the throne in 1189. A popular king and a hero of many medieval tales, Richard spent much time on crusades or as a captive in prison. He lessened the hold of **feudalism** by allowing nobles and knights to pay money rather than giving personal service in war. Richard hired mercenaries, or professional soldiers, to fight.

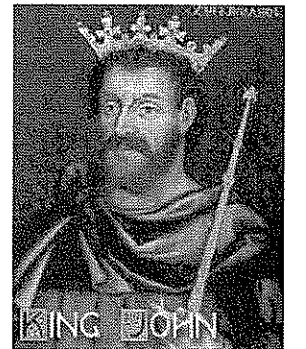
King John followed Richard. John had religious, domestic, and foreign problems during his reign. John was an unpopular king. He lost most of the English possessions in France. He was forced to surrender to the pope's wishes and also was forced to sign the "Magna Carta" at Runnymede by his own nobles.

The increased power of the church under Henry III created an anticlerical attitude among the people. A domestic power dispute led to the assembly of an informal parliament.

Edward I was king at the turn of the fourteenth century. He called the "model parliament" to win support for wars against Scotland and Wales. He conquered Wales, but could not defeat the Scots. He created a stronger monarchy, brought about a strong government ruled by king and Parliament and based on the principles of common law.



Sir Thomas Becket King Henry II



Match these names with the correct answer.

- | | | |
|-----|----------------------------|---|
| 2.1 | _____ William | a. lost the throne to William |
| 2.2 | _____ <i>Domesday Book</i> | b. conquered Wales |
| 2.3 | _____ Thomas à Becket | c. the archbishop of Canterbury |
| 2.4 | _____ Harold | d. the "Conqueror" |
| 2.5 | _____ King John | e. lost most English possessions in France |
| 2.6 | _____ Henry II | f. written by Geoffrey Chaucer |
| 2.7 | _____ Edward I | g. called "Beauclerc" |
| 2.8 | _____ Henry I | h. a list of property holders |
| | | i. set up the forerunner of the modern grand jury |

Feudalism and manorialism. With the Normans came certain political, social, and economic systems. These systems were unlike the Anglo-Saxon systems and had been developing on the continent since the establishment of the Frankish kingdoms after the death of Charlemagne in the year A.D. 814. The political system was known as feudalism. The social and economic system was called **manorialism**.

Feudalism differed from one country to the next, but the basic concept remained the same. In the feudal system the king held a great deal of land. To insure loyalty and military support, he would grant parcels of land, known as **fiefs**, to church leaders and to nobles. This fief was granted in a ceremony of **investiture** at which the noble receiving the land became a **vassal** of the king and swore an oath of loyalty. Each noble, in turn, could grant fiefs to lesser nobles. These lesser nobles became vassals of the nobles. The lesser nobles, finally, could grant fiefs to knights. The knights then became vassals of the lesser noble. In time of war or of need in the kingdom each vassal was pledged to support his lord. Thus, the king could demand aid from the nobles, who in turn demanded aid from the lesser nobles. The lesser nobles demanded aid from the knights. The king had at his command all the nobles and knights of the kingdom by this system. Feudalism involved only the nobility. The peasantry had no place in the system.

Manorialism, on the other hand, set up the social and economic structure for the lower classes. Like feudalism, manorialism differed greatly from one country to the next, but the basic concept can be described.

The land of a noble—or lord—which he did not grant to others of the nobility had to be cared for by someone. Since the lands often were vast, the lord had to hire workers to tend the crops and the animals. The entire estate became known as a manor. The lord built his house, the manor house, and chose the best land for himself. This select parcel was called the lord's **demesne**. This land was planted, tended, and harvested by peasants.

The remaining land on the manor was divided into pastureland, wasteland, forests, and farmland for the peasants. The peasants worked their own land after the lord's demesne had been tended. They often paid the lord 50 percent of their own harvest.

The peasants, or serfs, had little future. They were bound to the manor with little hope of moving off the land. The lord of the manor often did little more than provide the land for their huts and crops. The lord, however, could not evict these peasants.

Some peasants, called freemen, could afford to pay rent for land and to hire serfs to work their land. These few peasants also had the right to leave the manor if they could find better land or a better lord.

Feudalism and manorialism succeeded primarily in countries with weak monarchies and strong local government. Countries with strong monarchies eventually moved away from feudalism and toward the development of strong national trade and commerce.

Church. Norman church leaders and practices affected the structure of the English church just as Norman political and social systems had their effects.

Church architecture changed. Church power increased as more and more bishops and abbots were invested with grants of land. The increase of church power led to church intervention in political matters as well as to increased political intervention by government into church matters.

Monastic reforms, the founding of new orders, and the stand taken by men like Thomas à Becket indicated that the church felt the need to return to control over its own affairs, to a divesting of secular power.

The failure of the Crusades and the growth of commerce, cities, and a middle class all led to a spirit of reform seen in men like John Wycliffe. To the common medieval man, however, the church was the center of life. Each manor had a church and a priest's house near the rows of peasants' huts. The church took care of man's spiritual needs from birth to death. This consciousness of God and man is reflected in the literature, the drama, the artifacts, and the architecture of the time. The medieval peasant was not concerned about church politics. He was concerned with finding the strength and the courage to survive a harsh existence. The local church provided the spiritual support needed to give him that strength.

Answer true or false.

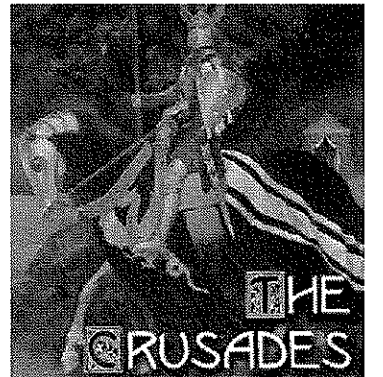
- 2.9 _____ A fief is a noble.
- 2.10 _____ The demesne is the best land on the manor.
- 2.11 _____ Serfs were bound to the land and to the manor.
- 2.12 _____ Freemen could rent land and hire serfs.
- 2.13 _____ Manorialism was a system of government.
- 2.14 _____ The church was central to the life of medieval man.
- 2.15 _____ Feudalism originated after Charlemagne's death.

Changes in medieval society. The Crusades, a series of religious wars, were waged against the Moslem "infidels" in the Holy Land. Kings organized bands of knights to recapture the Holy Land. The First Crusade accomplished the recapture of Jerusalem. The Second Crusade was not successful. The Third Crusade, led by King Richard, accomplished little. No crusades were undertaken to free the Holy Land after 1220.

Although militarily unsuccessful, the Crusades stimulated the growth of trade and banking, the growth of the cities, and the rise of a middle class. Commerce was encouraged by better world-wide conditions: the defeat of the Moslems, the growth of population, and the increase in demand for foreign products. English trade with both the Italian states and with Flanders increased. Italy became a banking center as well as a trade center. Flanders became an important supplier of woolen goods. Certain groups formed trade associations called guilds. Trade fairs were established for national and international trade purposes. The use of money replaced the old barter system and led to the development of banking and monetary systems.

By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, towns were becoming more important. By 1300, London had a population of some forty thousand. Although most of England was still rural, the population move was to the cities. Manufacturing and industry grew, causing growth in urban centers. A middle class rose with the growth of the towns. This new class, made up of shopkeepers, merchants, and tradesmen, gained influence through their growing wealth. Sometimes, these groups joined together to charter a new town and thus attained local independence. These people began to find ways of improving their lives and their political positions. By the end of the Middle Ages, the middle class had become the dominant force.

This growth of commerce, the cities, and the middle class eventually brought about the death of the feudal system in England and on the continent.



Complete these statements.

- 2.16 Militarily, the Crusades were a _____.
- 2.17 Three areas of growth stimulated by the Crusades were:
a. _____, b. _____, and c. _____.
- 2.18 Trade associations were known as _____.
- 2.19 The new middle class was composed of
a. _____,
b. _____, and
c. _____.
- 2.20 Feudalism declined as a result of _____.

ENGLISH LITERATURE (1066-1300)

This period of nearly two hundred fifty years saw many changes in language and in literary types. Several dialects were spoken in England. Old literary forms were dying out and being replaced by new forms influenced by continental literature.

Language. The development of the English language after the conquest is complex. Anglo-Saxon was influenced first by Norman French, a blending of French and the Germanic language of the Vikings who had settled in Normandy. Medieval French was also very close to medieval Latin. The upper classes of Norman nobles spoke Norman French as did the tradespeople, workmen, and retainers who had accompanied them. Anglo-Saxon, however, remained the language of the conquered, especially of the common people.

As English kings gained further French territories, new French words from different French dialects entered the language. French and Latin were official court and legal languages, but anyone needing to communicate with the common Englishman would need to know the English spoken by the people.

Little literature of the early part of this period survives. What does survive, however, shows little French influence. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continued for nearly a century after the conquest. Sermons, religious writings, and historical writings also continued to be written in English.

The main French influence occurs in words referring to matters of state, and to matters of the arts and learning, two areas in which the upper class involved themselves. French became the language of the educated and of the upper class.

Several dialects grew out of this strange coexistence of languages. Middle English dialects vary greatly, depending on the distance of the region from the central government. The London dialect, the dialect in which Chaucer wrote, eventually took precedence and became the basis of modern English. Had another dialect such as the Northwest Midland dialect taken precedence, modern English would be quite different from what it is today.

Answer these questions.

- 2.21 What language did medieval French resemble? _____
- 2.22 What two language influences did Norman French combine?
a. _____ and b. _____
- 2.23 What was the language of the common people? _____
- 2.24 What languages were used officially?
a. _____ and b. _____



Twelfth-century literature. Many new literary forms began to appear in the literature at this time. The development of forms appears to have been gradual when extant literary documents are examined. Some of these forms had been used in Anglo-Saxon literature; others came in from France or were developed by English writers.

The literature of this period also struggled for a language. Some authors chose to write in Latin; others, in French; still others, in English. Some wrote the same work in all three languages.

The late twelfth and the thirteenth centuries saw the rebirth of a true English literature. The fourteenth- and fifteenth-century writers firmly established English as a literary language.

Extant literary works of the twelfth century are scarce. The works consist primarily of sermons, sayings, and historical works, such as the *Peterborough Chronicle*. An important historical work, Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*, was written in Latin. A famous French version of this text was done by Wace. By the late twelfth century an English-verse translation was done by Layamon and was called simply *Brut*. This work traces the origins of Britain back to Troy (a common practice at this time). Brut, the supposed grandson of Aeneas, led his fellow Trojans out of Greek bondage and arrived on the island that is now Britain.

Other literature of the twelfth century includes sermons and a collection of wise sayings that became known as the *Proverbs of Alfred*.

A final literary form found throughout the ages is the **folk ballad**. Ballads are nearly impossible to date because they usually arise from the oral tradition of a common group of people, are spread from group to group by traveling minstrels or troubadours, and are changed slightly by the minstrel's desire to suit the ballad to the group or by his lapse of memory.

The ballad can be historical or nonhistorical. It may deal with romantic, supernatural, tragic, humorous, or adventurous subjects. Many versions of the same ballad exist because these songs were not written down until the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Nearly seventy versions of the ballad *The Two Sisters* have been noted.

Unlike other forms of poetry, the ballad says very little in many words. A ballad concerns itself with a single incident or scene. The characters reveal the topic of the ballad through dialogue, as in a play. The use of repetition of exact words, or a refrain, is charac-

teristic of this form. This repetition is usually to emphasize the sound of the words and to serve as a convenient memory devise.

The ballad stanza often consists of four lines of iambic pentameter. The first and third lines have four accented syllables; the second and the fourth lines have three accented syllables. The second and the fourth lines rhyme.

Example: Ballad stanza

4 accents: The wind so cold blew south and north

3 accents: And blew into the floor;

4 accents: Quoth our goodman to our goodwife,

3 accents: "Get up and bar the door."

Many of the early ballads are Scottish and English. The important thing to remember about ballads is that they were written to be sung. They do not read well as poetry; but, read aloud, they give an indication of the rhythm intended for the music.

"Bonny Barbara Allan" is a tragic love ballad that has been sung in many versions. Over one hundred different variations of this ballad have been discovered. It has been particularly popular in several different countries. The original version of the ballad was Scottish.

Barbara Allen's Cruelty

All in the merry month of May,
When green buds they were swelling,
Young Jemmy Grove on his death-bed lay
For love of Barbara Allen.

He sent his man unto her then,
To the town where she was dwelling:
"O haste and come to my master dear,
If your name be Barbara Allen."

Slowly, slowly she rose up,
And she came where he was lying;
And when she drew the curtain by,
Says, "Young man, I think you're dying.

"O it's I am sick, and very, very sick,
And it's all for Barbara Allen."
"O the better for me you'll never be,
Tho' your heart's blood were a-spilling!

"O do you not mind, young man," she says,
"When the red wine you were filling,
That you made the healths go round and round,
And slighted Barbara Allen?"

He turned his face unto the wall,
And death with him was dealing:
"Adieu, adieu, my dear friends all;
Be kind to Barbara Allen."

As she was walking o'er the fields;
She heard the dead-bell knelling;
And every toll the dead-bell struck,
Cried, "Woe to Barbara Allen!"

"O mother, mother, make my bed,
To lay me down in sorrow.
My love has died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow."

Author Unknown

Many other popular ballads have been written. This form entertained people for hundreds of years. The Adventures of Robin Hood and of other local heroes have been recorded in song.

Match these items.

- | | | | |
|------|-------|----------------------------|---|
| 2.25 | _____ | Geoffrey of Monmouth | a. <i>Proverbs of Alfred</i> |
| 2.26 | _____ | Layamon | b. <i>History of the Kings of Britain</i> |
| 2.27 | _____ | collection of wise sayings | c. sermons, sayings, history |
| 2.28 | _____ | ballad | d. <i>Brut</i> |
| 2.29 | _____ | twelfth-century literature | e. <i>Roman de Brut</i> |
| | | | f. <i>The Twa Sisters</i> |

Answer these questions.

- 2.30 What is a folk ballad? _____

- 2.31 What are the characteristics of the folk ballad? _____

- 2.32 What is the ballad stanza? _____

Complete this activity.

- 2.33 Write a ballad. You may simply write one stanza of four lines, or you may wish to write a complete one. Remember to choose an appropriate topic and to use the ballad stanza.



Adult Check

_____ Initial _____ Date