

The Anglo-Saxon Period: Historical Context

KEY IDEAS Britain's early years were dominated by successive waves of invaders. Among them were the Anglo-Saxons—a people who gave us the first masterpieces of English literature.

Centuries of Invasion

The Dark Ages, as the Anglo-Saxon period is often called, was a time of bloody conflicts, ignorance, violence, and barbarism. Life was difficult, and the literature of the period reflects that reality. Little imagery of the brief English summers appears in this literature; winter prevails, and spring comes slowly, if at all. The people were serious minded, and the reader finds scarce humor in their literature. Indeed, many of the stories and poems present heroic struggles in which only the strong survive. And no wonder.

EARLY BRITAIN The first person ever to write about England may have been the Roman general **Julius Caesar**, who in 55 b.c. attempted to conquer the British Isles. Put off by fierce Celtic warriors, Caesar hastily claimed victory for Rome and returned to Europe, leaving the **Britons** (as the people were known) and their neighbors to the north and west, the **Picts** and **Gaels**, in peace.

A century later, however, the Roman army returned in force and made good Caesar's claim. Britain became a province of the great Roman Empire, and the Romans introduced cities, roads, written scholarship, and eventually Christianity to the island. Their rule lasted more than three hundred years. "Romanized" Britons adapted to an urban lifestyle, living in villas and frequenting public baths, and came to depend on the Roman military for protection. Then, early in the fifth century, the Romans pulled out of Britain, called home to help defend their beleaguered empire against hordes of invaders. With no central government or army, it was not long before Britain, too, became a target for invasion.

ANGLO-SAXONS The **Angles** and **Saxons**, along with other Germanic tribes, began arriving from northern Europe around A.D. 449. The Britons—perhaps led by a Celtic chieftain named **Arthur** (likely the genesis of the legendary **King Arthur** of myth and folklore)—fought a series of battles against the invaders. Eventually, however, the Britons were driven to the west (Cornwall and Wales), the north (Scotland), and across the English Channel to an area of France that became known as Brittany.

Settled by the Anglo-Saxons, the main part of Britain took on a new name: **Angle-land**, or **England**. Anglo-Saxon culture became the basis for English culture, and their gutteral, vigorous language became the spoken language of the people, the language now known as **Old English**.



SUNSHINE STATE STANDARDS Literary Analysis

Benchmark LA.1112.2.1.8 Explain how ideas, values, and themes of a literary work often reflect the historical period in which it was written.

Benchmark LA.1112.2.2.3 Organize information to show understanding or relationships among facts, ideas, and events (e.g., representing key points within text through charting, mapping, paraphrasing, summarizing, comparing, contrasting, outlining).

► TAKING NOTES

Outlining As you read this introduction, use an outline to record main ideas about the historical events and literature of each period. You can use headings, boldfaced terms, and the information in boxes like this one as starting points. (See page R49 in the **Research Handbook** for more help with outlining.)

1. *Historical Context*

A. *Centuries of Invasion*

1. *Early Britain*
2. *Anglo-Saxons*
3. *Vikings*

B. *The Norman Conquest*



ADDITIONAL BACKGROUND

For more on the Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods, visit the **Literature Center at ClassZone.com**.

VIKINGS The 790s brought the next wave of invaders, a fearsome group of seafaring marauders from the rocky, windswept coasts of Denmark and Norway: the **Vikings**. Shrieking wildly and waving giant battle-axes, Viking raiders looted, killed, and burned down entire villages. At first, they hit and ran; later, finding England a more pleasant spot to spend the winter than their icy homeland, the Danish invaders set up camps and gradually gained control of much of the north and east of the country.

In the south, the Danes finally met defeat at the hands of a powerful Anglo-Saxon king known as **Alfred the Great**. Alfred unified the English, and under his rule, learning and culture flourished. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a record of English history, was initiated at his bidding.

The Norman Conquest

In 1042, a descendant of Alfred's took the throne, the deeply religious **Edward the Confessor**. Edward, who had no children, had once sworn an oath making his French cousin William, duke of Normandy, his heir—or so William claimed. When Edward died, however, a council of nobles and church officials chose an English earl named Harold to succeed him. Incensed, William led his Norman army in what was to be the last successful invasion of the island of Britain: the **Norman Conquest**. Harold was killed at the Battle of Hastings in 1066, and on Christmas Day of that year, **William the Conqueror** was crowned king of England.

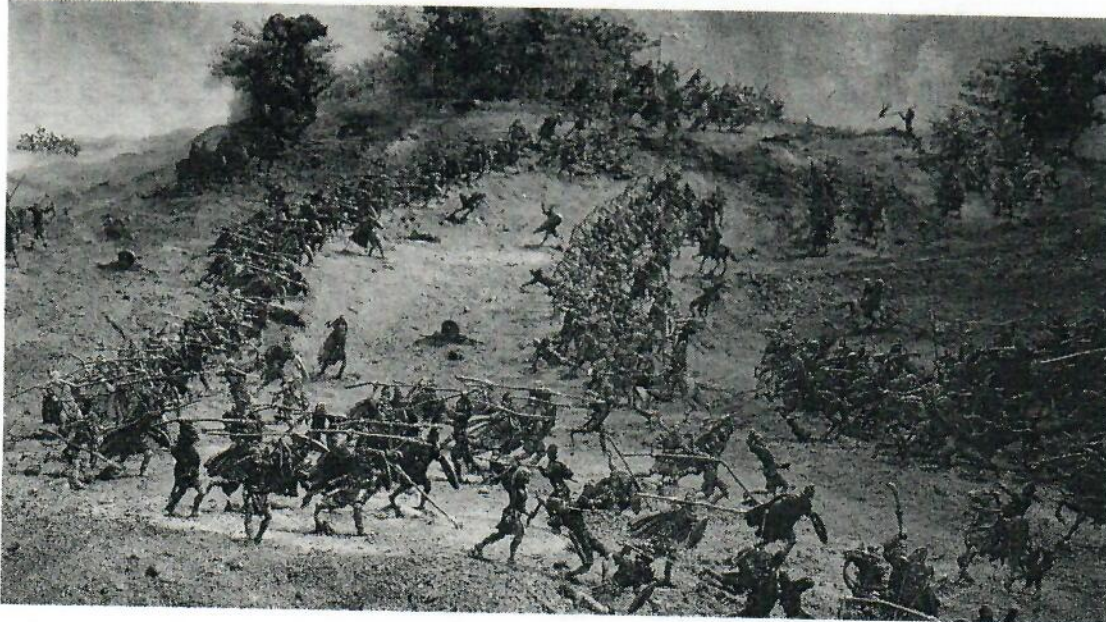
The Norman Conquest ended Anglo-Saxon dominance in England. Losing their land to the conquerors, noble families sank into the peasantry, and a new class of privileged Normans took their place.

A Voice from the Times

William returned to Hastings, and waited there to know whether the people would submit to him. But when he found that they would not come to him, he went up with all his force that was left and that came since to him from over sea, and ravaged all the country. . . .

—*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*

Scale model of the Battle of Hastings



Cultural Influences

KEY IDEAS Early Anglo-Saxon literature reflected a fatalistic worldview, while later works were influenced by rapidly spreading Christianity.

The Spread of Christianity

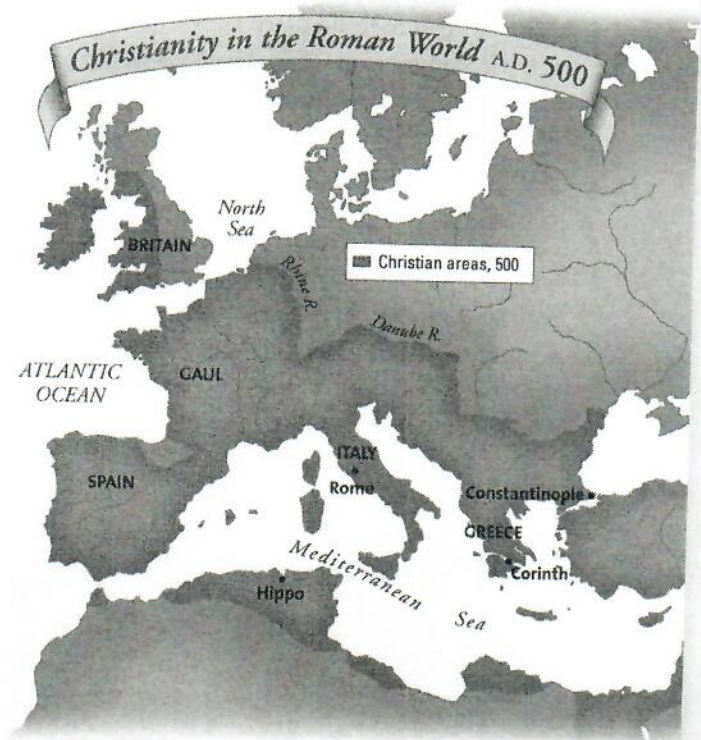
Like all cultures, that of the Anglo-Saxons changed over time. The early invaders were seafaring wanderers whose lives were bleak, violent, and short. Their pagan religion was marked by a strong belief in *wyrd*, or fate, and they saved their admiration for heroic warriors whose fate it was to prevail in battle. As the Anglo-Saxons settled into their new land, however, they became an agricultural people—less violent, more secure, more civilized.

The bleak fatalism of the Anglo-Saxons' early beliefs may have reflected the reality of their lives, but it offered little hope. Life was harsh, it taught, and the only certainty was that it would end in death. **Christianity** opened up a bright new possibility: that the suffering of this world was merely a prelude to the eternal happiness of heaven.

CHRISTIANITY TAKES HOLD No one knows exactly when the first Christian missionaries arrived in Britain, but by A.D. 300 the number of Christians on the island was significant. Over the next two centuries, Christianity spread to Ireland and Scotland, and from Scotland to the Picts and Angles in the north. In 597, a Roman missionary named **Augustine** arrived in the kingdom of Kent, where he established a monastery at **Canterbury**. From there, Christianity spread so rapidly that by 690 all of Britain was at least nominally Christian, though many held on to some pagan traditions and beliefs.

Monasteries became centers of intellectual, literary, artistic, and social activity. At a time when schools and libraries were completely unknown, monasteries offered the only opportunity for education. Monastic scholars imported books from the Continent, which were then painstakingly copied. In addition, original works were written, mostly in scholarly Latin, but later in Old English. The earliest recorded history of the English people came from the clergy at the monasteries. The greatest of these monks was the **Venerable Bede** (c. 673–735), author of *A History of the English Church and People*.

When Vikings invaded in the late eighth and ninth centuries, they plundered monasteries and threatened to obliterate all traces of cultural refinement. Yet Christianity continued as a dominant cultural force for more than a thousand years to come.



Literature of the Times

KEY IDEAS Anglo-Saxon literature often focused on great heroes such as Beowulf, though sometimes it addressed everyday concerns.

The Epic Tradition

The early literature of the Anglo-Saxon period mostly took the form of lengthy **epic poems** praising the deeds of heroic warriors. These poems reflected the reality of life at this time, which was often brutal. However, the context in which these poems were delivered was certainly not grim. In the great **mead halls** of kings and nobles, Anglo-Saxons would gather on special occasions to celebrate in style. They feasted on pies and roasted meats heaped high on platters, warmed themselves before a roaring fire, and listened to **scops**—professional poets—bring the epic poems to life. Strumming a harp, the scop would chant in a clear voice that carried over the shouts and laughter of the crowd, captivating them for hours on end with tales of courage, high drama, and tragedy.

To the Anglo-Saxons, these epic poems were far more than simple entertainment. The scop's performance was a history lesson, moral sermon, and pep talk rolled into one, instilling cultural pride and teaching how a true hero should behave. At the same time, in true Anglo-Saxon fashion, the scop reminded his listeners that they were helpless in the hands of fate and that all human ambition would end in death. With no hope for an afterlife, only an epic poem could provide a measure of immortality.

► For Your Outline

THE EPIC TRADITION

- Epic poems praised deeds of heroic warriors.
- Poems were recited by scops in mead halls.
- Poems instilled cultural pride.

COMMON LIFE

- Lyric poems reflected everyday reality.
- *Exeter Book* contains surviving lyrics.
- Writing moved from Latin to English.
- Medieval literature also explored everyday concerns.

Cover and illustration from a contemporary graphic work by Gareth Hinds, based on the epic poem *Beowulf*



These epic poems were an **oral art form**: memorized and performed, not written down. Later, as Christianity spread through Britain, literacy spread too, and poems were more likely to be recorded. In this age before printing presses, however, manuscripts had to be written out by hand, copied slowly and laboriously by scribes. Thus, only a fraction of Anglo-Saxon poetry has survived, in manuscripts produced centuries after the poems were originally composed. The most famous survivor is the epic *Beowulf*, about a legendary hero of the northern European past. In more than 3,000 lines, *Beowulf* relates the tale of a heroic warrior who battles monsters and dragons to protect the people. Yet Beowulf, while performing superhuman deeds, is not immortal. His death comes from wounds incurred in his final, great fight.

Reflections of Common Life

While epics such as *Beowulf* gave Anglo-Saxons a taste of glory, scopos also sang shorter, **lyric poems**, such as “**The Seafarer**,” that reflected a more everyday reality: the wretchedness of a cold, wet sailor clinging to his storm-tossed boat; the misery and resentment of his wife, left alone for months or years, not knowing if her husband would ever return.

Some of these poems mourn loss and death in the mood of grim fatalism typical of early Anglo-Saxon times; others, written after the advent of Christianity, express religious faith or offer moral instruction. A manuscript known as the *Exeter Book* contains many of the surviving Anglo-Saxon lyrics, including more than 90 riddles, such as this one: *Wonder was on the wave, when water became bone. Answer: an iceberg.*

EARLY AUTHORS Most Old English poems are anonymous. One of the few poets known by name was a monk called **Caedmon**, described by the **Venerable Bede** in his famous history of England. Like most scholars of his day, Bede wrote in Latin, the language of the church. It was not until the reign of Alfred the Great that writing in English began to be widespread; in addition to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, which was written in the language of the people, Alfred encouraged English translations of the Bible and other Latin works.

As England moved into the Middle Ages, its literature continued to capture the rhythms of everyday life. The medieval period was one of social turbulence and unrest, and several works give modern readers a glimpse of the individual hopes and fears of people of the time. **Margery Kempe**, for example, describes a crisis of faith brought on by childbirth; the letters of **Margaret Paston** and her family mainly deal with issues of marriage and managing the family estate.

Old English

Just as Britain’s fifth-century invaders eventually united into a nation called England, their closely related Germanic dialects evolved over time into a distinct language called English—today called Old English to distinguish it from later forms of the language.

A Different Language Old English was very different from the language we know today. Though about half of our basic vocabulary comes from the Anglo-Saxon language, a modern English speaker would find the harsh sounds impossible to understand.

Some words can still be recognized in writing, though the spelling is a little unfamiliar: for instance, *scōh* (shoe), *hunig* (honey), *milc* (milk), and *faeder* (father). Other words have disappeared entirely, such as *hatheart* (angry) and *gleowian* (joke).

Grammatically, the language was more complex than modern English, with words changing form to indicate different functions, so that word order was more flexible than it is now.

The Growth of English The most valuable characteristic of Old English, however, was its ability to change and grow, to adopt new words as the need arose. While Christianity brought Latin words such as *cloister*, *priest*, and *candle* into the Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, encounters with the Vikings brought *skull*, *die*, *crawl*, and *rotten*. The arrival of the Normans in 1066 would stretch the language even farther, with thousands of words from the French.

The Medieval Period: Historical Context

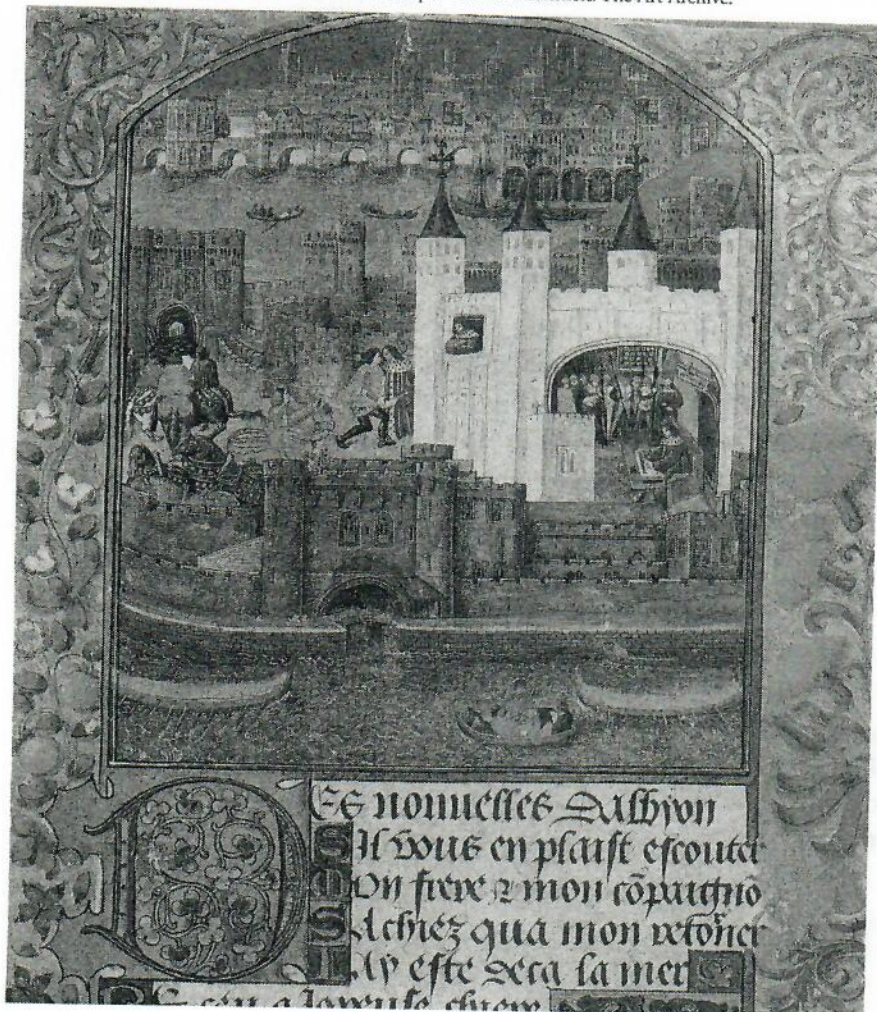
KEY IDEAS With the Norman Conquest, England entered the medieval period, a time of innovation in the midst of war.

The Monarchy

After his victory at Hastings, William the Conqueror lost no time taking full control of England. He was a new kind of king—powerful, well-organized, determined to exert his authority down to the smallest detail. Many people resented innovations such as the *Domesday Book*, an extraordinary tax record of every bit of property owned, from fish ponds to litters of pigs. Still, no one could deny that William brought law and order to the land, “so that,” as one scribe wrote shortly after William’s death, “any honest man could travel over his kingdom without injury with his bosom full of gold.”

Power struggles in the decades after William’s death left England in a state of near-anarchy until 1154, when his great-grandson Henry Plantagenet took

View of London with London Bridge in far distance. Royal Manuscript. From The Poems of Charles, Duke of Orleans. © British Museum/Harper Collins Publishers/The Art Archive.



► For Your Outline The Medieval Period

1. Historical Context

A. The Monarchy

1. William the Conqueror

ANALYZE VISUALS

This illustration from an illuminated manuscript of his poems depicts Charles, the French Duke of Orleans, imprisoned in the Tower of London. Charles was captured at the Battle of Agincourt during the Hundred Years' War and imprisoned for the next 25 years. Yet like most captured nobles, his confinement was not strict: he was allowed to live in a style similar to that which he had known as a free man. What details show how Charles lived? Does the Tower look as you imagined it? Explain.

the throne as **Henry II**. One of medieval England's most memorable rulers, Henry reformed the judicial system by setting up royal courts throughout the country, establishing a system of juries, and beginning to form English common law out of a patchwork of centuries-old practices.

Henry's son Richard I, known as **Richard the Lion-Hearted**, spent most of his ten-year reign fighting wars abroad. During his absence, his younger brother, John, plotted against him. The villain of **Robin Hood** legends, **King John** was treacherous and bad-tempered, quarreling with nobles and raising their taxes until they threatened to rebel. In 1215 he was forced to sign the **Magna Carta** ("Great Charter"), which limited royal authority by granting more power to the barons—an early step on the road to democracy.

War and Plague

As the medieval period drew to a close, war was a near-constant fact of life. The **Hundred Years' War** between England and France began in 1337, during the reign of Edward III. As the war continued on and off for more than a century, England also had to weather several domestic crises, including a terrible plague known as the **Black Death**, which killed a third of England's population.

When the war finally ended in 1453, England had lost nearly all of its French possessions. Two rival families claimed the throne—the house of York, whose symbol was a white rose, and the house of Lancaster, whose symbol was a red rose. The fighting that ensued, known as the **Wars of the Roses**, ended in 1485 when the Lancastrian **Henry Tudor** killed the Yorkist king Richard III at Bosworth Field and took the throne as Henry VII. This event marked the end of the Middle Ages in England.

A Voice from the Times

No freeman shall be taken, or imprisoned, or outlawed, or exiled, or in any way harmed, nor will we go upon him nor will we send upon him, except by the legal judgment of his peers or by the law of the land.

—Magna Carta

Cultural Influences

KEY IDEAS Medieval literature is best understood in the context of three powerful influences on medieval society: feudalism, the church, and a code of conduct called chivalry.

Three Social Forces

THE FEUDAL SYSTEM Feudalism was a political and economic system that William the Conqueror introduced into England after the Norman Conquest. Based on the premise that the king owns all the land in the kingdom, William kept a fourth of the land for himself, granted a fourth to the church, and parceled out the rest to loyal barons, who, in return, either paid him or supplied him with warriors called knights. The barons swore allegiance to the king, the knights to the barons, and so on down the social ladder. At the bottom of the ladder were the conquered Anglo-Saxons, many of whom were serfs—peasants bound to land they could not own.

THE POWER OF THE CHURCH There was one grand exception to the feudal system's hierarchy: the church. Led by the pope in Rome, the medieval church wielded tremendous power—levying taxes, making its own laws, running its own courts, and keeping kings and noblemen in line with the threat of ex-communication. The church owned more land than anyone in Europe, and its soaring stone cathedrals and great abbeys were as impressive as any castle. The church's power did lead to conflicts with the monarchy. When Henry II's archbishop and friend Thomas à Becket began favoring church interests over those of the crown, four knights loyal to the king murdered him. Becket was declared a saint, and his shrine at Canterbury became a popular destination for pilgrims, such as those described in **Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales***.

CHIVALRY AND COURTLY LOVE Medieval literature, including the famous stories of **King Arthur**, was influenced by another social force as well—the ideals of chivalry and courtly love made popular during Henry II's reign. Henry's wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, brought from French court circles the concept of **chivalry**, a code of honor intended to govern knightly behavior. The code encouraged knights to be generous, brave, honest, pious, and honorable, to defend the weak and to battle evil and uphold good. It also encouraged knights to go on holy quests such as the Crusades, the military expeditions in which European Christians attempted to wrest the holy city of Jerusalem from Muslim control.

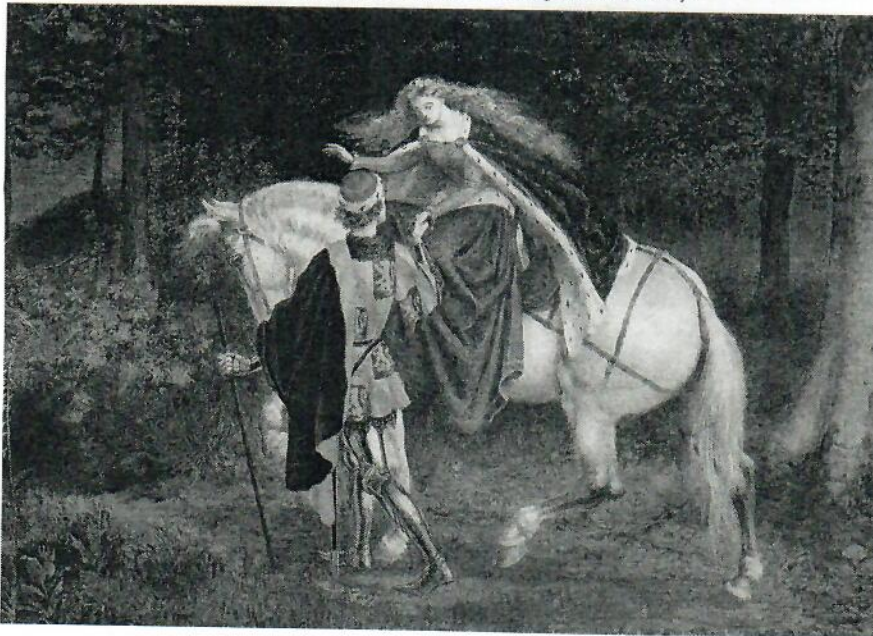
Eleanor and her daughter Marie applied chivalric ideals to the relationships between men and women as well. They presided over a "court of love," where lords and ladies would come to be entertained by music and tales of King Arthur and other romantic heroes and argue about the proper conduct of a love affair. **Courtly love** and the concept of chivalry represented ideals rarely met in real life. Yet they served as inspiration for some of the finest literature of the time.

A Voice from the Times

- *Marriage is no real excuse for not loving.*
- *He who is jealous cannot love.*
- *When made public, love rarely endures.*
- *A new love puts an old one to flight.*
- *Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved.*

—“rules” from the 12th-century book *The Art of Courtly Love*

La Belle Dame Sans Merci, Walter Crane. Private collection. © Bridgeman Art Library.



Literature of the Times

KEY IDEAS Medieval works, such as *The Canterbury Tales* and Arthurian romances, drew from many sources, historical and contemporary, while reflecting the society and ideals of their time.

The Age of Chaucer

The most famous writer of medieval times, “the father of English literature,” was **Geoffrey Chaucer**, a poet who demonstrated the potential of English as a literary language. Drawing on sources as diverse as French poetry, English songs, Greek classics, contemporary Italian tales, and Aesop’s fables, Chaucer masterfully blended old with new, all in the natural rhythms of Middle English, the spoken language of the time.

AN ENGLISH MASTERPIECE *The Canterbury Tales*, Chaucer’s best-known work, displays his ability as a storyteller, his keen sense of humor, and his sharp eye for detail. A collection of tales ranging from irreverent to inspirational, it is held together by a **frame story** about a group of pilgrims who pass time on their journey to the shrine of Thomas à Becket by telling stories. The pilgrims’ characters are revealed through the stories they tell and their reactions to one another’s tales. Though Chaucer apparently intended to have each of the 30 pilgrims tell 4 stories apiece, he died having completed only 24 of the tales.

Chaucer lived during a time of change and turmoil in England. He was born just a few years after the outbreak of the Hundred Years’ War and was still a small child when the bubonic plague hit Europe. The Black Death, as it was known, greatly reduced the population, which led to a shortage of laborers. In turn, serfs realized their new value and left the land to work in towns and on neighboring estates. This shift led to the decline of feudalism and the growth of a new middle class, to which Chaucer’s family belonged. In addition, the war with France had spurred the re-emergence of the English language among the ruling class. With its cast of characters ranging across British society, from the “perfect gentle Knight” to a common miller, and its use of everyday English rather than elevated Latin or French, *The Canterbury Tales* reflected all of these developments.

OTHER WORKS Chaucer was not the only poet of his time to compose in English or to write about ordinary people; **William Langland** did both in his masterpiece *Piers Plowman* (see page 120), as did writers of the popular **ballads** of the day—narrative songs telling of the lives of common folks

► For Your Outline

THE AGE OF CHAUCER

- Geoffrey Chaucer is “the father of English literature.”
- Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales* reflected his society and led to an appreciation for English as a literary language.
- Ballads are narrative songs relating the lives of common folk.



Detail of *Lydgate and the Canterbury Pilgrims leaving Canterbury* (1520). From John Lydgate’s *Troy Book and Story of Thebes*. (Roy.18.D.II. Folio No: 148). British Library, London. © HIP/Art Resource, New York.

or of characters and events from folklore (see page 212). The combination of Chaucer's literary gifts and social status, however, led to a new appreciation of English as a language that, while useful in everyday life, was elegant and poetic as well.

CHAUCER'S LEGACY *The Canterbury Tales* and Chaucer's other works were wildly popular in his own time and inspired a generation of English poets. One admirer sent him a ballad, addressed to "noble Geoffrey Chaucer," that described him as the ancient thinkers Socrates, Seneca, and Ovid all rolled into one. Another poet, John Lydgate, wrote after Chaucer's death, "We may try to counterfeit his style, but it will not be; the well is dry." Three-quarters of a century later, *The Canterbury Tales* was still so widely enjoyed that it was among the earliest books chosen to be published by William Caxton, the first English printer.

Medieval Romance

Medieval **romances**, stories of adventure, gallant love, chivalry, and heroism, represent for many readers the social order and ideals of the Middle Ages. Yet tales such as those of the good **King Arthur** and his sword Excalibur, Merlin the magician, Queen Guinevere, and Sir Lancelot and the Knights of the Round Table were set in an idealized world quite unlike the real medieval England, with its plagues, political battles, and civil unrest. In fact, while it is true that **chivalry** and **courtly love** were ideals made popular during the medieval period, the real Arthur was not of this age.

A LEGENDARY HERO From what little is known of him, Arthur was a Briton, a Romanized descendant of the long-haired, blue-dyed warriors who fought Caesar's army. A Latin history written around A.D. 800, two hundred years or more after Arthur's death, first mentions "Artorius" as a leader in the sixth-century battles against Anglo-Saxon invaders.

For centuries, oral poets in Wales celebrated their legendary hero Arthur just as Anglo-Saxon scopos celebrated Beowulf. Then, about 1135, the monk **Geoffrey of Monmouth** produced a Latin "history" based on old Welsh legends. Geoffrey's book caught the fancy of French, German, and English writers, who soon created their own versions of the legends, updating them to reflect then-current notions of chivalry. While the traditional tales focused on Arthur himself and on his courage and success in battle, these new romances used Arthur and his court as a backdrop for stories about knights who go through trials and perform great feats—often (influenced by the idea of courtly love) in the service of a lady.

A CHANGING LANGUAGE

Middle English

Along with political and cultural upheaval, the Norman Conquest led to great changes in the English language. Despite their Viking origins, by 1066 the Normans spoke a dialect of Old French, which they brought to England.

Status Talk Norman French became the language of the English court, of government business, of the new nobility, and of the scholars, cooks, and craftspeople that the Norman barons brought with them to serve their more "refined" needs. The use of English became confined to the conquered, mostly peasant population.

Hints of this class division still survive in modern English. For instance, Anglo-Saxons tending cattle in the field called the animal a *cū*, or cow, while the Norman aristocrats who dined on the product of their labors used the Old French word *buef*, or beef.

Ever adaptable, English soon incorporated thousands of words and many grammatical conventions from Norman French. These changes led to the development of Middle English, a form much closer than Old English to the language we speak today.

English Makes a Comeback During the long war with France, it came to seem unpatriotic among the upper class to use the language of the nation's number-one enemy, especially since Anglo-Norman French was ridiculed by the "real" French speakers across the English Channel. By the end of the Hundred Years' War, English had once again become the first language of most of the English nobility.



Morte d'Arthur (1862), John Mulcaster Carrick. Private collection. © Fine Art Photographic Library, London/Art Resource, New York.

TWO FAVORITES About 1375, an anonymous English poet wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, recounting the marvelous adventures of a knight of Arthur's court who faces a series of extraordinary challenges. Exciting, suspenseful, and peopled by an array of memorable characters, from the mysterious green giant who survives beheading to the all-too-human Sir Gawain, the 2,500-line poem is easy to imagine as a favorite of troubadours and their audiences.

A century later, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Malory retold a number of the French Arthurian tales in Middle English. Despite its title, which means "The Death of Arthur," Malory's book includes many episodes in the life of the legendary king and is considered a precursor to the modern novel. Oddly enough, it was printed just weeks before the final battle in the **Wars of the Roses**, the last English battle ever fought by knights in armor. Fittingly then, the literary fall of Camelot coincided with the real-life end of chivalry—and the end of the Middle Ages as well.

► For Your Outline

MEDIEVAL ROMANCE

- Romances are stories of adventure, love, heroism, and chivalry.
- They are set in an idealized world unlike medieval England.
- The real Arthur was a 6th-century warrior.
- *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* and *Le Morte d'Arthur* are two medieval romances.