

449-1485

MEDIEVAL PERIODS



IN READING GREAT LITERATURE, I BECOME A THOUSAND MEN
AND YET REMAIN MYSELF.

C.S. LEWIS

NOVELIST AND ESSAYIST

TIME LINE 449-1485

THE ANGLO-SAXON AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS

EVENTS IN BRITISH LITERATURE

c. 750 Surviving version of *Beowulf* probably composed

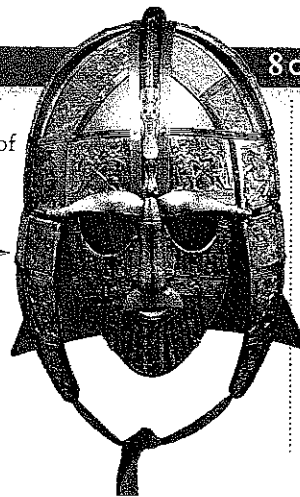
c. 975 Anglo-Saxon verse collected in Exeter Book

EVENTS IN BRITAIN

449 Traditional date of Anglo-Saxon invasion

597 Christian missionaries land in Kent; Christianity begins to spread among Anglo-Saxons

793 Vikings begin first of many raids on Anglo-Saxon kingdom ➤



871 Alfred the Great becomes king of Wessex (to 899)

EVENTS IN THE WORLD

500 Mathematician in India calculates value of pi

527 Justinian I becomes Byzantine emperor

630 Prophet Muhammad conquers Mecca, which becomes holiest city of Islam

800 Charlemagne, who unites much of Europe, crowned emperor of Holy Roman Empire

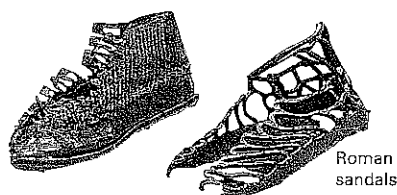
c. 800 Chinese invent gunpowder

c. 880 Mayan culture begins decline



Hadrian's Wall, built by Romans (A.D. 122-128)

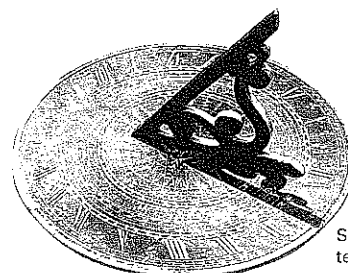
PERIOD PIECES



Roman sandals



Medieval candlestick



Sundial for telling time

1000

c. 1000 Surviving version of *Beowulf* written out by monks

1200



The Prioress

1400

c. 1375 *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* composed

c. 1387 Chaucer begins *The Canterbury Tales*

c. 1420 Earliest surviving Paston letter written

1485 William Caxton prints Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*

1000

1016 Canute, a Dane, becomes king of England (to 1035)

1066 Norman Conquest—William the Conqueror defeats Harold at Hastings and becomes king of England

1166 Henry II institutes judge-and-jury system throughout England

1170 Thomas à Becket murdered

1171 Henry II declares himself lord of Ireland, beginning centuries of English-Irish conflict

1200

1215 King John signs Magna Carta

1282 England conquers Wales

1295 Model Parliament assembled under Edward I

1301 Edward II becomes first Prince of Wales, a title thereafter given to male heirs of British throne

1337 Hundred Years' War with France begins (to 1453) ➤

1400

c. **1430** Modern English develops from Middle English

c. **1476** Caxton establishes first printing press in Britain; prints first dated book in English language (1477)



1000

1054 Christian Church divides into east and west branches

1095 First of "holy wars" called Crusades begins (to 1272)

1192 Japanese emperor takes title of shogun

1200

1206 Genghis Khan begins Mongol conquest of much of Asia (to 1227)

1235 West African kingdom of Mali emerges

1275 Marco Polo arrives in China

c. **1300** Renaissance begins in northern Italy

1325 Aztecs establish Tenochtitlan, site of present Mexico City

1347 Bubonic plague reaches Europe, soon killing millions

1400

1431 Joan of Arc burned at stake

1453 Ottomans conquer Constantinople

c. **1455** Gutenberg Bible produced on printing press

HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

THE ANGLO-SAXON AND MEDIEVAL PERIODS

449-1485



The British Isles, just off the west coast of continental Europe, enter recorded history in the writings of the Roman general Julius Caesar. In 55 B.C., fresh from his conquest of Celtic peoples known as Gauls, Caesar sailed from what is now France to Britain, largest of the British Isles, to assert Rome's authority over it. There he encountered a Celtic people called the Britons, from whom the island takes its name. Also living on Britain were Picts, remnants of a pre-Celtic civilization, and farther west, on Ireland (the next-largest British island) was another group of Celtic speakers, the Gaels.

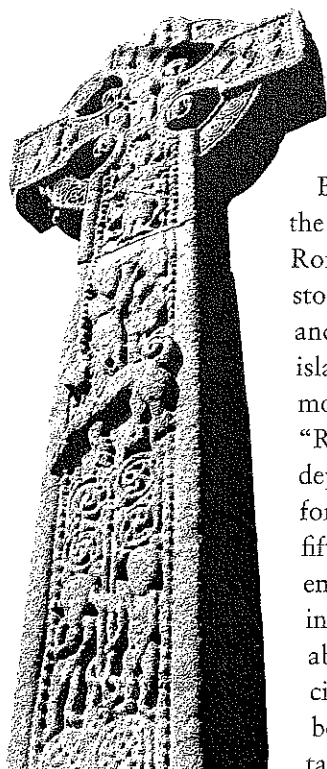
The Britons had a thriving culture by most standards of the day. They were skilled in agriculture and metalwork, traded with their Celtic neighbors overseas, and had an oral tradition of literature and learning preserved by a priestly class known as druids.

They were, however, no match for the Romans. About a century after Caesar's visit, Roman armies returned to Britain to make good his claim. Despite resistance, they rapidly conquered the Britons and drove the war-



Detail of a Celtic container





Above: Celtic cross

like Picts northward to what is now Scotland.

Britain became a province of the great Roman Empire, and the Romans introduced cities, fine stone roads, written scholarship, and eventually Christianity to the island. As they adapted to a more urban way of life, the “Romanized” Britons came to depend on the Roman military for protection; but early in the fifth century, with much of their empire being overrun by invaders, the Roman armies abandoned Britain to defend the city of Rome. It was not long before Britain too became the target of invasion.

Development of the English Language

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 usually called Old English to distinguish it from later forms of the language. Old English was very different from the English we speak today. Harsher in sound, it was written phonetically, with no silent letters. Grammatically, it 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 most valuable characteristic of the language, however, was its ability to change and grow, adopting new words as the need arose.

The Anglo-Saxon Period 449-1066

In an invasion traditionally assigned to the year A.D. 449 but actually taking place over several decades, Angles, Saxons, and other Germanic peoples (such as Jutes and Frisians) left their northern European homelands and began settling on Britain’s eastern and southern shores. The Britons—perhaps led by a Christian commander named Arthur—fought a series of legendary battles in an effort to stop the invasion. Eventually, however, they were driven to seek refuge in Cornwall and Wales on the western fringes of the island; in the northern area now called Scotland, where Gaels from Ireland were also settling; and in an area on the west coast of continental Europe that would come to be known as Brittany. In southern and central Britain, Celtic culture all but disappeared. The Germanic tribes eventually organized themselves into a confederation

LITERARY HISTORY

Although the early Anglo-Saxons did have a writing system, called the runic alphabet, they used it mainly for inscriptions on coins, monuments, and the



like. Their literature was composed and transmitted orally rather than in writing. In the mead halls of kings and nobles, where the Anglo-Saxons gathered to eat, drink, and socialize, oral poets called scopas celebrated the deeds of heroic warriors in long **epic poems**. They also sang shorter, **lyric poems**. In some of these, deaths or other losses are mourned in the mood of bleak fatalism characteristic of early Anglo-Saxon times. Many of the lyrics composed after the advent of Christianity express religious faith or offer moral instruction. Others reflect a more playful nature: the brief Anglo-Saxon **riddles**, for example, describe familiar objects, like a ship or a bird, in ways that force the audience to guess their identity.

of seven kingdoms called the Heptarchy. In the southeast was Kent, kingdom of the Jutes. Further west were the Saxon kingdoms of Sussex, Essex, and Wessex. To the north were the kingdoms of the Angles—East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria. Perhaps because the Angles were dominant in the early history of the Heptarchy, the area of Germanic settlement became known as Angle-land, or England, and its people came to be called the English. Modern scholars, however, usually employ the term *Anglo-Saxon* to refer to the people and culture of this period of English history.

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

THE GROWTH OF CHRISTIANITY

Despite the collapse of Roman power there, Christianity had never completely died out in the British Isles. Early in the fifth century a Romanized Briton named Patrick had converted Ireland's Gaels to Christianity. When the Gaels began colonizing Scotland, they brought Christianity in their wake. From the isle of Iona off the Scottish coast, missionaries spread the faith among the Picts and Angles in the north. Later, 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.



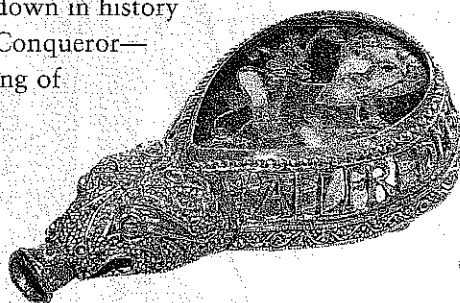
On Lindisfarne, a tiny island off the Northumbrian coast, monks produced the beautiful Bible manuscript known as the Lindisfarne Gospels.

After the fall of the Roman Empire, monasteries became centers of intellectual, literary, artistic, and social activity. The Book of Kells is an illuminated gospel book begun in an Irish monastery in the late eighth century.

THE DANISH INVASIONS

In the 790s, a new group of northern European invaders—the Danes, also known as the Vikings—began to devastate Northumbria's flourishing culture. Coming at first to loot monasteries, the Danes in time gained control of much of northern and eastern England. They were less successful in the south, where their advance was halted by a powerful king of Wessex, Alfred the Great. After inflicting defeats on the Danes in 878 and 886, Alfred forced them to agree to a truce and to accept Christianity.

Although Alfred's reign was a high point in Anglo-Saxon civilization, the tug-of-war with the Danes resumed after his death. In 1016 a Dane named Canute even managed to become king of all England; he proved a successful ruler and won the support of many Anglo-Saxon noblemen. Less successful was the deeply religious Edward the Confessor, who came to the throne in 1042. Edward, who had no children, had once sworn an oath making William, duke of Normandy, his heir—or so William claimed. Later, Edward was persuaded to name Harold, earl of Wessex, as his heir. When Edward died in 1066, the English witan (an advisory council of nobles and church officials) supported Harold's claim. Incensed, William led his Normans 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, and on Christmas Day of 1066, a triumphant William—who would go down in history as William the Conqueror—was crowned king of England.



Ornamental pin
commissioned by
Alfred the Great

LITERARY HISTORY

The spread of Christianity in Britain was accompanied by a spread of literacy and by the introduction of the Roman alphabet in place of the runic alphabet. Though poetry remained primarily an oral art, poems were now more likely to get written down. In this age before printing, however, the only books were manuscripts that scribes copied by hand. Thus, only a fraction of Anglo-Saxon poetry has survived, in manuscripts produced centuries after the poems were composed. The most famous survivor is the epic *Beowulf*, about a legendary hero of the northern European past. A manuscript known as the Exeter Book contains many of the surviving Anglo-Saxon lyrics, including "The Seafarer," "The Wife's Lament," and over 90 riddles.

Most Old English poems are anonymous. One of the few poets known by name is a monk called Caedmon,



described by the Venerable Bede in his famous eighth-century 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 891, Alfred initiated the compiling of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a historic record in poetry and prose that was added to, on and off, until early Norman times. He also encouraged English translations of portions of the Bible and other Latin works.

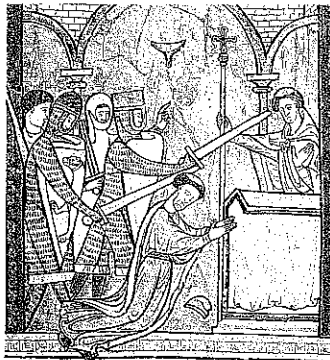
Inset above: Detail from an illuminated Bible

The Medieval Period

1066-1485

Like the Danes of Britain, the Normans (whose name means “north men”) had originally been Viking raiders from northern Europe. However, after settling in the region that became known as Normandy, just northeast of Brittany on the coast of France, the Normans had adopted French ways. Now William introduced these practices to England, beginning the medieval (or middle) period in English history.

Probably the most significant of William’s introductions was feudalism, a political and economic system in which the hierarchy of power was based on the premise that the king owned all the land in the kingdom. Keeping a fourth for himself and granting a fourth to the church, William parceled out the rest of England to loyal nobles—mostly Norman barons—who, in return, either paid him or supplied him with warriors called

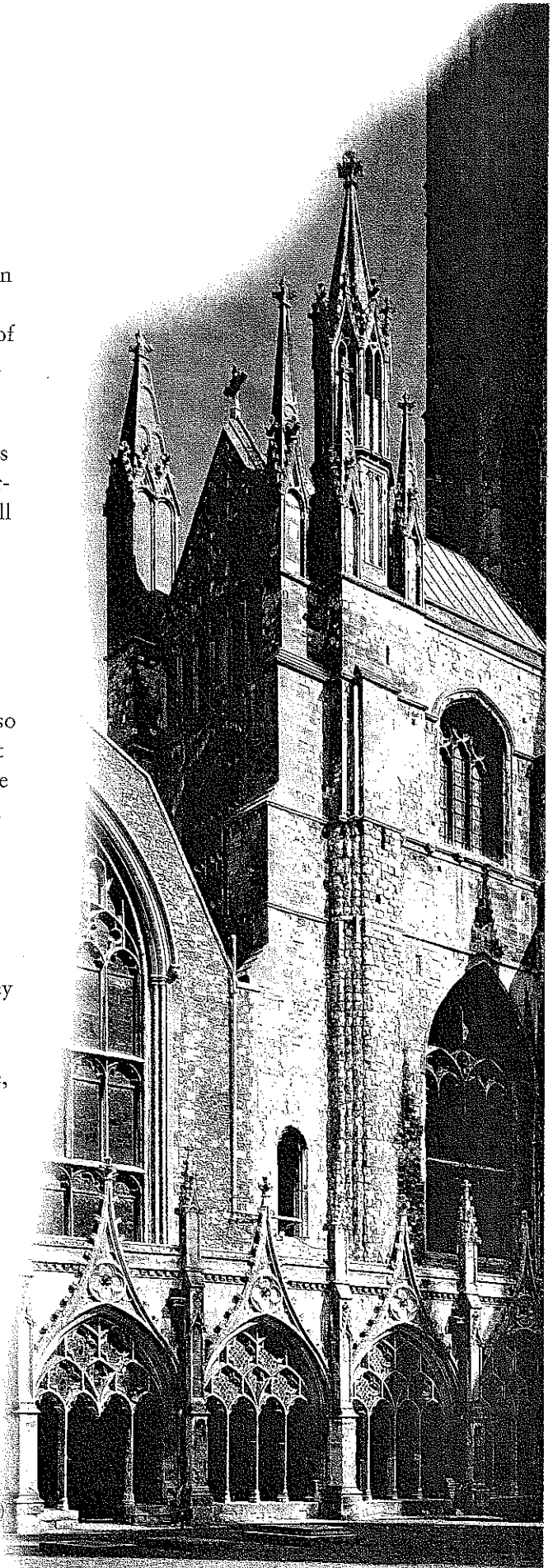


Hoping to influence the church, Henry II appointed his friend Thomas à Becket archbishop of Canterbury. When the archbishop began favoring church interests over those of the crown, Henry’s sharp criticisms prompted four loyal knights to murder Becket. Henry quickly proclaimed his innocence and reconciled with the church; Becket was declared a saint, his shrine at Canterbury becoming a popular destination for Christian pilgrims.

knights. The barons swore allegiance to the king, the knights to their 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. To protect Norman interests, barons were encouraged to build strong castles from which they could dominate the countryside and defend the realm from attack; at the same time, great cathedrals and abbeys were erected on the new church lands.

Because William’s successors were less strong and organized than he, power struggles among the barons

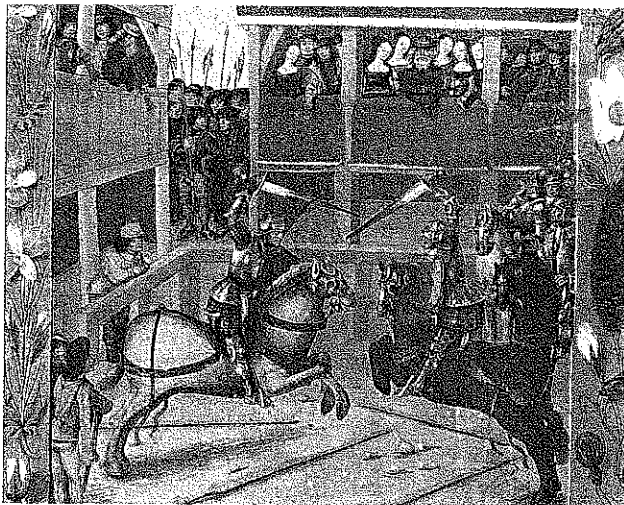
Canterbury Cathedral, begun in the 11th century, reflects the influence of Norman architecture.



were common in the decades after his death. When William's son Henry I died in 1135, the barons took sides in a violent struggle for power between Henry's daughter Matilda and his nephew Stephen. The near anarchy ended in 1154, when Matilda's son Henry Plantagenet took the throne as Henry II. One of medieval England's most memorable rulers, Henry reformed the judicial system, instituting royal courts throughout the country, establishing a system of juries, and initiating the formation of English common law out of a patchwork of centuries-old practices.

At least as colorful as Henry II was his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine, a former French queen who had brought as her dowry vast landholdings in France. From French court circles she also brought the ideals of chivalry, a code of honor intended to govern knightly behavior. The code encouraged knights to honor and protect ladies and to go on holy quests—like the Crusades, the military expeditions in which European Christians attempted to wrest the holy city of Jerusalem from Moslem control.

Henry's son Richard I, called Richard the Lion-Hearted, spent much of his ten-year reign fighting in the Crusades and in France, where English possessions were threatened. During his absence, his treacherous brother John—the villain of many Robin Hood legends—plotted against him. When Richard died and John became king, he found that the royal



Jousting knights

Development of the English Language

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 with them. 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. Ever adaptable, however, 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.

LITERARY HISTORY

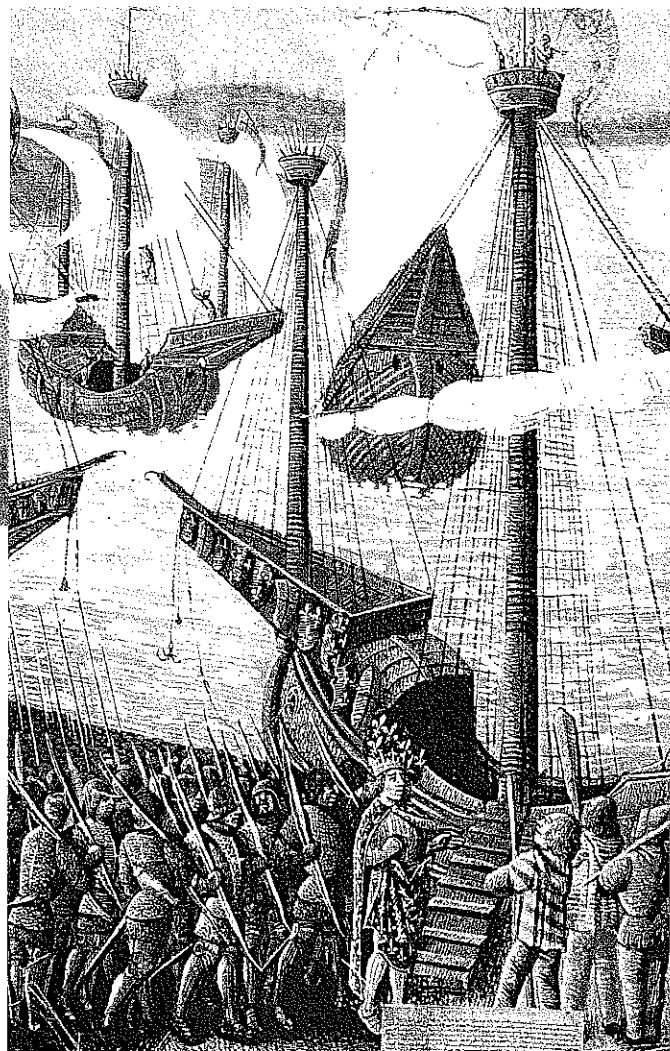
As English became the language of a mostly illiterate peasantry, the common folk again relied on the oral tradition to tell their stories and express their feelings. Many of their compositions were folk ballads, brief narrative poems sung to musical accompaniment. The later Middle Ages saw the flowering of **mystery** and **miracle plays**, which dramatized episodes from the Bible and from saints' lives, and **morality plays**, which taught moral lessons. From these simple plays, intended to convey religious truths to an audience only partly literate, arose the great tradition of English drama.

Right: Flexible body armor called mail was made from iron links.

treasury had been bankrupted by overseas warfare. In 1215 he was forced to sign the Magna Carta ("Great Charter"), which limited royal authority by granting more power to the barons and thus was an early step on the road to democracy. During the reign of John's son Henry III, an advisory council of barons—now called a parliament—began to meet regularly. Under his successor, Edward I, the Model Parliament of 1295 established the inclusion of commoners (eventually to become the House of Commons) as well as barons (the "House of Lords") in the council.

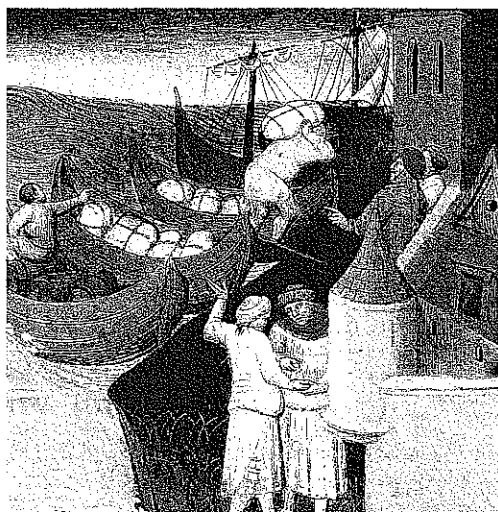
THE DECLINE OF FEUDALISM

The growth of the commoners' power went hand in hand with the growth of medieval towns, a result of an increase in trade that was stimulated in part by the Crusades. In the towns, merchants and craftspeople formed organizations called guilds to control the flow and price of goods and to set up rules for advancing from apprentice to master craftsman. The



King Philip II of France (above), along with Richard the Lion-Hearted and Frederick I of Germany, was a leader of the forces attempting to recapture Jerusalem in the Third Crusade (1189–1192).

Right: Magna Carta, 1215



Wool, an important product in medieval commerce, was shipped from sheep farms to market towns, where merchants exchanged money for goods.





The spread of ideas was greatly assisted by a landmark innovation in 15th-century Europe—the printing press.

growth of towns meant the decline of feudalism, since wealth was no longer based exclusively on land ownership. On the other hand, the crowding of townspeople in conditions of poor sanitation ensured that diseases like plague could spread rapidly.

As towns were becoming centers of commerce, universities were becoming England's chief centers of learning. At Oxford University, 13th-century scholars like Roger Bacon advanced the study of science and mathematics. A century later, an Oxford scholar named John Wycliffe led an effort to end widespread church corruption. Though his followers, the Lollards, were suppressed, his ideas spread to John Huss in central Europe and through him influenced the later religious reformer Martin Luther.

THE HUNDRED YEARS' WAR

Wycliffe's reform efforts took place during the Hundred Years' War, a long struggle between England and France that had begun 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 great epidemic of plague known as the Black Death, which killed a third of England's popu-

LITERARY HISTORY

Religious faith was a vital element of medieval English life and literature. One of the most distinctive products of the age is the long poem known as *Piers Plowman*, a dream vision that explores Christianity's spiritual mysteries. Religious devotion is also the key concern of *The Book of Margery Kempe*, an autobiography in which Kempe focuses on her spiritual growth. In contrast, far more worldly attitudes are expressed in the surviving correspondence of the Paston family. These remarkable letters, written from about 1420 to 1500 and discovered centuries later by one of the Pastons' descendants, provide fascinating glimpses of life in later medieval times.

Especially popular in the Middle Ages were **romances**—tales of chivalric knights, many of which feature King Arthur and the members of his court. For centuries the oral poets of the Britons in Wales had celebrated their legendary hero Arthur just as Anglo-Saxon scopas had celebrated Beowulf. Then, about 1135, the monk Geoffrey of Monmouth produced a Latin "history" based on the old Welsh legends. Geoffrey's book caught the fancy of French, German, and English writers, who soon produced their own versions of the legends, updating them to reflect then-current notions of chivalry. In about 1375, an anonymous English poet produced *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, recounting the marvelous adventures of a knight of Arthur's court. A century later, in *Le Morte d'Arthur*, Sir Thomas Malory retold a number of the French Arthurian tales in Middle English.

Development of the English Language

As warfare with France dragged on, English not only survived but triumphed. Among England's upper class it came to seem unpatriotic to use the language of the nation's number one enemy, especially since the Anglo-Norman variety of 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.

LITERARY HISTORY

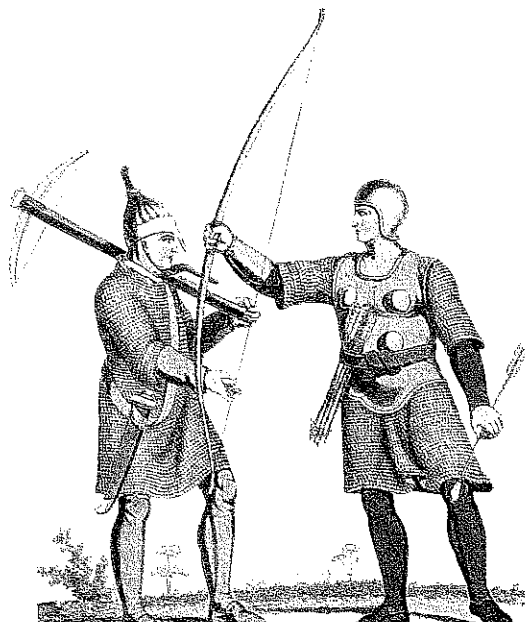
In the rebirth of English as a language of literature, no writer was more important than the 14th-century poet Geoffrey Chaucer, the towering figure of Middle English letters. Chaucer's masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, is a collection of tales supposedly narrated by a group of pilgrims traveling from London to Canterbury to visit the shrine of Thomas à Becket. The pilgrims, who come from all walks of medieval life—the castle, the farm, the church, the town—are introduced in the famous "Prologue," where Chaucer weaves a vivid and charming tapestry of English life in the later Middle Ages.

lation; the Peasants' Revolt of 1381; and Richard II's forced abdication in 1399, which brought Henry IV to the English throne. The war itself had many famous episodes—like

Henry V's great victory over the French at Agincourt and the French army's lifting of the siege of Orléans under the inspired leadership of the young peasant woman Joan of Arc. When the war finally ended in 1453, England had lost nearly all of its French possessions. It was also on the verge of a conflict in which 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, 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 is usually taken as marking the end of the Middle Ages in England.



In medieval art, the Black Death was often portrayed as a skeleton.



During the Hundred Years' War, the use of the longbow helped the English to inflict heavy casualties on the French, who were armed with the less efficient crossbow.

PART 1 Tests of Courage

The Anglo-Saxon and medieval periods were ones of turmoil and change—times when people’s courage was frequently put to the test. Amid this turmoil, the tests of courage often took the form of physical challenges, such as confronting a dreaded foe or battling to survive on the high seas. Other tests of courage involved spiritual or emotional challenges, such as standing up for one’s religious beliefs or enduring the absence of a loved one. As you read about tests of courage in this part of Unit One, try to place yourself in the distant past and imagine how you would respond to similar challenges.

The Beowulf Poet *from Beowulf* 30
A fearless hero takes on daunting enemies.

LITERARY LINK

D. J. R. Bruckner **A Collaboration Across 1,200 Years** 61
Beowulf brought to life

COMPARING LITERATURE: Beowulf and the Iliad *The Epic Hero Across Cultures: Ancient Greece*

Homer *from the Iliad* 66
Two great warriors fight a classic battle.

Anonymous *from the Exeter Book* 84
The Seafarer
The Wanderer
The Wife’s Lament
Hardship, loss, and loneliness

The Venerable Bede *from A History of the English Church and People* 98
A historian recounts the lives of early Christians.

LEARNING the Language of Literature

The Epic

Oral Heroic Narrative— An Epic Task

Imagine that you're performing with an improvisational theater group. First, you are asked to pretend that you're an Automated Teller Machine (ATM) that intentionally tries people's patience. Easy, you think. Next, you must play a butcher who can't stand the sight of meat. No problem. Then a scholarly-looking man asks you to recite a long narrative poem about the heroic struggles of a legendary figure who uses strength, cunning, and help from the gods to survive perilous trials—and you have to use elevated, solemn language throughout. You're speechless, uncomprehending, until it hits you—the man wants an epic.

What Is an Epic?

An **epic** is a long narrative poem that celebrates a hero's deeds. The earliest epic tales survived for centuries as oral traditions before they were finally written down. They came into existence as spoken words and were retold by poet after poet from one generation to the next. Most orally composed epics date back to preliterate periods—before the cultures that produced them had developed written forms of their languages.

Many epics are based in historical fact, so that their public performance by poets (known in different cultures by such names as *scops* or *bards*) provided both entertainment and education for the audience. Oral poets had to be master improvisers, able to compose verse in their heads while simultaneously singing or chanting it. These poets didn't make up their

stories from scratch, however; they drew on existing songs and legends, which they could embellish or combine with original material.

One characteristic feature of oral poetry is the repetition of certain words, phrases, or even lines. Two of the most notable examples of repeated elements are stock epithets and kennings.

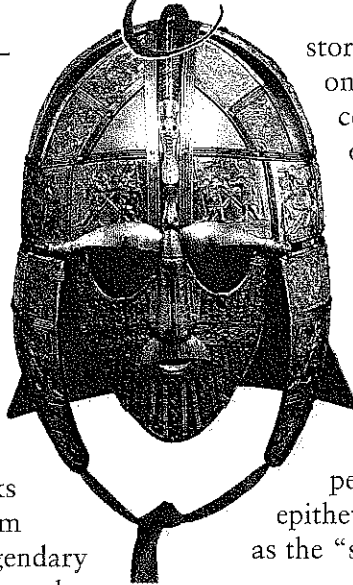
Stock epithets are adjectives that point out special traits of particular persons or things. In Homer, stock epithets are often compound adjectives, such as the “swift-footed” used to describe Achilles.

Kennings are poetic synonyms found in Germanic poems, such as the Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf*. Rather than being an adjective, like an epithet, a kenning is a descriptive phrase or compound word that substitutes for a noun. For example, in *Beowulf* “the Almighty's enemy” and “sin-stained demon” are two kennings that are used in place of Grendel's name.

Stock epithets and kennings were building blocks that a poet could recite while turning his attention to the next line or stanza. Epithets had an added advantage—they were designed to fit metrically into specific parts of the lines of verse. In skillful hands, these “formulas” helped to establish tone and reinforce essentials of character and setting.

Characteristics of an Epic

Epics from different languages and time periods do not always have the same characteristics. Kennings, for example, are not found in Homer's epics. However, the following characteristics are shared by most epics, whether they were composed orally or in



writing, in the Middle Ages or last year, in Old English or in Slovak:

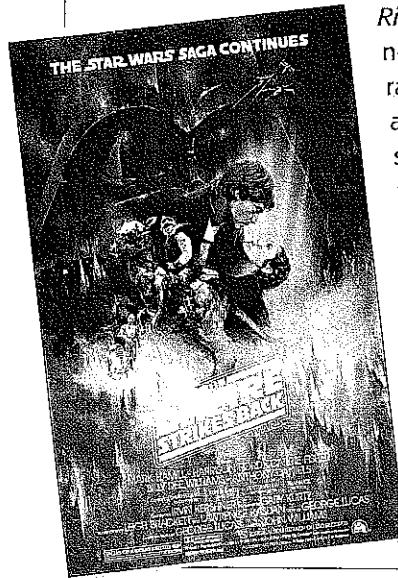
- The hero, generally a male, is of noble birth or high position, and often of great historical or legendary importance.
- The hero's character traits reflect important ideals of his society.
- The hero performs courageous—sometimes even superhuman—deeds that reflect the values of the era.
- The actions of the hero often determine the fate of a nation or group of people.
- The setting is vast in scope, often involving more than one nation.
- The poet uses formal diction and a serious tone.
- Major characters often deliver long, formal speeches.
- The plot is complicated by supernatural beings or events and may involve a long and dangerous journey through foreign lands.
- The poem reflects timeless values, such as courage and honor.
- The poem treats universal themes, such as good and evil or life and death.

The Epic Across Cultures

The epic is not a dead form. Although epics were sung by Sumerians as far back as the third millennium B.C., new oral epics continue to be created and recited in places like the Balkans and South-east Asia. Many poets around the world still write poems in the epic tradition, and the epic spirit animates many prose works, such as J. R. R.

Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, a popular fantasy novel. Many contemporary films are also cast in an epic mold, including such Hollywood hits as the *Star Wars* trilogy, which features an intergalactic struggle between the forces of good and evil.

YOUR TURN What evidence of epic features might you expect to find in the *Star Wars* trilogy?



Strategies for Reading: The Epic

1. Notice which characteristics of epics appear in the poem you are reading.
2. Decide what virtues the hero embodies.
3. Decide if the epic's values are still held today.
4. Determine the hero's role in bringing about any changes in fortune for the characters.
5. Use a list or diagram to keep track of the characters.
6. If a passage confuses you, go back and summarize the main idea of the passage.
7. When reading *Beowulf* (page 32) or the *Iliad* (page 67), use the accompanying Guide for Reading to help you clarify the language and form your own interpretation.
8. **Monitor** your reading strategies and modify them when your understanding breaks down. Remember to use your Strategies for Active Reading: **predict, visualize, connect, question, clarify, and evaluate.**

PREPARING to Read

from Beowulf

Epic Poetry by the BEOWULF POET
Translated by BURTON RAFFEL



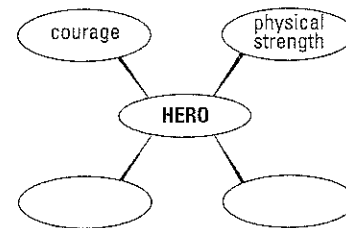
Comparing Literature of the World

Beowulf and the Iliad

This lesson and the one that follows present an opportunity for comparing the epic heroes in *Beowulf* and the *Iliad*. Specific points of comparison in the *Iliad* lesson will help you contrast Beowulf's heroism with that of characters in Homer's epic poem.

Connect to Your Life

Brave Heart According to *The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language*, a traditional hero is someone "endowed with great courage and strength" and "celebrated for his bold exploits." Are courage, strength, and boldness qualities you look for in a modern hero? Would you say that a hero's deeds have to be celebrated, or at least widely known? Think about people in today's world that you consider heroic. Then, in a cluster diagram like the one shown, jot down the qualities that make these people heroes in your eyes. Use your ideas to help you formulate your own definition of *hero*.



WORDS TO KNOW Vocabulary Preview

affliction
cowering
fetter
gorge
infamous
lament
livid
loathsome
murky
pilgrimage
purge
relish
talon
taut
writhing

Focus Your Reading

LITERARY ANALYSIS ALLITERATION

Alliteration is the repetition of consonant sounds at the beginning of words. Poets frequently use alliteration to emphasize particular words or images, heighten moods, or create musical effects. In works of the oral tradition, alliteration was also used to aid memorization. In his translation of *Beowulf*, Burton Raffel has used alliteration to suggest the sound and style of the Old English poem.

*The ancient blade broke, bit into
The monster's skin, drew blood . . .*

Look for other examples of alliteration as you read the excerpts from *Beowulf*.

ACTIVE READING MAKING JUDGMENTS

On pages 28–29, you were introduced to the characteristics shared by many **epics**. Look for evidence of these characteristics in *Beowulf*, and, on the basis of the evidence you find, **make judgments** about the ways in which the poem resembles and differs from other epics.

READER'S NOTEBOOK Use the information provided on pages 28–29 to create a chart in which you list common characteristics of epics. Then, as you read the excerpts from *Beowulf*, record evidence of the presence or absence of those characteristics in the poem. In your judgment, is *Beowulf* a typical epic?

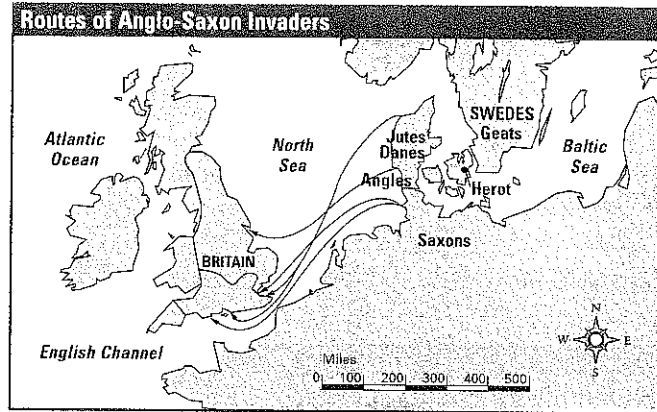
Build Background

The Birth of the *Beowulf* Epic After the fall of the Western Roman Empire to Germanic tribes in the fifth century A.D., Europe entered a chaotic period of political unrest and economic and cultural decline. Among the Germanic-speaking tribes of northern Europe, life was dominated by frequent bloody warfare, which drove some of them to abandon their homes for foreign shores. These tribes included groups of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes who settled on the island of Britain, where they established what is now called Anglo-Saxon civilization. Their famous tale of the great hero Beowulf, however, takes place on the European mainland, among two related tribes, the Danes of what is now Denmark and the Geats (gêts or gâ-ets) of what is now Sweden.

Beowulf is a Geat warrior who crosses the sea to aid the Danes and later returns to Sweden to succeed his uncle Hygelac (the Higlac of this translation) as king of the Geats. While we cannot be sure whether Beowulf ever really lived, we do know that Hygelac was a historical figure who led a military raid some time around the year 525. The action of *Beowulf* is presumably set not long afterward.

At that time, the northern Germanic societies had not yet adopted Christianity. Their warrior culture celebrated loyalty and deeds of great strength and courage. For entertainment the people gathered in mead halls, large wooden buildings where they feasted, drank mead (an alcoholic beverage), and listened to tales of heroic achievements. Such tales were presented both in the form of long epic poems and in the form of shorter verse narratives. Poet-singers—called scopas (shōps) in Anglo-Saxon society—recited the poems in a chanting voice, usually accompanying themselves on a harp.

Old English Text *Beowulf* is the most famous of the early Germanic heroic poems that survive. The form of the poem that has come down to us dates from sometime between the eighth



and tenth centuries—after the Anglo-Saxons' conversion to Christianity. It is written in Old English, the language spoken in Britain in the Anglo-Saxon period. As the lines shown below illustrate, Old English neither looks nor sounds like Modern English, and it must therefore be translated for most modern readers.

Old English poetry has a strong rhythm, with each line divided into two parts by a pause, called a **caesura** (sĭ-zhōōr'ə). In the Old English text printed here, the caesuras are indicated by extra space in the lines. In his translation, Burton Raffel has often used punctuation to reproduce the effect of the caesuras.

Lines from *Beowulf* in Old English

Đa com of more under misthleopum
grendel gongan— godes yre bær;
mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.

Modern English translation by Burton Raffel

*Out from the marsh, from the foot of misty
Hills and bogs, bearing God's hatred,
Grendel came, hoping to kill
Anyone he could trap on this trip to high Herot.*