

# Historical Background

## The Old English and Medieval Periods, 449–1485

They came to conquer and stayed to build. First, it was the Romans in A.D. 43 who drove the original Celtic inhabitants of Britain into the north (Scotland) and west (Wales) of the island. Then, in A.D. 449, after the last Roman troops had been summoned home to defend Rome against the barbarian invaders, a group of Germanic tribes, the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes, crossed the North Sea and occupied the island the Romans had called Albion. In a short time, "Angle land" became England.

### Invasion, Settlement, Assimilation

The next incursion, in A.D. 597, was more peaceful, led by the Roman cleric St. Augustine. He and his followers converted to Christianity the pagans who were there. The Bible of these Christians was written in Latin and they brought Latin learning with them.

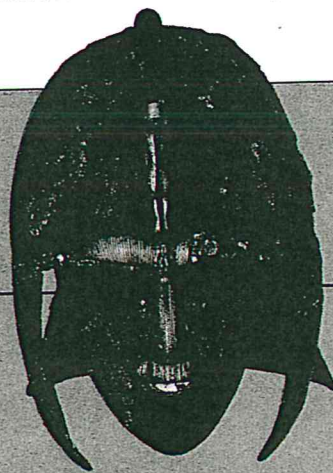
In the eighth century, the Danes arrived. At first they raided and looted the towns and monasteries of the northeast, but eventually they settled that area. In 871, when they tried to overrun the rest of the island, they were stopped by Alfred the Great, who is now considered the first King of England. The Danes, too, converted, assimilated, and gave us words like *sky*, *skill*, and *skate*.

The last successful invasion of England occurred in 1066 when the duke of Normandy in France claimed and won the throne. Known as William the Conqueror, he brought his court and its language to the country he seized. For some time, England was a bilingual country of conquerors and conquered. In his novel *Ivanhoe*, which is set in the Middle Ages, the nineteenth-century writer Sir Walter Scott captures this duality: animals are *swine*, *oxen*, and *calves* on the hoof, but *pork*, *beef*, and *veal* in the kitchen of the noble lord. Even today, we make a last *will* and *testament*, repeating the same meaning in Anglo-Saxon and Norman French, respectively.

### TIMELINE

449: Anglo-Saxon  
Invasion. ►

449



476: Western Europe Fall  
of Western Roman Empire.

496: France Clovis,  
king of Franks, con-  
verts to Christianity.





## The Feudal Era, 1100–1485

The Normans brought more than their language to the island. They also brought a form of government, social order, and land tenure we call feudalism. This is a vision of the natural and human world as a triangle or pyramid. At the peak is the king and below, in carefully graded steps, are nobles and freemen, down to the serfs who till the land.

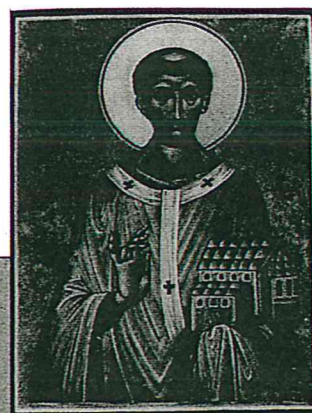
Yet all social systems are more fluid than they appear from the outside, and the feudal era in England was a tempestuous time. In 1215, a group of nobles forced King John to sign the Magna Carta. This Great Charter, which limited the powers of the king, marks the beginning of parliamentary government in England. Other kings faced more violent opposition from the nobles and two of them, Edward II in 1327 and Richard II in 1399, were deposed and assassinated. The Black Death, a grim name for the plague, ravaged England in the 14<sup>th</sup> century and may have killed one-third of the population. Drained by an intermittent series of wars with France, which dragged out for more than one hundred years, England was then torn by a brutal civil war from 1455 to 1485.

At the end of England's bloody civil war, Henry VII came to the throne and all of the forces that had shaped the island kingdom for a thousand years came together in a newly unified state. England was poised to participate in an incredible period of discovery and expansion.

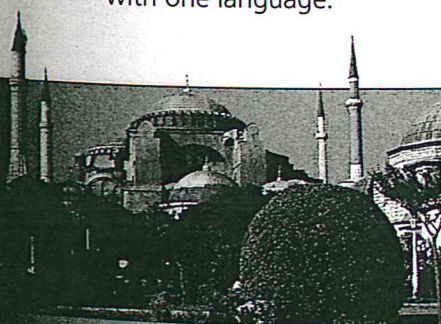
They had come, the conquerors, warriors and priests, the knights and serfs, the outlaws and the righteous, the men, the women, the children, and had settled an island that a glacier had sliced off the European continent. On that relatively small stretch of land, they created a country, a language, and a literature that was to become one of the wonders of the world.

### Key Historical Theme: From Many Tribes to One Nation

- For a millennium, England experienced successive waves of invasion.
- The last invaders, the Normans, brought with them the French language and feudalism.
- After a turbulent period, England eventually became a unified state with one language.



656



▲ 542: Byzantine Empire Plague kills half the population of the capital, Constantinople.

552: Japan  
Buddhism introduced.

591: China  
Beginning of  
book printing.

▲ 597: St. Augustine  
founds Christian monastery  
at Canterbury, Kent.



# Essential Questions Across Time

## The Old English and Medieval Periods (A.D. 449–1485)



What is the relationship between literature and *place*?

In 1399, just before he was deposed and killed, King Richard II returned to England from Ireland. In Shakespeare's version of the scene, the King kneels, touches the sacred soil of England, and says: "Dear earth, I do salute thee with my hand . . . So weeping, smiling, greet I thee, my earth, . . ." This is almost a thousand years after the invading Angles, Saxons, and Jutes set foot on the island's soil, but they neither knelt nor wept. Shakespeare's tragic king, whose feeling for the soil of England is so powerful, shows how the people had shaped a country that had, in turn, shaped them.

### How did English writers respond to their island geography?

**The Placeless Sea** The creation of a sense of place is an important theme in the literature of those who came from elsewhere to dwell on the island. In a way, however, this work of creation begins with an awareness of what is the opposite of place. For islanders, that means the sea, both a protective barrier and an untamable threat. As a watery wilderness, the sea is a kind of placeless place, a vast nowhere that can separate one from home.

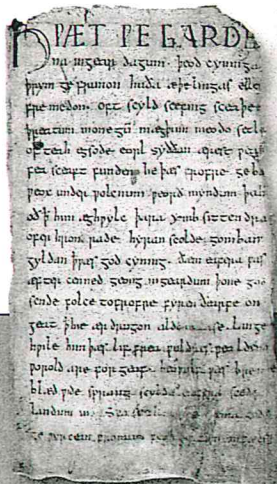
**"The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer"** Two Anglo-Saxon poems chilled by images of the sea, "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer," are spoken by men on sea voyages. They tell of exile and separation from a remembered home. The bleakness of these poems of lonely struggle is, however, tempered by a different frame of values. Resigned and even bitter as they must have been in their original forms, these poems have come down

### TIMELINE

656

712: Spain Seville  
conquered by Moors.

732: France Charles  
Martel defeats Moors. ▼



▲ c. 750: Surviving  
version of *Beowulf*  
composed.



to us in copies made by monks. These monks were aware that Christianity itself begins with a story of exile: Adam and Eve banished from the Garden of Eden. In the Christian tradition, all exile is a model of the exile of humankind from its rightful place in Heaven. In editing "The Seafarer," monks therefore framed the sea-tossed speaker's lament for his life with the overarching Christian theme of exile from Eden, from Heaven, and from God.

**The "Sea-Road"** The sea also figures in the first epic poem of British literature, *Beowulf*, which contains a distant echo of the journey of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes to England. In this poem, the hero Beowulf and his men travel by ship to the land of the Danes to face the monster Grendel. The "sea-road," as it is called in the poem, is not merely a threatening watery waste. It is a "road" to fame and honor—and a natural place for these seafaring warriors.

**The Mead Hall** The destination for Beowulf and his men is not a nation in our modern sense. It is a kingdom, whose capital and command center is Herot, a mead hall. This gathering place—a large building with a single room—probably smelled like a locker room, but it provided warmth, light, food, drink, song, and fellowship for a lord and his warriors. When the monster Grendel comes from the bleak and mysterious darkness to menace Herot, he is striking at the very center of human society, the hearth around which people gather. That is why Beowulf must meet him there and drive him back into the swamp, the dark place from which he comes.

## The BRITISH TRADITION

### THE CHANGING ENGLISH LANGUAGE by Richard Lederer

#### The Beginnings of English

The rise of English as a planetary language is an unparalleled success story that began, long ago, in the middle of the fifth century A.D. Several large tribes of sea rovers—the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—invaded the islands then known as Britannia. They brought with them a Low Germanic tongue that, in its new setting, became Anglo-Saxon, or Old English. The language came to be called *Englisc*, after *Englaland*, "land of the Angles."

Old English differs so much from modern English that it is harder for us to learn than German is. Still, we can recognize a number of Anglo-Saxon words: *bedd*, *candel*, *eorth*, and *waeter*. Anglo-Saxon words such as these concern the unchanging basics of life. They survived later social upheavals nearly unchanged.

A dramatic evolution in the language came after yet another conquest of England, this one by the Norman French. These Normans (shortened from *Northmen*) had originally been Vikings, but they now spoke French and had taken to French customs. In 1066, under William, Duke of Normandy, the Normans invaded England. One result was that Old Englisc was flooded by the French spoken by the Normans. Examples of French influence include the words *sir*, *madam*, *courtesy*, *honor*, and *royal*. From this infusion of French words emerged a tongue that today we call Middle English.



▲ 800: Peru  
Incans build city  
of Machu Picchu.

861: North Atlantic  
Vikings discover Iceland.

863

793: Vikings attack  
Lindisfarne. ▼



## How did literature make a nation of an island?

**A Place of Shared Stories** In the 8th century, Bede, a learned monk, wrote *A History of the English Church and People*, marking an important stage in England's developing sense of itself as an island-nation. With his knowledge of Latin and history, Bede was not interested in merely telling the story of a single clan's mead hall. Instead, he wrote the history of an entire nation—"Britain, formerly known as Albion."

Through Bede's informative prose, the reader can sense how "the island in the ocean" he describes, with its abundant resources, is on its way to becoming the earth to which Shakespeare's Richard II will kneel. Most importantly, Bede is aware that his island is becoming a nation, a place that is as much a product of its history as of its geography; a country is a geographical area with shared stories.

**A Nation Created by Imagination** Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, England's greatest medieval poem, is all about "shared stories" and a sense of England as a nation of different social types. These various characters are on a pilgrimage to the town of Canterbury. There, in 1170, Thomas à Becket, the Archbishop of Canterbury, was murdered in the cathedral on the orders of his former friend King Henry II, to whom he would not yield in matters of church policy. Becket was canonized, or declared a saint, and the cathedral became a shrine. That is why the pilgrims are traveling there, and they will seal their fellowship by telling one another stories along the way.

For Chaucer and his pilgrims, Canterbury is a somewhat distant goal, a symbol of the ultimate sacred place to which people journey on their life's pilgrimage—Heaven. Such was the ideal. Chaucer's pilgrims, however, have a wide range of motives, desires, and needs, many of which are far from noble. A later great poet and critic, John Dryden, was moved to say of Chaucer: "He has taken into the compass of his *Canterbury Tales* the various manners and humors...of the whole English nation...Not a single character has escap'd him."

In the process of inventing English poetry as we know it, Chaucer presents his pilgrims on the road. England is a place in motion, a nation created by the imagination, by the stories people tell one another. It is these shared stories, with all their humble realities, that transform the British Isles to—in the words of Shakespeare's Richard II—"Dear earth."

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and place:

**exile** (ek' sil') *n.*

long time living away from one's country or community, usually involuntary; banishment

**geography** (jē äg' rə fē)

*n.* physical features of a region, area, or place

**pilgrimage** (pil' grə mij)

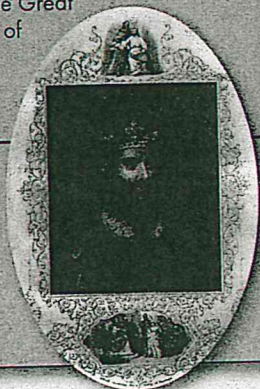
*n.* long journey to a holy or important place

### TIMELINE

871: Alfred the Great becomes King of Wessex. ►

c. 900: Western Europe Feudalism develops.

863



▲ c. 975: Saxon monks copy Old English poems into The Exeter Book.





## How does literature shape or reflect *society*?

In the ten centuries between the Germanic invasions and the dawn of the modern world, England changed from a place of warrior bands and invading tribes to a country ruled by a king, nobles, and bishops. Indeed, England was increasingly run and organized by merchants and landowners and their representatives in an evolving Parliament. The literature written during this period reflects these changes.

### How did writers capture a vanishing world of tribes and clans?

**The Hero's Code** The world of the Anglo-Saxon epic poem *Beowulf* is that of the tribe and its leader. To become a leader a young warrior must prove himself in battle. So Beowulf crosses the sea to aid his kinsman Hrothgar, who cannot protect his people from the monster Grendel. After his victories over Grendel and Grendel's mother, Beowulf becomes the leader of his own tribe.

**Vanishing World, Enduring Values** The *Beowulf* poet tells a rousing story, but he also allows his listener to see and feel the world of the hero in both its glory and decline. At the end of the poem, Beowulf, with only the faithful young warrior Wiglaf at his side, battles a dragon and dies for his people. The audience knows that the poet is lamenting not only the death of a hero, but the passing of a hero's way of life.

## The BRITISH TRADITION

### CLOSE-UP ON HISTORY

#### Guilds and the Status of Women

By 1000, merchants, traders, and artisans or crafts workers formed a new middle class, ranked between nobles and peasants. This class gained power in medieval towns, with merchants and artisans forming associations called guilds.

The craft guilds of artisans represented workers in one occupation, such as weavers, bakers, or goldsmiths. Guild members made rules to protect the quality of their goods, regulate hours, and set prices. No one except guild members could work in any trade, and becoming a guild member took many years of labor.

Guilds offered opportunities to women, who worked in dozens of crafts and dominated some trades. Young girls became apprentices in trades such as ribbon-making and papermaking. Also, a woman often engaged in the same trade as her father or husband and might inherit his workshop if he died. Chaucer's *Wife of Bath*, a weaver, represents this type of new middle-class woman.



982: Greenland Eric the Red establishes first Viking Colony. ▼

991: English defeated by Danes at Battle of Maldon.

c. 1020: America Viking Leif Ericson explores Canadian coast.

1040: Macbeth kills Duncan I.

▲1066: Normans defeat Saxons at Hastings; William the Conqueror becomes king of England.

1070



## How did Chaucer reflect social trends without preaching?

**A Poet and His World** At the other end of the period, Chaucer provides the most complete example of the poet's interaction with his world.

Chaucer's lifetime, the late fourteenth century, was a turbulent period in English history. The country suffered the devastations of the Black Death and Chaucer vividly describes that plague in "The Pardoner's Tale." In the preaching of dissident theologian John Wycliffe, the country also experienced a foreshadowing of the Protestant Reformation, the Protestant separation from the Catholic Church that would occur in the early sixteenth century. Wycliffe's criticisms of the church reflected a growing discontent with the showy wealth of some religious institutions. In the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*, we meet a number of characters who represent various religious orders. Their sometimes questionable behavior suggests the controversy that would lead to the Reformation.

**Showing, Not Sermonizing** Chaucer, however, does not rant, rave, or preach about corruption among religious orders or other social ills. Instead, he shows us characters like the Monk, who spends more time hunting and feasting than praying and fasting.

**Political Turbulence** In 1381, England was shaken by The Peasant's Revolt, in which farmers and laborers demanded a greater share in the wealth and governance of the country. King Richard II put the rebellion down, only to lose power himself eighteen years later. London, originally a Roman settlement on the banks of the Thames River, had by this time grown into a great city and a center for international trade.

**Rising Middle Class** Part of this tumult and change involved the replacement of feudal roles, such as knight and serf, with a newly empowered urban middle class. Chaucer himself was a member of this newly-rising group, as is one of his most memorable characters, the Wife of Bath.

**The Writer and Society** Writers often address social issues, but not as sociologists. Writers are interested in the human stories, the individual tale rather than the mass phenomenon. Readers are often left to figure out who or what is to blame or praise. The turbulent history of the later Middle Ages is contained in Chaucer's pilgrimage—between the lines.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about literature and society:

**sociologist** (sō' sē āl' ə jist) *n.* scientist who studies societies and the behavior of people in groups

**turbulent** (tur' byə lənt) *adj.* full of commotion or wild disorder

**feudal** (fyōōd' 'l) *adj.* relating to a system in which overlords granted land to lesser lords, or vassals, in return for military service and in which poor farmers worked the land for vassals

### TIMELINE

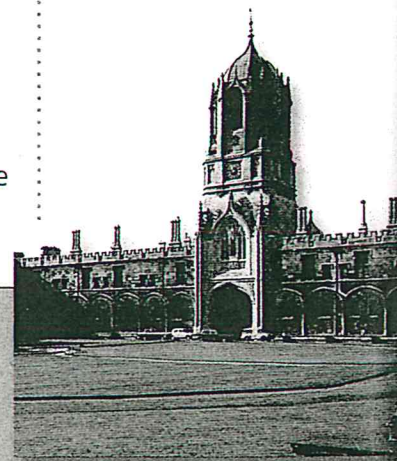
1070

▲ 1073: Canterbury becomes England's religious center.



▲ 1096: Europe and Middle East First Crusade begins.

c. 1100:  
France *Song of Roland* written.



▲ c. 1130: Oxford becomes a center for learning.





## What is the relationship of the writer to *tradition*?

You may first have encountered King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table in a book, a movie, a comic strip, or even a multi-player game. Their stories have been told, reverently and irreverently, for over a thousand years. These tales, in other words, are traditional; they have been handed down. The word *tradition* comes from the Latin *traditio*, meaning "to hand over, to transmit." Tradition in literature, however, does not simply refer to what a writer receives from the past. It also refers to what a writer does with the inheritance.

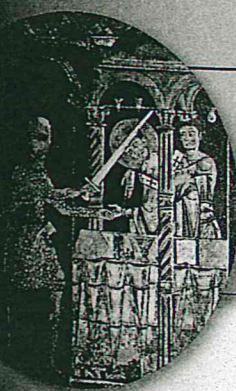
### How do writers change what they have inherited?

**Bequest from the Past** The King Arthur stories are a kind of bequest from the past. Different authors accepted this literary inheritance but decided to use it in different ways. For example, the poet who wrote *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* has his knight-hero submit to a series of tests that teach him something about himself. The tests come from earlier folk tales and romances, or adventure stories about knights, and the poet weaves them into a seamless whole.

Sir Thomas Malory, writing in the fifteenth century at the end of the age of chivalry, uses Arthurian legend in a different way. In his book *Morte d'Arthur* ("Death of Arthur"), Malory gathers many legends of Arthur and his companions to write an elegy, or farewell, to the era of knights.

**Changing in the Telling** The much earlier Anglo-Saxon epic *Beowulf* also ends on a note of farewell, with the dying hero deserted by all but one faithful follower. It is easy to imagine how this story grew in the retelling. Perhaps in the earliest recitals, the hero sails across the sea to rescue his kinsmen and kill the monster. Then, as new audiences clamor for more, the storyteller adds more exploits. Now, Beowulf must also pursue and kill the monster's mother. Still later, in an episode added by another teller, Beowulf is mortally injured by a dragon. Finally, the monk or monks who copy the tale alter it further, adding Christian elements from their own tradition.

1270: Thomas à Becket, Archbishop of Canterbury, ordered.



1214: Mongol leader Genghis Khan captures Peking.



▲ 1215: King John forced to sign Magna Carta.

1258: First commoners allowed in Parliament.

1270



## How did Chaucer respond to and create literary traditions?

**Using the Old** Geoffrey Chaucer is the supreme literary artist of the English Middle Ages because he is both indebted to traditions and committed to creating them. Consider the idea of his major poem, *The Canterbury Tales*: a varied group of people are thrown together and agree to tell stories to pass the time. In 1353, the Italian author Boccaccio had used the same format in his collection of stories, the *Decameron*, in which a group of aristocrats flee to a castle to avoid the plague and agree to tell one another a hundred tales. Chaucer knew Italian literature and the work of Boccaccio. The idea of a group of stories held together by a frame story is his inheritance.

**Making It New** Chaucer, however, altered what he inherited. His pilgrims reflect almost all levels of society, from the Knight to the Miller. They are not fleeing from the plague; they are on a religious pilgrimage. Chaucer's approach allows him to explore interesting differences between noble and base motives. For example, the Wife of Bath may be on a pilgrimage not so much to worship at a saint's tomb as to meet her next husband. Chaucer uses each tale to reveal something about the teller.

**Inventing The Rhythm of English Poetry** Chaucer not only reinvented the frame story; he also reinvented a French verse form to create the iambic pentameter line that would dominate English poetry for hundreds of years. Chaucer knew the ten-syllable lines and rhyming couplets used in French poetry. With the instinct that comes only with real genius, he adapted that form to English. In his rhyming couplets, Chaucer used a line of ten syllables with five alternating accents, the form known as iambic pentameter. This new form, when rediscovered by poets in the sixteenth century, became one of the most enduring traditions in English literature.

**Traditions Stretching Backward and Forward** The beginnings of literature are lost in the mists of prehistory, when some forms of telling stories came into being. Successive generations used those forms to relate the history of the tribe for each new generation. When these stories came to be written down, traditional forms were established. The wonder of literature in this period is that we can see traditions stretching backward into archeological time and stretching forward to tomorrow.

### ESSENTIAL QUESTION VOCABULARY

These Essential Question words will help you think and write about the writer and tradition:

**traditional** (trə dīsh'ə nəl) *adj.* relating to or based on old customs, beliefs, and ways of doing things

**inheritance** (in her'ɪ təns) *n.* goods, ideas, literary creations, or skills received from the past

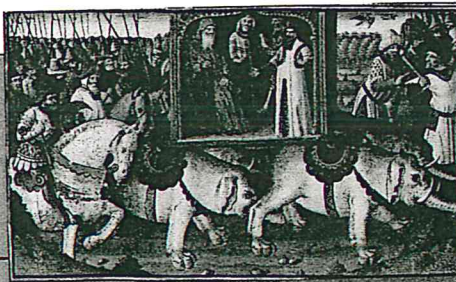
**legend** (leɪ'ənd) *n.* story handed down for generations and believed to be based on actual events

### TIMELINE

1275: China Marco Polo visits court of Kubla Khan. ►

1270

1277: England conquers Wales.



1291: Europe and Middle East End of Crusades.

1325: Mexico Aztecs establish Mexico city and create a dating system with a solar year of 365 days. ▼





# Recent Scholarship

## England's Green, Fertile Land

Burton Raffel

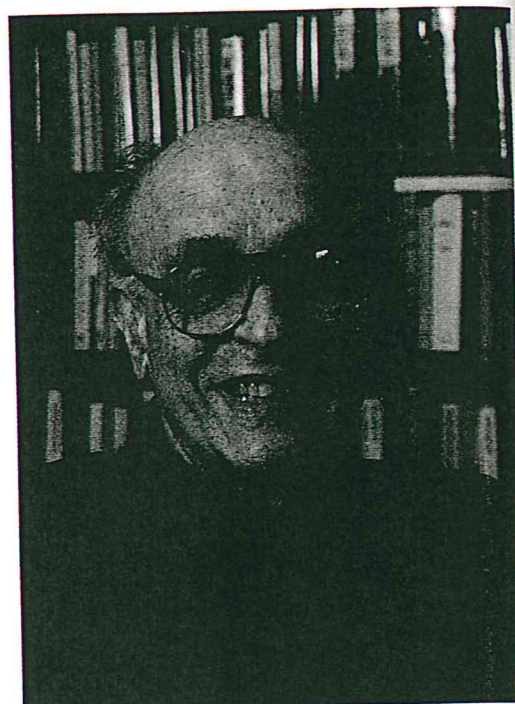
We tell jokes about the rainy English climate. A warm ocean current brings that moisture, and makes England the green, fertile land it still is. When the last ice age ended, some three thousand years ago, all across Europe easy hunting ended with it, and people without rich pasturage and easy farming 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



### About the Author

**Burton Raffel** (b. 1928) is a noted scholar and poet. You might also call him a time traveler. His work as a translator of world literature has taken him back in time to Anglo-Saxon England, with his versions of *Beowulf* and “The Seafarer,” and to Renaissance France, with his version of Rabelais’s *Gargantua and Pantagruel*—to name just two of his many translations. When he is not breaking the time barrier, Raffel serves as a professor of English at the University of Louisiana.



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*.

### ©Collaboration: Speaking and Listening

Burton Raffel refers to the conflict between "Anglo-Saxon 'natives'" and Viking or Danish "immigrants." Suppose you were a council of Viking leaders planning to invade England. Hold a **small group discussion** about the map of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms below, answering these questions as you make your military plans:

- Which region or regions might aid you in your fight? Why?
- Which regions might oppose your invasion most strongly? Why?
- Would it be easier to sail your war ships down the Ouse River or the Thames? Explain.

