



# LANGUAGE ARTS

STUDENT BOOK

▶ **12th Grade** | Unit 5

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# LANGUAGE ARTS 1205

## MEDIEVAL ENGLISH LITERATURE

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**LIFEPAC Test is located in the center of the booklet.** Please remove before starting the unit.

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# Medieval English Literature

## Introduction

One of the reasons Americans study about England is that American literature and history have their roots in England. Through tracing America's cultural heritage, you can come to a better understanding of what America is and what America hopes to become. Many of the standards, ideas, and concepts Americans hold dear are derived from much earlier times. Early settlers brought with them the English tradition, which is actually a blending of ideas from many different societies.

This LIFEPAK® will present the historical changes and developments as well as the literary achievements for three major periods in England. First, you will study the early period in which the Old English language developed. You will discover the relationships between history, language changes, and literary development during this time.

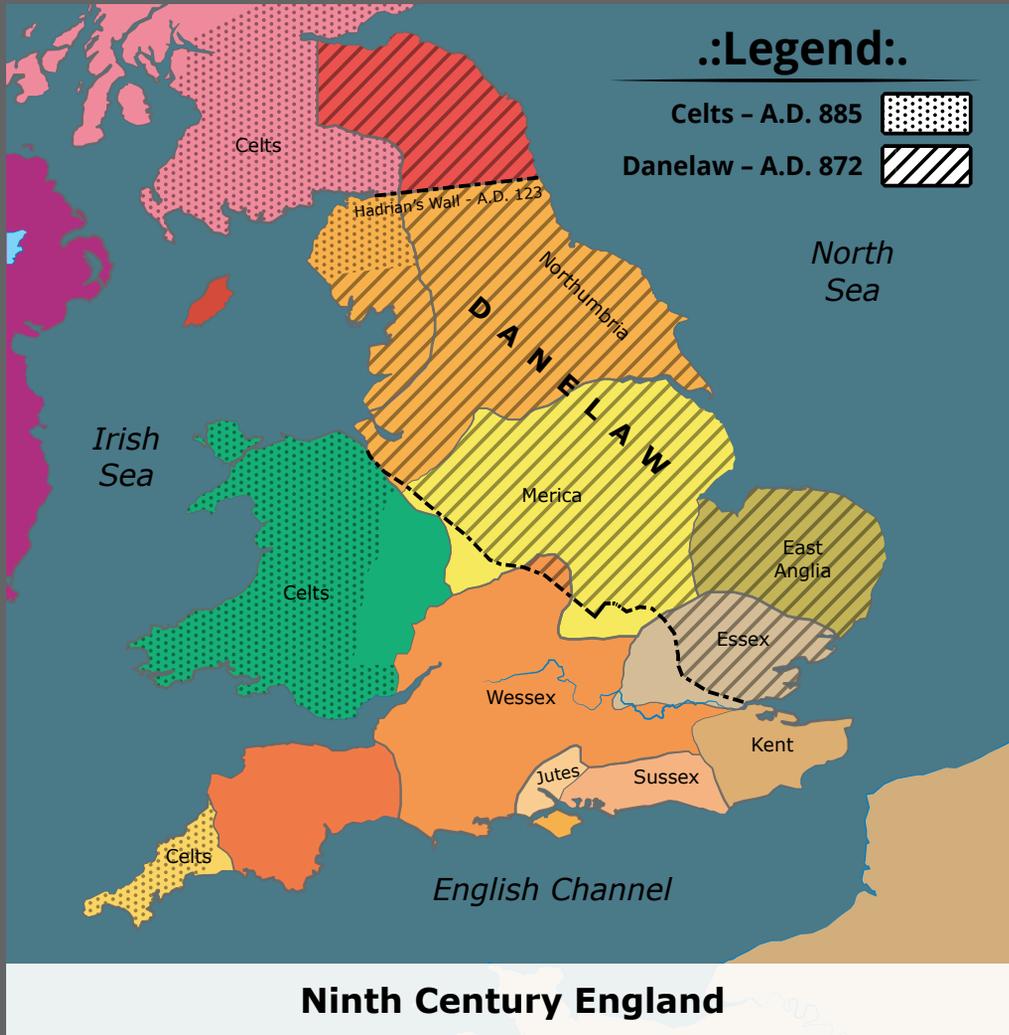
Next, you will become aware of the impact the Norman invasion had upon Anglo-Saxon society in its government, its language, its population, and its literature. This second section will deal with changes occurring between the years A.D. 1066 and A.D. 1300.

Finally, you will explore fourteenth-century England and its greatest literary representative, Geoffrey Chaucer. You will study the many influences upon the literature of this period. Chaucer's literature is great because it portrays a cross section of medieval society, making these people understandable and interesting. You may be surprised to learn that some of these fourteenth-century characters resemble some people of today.

## Objectives

**Read these objectives.** The objectives tell you what you will be able to do when you have successfully completed this LIFEPAK®. When you have finished this LIFEPAK, you will be able to:

1. Explain the contributions to language and literature made by the early Britons, the Celts, the Romans, and the Anglo-Saxons.
2. Identify characteristics of the Old English language.
3. Explain the role of the poet and the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon society.
4. Identify and describe the Anglo-Saxon literary forms of epic, elegy, riddle, and gnomic verse.
5. Recognize pagan and Christian elements in Anglo-Saxon literature.
6. Explain the impact of the Norman conquest upon Anglo-Saxon society, language, and literature.
7. Identify the importance of feudalism and the church as reflected by Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.
8. Describe the types of literature that dominated the transitional period between A.D. 1066 and A.D. 1300.
9. Recognize the Middle English language.
10. Identify Chaucer's writing and to summarize parts of the *Canterbury Tales*.
11. Identify other literary works of the fourteenth century.



Survey the LIFE PAC. Ask yourself some questions about this study and write your questions here.

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# 1. EARLY ENGLAND

The early period of English history is revealed to us primarily through the literature and through certain archaeological discoveries. Before written history, stories about early people—their beliefs, their heroes, and their accomplishments—were preserved through the oral tradition.

In this section you will learn more about the early Britons who settled in the British Isles and the later invaders who brought with them new elements of

language, new ideas, new beliefs, and new traditions. You will learn a little about each of the major invading tribes or groups. You will see how the Celts, the Romans, the Anglo-Saxons, and the Jutes influenced the Anglo-Saxon literature. You will learn more about the Old English language; the poet and the oral tradition; the epic and *Beowulf*; the elegy, represented by the “Wanderer” and the “Seafarer”; the riddle; and gnomic verse.

## Section Objectives

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

1. Explain the contributions to language and literature made by the early Britons, the Celts, the Romans, and the Anglo-Saxons.
2. Identify characteristics of the Old English language.
3. Explain the role of the poet and the oral tradition in Anglo-Saxon society.
4. Identify and describe the Anglo-Saxon literary forms of epic, elegy, riddle, and verse.
5. Recognize pagan and Christian elements in Anglo-Saxon literature.

## Vocabulary

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

**alliterative**

**caesura**

**comitatus**

**kenning**

**Note:** All vocabulary words in this LIFEPAC appear in **boldface** print the first time they are used. If you are not sure of the meaning when you are reading, study the definitions given.

## EARLY HISTORY OF ENGLAND

The history of England should be fascinating to most Americans because many of the roots of our country are in England. A common misconception is that England has always been populated by people very much like today's Englishmen. Nothing could be further from the truth. Many different people, from the Picts to the Normans, have inhabited the British Isles. The history of England is colorful and often violent. Each major influence or change in her culture and her population has been brought about by an invasion.

**Early Britons.** Little is known about the earliest inhabitants of the British Isles. This time period is mysterious because no written documents have been found detailing the lives and beliefs of the people. Later discoveries have uncovered certain artifacts, drawings, and manuscripts that have helped historians piece together more information about these early peoples. What is known is that the early Britons mined tin and made bronze tools and weapons. They may have built Stonehenge, a circular arrangement of huge stones. Stonehenge, located in Wiltshire, England, may have served as an observatory and as an astronomical calendar, accurately indicating the seasons and eclipses. Scientists and historians are still puzzled about the manner of construction of such an accurate and complicated calendar by a so-called barbarian people.

**The Celts.** By 700 B.C. England was invaded by a group known as the Celts. Two groups of Celts developed in the British Isles. The first group was composed of the Irish, Scots, and Manx peoples who spoke a language variation known as Gaelic. The second group made up the Welsh, Cornish, and Britons who spoke Brythonic. These Celtic people were aggressive warriors who worshipped gods of nature. Their religion involved magic and perhaps even human sacrifice. The Celts made and dyed woolen cloth. They set up trade with other areas of Europe. When the Romans invaded England in 52 B.C., the



| Stonehenge, in Wiltshire, England

Celts were forced into the hill country of northwestern England, thus escaping Latin influence. The Romans called one group of the Celts *Picts*, because they painted themselves blue. The word *pict* comes from the Latin word *pictus* meaning "painted."

**The Romans.** The Roman Empire spread over most of the known world from northern Africa to most of Europe, from the Middle East to Spain, and even to Britain in the west. The Romans built their empire as a result of many wars. To hold their newly acquired possessions, Rome established outposts and built roads.

After his conquest of Gaul (present-day France), Julius Caesar directed his attentions toward Britain. Perhaps he had heard about the rich tin mines, woolen cloth, and other British resources from traders. Caesar was aware of the aid and protection the Britons had provided to his enemies, the Gauls. Caesar invaded Britain in 52 B.C. The Britons resisted, but they were conquered. England was occupied by Roman troops for about four hundred years. Britain still contains the remains of many Roman structures such as Hadrian's Wall, which was built by Romans in A.D. 120. They also built forts for protection against the inhabitants of Scotland.

England flourished under Roman rule. Roman-built roads encouraged trade and the growth of towns. London became an important port.

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### Complete these statements.

- 1.1 A circular monument devised by the early Britons is called \_\_\_\_\_.
- 1.2 One tribe of Britons who painted themselves blue were called \_\_\_\_\_.
- 1.3 Early British natural resources included a. \_\_\_\_\_ and b. \_\_\_\_\_.
- 1.4 Julius Caesar invaded Britain in \_\_\_\_\_ B.C.

**The Anglo-Saxons.** When the Romans withdrew their troops from Britain to repel invaders attacking Rome, Britain was left unprotected. Other invaders threatened British inhabitants. Picts and Scots invaded from the North Sea. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes invaded and settled in the southeastern part of Britain. The name Angle-Land, later England, was taken from the tribe called the Angles.

The Anglo-Saxon period extends from about A.D. 449 to A.D. 1066. The legendary King Arthur was supposed to have reigned about A.D. 500. The legend may have been based on the life of a real Celtic leader—a leader who organized the Britons against the Germanic invaders.

The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were Germanic tribes that crossed the North Sea to conquer Britain. By the end of the sixth century, they had conquered the territory. These tribes settled in tiny regions. They had blended into larger kingdoms by A.D. 597 when Pope Gregory sent missionaries to England. An English nationalism came early to these kingdoms. Conversion to Christianity and a common bond to ward off invaders encouraged a national spirit.

The Anglo-Saxons, as these blended Germanic tribes came to be called, were hardy people. They were ruled by the traditional Germanic system of the leader, or chieftain, and his *witan*, or council of retainers. They called assemblies to discuss issues and to interpret laws.

The Anglo-Saxons were also an artistic people. Recent archaeological findings reveal that their craftsmen produced artifacts and ornaments such as brooches, helmets, and bracelets.

The year A.D. 597 marks the beginnings of English history. The English had learned from Roman and Irish missionaries to make written records of historical events. By then the language was actually called English, although scholars have used the term Anglo-Saxon to identify the language spoken at this time. Anglo-Saxon is closely related to Saxon and Frisian (Low German). Latin has influenced English through the church and through the classical writings. Danish (Scandinavian) influenced the language, especially in the tenth and eleventh centuries.

The spread of Christianity brought increased learning. Some men learned to read and write Latin while training for holy orders. Others studied Greek, the language used by the early church. Latin gradually replaced Greek in the West. By A.D. 597 a great deal

of Christian literature as well as pagan and secular literature had been written in or translated into Latin. Monastic schools were established. Theodore, Archbishop of Canterbury, and the African Abbot Hadrian set up such a monastic school at Canterbury. Within a short time England became a leader in learning.

During this period of learning, a record of early history and culture was set down. The past was kept alive by reading and by recording events in books. This process was painstaking since the average scribe could copy only two books a year.

Some monks began to write their own books in Latin. Aldhelm (or Ealdhelm) who lived near the end of the seventh century was a monk from Wessex and a student of Theodore and Hadrian. Aldhelm, a poet, was the first English writer of importance. A few of his verses and poetic riddles remain today.

Benedict Biscop (A.D. 628–A.D. 690), a monk from Northumbria, worked with Theodore at Canterbury for a time. Then he returned to Northumbria to establish Benedictine monasteries. Venerable Bede, a student of Biscop, became the outstanding Anglo-Latin writer of the period. Bede entered the monastery when he was seven years old and remained there for the rest of his life. He wrote many types of works including accounts of the lives of saints, commentaries on the books of the Bible, scientific treatises, grammatical handbooks, and critical writings. His *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*, *The Ecclesiastical History of the English Nation* is important for the information it provides about the transition of England from a barbarian to a civilized culture. Bede was a great historian and an outstanding scholar, yet he recorded many events that most histories might not contain. He was careful to investigate his material for accuracy. Methods of investigation at his time, however, were not developed; and standards of belief were different from those of the modern world. Therefore, some of his writings are considered legend. Nevertheless, Bede is considered the father of English history.

Egbert, a student of Bede, became Archbishop of York. He set up a great cathedral school that produced outstanding writers. One of these writers was Alcuin (A.D. 735–A.D. 804). Alcuin was brought to France by Charlemagne to help encourage the revival of learning during the Carolingian Renaissance.

**Match these items.**

- 1.5 \_\_\_\_\_ Anglo-Saxon period
- 1.6 \_\_\_\_\_ missionaries sent by Pope Gregory
- 1.7 \_\_\_\_\_ Benedict Biscop
- 1.8 \_\_\_\_\_ Venerable Bede
- 1.9 \_\_\_\_\_ Alcuin
- 1.10 \_\_\_\_\_ witan

- a. father of English history
- b. council of retainers
- c. A.D. 597
- d. chosen by Charlemagne
- e. Celtic leader
- f. A.D. 449 to A.D. 1066
- g. teacher of Bede

The West Saxons, as the inhabitants of Wessex were called, had been fighting off Danish Viking invasions from about A.D. 787 to about A.D. 1017. These Viking attacks resulted in the establishment of Danish settlements in England. England seemed literally to be losing ground.

In A.D. 871 Alfred the Great became king of Wessex. He was an outstanding leader who brought peace to his country, saving it from conquest by the Danes. After several battles, Alfred defeated the Danes. Guthram, the Danish leader, was baptized as a Christian. Finally, Alfred established the Danelaw, which gave a portion of Eastern England to the Danes, but which restricted the Danes to that portion and no other.

Many monasteries and churches had been looted by the Danes. Because of this looting, education declined. Alfred drew on the monasteries for teachers and brought teachers in from other countries when necessary. He became a patron of educators and of students. Alfred also influenced education by translating books from Latin into Anglo-Saxon, the language of the people. Alfred began the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in A.D. 892. This chronicle was the first account of history recorded in English (Old English) and is the oldest extant national chronicle. Alfred protected England by establishing forts, by being active in foreign affairs, and by keeping peaceful relations with his neighbors. He improved government by formulating a good code of laws.

Alfred's followers finally regained the Danelaw in A.D. 954. They ruled a united England until A.D. 1016 when King Canute captured England and made it part of the Danish kingdom. The English under



| Statue of Alfred the Great

Edward the Confessor again ruled England from A.D. 1042 to A.D. 1066 when the Norman Conquest dealt the death blow to much of Anglo-Saxon culture, language, and art. Gradually the language and customs of the Normans merged with the English, and the Middle English period was born.

Answer *true* or *false*.

- 1.11 \_\_\_\_\_ Danish Vikings invaded England from about A.D. 787 to about A.D. 1017.
- 1.12 \_\_\_\_\_ The Danelaw gave the Danes all of England.
- 1.13 \_\_\_\_\_ King Canute was an Anglo-Saxon king.
- 1.14 \_\_\_\_\_ Alfred began the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in A.D. 892.
- 1.15 \_\_\_\_\_ The inhabitants of Wessex were called West Saxons.

Complete this activity.

- 1.16 Choose a topic from those listed. Search out more information about it. Either present your information as an oral report or turn in a paper that summarizes your findings.

the Celts

King Arthur

King Alfred the Great

the Vikings

Stonehenge

Danelaw

Venerable Bede



**CHECK**

\_\_\_\_\_ Teacher

\_\_\_\_\_ Date

## EARLY LITERATURE OF ENGLAND

Few examples of Anglo-Saxon literature have survived. The Danes destroyed many manuscripts in their raids and destroyed entire monastic libraries. Surviving manuscripts reveal examples of narrative, elegiac, religious, and epic poetry. This wealth of literary type is unique to England during this early period. No other European country of this time had produced such a variety of poetry.

**The Old English language.** Most people have not read Old English verse in the original language because a speaker of modern English would not recognize most of the words. The language has changed greatly. The language before Alfred's reign was spelled in a phonetic imitation of the speech. Most of the examples of Old English existing today were preserved by scribes. The scribes were usually monks who used many Latin forms and spellings when writing the Saxon language.

During the reign of Alfred, spelling became more regular. By the time of Aelfric the spelling of West

Saxon became standardized. The Anglo-Saxon language is of Germanic origin. Germanic is an Indo-European language. Other Germanic languages of the time are Old Saxon, Old Frisian, Old Norse, and Old High German.

Most of the Anglo-Saxon (Old English) words that remain are basic parts of the modern English vocabulary. Such words as father (*faeder*), mother (*moder*), friend (*freond*), sheep (*sceap*), and heaven (*heafon*) are of Anglo-Saxon origin. Prepositions and conjunctions, as well as most pronouns, articles, and auxiliary verbs, come from the Anglo-Saxon. Although the actual number of Anglo-Saxon words retained in modern English may be outweighed by those from other languages, these Anglo-Saxon words are used more frequently in normal sentences. Anglo-Saxon depended upon *inflections* to indicate gender and grammatical function. The chart on the next page shows the inflectional structure of pronouns.



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LAN1205 – July '17 Printing

ISBN 978-1-58095-355-9

