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The Story of Medieval England: From King Arthur to the Tudor Conquest

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Georgetown University

Transcript Book

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Professor Jennifer Paxton received her undergraduate training at Yale University, where she earned honors in History and received the Henry Ellsworth Prize for her senior essay. She graduated summa cum laude and Phi Beta Kappa in 1987 and was awarded a Mellon Fellowship in the Humanities to pursue her doctorate at Harvard University, where she worked under the supervision of Professor Thomas N. Bisson. She did her dissertation research at the University of Cambridge under the support of a Frank Knox Memorial Traveling Fellowship. She taught at Harvard University and at The Catholic University of America before completing her Ph.D. in 1999. For over a decade, she has been a Professorial Lecturer in History at Georgetown University. She is currently a Visiting Assistant Professor at the Catholic University of America as well.

At Georgetown, Professor Paxton has taught both halves of the medieval European survey, and she designed a course on medieval Irish history that regularly draws high enrollments. She also teaches the history of Western monasticism from the 3rd to the 13th centuries, and she lectures regularly in both the freshman research seminar program and the core humanities course for the doctorate in Liberal Studies. At Catholic University, she teaches both graduate and undergraduate courses in medieval English and Irish history.

Professor Paxton's research focuses on England in the period between the reign of King Alfred and the late 12th century, particularly the intersection between the authority of church and state and the representation of the past in historical texts, especially those produced by religious communities. She is currently completing a book entitled *Chronicle and Community in Twelfth-Century England* (under contract to Oxford University Press), a study of how monastic historians shaped their narratives to project present polemical concerns onto the past. She has published articles in various edited volumes

and journals, including *The Haskins Society Journal* (for one of which she was co-winner of the Dennis Bethell Memorial Prize for best article) and *Anglo-Norman Studies*.

In addition to her teaching responsibilities, Professor Paxton is past conference director for the Charles Homer Haskins Society, a scholarly society dedicated to the study of the Anglo-Norman realms in the central Middle Ages. She lectures regularly on medieval history at the Foreign Service Institute in Arlington, Virginia, and has been invited to speak on British history at the Smithsonian Institution and the Shakespeare Theatre in Washington DC. ■

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The Story of Medieval England: From King Arthur to the Tudor Conquest

Scope:

During the 1,000 years between the end of the Roman occupation of Britain and the Wars of the Roses, England emerged as the dominant political entity on the island of Britain, aided largely by geography, which favored the broad, fertile plains of the south and east over the more rugged terrain of the so-called Celtic fringe in the north and west. The development of the English government produced a country that was more orderly and more responsive to public opinion than any other state in Europe. The achievements of England's monarchy and of its critics, who continually spurred it toward acknowledging the will of the people, laid the foundation for the powerful state that would found the American colonies in the 17th century and dominate the globe in the 18th and 19th. But the achievement did not belong to rulers and barons alone. As we follow the birth and growth of the English state, we will meet not just the kings and queens of the central political narrative but also the ordinary men and women who lived through this millennium of change.

As unlikely as it may seem, a unified English kingdom was the product of the chaos of repeated barbarian invasions. The first invaders were Germanic tribes from the European mainland in the 5th century. These were followed by Vikings from Scandinavia in the 9th century, and finally in 1066 by the most successful conquerors of all, the Normans, under their duke, William. After the Norman Conquest, two main questions in English political life remained constant for the next several centuries, and they often overlapped: Who would be the king (or queen), and how would he (or she) get along with the great lords of the realm? Strong rulers such as William the Conqueror (1066–1087) and his son, Henry I (1100—1135), were able to rule without challenge, but weaker kings, particularly those with shaky claims to the throne, often had to face challenges by rival claimants or by groups of barons who were critical of the way the realm was being governed. King Stephen (1135–1154) was nearly unseated by his cousin, Matilda, and the misrule

by King John (1199–1216) drove a coalition of his barons to invite a French prince to take the throne in his stead.

The fact is, English kings often provoked their barons to rebellion. Kings were notoriously short of money, and the best source of money was the barons. When demands for taxation became excessive or were perceived as arbitrary, the barons fought back. Their aims were to restrict the king's abilities to extract money from them, as well as his ability to prosecute them if they refused to comply. Beginning with the Magna Carta, signed by King John in 1215, two principles were enshrined in English law: The king could not raise taxes without the consent of the leading men of the realm, and those accused of crimes had the right to trial by their peers. These provisions led directly to the creation of Parliament. At first, under Henry III, Parliament was a very informal body; when Henry's excesses provoked his barons to rebellion in 1258, their leader, Simon de Montfort, summoned the first formal Parliament, comprising not only the barons but elected representatives from every region of England. From this time forward, Parliament was an increasingly important fixture in the political life of England.

The series of violent clashes between kings and their barons did not cease with the creation of Parliament, however. In the 14th century, two English kings, Edward II (1307–1327) and Richard II (1377–1399), were deposed and met horrible deaths at the hands of their rivals. But the most spectacular conflict over who would rule England unfolded over a 30-year period in the 15th century (1455–1485), when two rival branches of the royal house, divided by personal interest (and to a certain extent by policy), fought for the throne in Wars of the Roses. When the conflict ended with the death of King Richard III's at Bosworth Field, the Middle Ages ended, and the modern age of English politics began, in which the monarch was truly beholden to the people.

This shift in English politics was the fruit of social and economic developments throughout the Middle Ages. Life in England in the period of the early Anglo-Saxon settlements was indeed nasty, brutish, and short, and for many people, it remained so during all of the Middle Ages. But for others, the slow but steady growth of the English economy after about A.D. 1000 provided increased prosperity. Agricultural yields increased and trade

expanded. New markets were created and new towns founded. An active market in land allowed some peasants to become richer than their neighbors, and ultimately, over several generations, if they were very fortunate, to climb into ranks of the gentry or even the nobility. The same was true of successful merchants. Of course, this growth did not occur without setbacks, the greatest of which was the terrible mortality of the Black Death in 1348, during which a third of the English population may have perished. Paradoxically, however, the lot of those who remained slowly improved, as the decrease in population drove wages higher and rents lower, leading to a golden age for English farmers in the 15th century.

Increased prosperity also led to increased literacy and to a broadening of access to cultural production of all kinds. We will therefore examine how the arts evolved during this period in tandem with—and as a result of—political, social, and economic forces. We will look at the evolution of some of the enduring legends of English history and trace how they changed in response to shifting circumstances. We will focus especially on the evolution of the legend of King Arthur, from its shadowy beginnings in the period of Germanic invasion, to its flowering under the aristocratic Anglo-French court poets of 12th century, and finally to the popular 15th-century English prose of Sir Thomas Malory. We will not neglect the visual arts, of course, from the glorious illuminated manuscripts of the 8th-century Northumbrian renaissance to splendors of the late English Gothic cathedrals. In every case, though, we will discuss these works of art as products of particular historical circumstances.

Illuminated manuscripts and cathedrals were extraordinarily costly expressions of religious sentiment and could only be created with the patronage of the wealthy. But the course will also address the religious experience of ordinary men and women. England's religious majority went from paganism to Christianity under the Romans, returned to paganism under the earliest Anglo-Saxon invaders, and through the process of re-conversion, this time from two directions: Rome and Ireland. Ordinary believers experienced the medieval church not as a distant abstraction but as a part of their everyday lives; its calendar regulated their lives, its courts settled their disputes, and its wealthiest members owned their lands and

even acted as entrepreneurs in the new industries that developed in the later Middle Ages.

The story of England in the Middle Ages is fascinating and varied, full of colorful characters. But it is also inherently important to a Western—even global—audience, because we are all heirs of medieval England in one way or another, whatever our own ethnic heritage may be. The distinctive development of the English state as a representative democracy, the distinctive shape of the English language, and the legendary English heroes like King Arthur and Robin Hood who have captured people's imaginations all over the world have their origins in this 1,000-year period in one corner of a small island in northern Europe. The story of medieval England is a wonderful story that continues to shape the world we live in. ■

From Britannia to Britain

Lecture 1

Does medieval England matter for any other reason besides the fact that it's full of exciting battles and colorful personalities? Well, I would argue strongly that it does, especially if you live in an English-speaking society. … Many countries, not just the United States, owe a profound debt to medieval England.

In the early 5th century, a relatively unimportant province in the far northwest of the Roman Empire called Britannia was attacked by barbarians. The Roman authorities, who had their hands full elsewhere, essentially told the people of Britannia that they were on their own, and the province fell to the Angles and Saxons. The newcomers founded a network of kingdoms concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the island; the native Britons were pushed to the north and west. In turn, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were invaded by Vikings in the 9th century, with only Wessex escaping complete conquest. Wessex became the springboard for the Anglo-Saxon revival that ousted the Vikings and created the unified kingdom that would come to be known as England. This English kingdom was then conquered twice during the 11th century, first by the Danes and then, famously, by the Normans in 1066. Throughout the next four centuries, the English struggled with the French, politically and culturally, while pressing north and west into Wales, Ireland, and the borders of Scotland. By the year 1485 and the ascension of the Tudor dynasty, the inhabitants of that once-insignificant province were poised to create an empire that would span the entire world.

Britain—or Britannia, as the Romans called it—refers to the island comprising England, Scotland, and Wales.

The story of medieval England is full of exciting events and colorful personalities, but it is also our story—that is, the story of the English-speaking world. We owe a profound debt to the medieval English for the foundations of our legal systems and forms of government. England was one of the first nations in the Western world to establish that the monarch's rule was not arbitrary and absolute. England has one of the world's oldest representative legislatures in the world, and its common law includes some of the world's first declarations of human rights.

Continuity in the face of great change is one of the distinctive features of English culture.

In a very basic way, all of us who speak English bear witness to England's medieval history in every word we say and write. English is a mongrel language whose very grammar and vocabulary are the legacies of the island's many invaders. Very little of English is actually British—that is, derived from the Celtic language spoken by the inhabitants of Britain before the Romans arrived around the 1st century A.D; its history really begins with the Germanic language the Angles and Saxons brought to Britain from Europe, which replaced the British tongue wholesale through assimilating or exiling its speakers. The Viking invaders, primarily the Danes, altered some of the language's most basic elements; English pronouns that begin with a *th-* such as "this" and "they" and "their," for example, are all derived from Old Norse.

The greatest change to English, of course, resulted from the Norman Conquest of 1066. English, that hybrid of two Germanic language families, remained the language of the peasantry, while the conquerors' French became the language of the elite. French vocabulary permeated English, so that to this day, English speakers can often choose between Germanic and French synonyms—such as Germanic "clothes" and French "garments"—with the latter implying a touch of social elevation. This massive borrowing of French prestige words into English is one of the reasons English is such an expressive language. We've got a lot of shades of meaning to choose from.

Besides the language itself, the stories derived from medieval England still form a part of the popular culture to this day. The legends of King Arthur and Robin Hood were born in medieval England, and each generation since has reinvented these stories for itself. Their creation and transformations during this period were the result of changing political and social conditions. This continuity in the face of great change is one of the distinctive features of English culture, and it raises another interesting topic we will discuss in this course: How did the mass of English men and women persevere through war, famine, and plague to build a society that would ultimately spread its influence around the globe? We will answer this question by paying particular attention to what daily life was like for all the people in England.

English history in the Middle Ages is the story of the successful creation of a sense of nationhood among a diverse group of peoples. That process did not unfold without tremendous conflict. Early on, different individuals struggled to establish themselves as ruler of England, and small kingdoms competed for English hegemony. But even after the creation of a more or less unified

"This Blessed Plot … This England"

"England" is not synonymous with "Britain." Britain is the island comprising England, Scotland, and Wales, and the relationship among these entities is a very complicated one. The English felt from very early in their history that they had a natural right to lordship over the whole island and set about establishing it rather vigorously. England had subdued Wales by the late 13th century; Scotland eluded its grasp (at the cost of many lives, both English and Scottish) until 1603, thanks in part to the "auld alliance" between Scotland and France. In the end, it was the Scottish kings (albeit ones descended from England's Henry VII) who came to rule France when James VI of Scotland became James I of England. After the Act of Union in 1707, the English began a conscious attempt to create a "British" identity that was supposed to forge an overarching sense of belonging to all of the island's citizens, with varying levels of success. But for our period, there is no such *political* entity as Britain.

English kingdom in the 10th century, there was often violent conflict at the top. Kings rarely succeeded to the throne without having to fight for it. And kings often had very complicated relationships with their noble followers, who on the one hand were the backbone of royal rule and on the other could often be notoriously unreliable, even rebellious. We will look at how the nature of noble rebellion changed over time, with self-interest giving way to political, even philosophical (if not entirely selfless) goals. Of course, not all rebellions were led by nobility; events like the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 will help us examine how much power the ordinary person held in medieval English society. We will see how these ordinary citizens responded to the political, religious, economic and social developments of the period, but we'll also see them shaping these trends in their turn. By 1485, the powerful could not ignore the less powerful without serious risk of political turmoil.

The Venerable Bede, in his 8th-century work *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, described the island of Britain as "rich in grain and timber; it has good pasturage for cattle and draught animals, and vines are cultivated in various localities. There are many land and sea birds of various species, and it is well known for its plentiful springs and rivers abounding in fish." These geographical facts would be very important for the development of England: The mild climate allowed reliable harvests. Its navigable rivers aided travel and trade. Its forests—now long gone—offered not only building materials and fuel but game, medicinal herbs, and the like. What Bede does not mention is that most of these advantages are limited to the southeastern portion of Britain, the area that would become England. The rockier, harsher north and east were mostly suited to grazing. This division of the island into a wealthy lowland and a poorer "Celtic fringe" on its borders would have important long-term consequences for English history, as we will see. ■

From Britannia to Britain

Lecture 1—Transcript

Welcome to this course on medieval England. In this course, we're going to cover 1,000 years of history, roughly from the 5th century to 1485. It was quite a remarkable millennium. During these 1,000 years, the island of Britain saw enormous changes, and we're going to learn about those changes in this course.

Let me give you a very quick preview of what happened. In the early 5th century, a relatively unimportant province of the Roman Empire in the far northwest of Europe named Britannia (or Britain) was attacked by barbarians. Unfortunately, the Roman authorities had their hands full, so they essentially told the people of Britannia that they were on their own. And Britannia did indeed fall to these barbarian enemies, the Angles and the Saxons.

These newcomers founded a network of kingdoms concentrated in the southern and eastern parts of the island, in what is now England. The remnants of the native population of Britain were pushed into the north and west of the island, into what is now Wales and Scotland. But in their turn, the Anglo-Saxons were invaded in the 9th century. Vikings from Scandinavia destroyed all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms except for Wessex in the southwest. Wessex was the springboard for an Anglo-Saxon revival. The Wessex dynasty reconquered the territory ruled by the Vikings, and this resulted in a unified kingdom for the people who became known as the English. But then, this English kingdom was, in its turn, conquered twice during the 11th century, first by the Danes and then, famously, by the Normans in 1066.

For the next four centuries after the Norman Conquest, England faced in two directions. It looked to the continent of Europe, especially France. France for the English elite was the source of high culture, and indeed, this contact with France had profound effects on English culture. But England also looked to the poorer parts of the island of Britain in the north and the west, and the English came to feel these areas were naturally supposed to be subject to English domination.

By the end of our period, England is no longer closely connected to France, but it has succeeded in dominating Wales and then Ireland. Under the Tudors, who take power in 1485, at the end of the dynastic struggle we know as the War of the Roses, the English are poised to create one of the most successful nation-states in the history of the world. The drive to dominate the island of Britain that begins during the Middle Ages—it ends up being a kind of dress rehearsal for the British Empire, the empire on which the sun never set.

We're going to spend the next 36 lectures telling the story of all of these transformations, and I want to start by saying a little bit about why I think it's a good idea to learn about medieval England. The first reason is quite simply that this is a great story. It's filled with dramatic events: the Battle of Hastings in 1066, [when] William, duke of Normandy, becomes William the Conqueror; the murder of Thomas Becket in Canterbury Cathedral in 1170, [which] creates the most famous martyr of the Middle Ages and provides the justification for one of the greatest works of English literature, *The Canterbury Tales*; the showdown between Yorkists and Lancastrians at Bosworth Field in 1485, [in which] the tyrant King Richard III supposedly calls in vain for a horse and he loses both his kingdom and his life. We'll tell all these stories in this course. But why these stories and not others? Does medieval England matter for any other reason besides the fact that it's full of exciting battles and colorful personalities?

I would argue strongly that it does, especially if you live in an English-speaking society. You don't even have to be a citizen of that society, and you certainly don't have to be of English descent in any sort of narrow genealogical sense—you don't have to be English—to benefit from knowing about medieval England. Many countries, not just the United States, owe a profound debt to medieval England—Canada, Australia, New Zealand, for example. And in a different sense, so do the cultures of countries that were profoundly affected by English colonization (for example, India and Pakistan, many countries in Africa and the Caribbean). I want to give you just a few examples of this debt to medieval England. What do we owe to medieval England?

People often say American society is very litigious. We like to sue each other. And we also take a lot of pride in our legal rights; we're not shy about

insisting on them, whether it's the right to bear arms or the right to free speech. This focus on the law as something positive, something that gives power to the individual—this is a direct legacy of medieval England.

Let's think of an example. In our society, if we have a disagreement with a neighbor, we can settle it in court—we can sue them, take them to court. We don't have to do it ourselves; we don't have to fight the person to settle the dispute. And that access to a means of dispute resolution in a public court was the product of many centuries of development during the Middle Ages.

What if you're on the other end of the problem? What if you are accused of a crime? The right to a criminal trial by one's peers was established during the struggle between King John and his barons that resulted in Magna Carta, the "Great Charter," in 1215. So our modern legal system has very deep medieval English roots. We simply can't understand why we have the rights that we do if we don't understand the context that they came from.

In addition, all of the political systems of the English-speaking countries around the world derive some of their most basic principles from developments during the Middle Ages in England. At the heart of all of these political systems is the principle of representative government: The people in society should have a voice in the decisions that their governments make; specifically, that they should be able to choose people from their own region to represent them in a national assembly.

This principle was established during many years of bickering between English rulers and their barons. At the heart of these disputes was the need of the English kings to raise money; mostly they wanted money to pay for foreign wars. The kings were not able to extort the money from their barons by force (they certainly tried, but they couldn't do it), so they had to ask for it. In the process of asking for money, they opened up scope for negotiation, and the result was parliament. This is a body in which people can debate royal policy; they can approve royal taxes—or not. Now, during the period we're studying in this course, the number of people who need to consent to taxation is very tiny—only very wealthy men are deemed important enough for their opinions to count. We're not talking about mass democracy here, certainly. But the principle is established that the rule of kings in England

is not arbitrary. There are limits, and as long as the parliament controls the purse strings, kings have to tailor their policies to the opinions of their most important subjects, at least somewhat. And this need to consult their subjects takes on greater momentum over time. Whenever kings tried to disregard these opinions, they get in trouble, and sometimes, they lose their thrones (and their lives!) as a result. Nowadays, our representatives, our elected representatives, can refuse to support the policies of the executive if they so choose. This is a direct result of these hard-fought battles between king and parliament during the Middle Ages in England.

Our legal and political systems are really legacies of medieval England. Our ability to vote for our political representatives, our ability to rely on rights that are enshrined in our laws—these are due directly to developments in the period that we're going to study over the next 36 lectures.

But on a very deep level, even when we're not doing anything directly related to the government, we're all heirs of medieval England. In a very basic way, all of us who speak English, whether it be as a native tongue or as a second language—we're all experiencing the distinctive history of England whenever we open our mouths, because English is a mongrel language. The very grammar and vocabulary of English show evidence of the many invasions of English history.

One of the first things to say about English is what it doesn't have in it. It doesn't have very much [that is] remnant of the British language that was spoken in England before the Angles and Saxons settled there. When they settled, in the 5th century, they spoke their Germanic language that they brought with them, and they essentially replaced the language of the indigenous inhabitants, either because the British assimilated to the new dominant culture or because all the British were simply killed or driven away. We're going to talk about that in another lecture. It's probably a mixture of both. But the history of the English language really begins at the beginning of our course, in the 5th century, with the Germanic language brought from Europe by the Angles and the Saxons.

The next big transformation in the English language occurs at the time of the Viking invasions in the 9th century. At that time, large numbers of

Scandinavians, mostly Danes, some Norse, settle in eastern and northern Britain. Their presence is significant enough to influence the structure of English. Think for a second about our English pronouns. We have a lot of pronouns that begin with a th-, [such as] “this,” “they,” “their”—all of those th- pronouns derive from Old Norse. Whenever we talk about other people in English—when we talk about “them”—we’re speaking a little bit of Old Norse that the Vikings brought to Britain.

Finally, of course, the greatest change in the history of the English language came about as the result of the Norman Conquest of 1066. Until that period, English is a typical Germanic language with influences from another Germanic language, Old Norse. After the Norman Conquest, English is profoundly influenced by French, the language of the conquerors. For several hundred years after the conquest, the language of elite society is French. This is the case even though, within a very short time after the Conquest, people have to learn French as a second language; it’s an acquired language, but it has such prestige that they want to keep speaking it.

As a result, French vocabulary permeates English; it gives English almost a second vocabulary. To this day, we can often choose between a “native” Germanic word for an object and its French equivalent. For example, we can speak about “clothes”; “clothes” is a nice, old Germanic word, pretty general. But then you can use the French word “garments,” and there’s a slight hint there of social elevation. “Garments” is a fancier word. You can tell that the French vocabulary comes from the elite and the English vocabulary comes from everyone else. But the fact that English has this very extensive vocabulary comes from this massive borrowing of prestige words into English as a result of the Conquest. It’s one reason English is such an expressive language. We’ve got a lot of shades of meaning to choose from.

It’s fascinating to think of how our very language bears the marks of medieval English history. But this is not the only cultural debt that we owe to medieval England. Besides the language itself, there are all the stories that derive from this period [that] still form a part of popular culture to this day. For example, the legends of King Arthur and of Robin Hood were developed during the Middle Ages in England, and they took distinctive forms that changed over

time. This is a process that is still going on; each new generation reinvents Arthur and Robin Hood for itself.

In this course, we're going to follow these myths as they are born and as they are transformed by changing political and social conditions. The King Arthur of the 6th century is not the same as the King Arthur of the 12th century, who is not the same as the King Arthur of the 15th century, but he is still recognizably King Arthur. This continuity, even in the face of very great change, is one of the distinctive features of English culture. This course is going to let us understand the roots of some of these cultural icons that still appear in our books, our films, our other media to this very day.

This period is full of exciting events, [and] it will help you understand your own society. Those are two very good reasons to study medieval England. But there is a third. I hope you'll find this course interesting because it talks, not just about famous people, like William the Conqueror and Joan of Arc (we're going to talk about them), but also about ordinary people and how they reacted to the tremendous changes of the period that we're describing. There are going to be plenty of kings and queens and nobles in this course, but we're not going to neglect the rest of society. We'll watch the mass of English men and women persevere through disasters, like famine and plague, [to] build a society that is ultimately going to spread its influence around the globe. This is their story, and at specific points during the course, we'll be paying particular attention to what daily life was like for them. Now I just want to spend a few minutes talking about some of the themes that we're going to concentrate on as we tell this story.

First, we're going to follow the process of creating a unified English state. The island of Britain had always been ethnically diverse. How do you make one country out of this? The arrival of migrants from the continent, starting in the 5th century, adds a new layer of complexity to this ethnic mix. The new settlers are not by any means ethnically unified themselves. Only very slowly does a notion of "Englishness" develop that embraces all these groups. In this course, were going to look at how English nationalism grows out of these very unpromising beginnings and how England ends up absorbing successive waves of invaders: You have Vikings coming in, you have French-speaking Normans coming in, and somehow, they all

end up as English. We'll see how "Englishness" develops. We'll also see Englishness end up being contrasted with the Celtic "other," those people on the fringes of the areas that the Angles and Saxons settled. The Welsh, and the Scots, and later, the Irish become the "other" against which the English define themselves.

English history in the Middle Ages is a story of the successful creation of a sense of nationhood, but that process is not a peaceful one; there's tremendous conflict. Different individuals are struggling to establish rulership over England, and this competition for power at the top is our second main theme. For many centuries, these struggles took place against a background of division; you have many small kingdoms competing for hegemony. But even after you get the creation of a more-or-less unified English kingdom in the 10th century, you still have violent conflict at the top. Kings in these early centuries only very rarely succeed to the throne without having to fight for it. It took centuries even to settle on the principle of peaceful dynastic succession: A son should follow his father as king. It took a long time to do that, and even afterwards, kings have to fear being deposed and replaced by their rivals.

And kings often had very complicated relationships with their noble followers. On the one hand, these supporters are the backbone of royal rule. Kings simply can't maintain their authority without them. On the other hand, these nobles could often be notoriously unreliable. Rebellion was common. A third theme of the course, very much related to the second about power at the top, will be the tense relationship between kings and the nobility. We'll look at how the nature of noble rebellion changes over time. In the early period of our course, nobles are mostly rebelling against kings purely for selfish reasons; they want a better deal. In the later period, starting from the time of Magna Carta in 1215, nobles often (not always, but often) have overtly political goals in mind when they rebel. We're starting to move toward a political nation. This is by no means to say that there's no self-interest involved—there's always self-interest involved when nobles revolt—but it's not the only element. We start to see programmatic elements in these revolts. We're going to be looking at a lot of rebellions in this course and watch how they change character.

One of the most famous medieval English rebellions was led not by the nobility but by people at the bottom of the social hierarchy, and I'm talking here about the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. We'll see when we get to that point in the course that it's a bad name for the revolt. It's not really led by peasants—they're tradesmen, they're lower-order clerics, that sort of people—but the fact is that they're relatively humble, but they manage to pull off a massive revolt, really the scariest moment for royal power in the whole of the Middle Ages. And that, I think, is proof of how much progress ordinary people have made during this period.

So the fourth theme in the course will be the changes in everyday life for people in England. We're going to see them absorb these political, religious, economic, and social developments, but we're also going see them contribute to shaping these trends. The mass of ordinary men and women in England are a much bigger factor in English society at the end of our period than they are at the beginning. As I said, we're not talking about democracy—nothing close to it—but by 1485, the powerful cannot ignore the less powerful without serious risk of political turmoil. They have to care about the crowd. Those are the main themes that we're going to be following through the course.

Now I'd like to say a word about terminology, specifically, about geographical terminology. This course is going to deal mostly with the history of medieval England, and it's important to note that England is not synonymous with Britain, though the two are often used interchangeably. Britain is the island of which England forms a major part. Britain also includes Scotland and Wales, and as we'll see, the relationship between England and these other political entities is very complicated.

The English begin to feel from very early in their history that they have a natural right to overlordship over the whole island of Britain, they set about establishing that overlordship, [and] they're far more successful in our period in Wales than they are in Scotland. Wales is completely conquered by England in the late 13th century; we'll tell that story in a subsequent lecture. Scottish independence, however, is maintained, but only at the cost of fighting repeated wars with England. The English really only fail to conquer Scotland because Scotland has a very powerful ally; they ally with France.

But at various points in the history of the relationship between England and Scotland, it could have gone either way.

Here, I want to jump ahead of our period for just a few moments to explain a little bit more why I think this terminological confusion is important to talk about. As I said, during our period, Scotland maintains its independence, but in 1603, there's a dynastic accident that makes the Scottish king, king of England, as well. James VI of Scotland inherits the throne of England because Elizabeth I dies without heirs and King James of Scotland is her closest living relative. So this longstanding effort that England has engaged in, throughout the period we're studying, to dominate Scotland finally actually works out by accident because the Scottish monarchy, once they become kings of England as well, transfer themselves wholesale down to London, and they become English practically overnight. The Stuart monarchy loses its Scottish character entirely. This process is taken further in 1707 with the Act of Union. In the Act of Union, England and Scotland merged their parliaments; up until that that time, there were separate parliaments in England and Scotland, but now they have one parliament. They shared one monarch before, and now they have one parliament, as well.

After the Act of Union, the English begin a conscious attempt to create a "British" identity, and this is supposed to forge an overarching sense of belonging to some sort of greater political unit that includes the English, and the Scottish, and the Welsh. They decide actually to reach back to the terminology of the Roman period; they use the terms "Britain" and "British," because that includes the whole island of Britain. And that's why in the government of the United Kingdom today, you almost never hear the term "English." "English" is actually seen as sort of politically incorrect, because if you say "English," you mean not the Scots, not the Welsh, [and] you're excluding the residents of Northern Ireland. There's a fear of causing offense if you are looking as if you're making "English" stand for "British." I have a funny example of how this fear can be taken to absurd extremes. I saw an ad few years back. It advertised something called "British muffins." "British muffins," as if the term "English muffins" might be regarded as some sort of chauvinistic insult to the Welsh.

We're not going to worry about that sort of thing in this course; nevertheless, we're going to use these terms "England" and "Britain" carefully. By "Britain," we will usually mean the island of Britain in the geographical sense. There is no political entity "Britain" during our period. By "England," we will mean the land under the control of the people who come to be known in the course of the Middle Ages as the "English."

But if I'm asking you to consider these terms as distinct concepts, I'd better define them a little bit more fully. Let's look first of all at what the island of Britain comprises, and I think the very best place to start is with a description of Britain; this would have been very familiar to most educated English readers during the Middle Ages. This is the description that begins the famous work of the 8th-century English monk the Venerable Bede; he wrote a work called *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. This is what Bede says about the island of Britain: "Britain … is an island in the ocean, lying towards the north west at a considerable distance from the coasts of Germany, Gaul, and Spain, which together form the greater part of Europe. It extends 800 miles northwards, and is 200 in breadth." Now, that's actually pretty accurate, especially for someone using the mapmaking techniques available in the Middle Ages!

Bede goes on to describe the natural resources of the island: "Britain is rich in grain and timber; it has good pasturage for cattle and draught animals, and vines are cultivated in various localities. There are many land and sea birds of various species, and it is well known for its plentiful springs and rivers abounding in fish." What is Bede driving at here? What are we supposed to take away from this description of the island of Britain?

First of all, he's trying to get across the point that Britain is a fertile island. It's well watered by rivers; that's extremely important, both for agriculture and for trade. It's also heavily forested at the time that Bede is writing. Of course, later on, most of these forests in Britain are going to be cut down for timber and fuel. These geographical facts are very important for English history.

First, the fertile soil and the mild climate, especially in the south and the east, mean that the inhabitants of Britain are going to suffer less from bad

harvests than people on the continent are. This is not to say that there's never famine in Britain; there certainly is. But famines in Britain tend to be less severe, and they don't last as long as they do in the rest of Europe. Britain has a big advantage just from its geography.

I just want to give you a quick side note about something that Bede mentions. He mentions vines growing in Britain. Britain is on the margin of the area where grapes can be cultivated. At times when the climate is particularly warm, such as the period when Bede was writing, wine has been produced in Britain. Then during most of the rest of the Middle Ages, you couldn't produce wine in Britain. It's an interesting sign of the times that grapes are growing in Britain again today.

Another good thing about Britain's river systems is that they make internal trade relatively easy, especially, again, in the south and the east. Britain has lots of navigable rivers; the most famous one, of course, is the Thames that runs through London. And these rivers make it fairly easy to travel within Britain and to transport goods; this is, after all, a period when water travel is a lot easier and a lot cheaper than travel by land.

Britain's forests are also a very great natural resource. The forests were the source of timber for building [and] wood for fuel, but there are a lot of other things that you can get from a forest, as well: lots of kinds of food, [such as] wild plants [and] people would hunt game for food; herbs for medicine; wicker for basket making—all sorts of things come out of the forest. We're going to see that control of the forests actually becomes a real bone of contention between English kings and their subjects, simply because we're talking about a very lucrative resource. So if we sum all this up, what do we get from Bede? Britain is very well-endowed with natural resources; it has a good climate; it has nice rivers; it has forests. Everything you need.

But there are some important facts about British geography Bede doesn't mention, and they can help explain something very important about the island of Britain. Why does it end up having three countries in it, not one? Why do you have England, Wales, and Scotland? Britain is broadly divided into two zones: a zone in the southeast and a zone in the northwest. In the southeast, you have a more fertile zone; you have low-lying lands. In the

northwest, you have a rockier zone; it's more mountainous. The south and the east have terrain that is much more suited to arable farming—growing crops in fields. In the north and the west, it's much more suited to grazing animals, especially sheep.

This division into agricultural zones had important consequences that would influence settlement patterns and political developments for the whole of the period covered by this course and beyond. When the Angles and Saxons settle in the island of Britain in the 5th century, they're strong enough to claim the best agricultural land in the south and east. This is the land that can support higher densities of population, and you set up, thus, a demographic imbalance between the lands settled by the "English" and the lands that the descendants of the British were pushed back to, in Wales and the southwest and the northwest.

It's also a lot easier to create a unified political entity in the south and the east. It's not easy—we're going to see that—but it's easier. Communications are easier in the broad, well-watered plains of the southeast. In the rocky north and west, it's simply harder to get around, harder to do what you need to do to keep communications going. It's simply easier to hold power over an area when you can get around easily and make your presence felt. This basic geographical fact about Britain goes a long way to explaining why it's the English who end up dominating the island. But it also explains why the English never completely assimilate the Welsh and Scots either.

Incidentally, this imbalance of power is still seen as something of a problem in modern British politics today. British politicians worry out loud a lot about the fact that you have opportunity and wealth disproportionately concentrated in the south and the east of the country. If anything, this disparity is much greater in the Middle Ages than it is today.

So this is the geographical background. We have a lowland zone in the south and east that's more fertile; it's richer. We have a highland zone in the north and the west that tends to be poorer, more focused on pastoral farming, raising livestock; it can support a much smaller population. Broadly speaking, and here I'm generalizing, this is the distinction people are referring to when they talk about the contrast between England and the "Celtic fringe."

But there are even parts of Britain settled by the English that are considered remote. The far north and west of what becomes England shares some of the same geographical characteristics as the "Celtic" areas. There's always a sense that life in the border areas, the regions where English and Celtic settlement bump up against each other, is a little rougher, a little less advanced than in the areas closer to the political center of things in the southeast.

We'll see at many points in this course [that] political developments on the borders of England can threaten the stability of the center. For example, the Norman Conquest ends up being indirectly touched off by a revolt in the remote northern English province of Northumbria; I'll explain that in a subsequent lecture. English history has always turned partly on this culture clash between the core and the periphery of the kingdom.

Let's begin this remarkable story of the people who have inhabited the island of Britain. In the next lecture, we'll look at Roman Britain and we'll see what the Angles and Saxons are going to encounter when they arrive on the shores of Britain in the 5th century to start the long process of creating England.

Roman Britain and the Origins of King Arthur

Lecture 2

Gildas … records a very plaintive request for help that the authorities in Britain sent to a Roman commander in Gaul in the middle of the 5th century. The letter reads: "The barbarians push us back to the sea, the sea pushes us back to the barbarians; between these two kinds of death, we are either drowned or slaughtered." Gildas notes that Britain got no help in return.

In 55 B.C., Julius Caesar led a perfunctory Roman invasion of Britain as a part of his campaign to subdue Gaul. It took him a year and several reinforcements to do so, but he eventually gained the submission of several British tribes, and there his adventure ended. He was far more interested in advancing his position in Rome than in expanding its borders. It was the Emperor Claudius who, in A.D. 43, decided to bring Britain into the imperial fold.

Over the course of the next 20 years or so, the Romans began collecting tribute from British tribes and established legions at several important strongholds, including Londinium (now London) and Eboracum (now York). They built roads, or paved existing roads, to connect their many forts and settlements. Many of the British accepted their new rulers, but not all. The rebellion of the Iceni in A.D. 60, triggered by the Romans' brutal abuse of the Iceni queen, Boudicca, and her daughters, led to a full-scale rebellion of the southern British tribes, which nearly ended the Romans' hold on the island for good. Boudicca was captured and killed, and the Romans reestablished control, but it had been a close contest, and the Romans began to take the threat of British rebellion more seriously.

One of the consequences of this rebellion was the construction of Hadrian's Wall in the early 2nd century A.D. This fortification, which stretched across the narrowest part of Britain from modern-day Wallsend to Bowness, separated Romanized, "civilized" Britain from the barbarian tribes to the north, particularly the Picts and Scots. The wall became the northwestern *limes*, or boundary, of the Roman Empire for the next three centuries.

But even in the south, Roman Britain was divided into two broad zones. In the flat, fertile southeast, about 40 major urban centers had all the trappings of a Roman colony, such as forums, baths, and villas. Their inhabitants, Roman and Briton alike, wore Roman dress and spoke Latin. Christianity arrived in the 3rd century, and many Britons converted, although many more still worshiped their old gods and goddesses—sometimes overlain with a patina of Roman-ness. In fact, the town of Aquae Sulis—today known as Bath—drew pilgrims from all around the empire to its healing hot springs. But to the north and west, the hilly, rocky land was less suited to Roman settlement and Roman-style agriculture, and the tribes were less cooperative. Here, the settlements were mainly fortresses, the Roman inhabitants mostly soldiers. The majority of Roman Britain's inhabitants, however, were subsistence farmers, whose lives changed little during the years of Roman rule.

For a variety of reasons, the Roman military and administrative machine was weakening throughout the empire during the 3rd century; economic depression, succession crises, population decline, and foreign invasion all took their toll. Britain had its own problem with invaders. Scotti raiders (members of a tribe who would later settle in Scotland and give it its name) invaded from Ireland, while Germanic tribes invaded from the Low Countries and Germany. Most of these were smash-and-grab raids for treasure and slaves. But meanwhile on the continent, Rome itself was spiraling toward its fall, and in A.D. 406, Emperor Honorius withdrew the Roman legions from Britain.

Here the historical record becomes murky. We know that 5th-century Britain was laid open to large-scale raiding. Yet the archaeological remains don't show much evidence of warfare; rather, they suggest a mostly peaceful barbarian infiltration. We start to see permanent barbarian settlements in Britain, especially German settlements in the south and east. They settled in small bands of a few dozen people—men, women, and children—and seemingly intermarried with the native Britons. Over time, the Britons adopted the newcomers' language, which we now call Anglo-Saxon, or Old English.

But this assimilation, important as it was, was only part of the story. In the late 5th and early 6th centuries, there may have been some sort of concerted effort to push back against the new settlers. Gildas, a British monk of the 6th century, wrote of an unnamed warlord who fought 12 great battles against the barbarians. The last of these battles, at Mount Badon, halted the advance of the barbarians for 50 years (that is, right up until Gildas's time). This is the earliest evidence we have for the figure later known as King Arthur. Gildas's tales of Arthur are not a lot to go on; he makes it clear that this man was a military leader, not a king. He doesn't give him the name Arthur or any other name. And we don't even know where Mount Badon was, although historians and archaeologists have suggested many candidates over the years. But intriguingly, there is some evidence in the archeological record of a 50-year halt in the advance of Germanic settlement in Britain.

Gildas's work is not the only written evidence of Arthur's existence.

Gildas's work is not the only written evidence of Arthur's existence. A 7th-century poem written in Old Welsh describes a raid by Gwawrddur, the leader of the Gododdin (a tribe that lived around Edinburgh). Amidst the over-the-top praise of Gwawrddur's prowess, we find the eye-catching aside, "though he was no Arthur." In the 9th century, a Welsh writer named Nennius connected Gildas's warlord to a leader named Arthur that appeared in his own poems; Nennius may have had access to an oral tradition that justified this connection.

On the other hand, we cannot be sure that the Gododdin-poem Arthur is an allusion to Gildas's warrior, nor that Nennius did not simply make up the link between Arthur and the leader Gildas describes. And we can't be certain there weren't other reasons for the 50-year halt in German migration to Britain—not to mention there is no evidence of Gildas's 12 great battles. On balance, we simply cannot know whether or not Arthur existed. But the stories do capture a real phenomenon, the fading of the remnants of Roman Britain in the face of the German foe. ■

Important Term

matter of Britain: Literary corpus comprising stories of King Arthur and his knights.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Roman Britain and the Origins of King Arthur
Lecture 2—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, I introduced the course, and I talked about the many changes that England would experience in the course of the time that we're going to be covering in this course, over the 1,000 years between the 5th century and 1485. Today, we're going to look at one of those transformations: the end of Roman occupation in Britain and the arrival of the people who are going to be known as the English. Along the way, we're going to meet Arthur, though we're going to see that we can't be sure whether we should call him King Arthur or not. Let's begin by very briefly talking about how the Romans got to Britain and then how they left.

In all, the Romans held Britain for about four centuries. The first time the Romans set foot in Britain was in 55 B.C., under Julius Caesar. Caesar led an expedition to Britain in that year, but it wasn't very successful, so he came back the next year with a greater number of soldiers and he did manage to get some local British tribes to promise submission to Rome. And then, Caesar left, and really, there isn't much more to it than that. It's just Caesar's little British adventure, and mostly, it's just an offshoot of the campaign that he was waging in Gaul. This is his famous campaign; this is the one that leads him to write that all Gaul was divided into three parts. (This is a sentence that many students of Latin have had to suffer through.) Caesar really is only drawn to Britain because he thinks some of the tribes there might be giving aid and comfort to his enemies in Gaul, because some of the British tribes may in fact have had family connections to Gaul. So Caesar doesn't want them to be helping his enemies in Gaul. There's one other possible reason: He may have heard rather exaggerated stories about the potential of riches being found in Britain; maybe there's lots of gold and silver there. Of course, it swiftly turns out not to be true that there's gold and silver in great abundance in Britain, and that may be one reason why Caesar doesn't really bother to put more of an effort into conquering Britain. But the most important reason that he doesn't stick around in Britain is that really Gaul is all he can handle, and as soon as he subdues Gaul, he's back to Rome to start a civil war. So this little British escapade really is Caesar's own project; it's part of his private effort to secure riches and fame. It doesn't really go anywhere. It's not really "official" Roman policy at all.

So nothing much happens between Rome and Britain for about a century. In that century, of course, a lot changes for Rome. In between, the Roman Republic falls, largely due to Caesar's own actions, and Rome is now led by an emperor. The imperial administration grows much more elaborate. And the second time Rome encounters Britain, it's going to be much more of an official enterprise.

It all starts in 43 A.D. under the emperor Claudius. Claudius decides that he wants some sort of military triumph that he can boast about, and Britain is one of the last feasible places that the Romans can conquer. But unlike Julius Caesar, Claudius is not a general, so he has his soldiers plan the campaign and carry it out. They send a much larger number of men than Julius Caesar had had. Claudius basically just shows up at the end to take the credit.

This time, though, the Romans were planning to stay. They make arrangements to collect tribute from a lot of the British tribes, particularly in the south and the east. And over the course of the next 20 years or so, they establish legions at several important strongholds throughout Britain, including Londinium, which of course, becomes London, and the other very important center is Eboracum; Eboracum becomes York. There were many other fortified sites throughout the country, and of course, the Romans do what they always do—they connect them to each other with their famous Roman roads. A lot of times, these roads are based on existing trackways, things that the native British have already built, but the big contribution of the Romans is, of course, that they pave the roads, and often they make them straighter. This is helpful for the armies if they have to march a long distance. Some of these roads that the Romans built are still actually quite important in English life today. The Roman engineers are so good [that] later on, when engineers need to plan modern motorways, they often just use the same routes; they use the routes of the Roman roads. For example, a very famous Roman road became known later on as Watling Street; it was a great road that led northwest from Dover to London and then from London, continuing northwest, to Wroxeter. These two stretches of road are today the A2 and A5 Motorways. Many English workers today can thank the Romans for their daily commute.

So the Romans are busily turning Britain into a typical Roman province. But there was quite a serious bump in the road along the way because not everyone in Britain is pleased with the way things are going under Roman rule. Some tribes have entered into agreements with the Romans, but not all of these arrangements work smoothly. This is particularly the case for a tribe in the east of England, the Iceni. They broke out in a terrifying rebellion in 60 A.D. This rebellion came very close to sweeping the Romans out of Britain altogether.

What happened is this: The king of the Iceni, a guy named Prasutagus, dies without any sons, and the Roman authorities decide to incorporate the kingdom into the administration of the province. Apparently, some of the local Roman officials, however, overreached themselves; they're sent to carry out the annexation, but things get out of hand, and they end up flogging the king's widow, Queen Boudicca, and raping her two daughters. Boudicca is, naturally, not very happy about this; she rises in revolt, and she manages to carry a lot of the other British tribes into revolt with her. The British who revolt seem determined to erase all signs of Roman rule in Britain. Wherever they find Romans, they kill them. Wherever they come upon Roman settlements, they burn them. They even managed to burn the biggest settlement, Londinium. To this day, if you go down below the level of the street, down to the level of Roman occupation, you will find a layer of ash that is still left over from the huge fire that raged at the time of Boudicca's revolt. Eventually, though, the Romans do overpower Queen Boudicca; she's captured and killed, and the Romans reestablish control of the southern part of the island.

It had been a very close-run thing. The Roman authorities were clearly spooked, and one of the decisions that they made over the next couple of decades was that they were going to concentrate their efforts in Britain in the south and the east, where they've had the most success thus far. Under Emperor Hadrian, in the early 2nd century, the Romans build a wall clear across what is now northern England; this is to mark off the territory that they're prepared to defend. To the south of the wall is civilized territory. To the north, there are barbarians; there are tribes such as the Picts. "Picts" comes from the Latin word for "painted people"; they're people who paint themselves blue and they fight naked. These are people that the Romans

are just as happy not to mess with. And they find out why they shouldn't mess with the Picts when they try to build a wall a little further north. They build a wall called the Antonine Wall a few decades after Hadrian's Wall. That one proves to be too far north, and the Romans basically abandon it. Hadrian's Wall becomes the boundary of the Roman Empire. The word in Latin is *limes*; that's the "boundary." That's actually where we get our word "limit" from.

Already, Britain is divided, at the time of Roman rule, into a larger southern portion—this is what the Romans are willing to defend—and a smaller northern portion that they're not interested in defending. They're going to leave that alone.

But even in the south, the colonized area, the Roman province of Britain falls into two broad zones. These zones roughly follow the topographical divisions that I outlined in the last lecture. First, there's the southern and eastern part of the province. This is the area with the broad plains, with the fertile agricultural land. It's the easiest for the Romans to conquer. By the 2nd century, there are about 40 major urban centers established in this part of Britain, all connected up by those famous Roman roads. This area is certainly "Romanized" to the extent that the towns have the usual Roman buildings and the usual Roman trappings. You have a forum where people gather to do public business; you have bath houses, that sort of thing. There were also quite a few large Roman villas in the south. These were huge estates run for very wealthy people, probably employing many slaves.

So that part of Britain, the south and the east, looks fairly Roman, at least if you focus on the towns and the large villas—much less in the countryside, but in the towns and villas, it looks very Roman. But there's another zone, to the north and the west, that looks very different. Here, the landscape is hilly and rocky; it's much harder to set up the kinds of settlements the Romans are used to; and the local tribes are less cooperative. Here, you need a very heavy Roman military presence. This is where we see large numbers of legions settled. In Wales, in Cornwall, in the northwest, you have to have a lot more soldiers. Here there are fortresses. They're mostly pretty successful at preventing serious revolts, but there's certainly no question that they can hold the province if they don't have soldiers.

Life in the "civilized" part of the province is pretty good. Cities, such as London, York, [and] Lincoln, thrived. It's striking, in fact, how many of the cities that are going to be important in later English history had Roman roots. The Romans know where to build roads; they know where to build cities, too.

In the cities, the language of daily life, certainly the language of commerce, is Latin, and all the main cultural trends in the life of the Roman Empire eventually make their way to Britain—sometimes a little bit late, but they get there—artistic styles, styles of dress, even religion. From about the 3rd century, Christianity appears in Britain, and it gets a very secure foothold in the towns. Of course, it has plenty of competition. There are dozens of other cults being practiced in the British towns; this is the case in all Roman cities. But Roman Britain can boast a ritual center that is famous enough to draw pilgrims from other parts of the empire; this is the settlement at Aquae Sulis. This was a town in the west of Britain that had hot springs, excellent hot springs. The native British population had used the site for a long time to venerate their goddess, a goddess named Sulis. The Romans were a broad-minded sort of people; they liked to adopt the gods of the people that they conquered. So the Romans looked at the cult of this goddess Sulis, and they figured that, based on what they learned about Sulis, Sulis is pretty close to their goddess Minerva, the goddess of wisdom. So they create a composite goddess, Sulis Minerva. This, of course, entitles them to take advantage of the fantastic hot springs at the shrine of Sulis, and these springs later gave us our name for the city concerned: Bath. Some of the best Roman ruins in Britain can be found at Bath—very elaborate pools and temple complexes have been beautifully excavated, and they are well worth a visit.

While we're talking about Bath, I just want to pause for a moment to tell you about one of my favorite kinds of archaeological artifacts. There are a lot of these at Bath, and they give us a little bit of an insight into the mentality of some of the Romanized Britons who visit the site. One of the reasons people come to Bath is to ask the goddess for help, help of all kinds: I need help being cured of an illness. But one of the things that you wanted, often, when you asked the goddess for help was help getting back an object you've lost or an object that had been stolen. What people would do [is] they would write their wishes down on a tablet and then they would throw it into the

spring. This was a way of offering your wish to the goddess. Then she'd read it, clearly, and then do what you wanted. Some of these tablets are really rather vicious. They're known as "curse tablets." Suppose you found out that somebody stole your cloak—and there are actually curse tablets that talk about this—they stole your cloak, so you want the goddess to take revenge on that person. You actually would write on one of these lead tablets, "Curse that foul wretch Publius who stole my cloak." Then you would throw it in, and you would hope that the goddess would, in fact, curse Publius.

The people who left ritual offerings at Bath present a rather good cross-section of what the Romanized British population was like. There were some very rich objects that were deposited in the springs; doubtless, these were [left by] people who were living in the very fancy villas that I mentioned. But you also see some very humble objects; you see coins of very small value [that] were clearly left by the poorer inhabitants. The vast majority of the people who live in Roman Britain are simply poor farmers: They live on farms; they raise crops; most of the food that they grow, they probably consume themselves, but there's a little left over for the market, because they do trade in simple goods manufactured in Britain. These rural inhabitants probably speak little if any Latin; their language is British. This is a Celtic language; it's not very closely related to Latin at all. Far fewer of these people who dwell in the countryside would have adopted Christianity; most of them would have continued to follow their pagan gods throughout the period of Roman occupation. Christianity is mostly a city religion at this point.

So life in Britain carries on fairly well under Roman rule, but starting in the 3rd century, Britain begins to be attacked by barbarians. This is a crisis that affects not just Britain but really the whole of the Roman Empire in the 3rd century. It's a very bad century for Rome. There are various factors that cause this crisis. I'm not going to go into too much detail about this, but broadly speaking, there are four reasons why the Roman Empire has a bad 3rd century. There's an economic depression, and this is coupled with demographic decline. They really do go together, these two phenomena. People just aren't having babies, because they don't feel confident in the economy, and that brings the whole economy down, so it's a downward spiral. There's also a terrible series of conflicts over the imperial succession.

One thing the Romans never really figured out is how to choose the next emperor. They don't establish stable dynasties. If you know anything about the family relationships of the Roman emperors, I think that will make sense. And for most of the 3rd century, there are civil wars going on throughout the Roman Empire, sometimes in more than one part of the empire at once. Finally, the enemies of Rome pick a very good time to attack. Rome faces invasions on two major fronts, in Eastern Europe and in the Middle East. So with all of this going on, it's not a big surprise that Britain, on the very edge of the empire, kind of got neglected. You can definitely see in the archaeological record that the economy of Britain contracts during this period.

Britain has its own barbarian problem, its own localized barbarian problem. Britain gets hit from two directions. From the west, there are raiders from Ireland. These raiders from Ireland are known very confusingly as the Scotti. This is because later on, some of them are going to settle in Scotland, and they will give their name to that country. But just keep in mind [that] the Scotti are actually coming from Ireland. And then there are also raiders from the northwest coast of Europe; these are from the Germanic-speaking tribes in what are now the Low Countries and northern Germany. Mostly, they come to Britain on smash-and-grab–type raids; they're looking for booty and especially for slaves. Slaves are a huge part of the economy in this period. These raids are a foretaste of things to come, but for the moment, the Roman Empire actually does manage to pull itself together. You get some very strong emperors emerging; they're able to reorganize the Roman army and restore the authority of the government. One of the things they do is to try to shore up the defenses of Britain; they build new coastal defenses in the south and the east.

Now this is really quite interesting. Up until now, the Roman military effort in Britain has been concentrated in the north and the west. That's where you have the threat from the tribes who've never been completely conquered by Rome. They haven't had to worry about the south and the east; this is the most Romanized part of the province. But now, things are a little bit more unsettled out there. These new fortresses that they build on the south and east coasts have to look out across the water. They're put under the authority of an official known as the count of the Saxon Shore. It was called the Saxon

Shore because the people they were worrying about might come from among the Saxons in northern Germany.

So the count of the Saxon Shore is in charge of defending Britain against the barbarians from Germany. But in 367 A.D., the count is overwhelmed when Britain is hit by a perfect storm of barbarian raiders. This episode is known as the "barbarian conspiracy"; this is actually a contemporary term. A contemporary Roman writer named Ammianus Marcellinus called this the "barbarian conspiracy." What seems to have happened is [that] somehow, the barbarians got together—the Irish to the west and the Picts to the north got together to attack Britain. At the same time, the coast of Gaul is being hit by Germanic raiders, and of course, that means that Roman authorities in Gaul can't spare any help for Britain. The count of the Saxon Shore is killed, [and] all seems lost, until finally, a large Roman army shows up. It's under the command of the future emperor Theodosius, and he saves the day. A couple of decades later, you see the same scenario repeated. Again, you have a Roman general—this is a guy named Stilicho—he comes and helps out with the latest barbarian outbreak. But that's the last time that this kind of rescue is ever going to be available to Roman Britain.

That's because things are steadily getting worse for Rome. We are headed inexorably toward the fall of Rome. In 406 A.D., there's a very, very cold winter—an unusually cold winter—and the Rhine River freezes over, freezes solid. Large numbers of barbarians from the north of Europe just walk across; they walk across the river into Roman territory, and they raid all over the Roman province of Gaul. Clearly, if they're in Gaul, that's a threat to the security of Rome itself. The emperor at the time, a guy named Honorius, decides on a fateful step. He orders the Roman legions in Britain to withdraw to the continent. He's essentially telling the residents of Britain, you're on your own.

What happens next? Here is where the picture gets a little bit murky. The traditional picture of the 5th century is that you get barbarian invasions. Without the Roman troops there to defend the province, the way lies clear for large-scale raiding. We have a rather poignant record of the reaction of the local population to this alarming turn of events. This is preserved in a work by an author from the 6th century, a man named Gildas; I'll say more about

Gildas in a moment. But he records a very plaintive request for help. The authorities in Britain apparently sent a request to the Roman commander in Gaul in the middle of the 5th century, saying, please send us soldiers. This is how the letter reads: "The barbarians push us back to the sea, the sea pushes us back to the barbarians; between these two kinds of death, we are either drowned or slaughtered." Gildas notes that Britain gets no help in return, no answer from the Roman authorities.

That's the story that the later written sources tell us. But we as scholars have a problem. The archaeological record from the 5th century doesn't show much evidence of warfare. These records show that what you see is not really an invasion; it's really more of a peaceful infiltration. In the early 5th century, the nature of the barbarian problem changes. Up until now, mostly we've had barbarian raids. They're going to come, grab what they want, maybe burn the rest, kill some people, take some slaves, and then leave. But starting in the middle of the 5th century, they start staying. You start to see permanent settlements in Britain, especially in the south and the east. Now, there's currently some controversy among historians about this process. It used to be thought, following these written sources that I have just been talking about, that these settlers imposed their will by force; they're conquerors. More recently, some archaeological work has suggested that the process of Germanic settlement in Britain is really a rather gradual one, and it involves assimilation more than violence. That's some recent archaeological work. But we might be seeing the pendulum swing back the other way, and this is based on some very interesting DNA studies. These studies seem to suggest that the DNA of native British males is suspiciously absent from the gene pool of today's English residents. There are females, but no males. This would support the idea that the new settlers basically kill the native British men and marry their women.

But whether it's violent or peaceful or something in between—there were probably disagreements among the people at the time about this—the new settlers put down permanent roots in Britain. They stay. They seem to have settled at first in rather small bands, perhaps no more than a few dozen people at a time. These people probably do bring their families; they bring women and children with them. There's also a lot of evidence for intermarriage,

though, as I said, with the native population. The process of assimilation seems to have taken place over several generations.

Certainly, some of the British inhabitants do leave. They flee the new settlers; they move west and north and southwest. This is the area that I've talked about that becomes known as the Celtic fringe, in Wales, Cornwall, and northern England. As far as we can tell, though, many of the British don't leave; they just stay, and they blend in with the new culture that the settlers bring with them. Over time, they adopt the speech of the newcomers. This is why there's almost no trace left of the British language in modern English. The British simply stop speaking British and started speaking the language that ultimately becomes English. But this seems to have taken a while. There seems to have been a long period of bilingualism, because there are many English place names that clearly are translations of British ones, or they might be double names. For example, Breedon in Leicestershire is made up of the British word for hill, "bre," and the English word for hill, "dun." So the name "Breedon" literally means "hill-hill." I think in a way, the name of this place is a record of this period of assimilation when the British and the English are living side by side, getting to know each other and kind of creating a new culture. But ultimately, of course, English wins out, not British, and I think this is a sign of a kind of attractiveness of the English culture; maybe it's military dominance, probably something of both, and that's what the new settlers are able to exert on the British. They create something new.

But this assimilation, important as it was, is only part of the story. In the late 5th and early 6th centuries, there may have been some sort of concerted effort to push back against the new settlers. I mentioned Gildas before, the 6th-century writer who recorded that rather pathetic cry for help to the Roman authorities. Gildas was a British writer, a Christian; he was writing about the history of Britain during the period of barbarian settlement. He says that at the end of the 5th century, a great war leader emerged [who] fought 12 great battles against the barbarians. The last of these battles, at Mount Badon, was a great victory, and it halted the advance of the barbarians for 50 years. (That is, 50 years, right up to the time when Gildas is writing, and Gildas is saying in his work that things are getting bad again.)

This statement by Gildas seems to be the earliest evidence we have for the existence of the figure who later becomes known as King Arthur. It's not a lot to go on. Gildas calls this person a war leader, not a king, and in fact, the way he talks about him makes it very clear that there are other people who are kings, and this guy—this war leader—isn't a king. He doesn't give him the name Arthur; he doesn't give him any other name either. We don't even know where Mount Badon is; lots of people have tried to figure it out, but we really don't know.

But there are some tentative hints out there that there may have been such a person, some war leader who fought successfully against the barbarians, or at least that stories about such a person were circulating widely around the time that Gildas is writing. There's a poem written in Old Welsh early in the 7th century that describes a raid by the leader of the Gododdin; this is a tribe that lives around the area that's now Edinburgh. I'm not going to go into the details of the raid, but one reason the poem is famous is something that the poet says about one of the heroes of the battle. This is a guy named Gwawrddur. First of all, you get some lyrical, over-the-top praise about his performance in the battle: "He stabbed over three hundred of the finest, he slew both the centre and the wings, he behaved worthily in the forefront of the most generous army." So far, so good. Then the poet sticks the knife in; he adds, "though he was no Arthur." So you get the sense [that] Arthur is the standard of comparison, [and] no one is going to match that.

The story takes a further step in the 9th century; you get a Welsh writer named Nennius [who] makes the connection between the person Gildas describes—the war leader who fights the 12 battles—and the person in the poem. He figures they're the same person, so he adds Arthur's name to Gildas's description of the battles that the famous war leader won. Some scholars have suggested that Nennius knew they were the same person because he had access to oral tradition that had been handed down since the late 5th century.

There is even some evidence in the archaeological record that there may have indeed been sort of a 50-year halt in the advance of Germanic settlement in Britain. They're not going into new territory for about 50 years. So perhaps we have some confirmation here of the essential truth of the story. Could

that halt have been caused by this war leader who may or may not have been called Arthur?

Well, let's review the evidence and assess the arguments. The facts as we know them could support the idea of a famous war leader (not a king) who stemmed the tide of the Germanic advance in Britain. Maybe he was even named Arthur. But there are some important cautions to keep in mind.

We can't be sure that the person Gildas describes and the person mentioned in the poem are the same. We don't have any evidence about that one way or the other. It may be that Nennius has good reason to think they're the same, but he may just have put the two texts side by side. He's got Gildas; he's got the poem; he puts the two texts side by side, and he makes a great, big assumption.

We also can't be sure that the pause in settlement that we seem to see in the archaeological record is caused by the activity of the war leader that Gildas mentions. There are plenty of other factors that might have caused a temporary halt in migration or a halt in the advance of the settlement—changes in the political situation back on the continent, a lack of leadership, or there just isn't any desire to take any new land under cultivation. There are lots of reasons why this could have happened. And again, the archaeological record doesn't really support an idea of large-scale military activity at this time. We don't have 12 battlefields to go with Gildas's 12 battles.

So I think we need to keep an open mind about Arthur. We don't know if he really existed, or if he did, if he was actually called Arthur. But I think there are two things we need to take away from this story. The first is that the story of the leader that Gildas describes does capture a real phenomenon, because of course, Arthur ultimately dies, the British retreat, and the Germanic settlers do advance. Whether this is due to assimilation or to military defeat, it's undeniable. The area under Germanic control does expand. So think about the poignant part of the Arthur story; think about the idea of it being "one brief, shining moment" that's going to fade into darkness—that idea is there from the very beginning.

The second important point, of course, is that we are well on our way to a legend. The story of Arthur has quite a future, and we're going to follow the growth of that legend in subsequent lectures. But in our next lecture, we're going to turn to some kings that we do know something about. We're going to look at the origins of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms.

The Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms
Lecture 3

These groups that settled in Britain were illiterate, and they were pagans, and that's actually quite important, because it probably determined a lot about how the transition from Roman rule unfolded. The new settlers simply had no stake in preserving very much of the Romanized culture and administration that they found in Britain.

Now we turn from the Britons and the Romans to the Anglo-Saxons—the collective name given to the various Germanic peoples who settled Britain after the Romans withdrew. They came from lots of different places, as near as the Netherlands and as far as Sweden and Saxony. All of these peoples came from seafaring cultures, and all spoke Germanic languages. They were also all from stateless societies—that is, there was no central authority directing the migration to Britain but rather a mass of individual tribes acting on their own initiative.

The tribes' lack of central authority had a number of important consequences. First, in contrast to Rome's formal regulated legal system, law in Germanic society was sort of a self-help process. Laws were aimed at regulating relationships—whether between individuals or families—and allowed individuals to enforce the laws themselves through a system of **wergild**, meaning "man money." Every person in society had a monetary value based on status and importance; if a person was injured or killed, the guilty party would pay the victim (or his or her survivors) a certain amount based on the severity of the damage.

Paying the wergild was the responsibility of the perpetrator's entire family or kin group. One of the strongest checks on criminal behavior was the ability of a kin group to oust troublesome members; a habitual criminal might find himself with no one to help him pay wergild or to defend and protect him. Germanic law codes also distinguished between spontaneous and premeditated crime. The wergild system seems to have developed as a way to prevent family feuding. Most importantly from our perspective, it was a system enforced not by the state but by the people. That said, a

stateless society is not inherently a simple or unsophisticated one. German society was organized vertically, by economic status, and horizontally, by kin group—two factors that largely determined your options in life.

Much of what we know about life in these Germanic societies comes from its poetry, and most of that is concerned with the lives of the elite. War is the main subject of most of this poetry and was the most prestigious activity one could engage in. Yet the vast majority of Germanic people were peaceful farmers. They arrived in Britain with their families and livestock in tow and readily adapted British farming practices for their own needs. They had no interest, however, in Britain's Romanized culture and administration. Unlike the Germanic tribes who conquered the Continent, the Anglo-Saxons were mostly pagan and mostly illiterate; Roman values were simply alien to them. Men like Gildas—educated, Romanized Christians—were swept to the Celtic fringes.

As to how the process of Anglo-Saxon settlement went, written sources and the archaeological record disagree. Most scholars today think lots of little bands of settlers came to Britain on their own initiative because they'd heard that conditions there were favorable. But that is not at all the picture we get from our best written source about this period, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Bede says the newcomers are from "the three most formidable races of Germany"—the Saxons, Jutes, and Angles. Remember, though, Bede is about the 5th century from the perspective of the 8th, by which time the Anglo-Saxons had coalesced into several large kingdoms; he seems to be trying to backdate that development. The Saxons, he said, settled southern England and founded the kingdoms of the West Saxons (Wessex), the South Saxons (Sussex), and the East Saxons (Essex). The Angles settled to the north, giving rise to East Anglia (now Norfolk and Suffolk), Mercia, and Northumbria. The Jutes supposedly had to content themselves with the Isle of Wight and the relatively small kingdom of Kent in the extreme southeast of Britain. But Kent was economically powerful because it was so close to the Continent. These are the seven kingdoms that some modern scholars call the **Anglo-Saxon heptarchy**—that is, the rule of seven.

Bede's description of events has an appealing simplicity, and it seems to fit the map of Britain that had developed by the year 600. But the physical

evidence indicates that none of the kingdoms was purely Angle or Jute; in fact, the Jutes did not seem to exist as a coherent society before settling in Britain. The Saxon kingdoms were a little more homogenous, but they only acquired a sense of *being* Saxons in the course of the 6th century. The earliest Germanic artifacts in Britain show a lot of cultural diversity, whereas the later show more uniformity as the 6th century goes on. In short, the archeologists are probably right, and Bede is probably wrong. Bede may have made this mistake out of simple ignorance, but it's also likely that he had an agenda—namely, to give his society a more ancient, impressive, and formidable past.

Bede's version of events after the year 600 is more reliable; at this point, although the people living in Britain thought of themselves as many different kingdoms, it is reasonable to start using the terms "English" and "England." The formerly stateless, tribal societies had evolved into stratified societies with dynastic leadership, all of whom clamed descent from the god Woden. In actual fact, the dynastic picture was very, very complicated. Rarely did sons follow fathers peacefully to the throne. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a contemporary document that contains a year-by-year history of major events in England, demonstrates that in the 7th century, politics in the heptarchy boiled down to a perpetual series of succession disputes. As a result, no one kingdom had the time and resources to dominate the others.

The archeologists are probably right, and Bede is probably wrong.

One area in which the new English kingdoms were completely successful was in wiping out virtually all traces of the people who lived in Britain before them. Slowly but surely, Wessex extended its rule southwest into the British-controlled territory of Devon and Somerset. The Mercians made gains at the expense of the Welsh. The Northumbrians pushed north all the way to Lowland Scotland (in fact, the dialect of English known as Scots is descended from the Northumbrian dialect). But they came to more or less the same stopping point as the Romans did, those natural borders where the land became less hospitable.

Meanwhile, the British who were pushed back into Wales and Scotland formed powerful kingdoms of their own. The Welsh king Cadwallon, for example, allied with the Mercian king Penda against King Edwin of Northumbria, defeating him in 632. Interestingly, these British kingdoms retained their Christianity, but they would not be the ones to convert the Anglo-Saxons. ■

Important Terms

Anglo-Saxon heptarchy: Modern historical term for the seven most significant Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Wessex, Sussex, and Essex (settled by Saxons); Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia (settled by Angles); and Kent (possibly settled by Jutes, though this is uncertain).

wergild: Literally, "man money"; the value assessed in Anglo-Saxon law for the death or injury of a specific individual, intended to forestall family feuding. The amount of the wergild varied according to the age, gender, and social status of the individual concerned. All members of one's close kin were obligated to contribute to the payment of a wergild fine.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Early Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms

Lecture 3—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we looked at Roman Britain, and we saw how the Roman province fell to invaders or settlers from the northwest of Europe. We talked about the resistance to settlement that may or may not have been centered around a figure named Arthur who becomes the kernel of the King Arthur legend. Today, we're going to shift our focus from the British, the people who resist the settlers, to the settlers themselves, because ultimately, King Arthur lost and the settlers won. So in this lecture, we're going to meet the people who settled Britain and transformed it, slowly but surely, into England. We're going to look at the societies these people came from [and] what they may have brought with them to Britain. Then we'll look at how these settlers created a patchwork of kingdoms that covered all of southern and eastern Britain. Let's start by going back to the homelands of these settlers to see what sort of people they were.

First of all, let me say a few words about where they came from. It's important to know that they came from lots of different places. They were all, broadly speaking, from what we would call Germanic areas, that is, places where the language spoken was some form of German. But this included some pretty far-flung areas. Some of the settlers came from what is now the Netherlands, especially Friesland; some came from northern Germany, especially the north German plain, the area now known as Saxony; and quite a few seem to have come from Scandinavia, from Denmark and southern Sweden. Most of these areas, of course, are close to the sea, so the people who came to Britain were probably pretty familiar with sea travel.

These groups aren't all from exactly the same place, but their cultures did share some broad similarities. For one thing, they were quite decentralized. If you like, they were "stateless" societies. They don't have powerful kings that are making policy; there's not a single order: "Okay, everybody, let's get up and invade Britain and settle there." These are small groups acting on their own initiative when it seems in their best interests to do so.

A lot of things about these societies follow on from this basic fact: There isn't a strong central leader. A very important and very distinctive aspect of

these societies is their legal system, and the legal system very much reflects this idea that there isn't a strong central authority. It's quite different from, say, the Roman legal system. In Rome, you have laws decreed by the state, and there's a whole infrastructure of courts and advocates. Really, it's the state that is in charge of everything. In these Germanic societies, the law is really more of a "self-help" process. The system is set up so that everyone can basically enforce the law themselves. It's about regulating relationships between individuals or, really, between families. There isn't any state to get in between. The way it works is that everyone in society has assigned to them a monetary value called a *wergild*. The term *wergild* literally means "man money." The "wer" in wergild means "man." Think of the word "werewolf"; a werewolf is a "wolf man," a "man wolf." So "wer" is "man," and "gild" is "money." This wergild is based on various attributes that determine how valuable you are to society: What are you worth? This can include your gender, whether you're a man or a woman; how old you are; how rich you are. So you might have a very high-status man who has a wergild, or a price, that is six times that of a low-status man. You find these legal systems in all of the Germanic tribes in Europe. In some of these Germanic legal systems, women have a higher value when they reach childbearing age, because it was believed that that made them more valuable to society. If you look at these wergilds, they can tell us a lot about the values of these societies. You can see that childbearing is clearly valued; you can actually put a price on it.

Now this price was used to determine how much someone would have to pay if they injured or killed you. You'd have to pay a proportion of the wergild for a minor injury, then a little bit more for a serious one, and you would have to pay the full amount of the wergild if you killed someone.

The laws could make some rather sophisticated distinctions. For example, they could take account of how serious a specific injury was likely to be—what kind of impact it would have on the victim. For example, the Frankish laws impose different fines for cutting off different fingers, depending on how important the finger was. You'd have to pay twice as much for cutting off someone's bow finger—that's the finger they would use to draw back the bowstring—as you would for cutting off any of the others, because clearly, you if can't draw back the bowstring, you're going to have a serious problem. So you have to pay twice as much for that. You have to pay most of all if you

cut off the thumb, because of course, the thumb is your most valuable finger. So that's a way of putting a fair price on the injury, taking the consequences of the injury into account.

Now, what if somebody did worse than cut off your finger? What if you're not around any more; what good does the wergild system do for you? Well, it might not help you very much, but it's going to help your family, because your family gets the payment. And the reason that your family gets the wergild payment is so that they don't go take revenge on the family of the person who killed you. Essentially, the wergild system is a way of trying to stop people from getting into tit-for-tat feuds whenever there's some episode of violence—you might have a feud break out, and this system is to try to stop that. And we can guess, certainly, that violence is not exactly rare in these societies. But the key thing to note here is that the system is all about self-regulation. There isn't a state to enforce it; it all has to be worked out between the parties.

But the lack of a state doesn't mean that these societies aren't very complicated. They're quite sophisticated social organisms, [and] there's a lot of subtlety in their values. If you look at some of these barbarian laws, you can see that they seem to understand a lot about human nature. For one thing, they can differentiate between crimes of opportunity and crimes of forethought. Obviously, we do this in the distinction with regard to murder and manslaughter. If you plan it in advance, it's murder; if it just sort of happens in the middle of a fight—it's sort of in "hot blood"—then that's manslaughter. And we punish murder more strictly than we do manslaughter, for example. But the Germanic law takes this a step farther; it can distinguish between planning and spontaneous action with regard to theft. According to these laws, it's worse if you plan to steal something than if you just take advantage of something that drops in your lap. One of the best examples of this comes, again, from the Frankish law code. I'll warn you, it's a little bit gruesome, but it does give you a sense of what sorts of things go on in this period. This is the penalty for robbing a dead body. The fine varies depending on whether you plan to do this in advance. The fine is 100 solidi (that's a Roman money unit) if you steal from the body before it's put in the ground, but it's double that—it's 200 solidi—if you dig the body up to steal from it. Why would you steal from a body? Of course, that's because, in this

period, a lot of times, people are being buried with very rich grave goods—with jewelry, valuable weapons, that sort of thing—so it was a contingency that you had to plan for. I think that's a pretty sophisticated distinction to draw. You're going to punish the habitual criminal more harshly than the guy who just stumbles across a dead body and [thinks,] "Oh, why don't I just take advantage of this opportunity?" and succumbs to temptation.

So this is a complicated society. It doesn't have an elaborate government like the Roman Empire; it's not a very elaborate state, but still, it makes these fine distinctions, and it's not a society of equals either. There is hierarchy in this society. There are people of high status and people of low status. Some people have more resources than others. They might have more land; they might have more treasure; they might be able to command the loyalty of more people. Those are the people who get the higher wergild. So society is organized vertically into high-status and low-status people.

But as we've already seen, it's organized horizontally, as well, because it's organized by kin membership. Belonging to a family is all important. These are the people who are going to stick up for you. Now, this system certainly doesn't work perfectly. There are members of kin groups who don't do what they're supposed to do. Essentially, they were the "black sheep" of the early Germanic families. We know this because some of the Germanic laws actually spell out ways essentially that you can kick somebody out of your family. Suppose you have a cousin and your cousin is always getting into trouble. You don't want to keep paying wergilds for the people that he kills and injures—that gets expensive. So there's a way that you can declare this worthless cousin an "outlaw," and that means that he is a member of no kin group. That means, officially speaking, he has nobody to stick up for him. This would be a very scary proposition in this society, so it does work somewhat as a check on people's behavior. Interestingly, there's also an opposite procedure; there's a way for somebody to renounce their kin. I guess families had their problems then as they do now!

But the bottom line is that people's experience is pretty largely determined by their social status and by their kin group. These two factors are going to determine a lot about the options that they had open to them in life.

What kinds of things would people want to do? What are the values of these Germanic societies? One thing we need to make clear is [that] we don't know a lot about what people below the level of the elite valued, because mostly what we have is poetry, and poetry is pretty much exclusively about the top level of society. The people at the top are the ones who paid the poets. But since the elite members of society do drive a lot of very important aspects of life, I think it's all right to give their values some attention.

The most obvious fact about them is that these people valued warfare. War is definitely the most prestigious activity you can engage in. It's the most lucrative: You amass treasure that way; you give treasure out to followers; you amass followers; [and] you become a leader. Leaders who are successful in battle get poems written about them, their names are remembered, everything good happens to them. This society very much seems to have valued reputation—people remembering them.

The ironic thing about this warrior ethos—that's what people call it—is that the vast majority of people in these societies really have nothing to do with it. Most of these Germanic people, the ones who come and settle in Britain, are essentially peaceful farmers, and in fact, they are pretty successful farmers. When these groups of settlers arrive in Britain, they sit right down and start farming. They bring some of their own crops and livestock with them. They seem to have been more focused, for some reason, on raising pigs than the British were; they like pigs more than the British. But they're also very ready to adopt some of the local practices that work well in Britain. They start raising some of the crops that are grown in Britain; they start raising some of the livestock that is raised in Britain. Slowly but surely, they create a new landscape that is an amalgam of the farming methods of the British and the German settlers.

Well, if a few of them are fighting [and] most of them are farming, there's one thing none of them are doing, and that is reading. These groups that settle in Britain are illiterate, and they are pagans, and that's actually quite important, because it probably determines a lot about how the transition from Roman rule unfolds. The new settlers simply have no stake in preserving very much of the Romanized culture that they find in Britain. They don't get it; it's not important to them. This is quite different from what happens on the

continent. Most of the rest of the Roman Empire is conquered by barbarians who are, in fact, literate Christians. Lots of people don't realize that. They imagine barbarian hordes rampaging everywhere. The barbarian hordes on the continent are Christians. Now, they're a special kind of Christians; they're a heretical sort of Christian called Arians, and that causes its own religious tensions. But still, they're not pagans, and they do place a value on Roman civilization, and they mostly try to preserve it. The settlers in Britain, on the other hand, really don't. That's why Christianity in Britain is almost totally wiped out in the areas that the newcomers settle. Christianity survives mostly only in the fringe areas where the British concentrated, the places where they took refuge in the west. There, you do have people who were highly educated, people like Gildas, whom we met in the last lecture. These are people who certainly speak British, but they also can write very complicated Latin. Gildas's Latin is quite complicated. We're going to talk a lot more about the religious situation in Britain in our next lecture, but for right now, it's just important to remember that the new settlers are pagans, and they don't have any interest, at least for now, in adopting the religion of the British elite, which is Christianity. But as I said last time, the rural people in Britain had probably always been pagans, so the assimilation between the two groups that I talked about last time probably doesn't involve very much of a clash over religion. It's two pagan groups intermingling with each other.

So now we've met the Germanic settlers. We've seen they're very decentralized, [and] they have their own laws that are designed to minimize conflict between kin groups. We've seen they're pagan and illiterate. What happens when they arrive in Britain? How does the process actually unfold?

Here we have an interesting clash between our written sources and our archaeological evidence, and it makes for a complicated picture. In fact, I've already given you the picture that most scholars find persuasive nowadays, and this is the one in which you have lots of little bands of settlers [coming] to Britain basically on their own initiative, probably because they've heard that conditions there are favorable. But that's not at all the picture that we get from the best written source that we have about this period, and this is *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* by our old friend Bede. It was Bede's description of the island of Britain that I used to start off the course in our first lecture.

Bede gives us a very different story. He tells us that the newcomers came from "the most formidable races of the Germans"—that's what he calls them, Germans. These three races were, according to Bede, the Saxons (from northern Germany), the Jutes (maybe from Jutland in Denmark), and the Angles (and the Angles, Bede says, are from the territory in between the Saxons and the Jutes; here are the Angles in the middle). Each of these three races, according to Bede, settles down in a different part of Britain and becomes the ancestors of the peoples of Bede's own day. Now remember, Bede is writing in the early 8th century about things that happened in the mid-5th century, so he is more remote in time from the events that he is talking about than we are from the American Revolution. By the 8th century, the newcomers have coalesced into various larger groupings or kingdoms. We'll talk about that process in a moment. But what Bede seems to want to do here is to backdate that development, to project it back into the 5th century. He wants to see these large groupings that he's familiar with in his own time—he wants to see them present right at the start. He wants to make the period of migration and settlement a whole lot neater than it actually was. Lots of small, autonomous groups coming to Britain on their own in dribs and drabs—that's not nearly as impressive as three big peoples all coming in one big wave of migration and setting up kingdoms right away.

But Bede's story of how it all happened has been immensely influential, so I'm just going to lay it out briefly, because it's what the English believed about themselves until really quite recently. This was the view almost everybody accepted of how England was peopled. According to Bede, we have these three peoples. Where do they supposedly settle?

The Saxons supposedly settle in southern England. They give rise to the kingdoms that we find in place later across southern England: the kingdoms of the West Saxons (in Wessex), the South Saxons (in Sussex), and the East Saxons (in Essex). The Angles settle to the north of them. The kingdoms they give rise to are East Anglia (the kingdom of the East Angles) in what is now Norfolk and Suffolk, and Mercia (the kingdom of the Middle Angles), and Northumbria, [which] was the kingdom of the North Angles. Northumbria got its name because it was north of the Humber River, hence, Northumbria. So now we've got the Angles and the Saxons accounted for, and you can see [that] they're settling in the area that becomes England, not in Wales

and not even, at this point, in the southwest, in Cornwall. Those areas are still held by the British. But I've left out the Jutes. The Jutes supposedly have to content themselves with the Isle of Wight and with the relatively small kingdom of Kent in the extreme southeast of Britain. But Kent is a very economically powerful kingdom; it's very close to the continent, [and] the trading possibilities are extensive, so for the Jutes, that's got to be some consolation.

This picture Bede paints is very attractive. It explains very well what the map looks like by, maybe, 600; it explains it very well. At least, those are the most important kingdoms. But the kingdoms probably don't arise directly out of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. That's just a very convenient way of tidying up a very messy history. For one thing, East Anglia doesn't seem to have been the kingdom of the East Angles in the 6th century. It was probably ruled by a Scandinavian dynasty, not a German one. There's lots of diversity among the artifacts from this period, and that probably means that in East Anglia, you've got a mixing of a lot of different peoples. So East Anglia is a composite kingdom, not a thoroughly Anglian one at all. We have an even bigger problem with the Jutes—the Jutes are always a problem. A lot of scholars don't believe in the Jutes. Bede says the Jutes come from the continent, but there just isn't very much evidence, archaeological evidence or any other kind, that there were any Jutes before they arrived in Britain. Nowadays, scholars think that the people who become known as the Jutes, the people who end up ruling Kent, really only coalesce as a social and political grouping once they all find themselves together in close proximity in Kent under the influence of the Franks, across the water in France. There's no way that there was a big group of Jutes that got on boats together and came over to Britain. They only became Jutes once they got there. Fortunately, there doesn't seem to be a huge problem with the Saxons, at least. The Saxons are a little bit more straightforward, but it's clear that they only acquired a sense that they were Saxons in the course of the 6th century. This idea of identity is only gradually forming.

So the picture of how the settlers get themselves organized into kingdoms doesn't match Bede exactly. The archaeologists are probably right, and Bede is probably wrong. It was small bands of settlers who came over in small groups, followed perhaps by their wives and children. They settled here,

and the kingdoms arose later. The archaeology is very intriguing on this point. What you see in the cemeteries that have been excavated is, in the early period, quite a lot of diversity of artifacts. People are picking things from here and there; they have brooches of all different kinds, but over the course of the 6th century, you get much more regional uniformity. It looks as if people are starting to identify with certain cultural patterns on a regional basis, maybe an ethnic basis. Identities are *forming*; they don't exist fully formed when the settlers arrive in Britain.

Now maybe Bede gets this wrong simple because he doesn't know how it happened. That's very likely. But I also think that Bede has an agenda. He wants to make these kingdoms look a lot more well established than they actually were. These are very traditional societies; the older something is—the farther back you can trace it—the more impressive it seems. So if you can make these kingdoms date back to the 5th century; if, in effect, you can just transfer them wholesale from the continent and plop them down in Britain, then they're going to look more ancient and more formidable. So I think there's a little bit of that going on with Bede.

But one big reason Bede's picture of how settlement worked has been so popular is that it's at least easy to understand. Now I've explained why there are a few problems with it, why there are some nuances that we should be keeping in mind, I'm going to go ahead and follow Bede, because once we get to about the year 600, he pretty much does have it right. We do have a pretty clear picture of what the political geography of England is from this point on. (And I'm going to start calling it England now; I'm going to be also referring to the people who live in England as the Anglo-Saxons. They wouldn't have called themselves that, of course. That's really a modern term that scholars have invented to talk about the people who are supposedly descended from the Angles and the Saxons—thank goodness they didn't try to add the Jutes onto the name; that would have gotten really cumbersome!)

So what do things look like [in] about 600? What seems to have happened by this point is that kingdoms arose out of this initial mass of small settler groups. And it was probably, as you would expect, a rather messy process. Society slowly becomes more stratified. Some leaders are more successful than others; they're able to attract more followers; they're able to impose

their will on more people. So by 600, you have a group of kingdoms that spreads across what is now England. The dynasties that rule these kingdoms may have different origins, in some cases, from the people that they ruled. We're not talking about ethnic cohesion. This is all really sort of invented along the way. But you get a lot of dynastic genealogy and ideology forming in this period. All of these Germanic kings begin to claim descent from the pagan god Woden. We have texts of these royal genealogies that claim this. They go back many generations until you get back to Woden. Basically, this is the pagan equivalent of tracing your descent back to Adam, like the series of "begats" in the Bible. It's something that kings did to give themselves legitimacy, because it looked impressive to be descended from the king of the gods. Really, these are probably mostly Johnny-come-latelies, people who have only been powerful for a very short time, and they're trying to give themselves this extra cloak of legitimacy.

So they're all related to Woden, these kings. Who are they? I'm going to simplify here. The traditional way to classify the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms is to group them in what historians call the "heptarchy," the rule of seven. Again, nobody calls them this at the time—this is a modern term, but it's a pretty useful one; I think we'll keep it. These are the seven largest, most powerful kingdoms, the ones you really need to know about. There are a few other smaller kingdoms, but they're less important, and we will not worry about them. These seven kingdoms do align pretty well with the classification given by Bede, so he's not wrong about 600 A.D.; he's just wrong about how we got there. Here are the kingdoms of the heptarchy, and we've already met them: Northumbria in the north, Mercia in the west midlands, East Anglia in the east midlands. Those are the supposedly Angle kingdoms. Then there are the three Saxon kingdoms: Wessex in the southwest, Sussex on the south coast, Essex in the area to the east of London. Finally, there's Kent in the southeast, just across the English Channel from France.

As I said, there are smaller kingdoms that came and went. Some of them got absorbed into larger ones. In fact, Northumbria was a composite kingdom. It was made up of two kingdoms that merged: Deira in the south of Northumbria and Bernicia in the north of Northumbria. I know that's a bit confusing, and I wouldn't even go into it, but we're going to see in the

next lecture that the fact that Northumbria is really two kingdoms that come together in one makes a big difference.

So those are the basic contours of English geography by around 600. But the dynastic picture is very, very complicated. This is a very competitive atmosphere. I just mentioned that these kingdoms have emerged out of competition for status among all of the various English war leaders. That process doesn't just end when one family finds itself on top. For one thing, each ruling family often gets embroiled in all sorts of internal disputes. It's very rare for son to follow father peacefully on the throne. We can follow some of the ins and outs of this process in a document called *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; this is a year-by-year history of England that we'll be talking a lot about in the lectures to come. What we see in the *Chronicle* is a whole lot of succession disputes and quite a lot of violence. A lot of kings are killed by their rivals. Basically, English politics in the 7th century and even later is one big succession dispute. This is probably one big reason why you don't get one kingdom absorbing all the others. There isn't any one kingdom that gets its act together long enough to do that.

But one area in which the new English kingdoms do seem to have been completely successful is in wiping out virtually all trace of the people who lived in Britain before them. As I said earlier, the British fled or they assimilated with the newcomers. That doesn't mean that military conflict between the British and the Anglo-Saxons ends. Anglo-Saxon expansion is continuing throughout the 7th century. Slowly but surely, the kingdom of Wessex extends its rule all the way to the southwest into the British-controlled territory of Devon and Somerset. Similarly, the Mercians make gains to the west at the expense of the Welsh. And the Northumbrians push north; they push so far north that they're up into territory that had been ruled by British dynasties up until then. They go so far that they end up controlling essentially the area that is now lowland Scotland, and in fact, the dialect of English spoken in Scotland—it's known as Scots—that dialect of English is descended from that Northumbrian dialect. So the Anglo-Saxons are definitely still expanding. These new kingdoms are expanding.

But still, they tend to come to a natural stopping point more or less at the line that marks off the old division between the Roman civilian area and the

Roman military area. They never get very far into Wales proper, for example. And the British who are pushed back into these remote areas sometimes give as good as they get. There are some very famous Welsh kings from this period, including a very renowned king known as Cadwallon. Cadwallon allies with a Mercian king—a king named Penda—they ally together, this Mercian king and this Welsh king, against King Edwin of Northumbria. And in 632, they go into battle against King Edwin and they slay him. So the British who have been driven into the mountainous, less hospitable regions of the island are still a force to be reckoned with.

One intriguing difference between the British and the Anglo-Saxons in 600, of course, is that the British are Christians [and] the Anglo-Saxons are pagans. The British are keeping the flame of Christianity alive on the fringes of the island. But they are *not* going to be the ones who convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. We'll find out who did in our next lecture.

The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons

Lecture 4

The important point to stress is that Anglo-Saxon paganism was a pretty vital concern. There was a network of houses of worship, the calendar was organized around festivals celebrating the gods, and we have evidence that individuals were personally devoted to the gods. So now we have to explain how all of that was transformed in less than a century.

At the end of the 6th century, all the English kingdoms were pagan. By the end of the 7th, they were all Christian. The conversion of the English was largely a top-down process: If the king converted, his people followed almost without question—such was the psychology of a culture based on the ***comitatus***, or war band. But this meant that if the king changed his mind and returned to paganism, the whole kingdom relapsed along with him. Thus it took time for the Christian church to establish a power base in England; by the time they did, the kings had mostly converted for good. Conversion was also a multicultural enterprise. Missionaries came from two directions: Rome and Ireland. Each set of missionaries brought different cultural assumptions and practices, which would ultimately cause some conflict.

It's important to remember that the earliest Anglo-Saxon settlers essentially wiped out the remnants of Roman Christianity in southeastern Britain. They seemed to have worshiped a pantheon we're most familiar with from German and Norse mythology, including figures like Woden and Thor, although many people paid particular devotion to one god above the others. They had seasonal festivals for specific deities, as well as local shrines to individual gods or groups of gods; at least 43 place-names in southern England today can be traced to these worship sites. We have a wonderful description of the temple used by an early king of East Anglia, Raedwald. It was a huge round building, with niches, sort of like chapels, all around the perimeter where different gods could be worshiped. Raedwald was one of the early converts to Christianity, but rather than abandon the gods of his ancestors (and risk his wife's wrath), he simply gave the Christian god a niche in the temple. Like

a lot of polytheists, the Anglo-Saxons were broad minded, and they were fine with a new god as long as they didn't have to give up the old ones.

The first official mission of the Roman church to the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Kent in 597. Perhaps motivated by political concerns as much as spiritual ones, Pope Gregory the Great commissioned the head of his own private monastery in Rome, a monk named Augustine, to lead the mission, and he sent him with an extensive entourage. Augustine set up his mission in the city of Canterbury, likely choosing the spot not only for its proximity to mainland Europe but its cultural familiarity with the Christian Franks. In fact, the queen of Kent, Bertha, was a Frankish princess already practicing Christianity.

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Pope Gregory the Great sent missionaries to Britain for both spiritual and political reasons.

Augustine's initial reception was fairly skeptical. At first, King Aethelbert gave him grudging permission to found a monastery in the city; it took three years of effort to convert Aethelbert. With this royal backing at last, Augustine founded three more episcopal sees and managed to convert the neighboring kingdom of Essex. One of the keys to Augustine's success was his decision, based on Gregory's advice, to reconsecrate the pagan temples as churches and retrofit the pagan festivals to make them Christian. (This is very much the way Christianity had gone about converting Roman Empire's pagans in earlier centuries.)

Despite Augustine's early success with Aethelbert, he failed to convert Aethelbert's sons, and on Aethelbert's death in 616, Kent relapsed into paganism. In fact, a wave of pagan reaction seems to have washed over all of southern England at this point. Our strongest evidence for this reaction

comes from the Sutton Hoo archaeological site in East Anglia, where we find a king's ship burial (possibly Raedwald's) with a mixture of Christian and pagan articles among the grave goods.

On the other hand, Aethelbert's Christian daughter, Aethelburh, married King Edwin of Northumbria and brought a chaplain named Paulinus with her to the north. According to Bede, Edwin did something very interesting at this point: He decided that he would not convert to Christianity without the approval of his warriors. Edwin's chief priest, Coifi, said he was ready to give up on the old gods and try something new, because his years of zealous worship had not brought him much material success. Another follower made a striking analogy: A man's life is like a sparrow sheltering from winter's storms inside the king's banqueting hall. What comes before and after that comfortable time is like the storm, dark and impenetrable, and if the new faith could help them understand it, it was worth a try. The Northumbrians converted, but once again, when the king died (killed by Cadwallon and Penda in 632), the kingdom relapsed too.

Edwin did something very interesting at this point: He decided that he would not convert to Christianity without the approval of his warriors.

A few years later, a Christian named Oswald would ascend the Northumbrian throne, and the kingdom would convert for good. Oswald had been converted not by the Roman missionaries but by the Irish monks at Iona, in the Inner Hebrides. He looked north for help in setting up the church in his own kingdom. Oswald invited monks from Iona to found a new monastery at Lindisfarne, off the Northumbrian coast, and it was from Lindisfarne that the rest of the kingdoms of England were converted. This was a period of great artistic accomplishment in the monasteries of northern England, producing beautiful manuscripts such as the Book of Durrow and the Lindisfarne Gospel.

The kingdoms converted from Lindisfarne followed the Celtic church calendar, whereas those converted from Kent followed the Roman one. In

particular, the way to calculate the date of Easter each year was different in each tradition. This caused disharmony between and even within courts, such as when Oswald's successor, Oswiu, and his southern princess celebrated Easter at different times in the same court. King Oswiu decided for the good of the kingdom, the Easter question needed to be settled once and for all. The nobles and churchmen met at the monastery of Whitby to debate the point. Saint Colman, a monk from Lindisfarne, argued for the Celtic side, saying their tradition was older and thus more proper. Saint Wilfrid, an Anglo-Saxon cleric, argued for the Roman side, saying that the pope was the successor of Saint Peter, so even if his method of calculating Easter was new, his source of authority was older and more venerable. The king sided with Wilfrid and brought his kingdom in line with Rome. This would be one of England's first decisive steps toward cultural allegiance with continental Europe, but at first it mainly affected men like Bede, who led sheltered, luxurious lives of study and thought. Life for the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons was very different. ■

Important Term

comitatus: From the Latin for "retinue"; the war band of a Germanic tribal leader. It formed the chief fighting unit defending the early Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Conversion of the Anglo-Saxons
Lecture 4—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we looked at the Germanic society that the English settlers brought with them from the continent to Britain. We saw that it was a fairly sophisticated society with respect to its legal norms; at least the system was pretty well set up to deal with the fact that these are societies without much of a state apparatus. But then we watched kingdoms begin to coalesce over the course of the 6th century; some war leaders are able to dominate others, and they build up strong networks of supporters, and they create kingdoms. We saw the creation of these kingdoms across a territory that would become known as England, roughly divided into about seven major kingdoms, and we call these the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. We also talked about the fact that these Anglo-Saxon settlers are pagans, and that was true throughout the period when these kingdoms are in the process of forming. But in today's lecture, we're going to see that change. England will convert to Christianity. The process of conversion in England took about a century, perhaps a little less. At the end of the 6th century, all the English kingdoms are pagan. By the end of the 7th century, they're all Christian.

I'm going to start with a few general remarks about conversion. Then I'm going to back up and say something about what the Anglo-Saxons believed *before* they converted, in other words: What are they converting *from*? Then, I'm going to concentrate on the two most important parts of England for the conversion process, Kent in the southeast and Northumbria in the north.

First, a few general words about conversion and how it works: There are two main points I want to make. The first is that conversion in England is largely a top-down process. One effect of the creation of the kingdoms is that kings in England have the clout to bring their whole kingdom with them if they decide to convert. If the king makes the move to accept the new religion, his followers are going to go along, too, because peer pressure in the king's war band is very strong. There's not really any such thing as liberty of conscience in the 7th century. You go along with what your leader is doing, but the leader does have an interest in getting the consent of his followers first. He's going to want to make sure that a big move, like converting to Christianity, has some support.

But this also meant that if the leader of a kingdom changes his mind about being a Christian, or if you get a new king coming to the throne who isn't a Christian, then the whole kingdom might go back to being pagan again. Historians call that "relapsing into paganism." And that does happen in Anglo-Saxon England. For the first few generations, it's never quite clear whether a kingdom is going to stick with Christianity or not. It took a while for the Christian Church to kind of get going on its own, to develop an infrastructure so that it can carry on regardless of what the king is doing. By the time that happens, the kings have pretty much all decided to stick with Christianity anyway. So kings are vital to the process of conversion in England.

The second main general point I want to make about conversion is that it's a multicultural enterprise. We're going to see that missionaries came to England from two main directions. They come from the continent via Rome, and they also come from Ireland. Each set of missionaries brings with them different cultural assumptions [and] different practices, and this is ultimately going to cause some conflict. We're going to see that conflict unfold at the end of the lecture.

For now, let's go back and look at what the Anglo-Saxons believed before they converted. It's important to stress what I mentioned in the last lecture, namely, that the Christianity of Roman Britain has virtually no impact on the Anglo-Saxon settlers. There are a few little traces here and there of Christianity surviving in the territory the Anglo-Saxons settled, but there are precious few. There are not a lot. There certainly aren't a lot of conversions to Christianity by the new settlers; that doesn't seem to happen at all. And the British church that survives on the margins—in the Celtic fringe, the areas in Wales and the southwest and the northwest—those areas make no effort to preach to the Anglo-Saxons. They see them as the barbarian enemy, and the British wanted nothing to do with them.

So what do the Anglo-Saxons believe? They seem to have worshiped a pantheon of gods, sort of like the Greek or Roman pantheon—a bunch of gods with different kinds of aspects and characteristics to them. The most important of these were Woden, the god of war (that's the one I mentioned that all of the kings in Anglo-Saxon England want to claim to be descended

from), so you've got Woden. And the other really important god is Thor; Thor is the god of thunder. If you wanted to show that you're a follower of Thor, you might want to wear an amulet with Thor's hammer on it. Thor's hammer is a very powerful symbol. We have lots of these amulets that have survived; it's kind of like wearing a crucifix if you're a Christian. You wear a Thor's hammer, and everybody knows that you're a follower of Thor. We also know that there are festivals throughout the year to celebrate the gods; for example, our holiday Easter—the name for our holiday Easter is from the Anglo-Saxon word for the month of April. In April, there was a festival to celebrate the goddess Eostre, and that's where we get "Easter" from. We also know that the gods were worshiped in specific places; they had temples. One way we can tell this is by place names. A lot of English place names can be traced to the worship site of some god or other. There are at least 43 of these places in southern England that have survived in the map today, and there are probably others that have not survived.

So what was one of these pagan worship sites like? They had wooden buildings; often, they're quite large. They might be designed for a whole tribe, or they might be just for the king. They could be the center for worshiping more than one god. We have a wonderful example of this. This is the temple of an early king of East Anglia, a guy named Rædwald. His temple was set up in a very interesting way. It was a huge round building, and all around the perimeter of the hall, there were little niches, sort of like chapels, and in these different niches, you could worship different gods. So you really do have kind of a pantheon effect. Now, the interesting thing about this king and this house of worship is what happens in the early 7th century, when Rædwald goes on a trip to Kent. He visits Kent, and he's in Kent just at the moment when Kent is converting to Christianity. He gets intrigued, and he converts, too. But then he goes back home to East Anglia, and he tells his wife what he's done, and she's not happy at all. "How can you abandon the gods of your ancestors?" she says. So Rædwald compromises. He just adds one niche in his temple dedicated to the Christian God, sort of adds him into the mix. This is obviously not exactly what the Christian missionaries had in mind; they would have preferred strict monotheism. But it gives you a sense of the kind of paganism the Anglo-Saxons practiced. Like a lot of polytheists, they're fairly broad-minded; they're fine with this new God as long as you don't have to give up the old gods at the same time.

So that's most of what we know about what the Anglo-Saxons believed and how they worshiped. I think the important point to stress is that Anglo-Saxon paganism is a pretty vital, going concern. There's a network of houses of worship; you've got a calendar organized around festivals that celebrate the gods; [and] we have evidence that individuals are personally devoted to their gods. Now, what we have to do is explain how all of this is transformed in less than a century.

The first official mission of the Christian Church to the Anglo-Saxons arrives in Kent in 597. This is a very high-level delegation; it's sent directly by Pope Gregory the Great. There's an interesting story about how Pope Gregory first got interested in converting the Anglo-Saxons. Why did the whole idea of doing this come onto his radar screen in the first place? Supposedly, one day before he became pope, he came across some slaves from England in a Roman slave market. The slave trade is very important in Europe in this period; there would have been slave markets virtually everywhere. Gregory comes across these slaves [and] he's struck by their fine complexions and beautiful hair. (He probably hadn't seen that many blond people in Italy, so they really do stand out.) He asked where the men come from, and he's told they're from Britain, where everybody looks like they do. Then he asks if they're Christians or pagans, and he's told they're pagans. This makes Gregory sad, of course. Then he asks, "What's the name of their people?" He's told that they are the Angli, the Angles. Gregory then makes a pun in Latin. He says the name Angli is appropriate, because the men have such angelic faces. *Angeli* in Latin: Angli, *angeli*. Then he asks what province they're from, and he's told Deira. (Remember, that's one of the two kingdoms that make up Northumbria.) So now he makes another pun. Deira, *de ira* (that's how you spell it) means "from wrath" in Latin. Gregory says, "Great, they'll be rescued from the wrath of God by being converted to Christianity." Later, when he becomes pope, he decides he's going to send a mission to convert the Anglo-Saxons.

This is a wonderful story: the dramatic encounter of the future pope with the beautiful captives, the resolution to send a mission to rescue the bright foreigners from the darkness of sin. It's probably not true. But the English later liked to think it was. Who wouldn't want to tell a story like that?

There were probably other factors, in fact, that led Pope Gregory to send a mission to England, and they had to be important, because this enterprise was a big and expensive one. The head of the delegation is the head of the pope's own private monastery in Rome, a monk named Augustine. He's the one who's going to be sent, and he goes with an extensive entourage. Why? Why all of this? Historians think that the pope may have been trying to add a new territory to the papal column, a place that is very much under direct papal influence. One reason for this may be [that] the late 6th century is a really difficult time for Italy. There are enemies around Rome, [and] the pope is under pressure from these enemies, particularly the Lombards, this barbarian tribe that's always pressing on Rome. And the pope is probably looking for new allies abroad. So the English project probably seemed like a reasonable scheme.

Augustine sets off with the task of becoming the first bishop for the English. He travels with his companions through Gaul, and in 597, he crosses the English Channel and arrives in Kent at the city of Canterbury, and that's where he sets up his mission. For that reason, people usually call him St. Augustine of Canterbury to distinguish him from Augustine of Hippo, the famous church father who lived in the late 4th and early 5th centuries.

So why Kent? Augustine has at least seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms to choose from; why this one? It has a lot to do with proximity. It's the closest kingdom; it's just across the Channel. But that proximity means that Kent is very much under the influence of the Frankish kingdom in Gaul. We talked about how the Jutes become a kingdom under Frankish influence. In fact, the queen of Kent is a Frankish princess, a woman named Bertha. She was the wife of the Kentish king Ethelbert. She had been merrily practicing Christianity at the Kentish court for 30 years, with her husband's approval. This hadn't really made any impact on his religious beliefs, but it was an opening. The Kent people were at least familiar with Christianity. They knew what it was: They had trading contacts with the Franks; there were people that Queen Bertha had brought with her—she had chaplains. So Christianity is a known quantity.

Augustine shows up at the Kentish court ready to preach the Gospel. At first, he gets a fairly skeptical reception. It takes a couple of years before he makes

any headway. The king does give him rather grudging permission to found a monastery in the city. This monastery is later known as St. Augustine's, Canterbury, after St. Augustine. But Augustine keeps hammering away, and after about three years, King Ethelbert finally converts. Now Augustine is on a roll; he's got royal backing. He founds three new episcopal sees; this means he has three other bishops to work with him. He also manages to convert the nearby kingdom of Essex during this period.

One reason that Augustine has so much luck in this early phase is [that] he and Pope Gregory came up with a pretty culturally sensitive way of proceeding. Augustine actually wrote to the pope asking for advice: What do I do about the pagans? They have these worship sites; they like to go to them. Remember, we talked about how there were a lot of these, and they're very important to the local people. Pope Gregory gave Augustine some very astute advice. He said, go ahead; use the holy sites that people are used to coming to. Turn them into churches. You're going to have to get rid of the idols, of course, but then reconsecrate the temples as churches. The people are going to feel less of a dramatic shift as they change over from one faith to another. And the pope also said Augustine should just feel free to sort of retrofit the pagan festivals to make them Christian. For example, there was a feast on which the pagans in England sacrificed oxen to their gods. They would kill the oxen, and then, of course, they would eat them. The pope says, great, let them keep doing that, but just substitute some Christian holiday. That way, all the good parts of the old faith will be kept—you still have the big oxen feast—[and] everybody's happy. Now, of course, this is very much the way that Christianity had proceeded in converting the pagans in the Roman Empire. The Christian celebration of Christmas owes a pretty big debt to the Roman holiday of Saturnalia. That had worked out pretty well. So the pope's advice is field-tested, and it worked very well in England. Plenty of people are able to see their way clear to adopting the new faith. And one very notable thing about the conversion of England is that you don't get any martyrdoms. I think that's partly because the missionaries go about their work in this rather sensitive, rather conciliatory way.

But remember I said at the beginning that the king has a lot to say about religious policy? Well, he has virtually everything to say about religious policy. King Ethelbert dies in the year 616. Despite Augustine's best efforts,

he had not managed to get Ethelbert's sons to convert—they are still pagan—so when Ethelbert dies, Kent relapses into paganism.

In fact, there's a wave of pagan reaction that seems to have washed over all of southern England at this point. We aren't really sure of the religious status of some of these kingdoms. We're not really sure if they're pagan or Christian. If you look at East Anglia, for example, you've got King Raedwald. He's the king I mentioned who's got the rather eclectic approach to religion; he's got all the chapels to the pagan gods, with one little Christian niche. If you look at the artifacts from this period, you see evidence of this rather ambiguous religious situation. The best evidence, I think, for this comes from the spectacular discoveries at Sutton Hoo in East Anglia.

This is a huge ship burial; you've got a giant ship—a whole ship—buried intact in the ground, and it's got all sorts of grave goods included. This may have been the grave of King Raedwald; nobody knows for sure. Scholars are still arguing about who it is. But whoever he was, he was probably a king, because of the richness of the burial. And the interesting thing about the goods in his grave is that there were some Christian articles among them. The most famous of these are the so-called Saulus and Paulus spoons. These are two silver spoons; one has the name Saulus engraved on it [and] one has the name Paulus. These, of course, are the names of the Apostle Paul before and after his conversion to Christianity. So could this be kind of a hint? Is this the burial of somebody who himself had converted to Christianity?

Maybe. But there are some problems. It looks as if the two spoons don't come as a set; they're not made together at the same time. It might just be a coincidence that we find them together. Maybe they're not sending any sort of message. It's also a little bit worrisome that the spoons are found in a giant ship burial; a ship burial is about as pagan as you can get. Christians are not buried in ships in the ground typically. It does sound to me, perhaps, like our old eclectic friend Raedwald. This is the sort of thing I think Raedwald would do. At any rate, I think it's an indication that the religious situation is in flux.

So despite this early success of Augustine's mission, we have a serious setback. But hope is not lost. Ethelbert's sons had not converted, but his

daughter had, and she had gone north to the court of Northumbria to marry King Edwin. She brought with her a Christian chaplain named Paulinus. King Edwin actually already knew Paulinus. He had spent a brief period in exile at the Kentish court, [and] he had met Paulinus then, so he was ripe to come under the influence of his wife's chaplain.

But Edwin does something very interesting at this point. Once he decides he wants to convert, he decides he doesn't want to convert to Christianity unless he has the approval of his warriors. I think he realized that they needed to be a united band; they couldn't be divided over the question of religion, and Edwin feels it's important that he consults them. This is a scene that we have in the Venerable Bede's account, *The Ecclesiastical History*. What he says is that Edwin gathers his warriors together, and he essentially says, hey, what do you say; do we go with this new faith or not?

And then something really intriguing happens. King Edwin has a chief priest; his name is Coifi. And Coifi gets up and says he's ready to give up on the old gods and try something new, and he has quite an interesting justification for this. He says [that] he's always been a very zealous servant of the gods; no one has done more for the gods than I have, he says. But look—you, the king, have given lots of people more rewards than me. So what good has it done me to serve the old gods? Maybe it's time for something new. This is kind of an interesting materialist justification for adopting Christianity.

But then we get another follower speaking up, and he has a much more philosophical argument to make. He says to the king, you know, we don't really understand what happens after we die; we don't even really know what happens before we're born. Then he makes a striking analogy. Think of a sparrow in the winter, he says. Outside, the wind and snow are raging. The sparrow might fly into the royal banqueting hall, where it's warm and comfortable; he might be there for a few minutes, and then he flies out the other side. Life is like that, the king's man says. What happens before and after is dark to us, like the storm that rages outside the king's hall. For a few brief moments, we have a comfortable existence, and then we head back out into the darkness. But maybe this new faith can tell us what's out there, what waits for us after our time in the hall; maybe it's worth a try.

Well, this seems to have done the trick. And once it looks as if that's the way things are heading, Coifi, the chief priest—the guy with his eye on the king's favor—he's the first one to step up. He's a priest, which means he's not technically allowed to bear arms; he's not even supposed to ride on a stallion. But he's determined to be the first Christian, so what he does is to grab a spear, leap onto a stallion, and ride right to the temple and desecrate the shrine. He thus proclaims his allegiance to the new faith. Coifi is going to waste no time turning his new religious policy into royal favor.

It's a wonderful story. But it's another false start for Christianity, because King Edwin is killed in battle in 632, only five years after the conversion. I mentioned this in the last lecture; this is when the Welsh king Cadwallon allies with the Mercian king Penda, and together, they defeat Edwin. You don't have a Christian king anymore; we have another relapse into paganism; and Paulinus, the chaplain, is forced to flee.

But the future of Christianity in Britain is in Northumbria. After a few years of dynastic squabbles, a new king comes to the throne—a man named Oswald—and he is already a Christian. This is the first time that has happened, that you had someone ascend to the throne who had already converted to Christianity beforehand. How did that happen?

Remember, I've mentioned a few times [that] Northumbria is made up of two kingdoms, Deira and Bernicia? Well, throughout this period, the two halves of Northumbria are competing for the throne. Edwin had belonged to one of these branches; Oswald belongs to the other. While Edwin had been king, Oswald was in exile. He spends his exile in the north, among the Picts and the Scots. These peoples are Christian already, and they have been evangelized out of the great monastery at Iona. Iona had been founded in the mid-6th century by the Irish monk St. Columba.

So when Oswald comes to the throne in Northumbria, he brings with him these very close connections to Iona and to the Christian churches in Ireland and Scotland. When he wants to set up the church in his own kingdom, he looks north. Oswald asks monks from Iona to come and found a new monastery in Northumbria, and they found it at Lindisfarne, on a little island off the Northumbrian coast. They send a man named St. Aidan, and he sets up

this new church. Lindisfarne is the church out of which the rest of England is evangelized. The monks from Lindisfarne spread out to other parts of Britain and convert [them] to Christianity. Mercia is the last to convert, in the middle of the 7th century.

So by this point, most of England is at least nominally Christian. But it does pose a problem that the north of England has been converted out of Iona and Lindisfarne rather than out of Canterbury. This is because the style of Christianity practiced in the north and in the south is different in a number of important ways. These are differences between the so-called "Celtic" churches of Ireland and Scotland and the Roman-oriented churches of the south.

One of the most physically obvious differences [has] to do with monks. Monks in the two respective churches wore a different kind of tonsure. The tonsure is the special haircut that monks get that marks them out from laymen. The Roman tonsure is pretty much what, I think, we're familiar with now when we think of a monk; you shave a circle on the top of your head. The Celtic tonsure is very different. What you would do is to shave the whole top of your head, and you would leave the hair growing long on the back and sides. This might seem like a pretty insignificant difference, but people at the time got fairly exercised about it.

The more important difference between the two churches, though, is over the date on which to celebrate Easter. Easter is a so-called "movable feast"; that is, it's not always on the same date on the calendar, the way Christmas is. Christmas is always on December 25. Easter has to be on a Sunday, for one thing. You don't always have Sundays on the same date on the calendar. Over the centuries, there had been lots of discussion about when to celebrate Easter, and there were various methods for determining the date [that] had been tried at various churches. In the 6th century, the church in Rome adopts a new method for calculating the date of Easter. But in the Celtic areas, like Ireland and Scotland, there's kind of a conservative reaction against the change. They've been celebrating Easter a certain way for a long time; why change now? It's not broke; why should we fix it? So a lot of churches refused to change their method, including Iona and Lindisfarne. So you had a situation in England where the date of Easter could be different in different

places, depending on whether you had been converted out of Canterbury or out of Lindisfarne.

This can cause problems, say, if you have a woman from one part of England marry a man from another part of England, and that's just what happened when Oswald's successor, King Oswiu, married a southern princess. Now the king and the queen are celebrating Easter at different times in the same court. So it's Easter for one; it's still Lent for the other; you still have to be fasting for Lent; what do you serve for dinner? Worse than this, there's disunity among the king's followers. There, again, is the question of cohesion among the warriors. King Oswiu decides that for the good of the kingdom, the question of which date of Easter to follow needs to be settled once and for all.

So he calls a summit meeting. All the great nobles and churchmen of the kingdom meet at the great monastery of Whitby. Whitby was a double-monastery; it has monks and nuns, and it's ruled over by a wonderful princess named Hild, a very formidable woman. So there they are at Whitby, and their job is to decide, which way do we go on the Easter question? The king sets up a debate between two churchmen representing, respectively, the Celtic point of view and the Roman point of view.

For the Celtic side, we have St. Colman, a monk from Lindisfarne. He argues that we should follow the Celtic Easter because that's the tradition that has been handed down to us by our very powerful patron, St. Columba, who had founded Iona. If it was good enough for St. Columba, it's good enough for us.

For the Roman side, we have St. Wilfrid. He's an Anglo-Saxon cleric; he'd been educated abroad, and he definitely has the Roman take on the question. He responds to St. Colman this way: All right, you've got St. Columba; we've got St. Peter. He means, the Roman church is the special church founded by St. Peter, [and] St. Peter is the keeper of the keys to heaven, so no one is more important than Peter. It's an appeal to hierarchy. Our saint takes precedence over your saint. We've got the keys to heaven; what do you have?

This argument makes sense to the king. It's definitely something a king can understand. So King Oswiu decides to go with Rome. This decision has enormous consequences for English history. It means that from now on, the English church is going to look south rather than north, across the Channel rather than to Ireland or Scotland. It's going to be part of the European mainstream; this is not the last time that we're going to see that England has to choose between north and south. It also means England is going to have a close connection to the papacy. After the decision to go with the Roman Easter, English churches start to play up their papal connections as much as they can, especially Canterbury, of course—they've got a good justification for doing so. Although England, thus, has really been converted mostly out of Lindisfarne, the story they want to remember is the one about St. Augustine's mission from Pope Gregory.

But the time when Northumbria is under the influence of the Celtic church bears great fruit artistically. This is the period of some of the most beautiful manuscripts produced in England, such as the Book of Durrow and the Lindisfarne Gospels. They're heavily influenced by artistic techniques in Ireland, and of course, they spread to Wyona and then to Northumbria. This period is so rich artistically that scholars call it the Northumbrian Renaissance.

At the same time, the new Roman orientation of the Northumbrian church means channels to Rome for learning open up. Northumbrian abbots travel to Rome to acquire books for their libraries. One of the great beneficiaries of this development is our friend the Venerable Bede; he has all the books he needs. He can sit in Jarrow and write works of tremendous erudition, including, of course, *The Ecclesiastical History*. It's thanks to his work that I've been able to tell you everything that I talked about in this lecture.

But of course, Bede's experience as a sheltered, educated monk was far removed from that of the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons, and we're going to turn to them in our next lecture.

Work and Faith in Anglo-Saxon England

Lecture 5

To call someone “churlish” is not a compliment. It can mean coarse, rude, inappropriate, that sort of thing. The word “churl” in modern English is a kind of fossilized record of [Anglo-Saxon] social snobbery, because people at the top of society tended to associate everything negative with people at the bottom.

Daily life could be very different across 7th- and 8th-century Anglo-Saxon England depending on a number of factors. Obviously, socioeconomic class could make a big difference, but so did geography—not only which kingdom you lived in, but which village. Lifestyles could vary enormously even in neighboring villages, which is important to keep in mind as we examine the details of ordinary English people’s lives.

What was it like to be an Anglo-Saxon king? More than anything else, it was dangerous. While a king’s son (not necessarily the eldest) was often the presumed heir, his succession was by no means guaranteed. For example, in the ruling house of Wessex, there were five 8th-century kings in a row who had no clear claims to the throne that we can find. The overwhelming fact of life for a king was that he might have to fight to stay in power. Death in battle and assassination were common; enemies abounded both within and without the court.

There seems to have been an informal pecking order within the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy. The top dog at any one time was called the **bretwalda**, meaning “Britain ruler,” But bretwalda was not an official title per se; it was used more as a compliment or term of deference among leaders. Being considered a bretwalda meant you might have less to fear from your rivals, and they would have more to fear from you. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* lists the bretwaldas from the late 6th century to the early 9th, and the list roughly matches other evidence about the center of political gravity shifting in England during the period: In the early 7th century, King Ethelbert of Kent, the first royal convert to Christianity, was bretwalda; in the mid 7th century,

the honor shifted to the kings of Northumbria. Later, as later lectures will support, Mercia and then Wessex took prominence.

Materially speaking, the lives of kings could be pretty comfortable. Most construction, including royal halls and forts, was of timber, so we don't really have many surviving structures. Old Yeavering, in the north of England, is one of the few exceptions; it was probably the Northumbrian royal palace. The palace complex contained four great halls, each about 300 square meters in area. We know that kings' halls hosted great feasts, which demonstrated the kings' wealth and power. Anglo-Saxon poems often praise queens as cupbearers, dispensers of mead, and we know the king's followers were forbidden to draw weapons where drinking was going on. Anglo-Saxon culture took drinking extremely seriously. The kings paid for all this feasting by collecting tribute from the territories they ruled. Each territory had a tribute center where produce was collected; one such site, called Higham Ferrers, has been excavated in Mercia. It had various storage buildings, a cattle enclosure, ovens, a mill, and a few residences for permanent staff. So there was quite an elaborate infrastructure supporting the lifestyle of these Anglo-Saxon kings.

We have good reason to wonder how "Christian" were the people who had officially embraced Christianity.

The king's closest followers, or **thegns**, were the core of his military entourage. They were prosperous men, but since their power depended on the king's, they had many of the same worries and enemies. Originally, the thegns lived at court full time; later in the period, they acquired landed estates from the king and might be absent from court for long periods. When at court, they had to worry about what was going on back at their estates, and while at their estates, they had to worry about what was going on at court. So it could be a little nerve-wracking to be a thegn. But the basic similarity between kings and thegns was that they were supported by the people at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Anglo-Saxon England was a hierarchical society and was a society very comfortable with the institution of slavery. Many estates were worked by

slaves under the supervision of a reeve, or overseer. Almost anyone could wind up a slave; for example, you could be taken as the spoils of war, or you might sell yourself or family members into service when you had no other means of support. Most people were free farmers known as ***ceorls***, from which we get the word "churl." These farmers lived in small villages of no more than a few hundred souls. They mostly lived in timber longhouses waterproofed with wattle and daub—essentially, mud and sticks. Farming technology was very primitive—plows were inefficient, fertilizer was scarce, livestock was expensive to maintain, and productivity was low.

Analysis of Anglo-Saxon cemetery remains tells us a lot about the health of the general population. In some regions, teeth and bones show evidence of poor nutrition, overwork, and disease. In others, a cemetery indicates a lot of the locals lived healthy lives to a ripe old age. But while there were some fortunate exceptions, it's fair to say that life for the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons was "nasty, brutish, and short."

While the thegns often followed their kings quickly in converting to Christianity, it took longer for the faith to trickle down to the working populace and we have good reason to wonder how "Christian" were the people who had officially embraced Christianity. The spectacular warlord's ship burial at Sutton Hoo was probably one of the last of its kind; as

Christian Faith, Pagan Charms

A mid-10th-century medical manuscript called *Bald's Leechbook* suggests two different ways to cure a horse or cow who has been shot by an elf—no doubt a common and vexing condition. First it says, "If a horse or other cattle is [elf]shot, take dock seed and Scottish wax and let a man sing twelve masses over [them]; and put holy water on the horse or cattle." Option two is to "take an eye of a broken needle, give the horse a prick with in the ribs; no harm shall come." This wonderful mixture of pagan magic and reverence for Christian symbols like masses and holy water paints a clear picture of the ways the Anglo-Saxons adapted Christianity to their own culture.

Christianity spread, the burial of elaborate grave goods declined. Yet we find individuals buried wearing Thor's hammer amulets well into the supposedly Christian period. Does this mean there were still a lot of Thor supporters around, or were these objects considered traditional, and people didn't want to stop wearing them? We cannot know for certain.

One reason the Anglo-Saxons were comfortable mixing paganism and Christianity may have been that they didn't see them as all that different. Take, for example, the Franks Casket (named for its 19th-century owner, Augustus Franks, not the Frankish people). This small ivory box from the early 8th century may have been a saint's reliquary, but one side is carved with scenes from the brutal, violent German myth of Weland the Smith, while the other shows the baby Jesus being visited by the Magi. On the surface, that would seem a startling juxtaposition. On the other, both are stories about lordship—Christ the good king and Weland's master the terrible one. Perhaps the message is about which sort deserved obedience, a very Germanic ethic grafted onto Roman stock.

One significant reason why the Christian faith did not make faster progress in England was how difficult it was to create a Christian infrastructure in a largely rural area, where the villages were spread so far apart and the population density was so low, compared with, say, Italy, which was more urbanized and interconnected. In England, a bishop was in charge of a huge territory, and it was hard for him to oversee all of it. Rather than attempt to build a church in every tiny village, English bishops encouraged the building of minsters, which served a larger area. The minster's clergy usually took turns making a circuit of the surrounding area to minister to the people. But even still, coverage of rural areas was uneven. But England produced its share of saints, who were well-regarded by the people. Monasteries, which by definition were supported by laymen, noble patrons and humble pilgrims alike, were numerous. There was a distinctive form of monastery in England called the double monastery, which was for both monks and nuns and was ruled by an abbess, such as Abbess Hild who presided over Whitby Abbey. The success of Anglo-Saxon monasticism is proof that the Christian faith, in whatever form, had struck deep roots in England by the end of the 7th century. ■

Important Terms

bretwalda: Anglo-Saxon title that may have designated the preeminent king among the kingdoms of the heptarchy between the 5th and 9th centuries. The rights of the bretwalda seem to have included tribute, military service, and appearance at his court, but the details of how these rights were exercised are unclear.

ceorl: Anglo-Saxon peasant farmer.

thegn: Important Anglo-Saxon landholder who owed the king military service, attendance at court, and help with administrative tasks. The thegns were the backbone of the royal government on the local level, but their position was undermined in the 11th century by the advent of the housecarles.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Work and Faith in Anglo-Saxon England

Lecture 5—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we looked at how England converted to Christianity. Now that we've got the English more or less Christianized, I want to take a little detour from our chronological narrative to do something I promised to do at the very beginning of the course, which is to stop periodically and look at the question of what daily life was like for English men and women.

We'll look at English society roughly in the 7th and 8th centuries; we'll look at the whole social spectrum, from top to bottom. But really the important part of the lecture will be the chance to focus on people on the bottom of the social ladder. We'll pay plenty of attention to them. Along the way, we'll look both at the material aspects of life and at the spiritual aspects of life. What were the conditions of daily living, but also, what are the ways in which people might find solace in their faith, and what was the practice of that faith like? That's what I want to cover in this lecture.

The first point I want to make is [that] daily life in Anglo-Saxon England could be very different depending on a number of factors. One was your social class. It obviously made a very big difference if you were rich versus if you were poor. But it could also make a big difference what part of the country you were from or even what village. The health and prosperity of Anglo-Saxon communities could vary a lot, even if they were quite close to one another. So let's keep in mind that within the general outlines of what I'm going to talk about, there's enormous variation.

Let's start at the top of the social hierarchy and we'll work our way downwards. What's it like to be an Anglo-Saxon king? Well, the most important thing to say is that it could be very, very dangerous. I've mentioned a few times that there wasn't a very well-established system to decide who's going to succeed to the throne. There's a general presumption that it's going to be a son of the previous king, but there were many, many instances where that isn't what happened. For example, the ruling house of Wessex, known as the line of Cerdic, disappears from view for most of the 8th century. There are five kings in a row [that] we don't have any idea who they are; we don't

know if they have royal connections or not. They may simply have been powerful enough to make themselves king, or maybe they're related to the royal family so distantly that we can't figure out how anymore. There's not a lot of dynastic stability.

But the overwhelming fact of life for a king is that he might have to fight to stay in power. Death in battle is common; we've seen that already with King Edwin of Northumbria. Also, assassination was something that Anglo-Saxon kings had very good reason to be afraid of. For example, King Ethelbald of Mercia was murdered by night in 757 by his own bodyguard. His story hints that there were maybe some irregularities in his private life that may somehow have led to the murder. There is the record of a gift of land that the king gave to an abbess in Mercia "because he had stabbed—or smitten—her kinsman." So this gift of land is a payoff, as in the wergild system we described in a previous lecture. It's possible that the king had gotten himself involved in a deadly feud with a powerful Mercian family. It obviously had to be powerful if an abbess belonged to it, because an abbess is going to necessarily come from a powerful family. So it's thus dangerous to be the king.

You might have to spend your time worrying either about external enemies, like King Edwin, or internal enemies, like King Ethelbald. What do you do the rest of the time? Mostly kings are just trying to maintain their power with respect to other kings. There seems to have been a kind of informal pecking order within the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy about which king is preeminent at any one time. This competition for supremacy is about being the top dog, and the English have a word for it: "bretwalda." So what's a "bretwalda"? It's an Anglo-Saxon term, and loosely, it means "Britain ruler," the person who is supreme in Britain. And in a later text, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, we have a list, and it supposedly contains all the bretwaldas of this period, starting from the late 6th century and going down to the early 9th century.

What does it mean to be a bretwalda? People used to think that this is some kind of official office that kings compete for, a kind of acknowledgment [that] you are the most powerful king in Britain at the moment. But scholars don't really think this any more. They think the title is a lot more informal than that; it's a kind of a compliment you might pay to a ruler, perhaps when

you write a flattering poem about him. So there's really not the office of bretwalda in any official sense, but clearly, kings want to be thought of as bretwalda. Being powerful enough to be considered bretwalda is nice because it means you might have less to fear from your rivals, and they might have more to fear from you.

And the list of bretwaldas in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* does show a pattern that roughly represents the political center of gravity in England as it shifts over time: Starting from the early 7th century in Kent, with King Ethelbert, the first convert to Christianity; then we go up to Northumbria in the mid-7th century—we talked about Northumbria last time. And then we'll see in the next lecture how things shift again to Mercia and then to Wessex. So the Anglo-Saxon kings are always trying to maintain their position with regard to the other kings, and they're trying to defend themselves against attack, from inside and out.

Materially speaking, the lives of kings could be pretty comfortable. You'll remember the story that we heard in the last lecture when King Edwin's follower is comparing life to a sparrow flying in and out of the king's hall. Well, in the story, the king's hall is a very good place to be; you want to be in the king's hall. We don't have a lot of records of what these halls were like physically speaking because they don't survive; they were all made of timber. But there is a remarkable site that has been excavated in the north of England at Old Yeavering, and it's probably the very Northumbrian royal palace where the conversion of Northumbria under King Edwin took place. We've got the postholes in the ground, so we can see how big the buildings were in this compound. There are four great halls, each of which is 300 square meters in area. These are very substantial buildings.

Now, remember how King Edwin's rather philosophical follower talks about how nice it is in the king's hall? One reason he thought it was so great in the king's hall may have been the fact that that's where feasting occurred. This is one of the big ways in which kings show how rich and powerful they are. It's a primitive society; food is scarce, so you show your power by consuming food in abundance. And not just food—alcohol is probably just as important as food. In Anglo-Saxon poems, queens are praised for being cupbearers. They're the ones who brought around the drink; they were dispensers of

mead. And the king's followers seem to have taken plenty of advantage of what was on offer; we actually have rules that survive from this period about not drawing weapons where drinking was going on. Clearly, a very good idea. It's a culture that takes drinking extremely seriously.

But all of that display is expensive. How can the kings afford all this? By the period we're talking about, the kings have managed to organize their lands into territories that owe tribute, and each of these territories would have a tribute center where people would have to bring the produce that they owed to the king. Archaeologists have excavated one of these tribute centers in Mercia, at a place called Higham Ferrers in Northamptonshire. It had various buildings for gathering in different kinds of foodstuffs. It had a cattle enclosure for livestock; if what you owed the king was cattle, you could bring them there, and they would go into the enclosure. There were ovens; there was a mill; and there were also residences for a small permanent staff. So there's quite an elaborate infrastructure that is supporting the lifestyle of these Anglo-Saxon kings.

Now, the kings are not in these halls alone, and that brings me to the next level down in the social hierarchy, to the king's followers or nobles, called the "thegns." We've seen the thegns in action already. These are the people who give the king advice: whether to convert to Christianity, whether to go to war against the Mercians, that sort of thing. These are prosperous men, but they're dependent on the king for power—he gives them land—so life for them could be as precarious as it was for the kings themselves. They're subject to the same dangers of military campaigns that the king is. That's the reason that he gives them favors; he wants them to be soldiers.

And thegns have to travel, just like kings. Quite often, they have more than one estate that they have to worry about, so they would be itinerant. They would travel from one estate to another, and at each estate, they would check on how things were going with the agricultural labor on the estate, and they might eat up some of the produce at the same time. It was probably a very busy, very anxious time for the people living on the estate, when the lord shows up periodically to check on them. So basically, the lifestyles of kings and lords are similar. They're supported by people at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

Let's talk now about the people who are working hard to pay for the people at the top, because kings and lords are a very tiny proportion of the population. What about those workers on the estates? Many of them were slaves. I've mentioned this is a hierarchical society. It's a society very comfortable with the institution of slavery. A lot of these estates owned by the nobles would be worked by slaves under the supervision of a reeve, who was basically an overseer. Nobles have reeves on their estates, just like kings. The life of a slave under these reeves could obviously be very harsh. And slavery is something that can happen to almost anyone. If you fall into the wrong hands in war [or] if you're hit by hard times, you might end up a slave.

But slaves are never the majority of the population. Most of the people are rather humble "free" farmers; they spend all their time raising crops and livestock. They might owe tribute, but they're also working for themselves. These people are known as "ceorls." Now, we have a word "churl" in modern English; it's not a nice word. To call someone "churlish" is not a compliment. It can mean coarse, rude, inappropriate, that sort of thing. Really, the word "churl," as we use it in modern English, is kind of a fossilized record of social snobbery, because people at the top of society tend to associate people at the bottom of society with everything negative.

What's it like for these farmers? (I don't think we'll call them ceorls; it's just too confusing.) They mostly live in fairly small villages—between a couple of dozen and a few hundred people. Again, we don't have a whole lot evidence of what their houses were like, but again, we do have postholes and we do have aerial photography, that sort of thing. They mostly built longhouses of timber, and they're made somewhat waterproof by wattle and daub. "Wattle and daub" is the fancy archaeological term for "mud and sticks," basically. They use those to make the houses a little bit more impervious to the elements. These longhouses could be quite large, as big as 16 by 7 meters; that's quite a reasonable footprint. They also built more specialized buildings—sheds for storage, workshops, that sort of thing. So they can be reasonably well housed, many of them.

Almost all of their effort would have to have been spent making a living out of the soil. One basic fact about farming in this period is [that] technology is very primitive. They can't plow a very deep furrow; they don't have horse-

collars. This means they can't take the best advantage of the traction of their animals. They also don't have a very effective system of crop rotation. At this period, they basically have a two-field system: They would put a crop in the field one year; they would let the field lie fallow the next. This means only half their land is in productive use at any one time. They also don't have very effective fertilizers. Really, the best fertilizer they have is animal manure, but there's a chronic shortage of that because livestock is scarce. It's expensive to maintain livestock. You have to feed them over the winter; you have to set aside hay for them. That means you don't have an excess of livestock [and] you don't have enough manure, perhaps, to fertilize the fields. It can be kind of a vicious cycle. And it means that crop yields in this period are extremely low, and many Anglo-Saxon communities are hovering on the brink of starvation a lot of the time. We're really talking about subsistence.

But we have evidence from Anglo-Saxon cemeteries that the fate of these communities could vary quite a lot. Archaeologists have done a lot of work on these cemeteries. They've analyzed the human remains in the cemeteries, and they've been able to tell quite a lot about the health of the population in the settlements from which the people came. Some cemeteries show signs of serious stress on the population. If you analyze the teeth and bones in these burials, you can see signs of overwork, signs that people have had to carry heavy loads or pull heavy burdens, maybe a plow, for example. There's also a lot of evidence for bone fractures, some of which have healed badly. The people with these fractures—some of whom lived many years after the injury—must have been in constant pain for years. Scholars figure that most of these injuries probably came from farming accidents; farm work can be very dangerous. You also see signs of disease, [such as] arthritis, [and] various vitamin and mineral deficiencies; this would indicate that the people are not getting a varied enough diet. So it could be very difficult, could be very painful to live in Anglo-Saxon England.

On the other hand, there are cemeteries where a lot of the residents of that particular settlement seem to have lived healthy lives to a ripe old age. It's not true that there were no old people in the Middle Ages. What could account for these disparities? There are several possibilities. One is that in a society that's almost completely dependent on agriculture, it matters a lot where you settle. The fertility of the soil can vary, and that can have a huge

impact on the health of the community. Broadly speaking, it's going to be a better life in the lowland plains, where it's easy to farm, than it's going to be in the rocky north and west. But these differences have even been seen in communities that were relatively close together. Soils can vary a lot even in a relatively small area. So that's one possibility.

Another possibility is simply bad luck. A community might be hit by an outbreak of disease, and it might never recover. All over England, there are signs of villages that were abandoned, and this happens right throughout English history. A settlement might reach a tipping point where it's simply no longer viable for people to continue there. So while there are some fortunate exceptions, I think it's fair to say that for the vast majority of Anglo-Saxons, life can be, if we want to paraphrase Thomas Hobbes, kind of nasty, brutish, and short.

But there may have been some consolations on the spiritual level that made up for the very tough physical environment that people have to cope with. Here I want to turn, for the remainder of the lecture, to what religion may have had to offer to the Anglo-Saxons. And we'll pick up here on what we talked about in the last lecture.

At that point, we talked about conversion as a top-down process. We talked about how the decision of the king to convert to Christianity sets the tone for the rest of society. Of course, the first people to convert are the king's followers, the thegns. Then they take Christianity out to their estates. But it does take a while for the new faith to trickle down to the people on the bottom of the social hierarchy. And we have good reason to wonder how "Christian" the people are who have officially embraced Christianity.

What's our evidence for the process being gradual? One thing is [that] it takes a long time for people to change their personal religious habits. Here, archaeology can be extremely helpful. I talked last time about the spectacular burial site at Sutton Hoo. Well, it's probably one of the last of its kind. As people convert to Christianity, they stop having themselves buried with grave goods. That's a custom associated with paganism; Christians are not supposed to do that. This is a terrible loss to archaeology. Archaeologists

hate it when a community converts to Christianity because all of a sudden they have a lot less data!

But even though you don't have pagan grave goods any more, you do still find with people quite a number of Thor's hammer amulets, even rather late in the period of supposed conversion. What are we supposed to make of this? Does it mean that there are still quite a few hard-core supporters of Thor around? Or does it mean these objects are traditional, [and] people don't want to stop wearing them? Maybe their grandfather gave it to them. Regardless, I think it tells us that there's a long period when there's still some fluctuating going on in religious identity; certainly, not everybody is 100 percent Christian the way the missionaries might like to see them.

Another way you can tell that there's a lot of paganism surviving is in some of the magical charms that survive; these are in manuscripts from quite a bit later in the period, so if you still have them preserved later on, it's probably even more the case that they're common in this early period we're talking about now. These are a little bit similar in a way to the curse tablets that I talked about from Roman Bath. These are ways of dealing with a situation that you can't cope with otherwise. You're calling on some sort of supernatural force to help you deal with a problem, often a health problem. In this case, in the case of these charms, what you get, really, is an instruction booklet to deal with your specific problem. Sometimes these charms contain a very endearing mixture of the new faith and the old.

I've got a great example of this for you. This is from a mid-10th-century medical manuscript called *Bald's Leechbook*. It gives you two choices of what to do to cure a horse or a cow who is shot by an elf. I bet you've always wondered what you're supposed to do in that situation. Well, you've got two options. Here's the first: "If a horse or other cattle is [elf]shot, take dock seed and Scottish wax and let a man sing twelve masses over [them]; and put holy water on the horse or cattle. Have the herbs always with you." So that's option 1. You can also try option 2: "For the same affliction, give the horse a prick in the ribs with the eye of a broken needle; no harm shall come." All right, problem solved. I think there's a wonderful mixture in this of pagan magic but also a kind of a respect for Christian symbols: You've got holy water; you've got masses. One gets the sense that the Anglo-Saxons are just

as happy to add some new Christian elements into the repertoire, but they're necessarily going to throw the baby out with the bath water. This is along the same lines, I think, as King Raedwald and his temple that mixes pagan and Christian worship in one location.

Now, one reason, I think, that the Anglo-Saxons are comfortable mixing paganism and Christianity is that they don't really see them as all that different. This might seem a rather startling proposition, [and] it certainly would have distressed some of the churchmen of the time. But there can often be a pretty big divide between the way a religion is preached by clerics and the way it's experienced by the laity, and I think we have a good example of this that I think tells us a lot about how Christianity gets a foothold in Anglo-Saxon society and why it takes so long for paganism to go away completely.

I want to talk for a moment about an object. It's called the Franks Casket. The name of the object is confusing; it doesn't have anything at all to do with the people called the Franks, the people who lived in Gaul and gave their name to the kingdom of the Franks. It's just called the Franks Casket because in the 19th century, it was briefly owned by somebody named Augustus Franks. What it is, is a small ivory box; it's only 229 millimeters long and 129 millimeters high. It seems to date from the early 8th century; probably it's a product of the Northumbrian Renaissance. It may have been a reliquary; that is, it may have been intended to hold relics, bodily remains of the saints. The curious thing about it is that on it is carved scenes from the life of Christ but also scenes from Roman history and scenes from Germanic mythology. It's a kind of multicultural catchall. It's got everything.

The really striking thing is which Germanic myth the casket represents. It's the story of Weland the Smith. This was a very well known story. Weland was a smith who was captured by the evil king Nithhad. Nithhad lamed Weland and forced him to work for the king making beautiful objects. Weland eventually escapes, but before that, he exacts a terrible revenge for the ill treatment he has suffered. When the king's two sons come to check on Weland's work, he kills them, and he makes their skulls into cups, and he serves drink in these cups to their father, the king. He turns their eyes into gems and gives them to their mother as a gift. When the king's daughter

comes to Weland to get a ring repaired, he drugs her, and rapes her, and impregnates her, and only then does he make his escape.

That's the story on one side of the Franks Casket. On the other side, we have the gifts of the magi. On the surface, that would seem to be a pretty startling juxtaposition. But one scholar of Anglo-Saxon England has made a very convincing case that what we see here is actually evidence for the fact that English people in the 8th century don't really see a lot of difference between the story of Weland and the story of Christ—certainly, not as much as you might think. For them, both stories are about lordship, and on the Franks Casket, you have good lordship and bad lordship. Christ is a good lord. You're supposed to be loyal to him; you bring him gifts. But King Nithhad is a bad lord. He mistreats his followers, and on him, you can exact a terrible revenge. In fact, there's a lot of textual evidence that people in this period in England were wrestling very hard with Christian notions of forgiveness and turning the other cheek, and they were pretty much concluding that that was a part of the Bible that you didn't have to take literally. In other words, they're taking Christianity and they're adapting it to fit the warrior ethos that they're used to. This makes it a lot more palatable for them to accept Christianity. So that's some of the evidence that the acceptance of Christianity is gradual and that the kind of Christianity people practiced is very much influenced by their existing culture.

One big reason why the Christian faith doesn't make faster progress is that it's just very difficult to create the kind of infrastructure you need in a big area like England when it's overwhelmingly rural. It's hard to set up a network of churches that is going to cover the whole country. That is going to take a very long time.

English church leaders take a rather sensible approach to the problem of covering so much territory. Rather than attempt the task of building little churches in every tiny village—they would never have managed that—instead, they encourage the building of larger churches, known as "minsters," that would serve a rather extensive area round about. They'd be staffed by several priests at least. Sometimes these priests were following a religious rule—they were monks—sometimes not; it varied. But these priests

would take it in turn to make a circuit of the surrounding area to minister to the people.

The problem with these minster churches is that there isn't one overarching plan for the whole country; there isn't even one whole plan for a diocese. They're very ad hoc. The coverage could be uneven. If you're lucky, you live near one; if you're not, you might have no church that you could reasonably get to on a regular basis. So some people have very abundant religious provision; others have none at all.

Despite the lack of a well-planned and extensive infrastructure, the Anglo-Saxon church does seem to have produced its share of saints. Their biographies demonstrate that they're very revered by the lay faithful. For example, *The Life of St. Cuthbert*—he lived in the late 7th century—talks about people crowding around visiting clerics whenever they appear in a village. There are stories of miracles that the saints performed, and in these miracles, you see the whole social hierarchy represented, from top to bottom; everybody is involved in the practice of the faith.

Monasteries are very numerous in Anglo-Saxon England, and that means that people are supporting them financially; they couldn't have existed otherwise. Monasteries are founded on lands given to them by kings or nobles. But the humbler sort of people are also supporting monasteries by giving alms when they visit them on pilgrimage. These monasteries are sometimes just for men, sometimes just for women, but there's also this very distinctive form of monastery in England called the double-monastery, which is for monks and nuns, ruled by an abbess. We've already encountered one of these; this is the great double-monastery at Whitby, ruled over by Abbess Hild, where the Synod of Whitby took place. Some of these monastic communities were large [and] many were tiny, but all of them depended on the support of the lay community. The success of Anglo-Saxon monasticism is certainly proof that the Christian faith, however people choose to believe in it, however they choose to practice it, had struck deep roots by the end of the 7th century in England. People believe it's worth supporting.

To sum up what we've covered today: Life in Anglo-Saxon England varied depending on where you are on the social hierarchy and where you are

physically, what community you live in. It could be harsh [and] it could be often violent, particularly for the people at the top who are playing for the biggest stakes. But the Christian faith does give people in Anglo-Saxon England a meaningful frame of reference. It penetrates their lives to an increasing degree and it probably gives them some spiritual consolation for the material privations that they suffered.

They were going to need all the solace they could get, because England was about to be invaded. We'll meet the new invaders next time.

The Viking Invasions
Lecture 6

The first really effective effort to cope with the Vikings … led directly to the unifying of all the English kingdoms under one dynasty. So the Vikings are really responsible in the end for the creation of the single kingdom called England.

When we talked about the conversion of England to Christianity, we focused on Northumbria, which in the 7th and early 8th centuries was the most powerful kingdom in England. But a series of ineffectual kings led Northumbria into decline in the early 8th century, and the torch passed to Mercia and a king named Offa.

During Offa's rule, which lasted nearly four decades, Mercia was unquestionably the most important and most powerful of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. One of the ways we measure the power of Anglo-Saxon leadership was the amount of tribute they commanded—tribute in all honesty being a form of protection money. Offa of Mercia was very good at exacting tribute. His military renown attracted the best soldiers, which enhanced his prestige and power among the kingdoms, and so on. If Offa showed up in your kingdom with these very able soldiers, you'd probably be quite willing to pay him tribute. The Tribal Hidage recorded what the different kingdoms in southern and central England had to pay Offa in tribute. A **hide** was a unit of land—notionally the amount of land that could sustain one family. The hide could vary in size depending on the part of the country you were in and the relative land fertility.

Offa seems to have been the first king in English history to invest massively in public infrastructure. He used his wealth to build a huge earthwork, called Offa's Dyke, on the western border of Mercia, near what is now the border of England and Wales. At 70 miles, it was the longest defensive structure built in Britain since Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall, and was clearly carefully planned: Its route takes advantage of the natural contours of the land to offer clear views of the west (and any potential Welsh encroachment) at every point along its length. Impressive as the

dyke was, it is irrefutable evidence that, for all his power over the Anglo-Saxons, Offa was unable to subdue the Welsh.

Offa was also the only Anglo-Saxon king who corresponded with the Emperor Charlemagne. They corresponded over a church controversy about the veneration of images, and there was even serious talk about arranging a marriage alliance between their two families.

Alas, Offa's successors did not live up to his example, and after his death, the locus of power in England shifted to Wessex. At that time, Wessex was still expanding its boundaries to the southwest, gathering power and wealth. By the early 9th century, the kingdom stretched from near modern Reading to the southwestern tip of Cornwall. But the crucial factor again was leadership. King Egbert, who ruled from 802 to 839, completed the conquest of Cornwall, defeated the Mercian army, and for a time even controlled London. Finally, unlike Offa and many of the other kings we have discussed, his successors were equally competent.

This attack on the heart of English Christianity seemed to witnesses like the end of the world.

Meanwhile, in the late 8th century, Britain began suffering from a series of attacks by raiders from Scandinavia whom the Anglo-Saxons called the Northmen and we call the Vikings. No one is sure why the raids began; scholars' best guess is a scarcity of resources in their homelands. The attacks began off the Dorset coast in Wessex in 787, but the most famous raid of the period happened in 793. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for that year records terrible portents in Northumbria, including fiery dragons flying through the air, followed by a famine; and then, to top it all off, "the raiding of the heathen miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne Island by looting and slaughter."

The Lindisfarne Stone, a carving that may have been erected at Lindisfarne to commemorate the dead, shows what looks like a Viking raid on one side and the biblical Last Judgment on the other. This attack on the heart of English Christianity seemed to witnesses like the end of the world. There has been

a recent scholarly effort to rehabilitate the Vikings' image. The argument runs that we have a distorted picture of how devastating the Vikings were because they tended to target churches, and most of the contemporary texts we have describing the raids were written by churchmen. These scholars point out that many Vikings engaged in peaceful trading as well as raiding. But we should not minimize the psychological impact of raids like the one on Lindisfarne.

At first, the Vikings raided in a scattershot fashion, working in small bands of about three boats and 50 men, grabbing what loot and slaves they could find, and departing quickly. Starting in the 840s, the Vikings began to consolidate their forces into much larger fleets carrying a thousand men or more. What had changed, once again, was leadership, men who could attract and hold the loyalty of many bands of raiders at once. On the one hand, an enemy like this is a bigger target. It can't sneak up on you the way a small band can. On the other hand, you can do virtually nothing to stop it.

In 850, a large group of Danish Vikings spent the winter on the island of Thanet, off the coast of Kent, rather than dispersing to their homes in the usual manner. In the spring, that band raided Canterbury; they raided London and drove the king of Mercia out of the city. The Wessex army finally beat them back. Then in 865, the *micel*, or Great Army, invaded, intent not on plunder but on conquest. Starting near York, one by one, they conquered all the English kingdoms except for Wessex. Then the men of the Great Army sent for their wives, children, and retainers in Denmark. They were settling down. Yorkshire and East Anglia were swamped by Danish settlers; Mercia's king, Ceolwulf, gave up lands now known as the Five Boroughs, including the towns of Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham, Leicester and Derby, to the Vikings in order to keep his crown. The cultural impact of Danish settlement was tremendous, touching everything from language to political and legal customs; in fact, the English called these Scandinavian territories the **Danelaw**. After a time, the new settlers integrated themselves peacefully among the Anglo-Saxons in the Danelaw, but the warfare was not over yet. Wessex still remained out of the Vikings' grasp. ■

Important Terms

Danelaw: The areas of northern, central, and eastern England that were heavily settled by the Danes beginning in the 9th century. In these areas, Danish law was followed rather than English law, and Danish units of land measurement were in use.

hide: An Anglo-Saxon unit of land, originally consisting of enough land to support a single peasant family; the size of the hide varied by region. Hides were used to assess taxes and military obligations.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Viking Invasions
Lecture 6—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we took a pause in our chronological narrative to look at life in Anglo-Saxon England in the 7th and 8th centuries. We looked at life from a material point of view but also from a spiritual point of view. This time, we're going to pick up the narrative again. We're going to look at how the center of political gravity shifted in the 8th century.

In the 7th century, Northumbria had been the most powerful kingdom, but in the 8th century, you see the rise of the kingdom of Mercia in the middle part of England; Mercia takes over as the rising power, and then in the early 9th century, Wessex takes over from Mercia. But things got difficult for all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the 9th century because of the Vikings. The arrival of the Vikings is a major watershed in English history; it's the second of the great transformations that we've seen. The first was, of course, the end of Roman rule in Britain and the arrival of the Anglo-Saxons. In this lecture, we're going to see the Vikings arrive on the scene, and in the next lecture, we're going to look at the first really effective effort to cope with the Vikings, and this led directly to the unifying of all the English kingdoms under one dynasty. So the Vikings are really responsible, in the end, for the creation of the single kingdom called England. We're going to be talking about Vikings a lot for the next two lectures.

But let's start with what's going on in English politics. When we talked about the conversion of England to Christianity two lectures ago, we spent most of our time talking about Northumbria. In the 7th century and into the early 8th century, the kingdom of Northumbria is the most powerful kingdom in England. Then, Northumbria goes into a decline. This could happen rather quickly to an Anglo-Saxon kingdom. In this case, it was a lack of leadership. If you have a series of ineffectual kings, the kingdom loses momentum, and that's what happened to Northumbria in the early 8th century.

The torch is passed to Mercia. You may remember that last time I talked about a Mercian king [who] was assassinated in 757, probably as part of a private feud that he'd gotten mixed up in. Well, he is replaced on the throne by one of the truly great Anglo-Saxon kings, a man named Offa. Offa's reign

is a good example of how important leadership was. His rule lasted nearly four decades, and during that time, Mercia was unquestionably the most important, most powerful of all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. After his reign, the momentum is going to shift south again, to Wessex.

But I think all this talk of momentum and power begs an important question: What makes a king powerful in Anglo-Saxon England? Well, one of the big indicators of how powerful you are is how much tribute you can collect. In the last lecture, we talked about kings collecting tribute from their own lands. Tribute is simply the money that you can get people to pay you essentially so that you will leave them alone. There's an implicit deal here: If you've give tribute, you're going to get protection in exchange, but it's not really a voluntary arrangement. It's glorified protection money. This is how kings support themselves. But the really powerful kingdoms are able to get other *kingdoms* to pay them tribute. The justification is the same as it is with individual people within your own kingdom. The kingdom *collecting* tribute is going to protect the kingdom *paying* tribute from its enemies. Really, though, the kingdom exacting the tribute is the enemy that the weaker kingdom needs protection from.

Well, Offa of Mercia is very good at exacting tribute. He's able to do this because success breeds success. He attracts a lot of good soldiers because they figure they're going to have successful careers with Offa; they're going to make a lot of money. And if Offa shows up with these very able soldiers, you're going to think it's a good idea to pay tribute to him.

Offa was very systematic about this process of collecting tribute, and we have a great record of the tribute he collected. It's from a document called the Tribal Hidage. It's a record of what the different kingdoms in southern and central England had to pay to Offa. Now, what's a "hide"? A hide is a unit of land; it's notionally the amount of land one family needs to farm in order to sustain itself. The hide could vary in size depending on what part of the country you're in, because the landscape varies [and] the soil varies, so you might need a bigger hide in some areas than you do in others. We're going to meet hides again later on in the course, but for now, it's just important to know that it's a unit of land, and Offa is using that unit to assess the amount of tribute that is owed to him: so much per hide of land.

So Offa has a revenue stream coming in from the other kingdoms in England. What does he do with it? He seems to have been the first king in English history to invest massively in public infrastructure. He built a huge earthwork on the western border of Mercia, the border with Wales. It became known as Offa's Dyke, and it's enormous; it is certainly the longest defensive structure built in Britain since Hadrian's Wall and the Antonine Wall in the 2nd century. It runs north to south for over 70 miles; large sections of it are still visible. It also seems to have been built with great care. The route of the wall takes advantage of the natural contours of the land so that the dyke always gives a view to the west that will guard against surprise attack from Wales.

Now, Offa's Dyke does raise an interesting point. Obviously, Offa has not been able to impose tribute on the Welsh. It's worth remembering [that] the Celtic fringe could be pretty stubborn, but Offa is going to make very sure the Welsh don't cause him any trouble. Building the dyke is a way of protecting his investment, because if the Welsh ravage the lands of western Mercia—if they plunder and burn—there is going to be less tribute coming in for Offa. So it's worth his while to build this dyke.

Another very interesting aspect of Offa's reign is that Offa is the only Anglo-Saxon king who corresponded with Emperor Charlemagne. Charlemagne wanted some help in a church dispute that he was involved in. There was a controversy over the veneration of images, and he wanted Offa's help in getting the English church to take his side. Charlemagne even referred in one letter to Offa as his "friend," so he's kind of trying to butter Offa up. Relations between the two kings were not always harmonious; there were several times that they broke off contact with each other for years at a time. But there was serious talk at several points of a marriage alliance between the two royal families, and even though it didn't come to anything, that's an indication of how prestigious Offa was. In a sense, it's a sign of importance that Offa and Charlemagne were even able to be offended by each other.

But alas, talent does not seem to have run in the Mercian royal family, and the people who succeeded Offa in Mercia are really nobodies. And here, we see again that the quality of royal rulership is absolutely crucial; there's really not a whole lot of administrative machinery to back it up. You follow a king because you are impressed with him, not because there is any kind

of abstract state apparatus that is up and running regardless of the person in charge. For example, if the reeves—the people running the estates—aren't afraid of the king, they're just going to steal from him when he isn't around, and there isn't going to be much tribute to collect. If the king isn't a ruler that other warriors respect, they won't turn out and fight for him, and his lands will get attacked. So if you have one incompetent king, that can spell doom for a royal dynasty.

The initiative shifts after Offa's death to the kingdom of Wessex in the southwest. There are several reasons why Wessex becomes the next great Anglo-Saxon power. One reason is that Wessex still has room to expand to the west and gobble up more territory. Mercia had gone about as far west as it could; we can see that from Offa's Dyke. But during this period, the Wessex kings are slowly but surely conquering the southwestern peninsula of Britain that contains Devon and Cornwall. By the early 9th century, Wessex has finally conquered Cornwall completely. These are areas still inhabited by Celtic peoples. In fact, Cornish, the language of Cornwall, which is very similar to Welsh, was spoken in Cornwall until the 18th century. But what this means—this conquest of Cornwall—is that now you've got new land; you can give it out to followers. You have new tribute to exact. This is one of the best ways for an economy to grow in the early medieval period; you just conquer more territory and you get control of more people.

But I think the crucial factor is leadership. Wessex produces a series of very able leaders in the 9th century. The first of these is King Egbert of Wessex; he's the one who conquers Cornwall. He rules from 802 to 839, so he takes power only a few years after Offa of Mercia dies in 796. Egbert comes from a branch of the Wessex royal family that had been in eclipse for a long time, so he is obviously pretty impressive. He manages to get himself back into power and he has to then rebuild his power base, but he does it very successfully. And in 825, he goes up against Mercia, and he wins. He beats the Mercian army at the Battle of Ellendon, and as a result, he really, at one blow, takes over the whole Mercian hegemony that had been established in the 8th century over the southern part of England. All of the English kingdoms that had been paying tribute to Offa, now they're going to pay tribute to Wessex. This includes the Mercian overlordship of the city of London. Now, Mercia gets it back a few years later, so it goes back and

forth between Mercia and Wessex. It's a prize to be competed for, and it's an indication of how important London is. We're going to talk more about London in the next lecture. So Egbert is a successful king, and his heirs are successful kings. The initiative is definitely with Wessex from now on.

But just as Wessex is struggling with Mercia, a new threat appears in the island of Britain. Raiders from Scandinavia begin attacking Britain in the late 8th century. No one's sure exactly why they appear at precisely this time; it's sort of more or less out of the blue. Scholars think it's possible that they've been driven by a scarcity of resources at home. Scandinavia can be a very tough place to make a living, at least under premodern conditions; there's just not a lot of good farmland. Certainly, what these raiders are after is plunder but also trade to a certain extent. They're willing to make money however they can.

These raiders are, of course, the people that we typically refer to as the Vikings. Now, I need to point out that they would never have called themselves that. "Viking" was an Old Norse word and it meant "to go out raiding," so it was a verb. It wasn't a noun; it was a verb. It described an activity you engaged in. You went out a-viking, and then you went and did something else. For the Scandinavians themselves, this was a perfectly straightforward career choice. The Anglo-Saxons also didn't call them Vikings; they actually called them Northmen because they came out of the north. And of course, the Vikings themselves would have just called themselves Olaf, or Egil, or whatever their names were, but we're going to go ahead and call them the Vikings. It's something we're used to and we're going to stick with it.

At first, nobody knew how serious this threat was going to be. In 787, three longships appeared off the Dorset coast in Wessex. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* just notes that this was the first time the ships of the Northmen were seen off the English coast. But they were a harbinger of things to come.

The most famous Viking raid of this period, the one for which we have a lot of evidence, happened in 793. In that year, the monastery of Lindisfarne, off the coast of Northumbria, was attacked. This seems to have sent a shock wave all over England but also Europe, as well, because Lindisfarne was

such a famous monastery. This was the monastery founded by St. Aidan out of Iona that had converted much of England to Christianity, so it's kind of the mother church of a lot of England. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* entry for 793 records terrible portents in Northumbria that year, including fiery dragons flying through the air; then there was a famine, and then to top it all off, says the *Chronicle*, "the raiding of the heathen miserably devastated God's church in Lindisfarne island by looting and slaughter." So that's pretty bad. But the most influential account of the raid on Lindisfarne is the one that we have preserved in a letter that was written to the Lindisfarne community after the raid to console them.

The letter came from a cleric named Alcuin. He was a Northumbrian by birth, but he'd spent much of his career at the court of Charlemagne. Charlemagne had assembled a kind of dream team of intellectuals. He would go all over Europe and he would recruit the best and the brightest wherever he could find them, and Alcuin fit the bill. He'd been educated in Northumbria—it was still the period of the Northumbrian Renaissance. He was actually born in 735, the same year that the Venerable Bede died.

Then, of course, Alcuin goes off to the continent, but he keeps in touch with his homeland. When he found out about what had happened at Lindisfarne—this was a place he knew very well—he was devastated. He wrote to the community in agonized terms. First, he described the terrible desecration of the church that the Vikings had supposedly carried out. Supposedly, they'd "trampled on the bodies of the saints … like dung in the street." Alcuin goes on to utter a cry of despair: "What assurance is there for the churches of Britain if St. Cuthbert, with so great a number of saints, defends not his own?" St. Cuthbert is the saint I mentioned in the last lecture who went around ministering to humble people in England, and he's the saint to whom Lindisfarne was dedicated.

Now, being a good Christian, Alcuin can't leave it there. He has lots of encouraging things to say about God chastising the ones he loves, etc., etc. But still, you get the sense that the whole experience has been pretty horrific for all concerned. And we have visual evidence to go with these texts. There's a carved stone called the Lindisfarne Stone, and it may have been erected at Lindisfarne to commemorate the victims of the raid. It's badly

damaged; only the top part of the stone survives, but on one side, you can clearly see a group of men carrying out an act of violence, perhaps directed against monks. They're certainly holding weapons. On the other side of the stone, you see the Last Judgment. So that's how cataclysmic this raid is seen to be.

Now, there has been an effort recently among scholars to try to rehabilitate the Vikings. This new argument runs that our picture of the Vikings—how devastating they are—is distorted because of the fact that they tend to target churches. Churches are good targets; they have lots of valuable objects in them: things used in the liturgy—gold chalices, that sort of thing. And other people even stored their valuables there sometimes. So if you asked the Vikings, why do you attack churches, they'd probably say essentially what Dillinger said about robbing banks: "'Cause that's where the money is." And most of the texts that we have were written by churchmen, like Alcuin, and churchmen, of course, are concerned about what happens to other churchmen, and they're far more likely to keep this record of doom and gloom. So a lot of modern scholars point out that there are many Vikings who are engaged in peaceful trading, as well as raiding. They would trade and/or raid as the situation called for. This is all true, but I don't think we should minimize the psychological impact of raids like the one on Lindisfarne. They just weren't supposed to happen—the saints were supposed to protect you—and so they call into question a lot of assumptions about how the world is supposed to work. How safe is anyone if the monks of the Holy Isle are vulnerable?

But the Lindisfarne raid is just the first of many. At first, the Vikings raid in a very scattershot fashion. They'll strike at various points around the British Isles and in Ireland, usually in small groups: no more than a few longboats each, holding maybe 40 to 60 men apiece. These are smash-and-grab raids, very much like the ones that we talked about at the time when Roman rule in Britain is declining. Again, the target of these raids is plunder, but besides plunder, the Vikings are also very interested in slaves. They are very big slave traders. There's a wonderful story that illustrates how the slave trade is just a fact of life in this period, and the Vikings just insert themselves into it. It's about an Irishman named Murchad. He's captured by Viking raiders in Ireland [and] taken to Northumbria, where he's sold to a group of nuns. (Now notice, the nuns have slaves, [and] they don't mind buying them from

Vikings.) But apparently, things get a little too cozy between Murchad and some of the nuns. This is discovered, and as punishment, he is put in a boat and set adrift, whereupon he gets captured by another group of Vikings, who sell him again. At long last, he makes his way back to Ireland, is reunited with his long-suffering wife, and ends his days as a teacher of Latin.

The kinds of raids that Murchad falls victim to are really characteristic of the early period of Viking activity .This phase of small-scale raiding lasts for a few decades, but starting in about the 840s, the scale of Viking operations changes. Vikings begin to consolidate their forces; they form much larger fleets. This is a really dramatic transition. We start out with small groups—maybe a few ships, maybe 100 or so men. In the 840s, you start to see fleets of 50 to 60 boats, and they would carry maybe 1,000 men or more.

What has changed is that leaders of the Vikings have arisen who are personally charismatic, and they have the organizational talent to hold such a huge enterprise together from year to year. Before this, these small-scale groups would raid for a summer, and then they might go their separate ways. Now, you start to see groups that coalesce and they form a kind of a group identity with loyalty to a particular leader. Some of these leaders were obviously very formidable figures indeed. The Great Army that descends on England in the middle of the 9th century is led by a trio of brothers, the sons of Ragnar. The fiercest of these was reputed to be a guy named Ivar the Boneless. Now, nobody knows exactly what that nickname means. What does it mean that he's "the Boneless"? It's one of those real puzzles of medieval history. There are all sorts of speculations about what it meant; one of these possibilities is too rude for me to explain. But one thing we can be pretty sure of: Ivar the Boneless is not a nice guy, and he's scary enough to attract a lot of other very scary guys to follow him.

So this is a very different kind of enemy. On the one hand, an enemy like this is a bigger target. You can see it coming. It's not like the little raids; they might come upon you with no warning. But you do have warning that one of these giant Viking armies is on its way. You can't avoid it. That's the good news. The bad news is that there's not a lot you can do to stop it.

In 850, a large group of Danish Vikings spends the winter on the island of Thanet. This is a major turn of events. Up until this point, as I said, you might get Viking raiders staying for a summer, but they then split up and go home. In 850, for the first time, we see a group of Vikings that doesn't split up, does *not* go back to Scandinavia. Instead, they stay right in easy reach of England, and they're clearly just waiting for a break in the weather before they get down to business. And that's just what happens.

When the spring comes, the Viking army comes ashore. The Vikings raid Canterbury; they raid London; they drive the king of Mercia out of the city. They do suffer defeat at the hands of the army of Wessex, so they're not unbeatable, but they're a very big problem, and they continued to be a problem.

There was some turnover in the leadership of this force, and they don't spend all their time in England; they go back and forth to the continent. But in 865, a new and improved Viking army arrives. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls this the "micel here," the Great Army, or just the Army. This time, the Vikings seem to have been interested not just in raiding but in actual conquest. One by one, they conquer all the English kingdoms except for Wessex. They start with Deira, the southern part of Northumbria that's centered on York. That's their first successful conquest. But the most gruesome accounts that we have of this process have to do with the conquest of East Anglia in 869. Some of the details are from later sources—we probably shouldn't trust them completely—but I'm going to tell the story because it goes into the myth of the Vikings in England that the English liked to believe.

Supposedly, King Edmund of East Anglia was captured by the great Viking army, led by Ivar the Boneless, and Ivar asked Edmund to renounce his faith in Christ. Of course, Edmund refused, so Ivar first had him scourged, and then shot with arrows, and then finally, beheaded. But his head was preserved in a rather unusual way. A wolf got a hold of it, and miraculously, we're told, even though the wolf was hungry, it didn't eat the head. Later on, some English people manage to get the head out of the wolf's jaws, and they reunite it with the body. Later, the monks of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk claim that they have King Edmund's body, and supposedly, you could still

see the little red line around his neck where his head had been miraculously reattached to his body.

Well, that charming story is meant to kind of give a religious gloss to an event that probably really has nothing to do with religion at all. I doubt that Ivar the Boneless cared one way or the other whether Edmund renounced Christ; he just wanted to conquer East Anglia. King Edmund lost, the Vikings won, [and] that's the end of it. And the consequences for England are momentous, because now almost all of the eastern seaboard of England is in Viking hands. And now something new happened: Large numbers of Scandinavians come to settle in England. The men of the Great Army send home to Denmark for their wives, their children, their retainers, whoever they can get to come follow them to England to settle. The Vikings are settling down.

Yorkshire and East Anglia are swamped by Danish settlers. You can see the results of this settlement just by looking at a map of England. This part of England has a large number of place names that end in –by or –thorp, like Grimsby or Althorp. These are suffixes that can denote a settlement started by a certain person, so Grimsby would be the settlement of the man named Grim. And "thorp" is related to the German word "Dorf," which means "village." So you get lots of these names in this part of England.

Parts of central and eastern Mercia also have lots of settlers come in, not as densely as in Yorkshire, but still, very substantial numbers. That's because the Vikings didn't conquer Mercia; they simply made a deal with the king of Mercia, a guy named Ceolwulf. Ceolwulf is perhaps not the greatest hero in English history. It doesn't really look that great when your response to the Vikings is to let them take half your kingdom so that you get to cling, rather miserably, to the other half for a few more years. That's what Ceolwulf did, and it meant that some of the richest land in Mercia is open to settlement. The lands that the Vikings got in this agreement with Mercia became known as the area of the Five Boroughs, because they included the five towns of Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham, Leicester, and Derby. Lincoln, Stamford, Nottingham, Leicester, and Derby—those areas also get lots of Danish settlers.

The cultural impact of the Danish settlement is tremendous. In this area, land came to be measured according to Danish units, not English ones. You'll remember I talked earlier about King Offa's Tribal Hidage, the record that he kept of all the tribute owed to him by the other English kingdoms, and the land was measured in hides. Well, in the areas of Danish settlement, they don't use hides anymore; they use a Danish unit called the "carucate," which denotes the land that one plow could be expected to keep under cultivation.

There's another, larger unit of land, an administrative unit that is used in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, called the "hundred." It's supposedly derived from 100 hides of land. We're going to be talking a lot more about hundreds in a later lecture. But for right now, I just want to introduce them to say that in the Danish parts of England, they don't use hundreds anymore. They use a Danish unit called the "wapentake." This came from a Danish term that meant "the showing of weapons," and it probably meant some sort of occasion when all the able-bodied men are supposed to show up and demonstrate that they've got the proper weapons for self-defense. So these very basic things—what you call places, how you divide up the land—these things are changed by the settlement of the Danes in eastern England.

Of course, other things change, too. The Danish settlers want to follow their own legal customs, so in these areas, the law is Danish law, not English law. As a result, later on, this part of England—roughly the Danish areas east of Watling Street—come to be called the Danelaw.

Many of the Danes who settle are just interested in getting on with the task of making a living, and we know there is substantial intermarriage and other kinds of contact between the Danish settlers and the native English. One way we can tell this is by the very strong impact of the Vikings on the English language. Such a strong impact really only comes about if you have a substantial number of bilingual speakers. I already talked in the first lecture of this course about how many English pronouns are derived from Old Norse, words like "this" and "they" and "them." But you have a lot of other very common words that are borrowed from Old Norse, and I'll just give you a brief sample of the kinds of very common English words that come from Old Norse: "anger," "birth," "dirt," "gift," "knife," "law," "leg," "shirt," "take," "window," and there are many others. It's common for languages to borrow

specialized vocabulary from another language, particularly if that other language is acknowledged as having some sort of special competence. We have borrowed a lot of terms relating to cooking from French. We think of the French as people who know a lot about cooking. But if you're borrowing words for everyday objects, like parts of the body ("leg") or very common articles of clothing ("shirt"), that means you're really living side by side with each other on a daily basis. So the Viking settlers did really become a part of life in England.

But I've been talking about the peaceful legacy of the Vikings in England. This kind of assimilation that can leave traces in the English language only starts in the late 9th century. And that's because the Viking army isn't quite finished with England yet. There's one last kingdom to conquer, the kingdom of Wessex. In our next lecture, we'll see what happens to Wessex when it, too, comes under Viking attack, and we'll meet the greatest English hero of the age, King Alfred.

Alfred the Great

Lecture 7

Alfred was a complicated man; he was perhaps not ideally suited to being a king by temperament, at least. He was a very religious man who struggled a lot with the baser parts of his human nature. … But despite all this, Alfred took the throne, and it's probably a good thing for Wessex that he did.

Alfred of Wessex is the only English king to have earned the byname "the Great." King of Wessex from 871 to 899, he led the Anglo-Saxon resurgence against the Vikings, unified the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, created the first English law code, and fostered a revival in literacy and learning among the English monasteries. But no one could have predicted any of these accomplishments when Alfred took the throne.

In the early 9th century, Wessex came to dominate the entire southern coast of England, with hegemony over Sussex, Essex, and Kent. They had fought Mercia to a standstill and an uneasy peace. Despite their strength, when the Viking raids began in the 840s, Wessex suffered as much as any other kingdom. King Aethelwulf undertook a pilgrimage to Rome in 855 specifically to ask God for assistance against the Vikings. This in itself was not surprising; what was odd was that he sent his sickly youngest son, the five-year-old Alfred, on the arduous journey to Rome with an advance party. Alfred was confirmed by the pope personally, and in retrospect many would see this as the pope's consecration of Alfred as England's future king—which, given his three older brothers, would have seemed unlikely to come to pass. In any event, Alfred's time in Rome surely affected his later devotion to the church and to education.

While Alfred and Aethelwulf were in Rome, Aethelwulf's oldest son, Aethelbald, was in charge of Wessex. When they returned, Aethelbald refused to step aside. Aethelwulf had to engineer a face-saving compromise: He left Aethelbald in charge of the original western core of Wessex while retaining Sussex, Kent, and the newer territories for himself until his death in

858. Alfred, young as he was, would remember these incidents when he had grown sons of his own and would not repeat his father's mistakes.

Alfred grew to manhood and became a soldier, as was expected of a royal son, helping to defend Wessex against worsening Viking raids. Over the next 13 years, one by one, all three of Alfred's older brothers died. The last of the brothers, Ethelred, had left two young sons, but Alfred, despite any qualms he might have had, shunted them aside and seized the throne. Arguably, he was justified; he was probably the most experienced military leader Wessex had, and the Anglo-Saxons had no hard and fast rules about royal succession. But it was still a controversial move.

Once the crown was his, Alfred immediately faced a military crisis: the advance of the Great Army. He immediately set out to meet them and achieved a strategic stalemate at the Battle of Wilton. In effect, he fought them to a standstill, and then paid them to go away—actually a fairly standard thing to do when you faced a Viking force. This move bought him a little time; for the next five years, the Great Army was busy in Northumbria and Mercia. Alfred could watch and wait. When the Great Army returned, they were led by Guthrum, who eventually scattered Alfred's forces. The king fled to the Isle of Athelney, a marshy part of western Wessex, where he spent the winter of 877–878. Slowly but surely, he reconstituted his army. He sent a message to all of Wessex, asking the fighting men who had survived the previous two years to assemble at Egbert's Stone. No one knows exactly where Egbert's Stone was, but it may have been somewhere on the border between Wiltshire and Somerset. The men came, and they assembled into an army big enough to take on Guthrum.

Guthrum was encamped near Selwood in western Wiltshire at Edington. Alfred marched to meet him and assembled his men in the classic German shield wall formation. The battle became a hand-to-hand contest of brute strength and morale, and this time, Alfred won. He pursued Guthrum's fleeing army and laid siege to them in their encampment. Finally, Guthrum surrendered, agreed to withdraw from Wessex, and accepted Christian baptism with Alfred as his godfather. Alfred probably had no illusions about Guthrum's spiritual sincerity, but the concession was of great symbolic importance.

Alfred did not rest after Eddington. He reorganized his army, built fortresses, and created the first-ever royal English fleet to try to beat the enemy at their own game. The army of Wessex, the **fyrd**, was composed of levies of free men from all of Wessex; these men were usually substantial landowners with significant duties at home, so Alfred divided the fyrd into two halves that each served for six months of the year. He built his fortresses, or ***burhs***, at strategic points throughout his territories. The streets in the *burhs* were laid out in a careful grid pattern, making it easy to transport troops and materials within the *burh*. Incidentally, as part of this process, Alfred rebuilt the city of London practically from scratch. Alfred kept excellent planning and accounting records, which come down to us in a document called the Burghal Hidage. It spells out, for example, how many men are required to defend a given length of wall, and then uses this formula to assign the required number of hides to each *burh* depending on its size.

Alfred rebuilt the city of London practically from scratch.

Although the Anglo-Saxon settlers had been seafaring folk, they had taken root rather quickly in England and by Alfred's day more or less avoided the sea except for trading vessels. Alfred drew the obvious conclusion, however, that an enemy that arrived by sea could be intercepted at sea. Unfortunately, the ships Alfred designed weren't all that effective, and overall this navy was the least successful of all his defensive efforts. Still, he set an important precedent for defense of the realm.

Alfred made progress on the political front as well. Mercia had become essentially a Danish client kingdom, but after Edington, helped a Mercian **ealdorman** named Aethelred to claim the Mercian throne, giving Aethelred his daughter Aethelfleda in marriage. Aethelfleda seems to have inherited her father's political savvy and continued to rule Mercia after her husband's death for several years. So Mercia effectively became a client state of Wessex.

Alfred is known for his cultural accomplishments as well. He was one of the most literate kings of his age and wanted other people to have access to the riches of classical and Christian texts. At the end of the 9th century, there was hardly a Latin-literate churchman, much less any laymen, left in England. So Alfred commissioned a great project to translate the great works of antiquity into English vernacular. Remarkably, Alfred translated many works himself. This period also saw the beginning of year-by-year compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, although it is unclear what role, if any, Alfred had in this development.

Alfred also decided to gather all old laws of his realm, choose the best ones, and make a new law code. In essence, he invented the role of king as lawgiver, rather than law interpreter. This was a decisive move away from the self-governing Anglo-Saxon society that first settled Britain toward a modern notion of statehood.

After Alfred died in 899, his son Edward the Elder and his grandson Athelstan slowly but surely reconquered the English kingdoms lost to the Danes. Wessex had created the first-ever united English kingdom. ■

Important Terms

burh: Anglo-Saxon term for a fortified town or settlement. Alfred systematically strengthened existing *burhs* and founded new ones to defend Wessex from Viking attack. The taxes required to pay for these *burhs* were enumerated in the Burghal Hidage.

ealdorman: Anglo-Saxon royal official in charge of a shire, responsible for summoning the fyrd. The ealdorman was replaced by the earl in the Danish regions of England and then throughout the kingdom under Cnut.

fyrd: Anglo-Saxon military force consisting of all free men of the shire, who were obligated to serve as requested for 60 days.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Alfred the Great

Lecture 7—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we saw the Vikings arrive in England, and we watched them pick off the English kingdoms one by one. In eastern England, they settled in large numbers and slowly transformed the landscape and even the language of England. But there was one kingdom that did *not* fall to the Vikings, one kingdom that held out against them, one last remnant of Anglo-Saxon rule, and that was Wessex in the southwest. And Wessex was going to be the key to English revival, and it was going to be the kingdom that ultimately united the English and made them one people. But that was a very long process. Today, we're just going to look at the career of one man, the king who laid the groundwork for all that was to follow. And that man is King Alfred. He is known to us as Alfred the Great; he ruled from 871 to 899. In this lecture, we're going to try to see why people call him Alfred the Great. I do think he does deserve the name, and I'm going to try to justify it to you today.

But before we get to Alfred, we need to back up a bit and talk for a minute about the kingdom of Wessex. We saw last time that in the early 9th century, Wessex became the most powerful kingdom in England. They took over from Mercia, essentially, after the death of King Offa, and when King Egbert beat the Mercians in 825, that was the sign that the torch really had passed to Wessex. Egbert's successors continued that legacy and extended their dominance along the whole southern coast of England. Basically, Wessex has hegemony over the kingdoms of Sussex, Essex, and Kent by the middle of the 9th century, so they've expanded their authority considerably. They have kind of a stand-off with Mercia. They're not exactly friends, but they're not really enemies either. On the other hand, Wessex is suffering from Viking raids like everybody else in England. And things have gotten worse in the 840s, as we said last time; this is when Vikings begin to raid in much larger groups.

So this is the situation for Wessex in the middle of the 9th century under the reign of King Ethelwulf, the son of Egbert. Ethelwulf is an interesting guy. He made a grand pilgrimage to Rome in 855. This wasn't unprecedented. Plenty of other Anglo-Saxon kings have done it. Some have even gone to

Rome basically with the intention of retiring there; they died in Rome. But King Ethelwulf has a special reason to undertake a pilgrimage. He wants to ask God for help in dealing with the Viking menace. His churchmen had actually recommended this step earlier, in 839, but for whatever reason, Ethelwulf had not gone on pilgrimage then, and the raids had intensified. So the trip to Rome is long overdue.

The really odd thing that Ethelwulf does is to send his youngest son, Alfred, as part of the advance party, [which] goes out to prepare for the journey, two years ahead of time, in 853. Alfred is about four or five years old at the time. He's not a physically robust child; he suffered always from all kinds of complaints. Later in life, he was going to be plagued by digestive problems that kept him imprisoned in the latrine for long periods of time. The journey to Rome is also a very arduous one. The trip is about 1,600 kilometers, and it could easily take up to two months. There's also no easy way to get over the Alps; all the mountain passes in this period are full of robbers. So the king must have had a very good reason for wanting Alfred to go to Rome.

No one knows for sure why the king sent his youngest son on this very dangerous journey. Possibly, he thought Alfred was the most expendable of his sons—he had three older sons. But Alfred's most recent biographer, I think, has the best explanation. Sending a king's son in the advance party, even a five-year-old king's son, is a sign of respect for the pope. In fact, when Alfred reached Rome, he was confirmed by the pope personally, and this gave them a very special bond with each other. Ethelwulf doubtless planned for this to happen, and he was surely counting on using Alfred as a means of strengthening ties between the papacy and Wessex. This confirmation ceremony that Alfred underwent seems to have been blown up in retrospect into something more elaborate than it really was; later sources call it a consecration, as if the pope were designating Alfred as a future king. This is something that would have seemed really improbable at the time—Alfred is the youngest of four brothers—but later on, it's going to make it look as if Alfred's success was foreordained, and that's always useful for propaganda purposes.

Maybe Alfred had made a big success of his first trip to Rome—maybe he asked to go back—but for whatever reason, when King Ethelwulf finally set

out on his pilgrimage in 855, he took Alfred with him. And they spent a whole year in the city. This period made an enormous impression on Alfred. They visited all the ancient monuments and the buildings in the city, but they're mainly there to see all of the important churches, especially the ones that are associated with the early Christian martyrs. Alfred obviously thought about this time in Rome for the rest of his life, and a lot of the emphasis that he placed on learning later in his reign doubtless [came] from his experiences in Rome.

But all was not well in Wessex while Alfred and his father, the king, are off enjoying the sights in Rome. King Ethelwulf had left his oldest son, Ethelbald, in charge of Wessex while he was away, but when the royal pilgrimage party got home, Ethelbald refused to step aside for his father. This was always a big problem in a royal family; we're going to see this repeatedly in the rest of the course. What do you do with grown-up princes? They've been raised to rule, and you don't have anything for them to do. You can't really have two kings at once—and if you try to do that, it can be a disaster. Now Ethelbald has had a taste of power, and he doesn't want to let go of it. So he rebels against his father; in effect, Ethelwulf has to submit to a kind of face-saving compromise. Ethelbald is left in charge of the western part of Wessex—that's the original core of the kingdom of Wessex—and King Ethelwulf has to be satisfied with the eastern area; those are the old kingdoms of Sussex and Kent that Wessex is controlling now. Ethelwulf has essentially been demoted to subordinate king. Ethelwulf hangs on for two more years and then he dies in 858.

So why does this rather sorry episode of family squabbling matter in the story of Alfred? I think it matters because I think Alfred is paying very close attention, young as he was, to everything that's going on politically in the kingdom of Wessex. He saw what happened between his father and his older brother, and he made very sure later in his life that the same thing was not going to happen again. He ended up himself with adult sons who were itching to rule, but he kept them on a very tight leash. It wouldn't surprise me if Alfred had wanted to go back to Rome later on on a pilgrimage of his own when he was king. But he didn't go. He never left Wessex unguarded.

But we've gotten ahead of the narrative. Let's get back to the young Alfred. His father dies in 858. At this point, it still probably seemed very unlikely that Alfred would end up as king. Alfred grew to manhood [and] became a soldier—that's what a royal son is supposed to do—and he played a key role helping to defend Wessex against Viking raids, which are getting worse again throughout the 860s. This is the period when the Great Army is on the loose. But over the next 13 years, one by one, all three of his older brothers died. That meant that in 871, Alfred is the last of Ethelwulf's four sons left alive. But the last of the brothers to die, Æthelred, had left two young sons. What would Alfred do?

He did what any king who was later going to be called "the Great" would have done. He shunted his nephews aside and he took the throne. There's a pretty good justification for this. Alfred had spent most of the past few years in the field facing the Vikings. By this point, he is definitely the most experienced military leader that Wessex has. He's clearly the best candidate for the throne. In this period, we don't yet have hard-and-fast rules about royal succession; really, any member of the royal family might be chosen. Wessex obviously needs Alfred. And he even has, in a sense, the approval of his dead brother. There had been an agreement among the sons of Ethelwulf that the brothers would be each other's heirs. But it was still controversial that Alfred was setting his nephews aside. He did have to smooth that over with his followers. And Alfred himself may have had qualms about becoming king. He was a complicated man; probably he was not ideally suited to being a king by temperament, at least. He was a very religious man; he struggled a lot with the baser parts of human nature. His contemporary biographer, Asser, says that he had a very big problem with lust as a young man; later, Alfred thanked God for sending him those digestive complaints—the ones that kept him in the latrine all the time—because that made it physically difficult to indulge in the sins of the flesh. That actually helped Alfred out in his efforts to stay pure. This is definitely not the attitude that most kings took in the Middle Ages. We'll see that most of them have no problem with sins of the flesh; they're eager to engage in them.

But despite all this, Alfred takes the throne, and it's probably a very good thing for Wessex that he does because Alfred immediately faces a military crisis. You'll remember the Great Army that we talked about in the last

lecture, the huge Viking force that had been conquering the kingdoms of England one by one. Well, now they have their sights set on Wessex. Wessex contains some very rich farmland. It's a very attractive target, and it's clear to everyone in England that Wessex is where the army is going to head next.

Alfred sets out to meet the Vikings in the field. He fights a battle against them at Wilton, and while he doesn't win, he does manage to achieve a strategic stalemate. He hasn't smashed the Vikings, but he has inflicted damage, enough so that the Vikings are willing to be paid off. In effect, Alfred gives them a bunch of silver so that they'll go away. This is actually a fairly standard thing to do if you're faced with a Viking force. The Vikings aren't fussy; they just want plunder, and if you're going to make it easy for them, fine. They could skip the fighting. In 845, Paris had paid a Viking army to go away, and they did. Later in English history, though, paying tribute to Vikings got a bad reputation, and we'll see this in a subsequent lecture. We're going to talk then about "Danegeld"; this is the money that you pay the Danes to go away. This happens later, in the 10th and 11th centuries, and it becomes a rather hated institution. It becomes associated with appeasement. The idea is that if you pay the Danes, they're always going to come back for more. There's a wonderful line about this by the great British poet Rudyard Kipling. This is what he says: "If once you have paid him the Dane-Geld/You never get rid of the Dane." But there's a very good case for Alfred paying the Danes off in 871: It buys him some much-needed time. For five years after he comes to the throne, the Great Army is busy off in Northumbria and Mercia, and Alfred can watch and wait.

Of course, eventually, the Army does return, and this time, they're led by a man named Guthrum. Guthrum's army hammers away at Wessex and finally succeeds in scattering Alfred's forces. The king is desperate. He ends up having to take refuge with a very few followers in the remote Isle of Athelney; this is a marshy area in the western part of Wessex. He hides out there for the whole winter of 877–78.

There's a wonderful story about Alfred's lonely time in the marshes. Supposedly, Alfred is alone, and he comes across the hut of a swineherd, and he asks for shelter. He stays there for a number of days. Essentially, he's getting himself back together—he's regrouping after the terrible experiences

that he's had over the last couple of years, and he's praying for guidance. One day, the swineherd takes his flock out to pasture, and Alfred is left in the house with the swineherd's wife. She had put some loaves in to bake, and when she gets busy doing other domestic chores, she notices that the bread is burning; she scolds Alfred, saying, look, you're right here. You can see the loaves are burning, and you won't even get up and turn them over, yet you're quite happy to eat them when they come out of the oven. Alfred is very embarrassed by this tongue-lashing, so he meekly gets up, he turns over the loaves, and even helps the swineherd's wife to take them out of the oven when they're ready. The lesson is supposed to be that Alfred is humble, that he's learning his lesson about taking care of what's right in front of you.

It's a great story, but we have no record of it until over a century after Alfred's death. It's probably a folk legend. But I do think it captures something that's probably true about Alfred, and we've already mentioned this. Alfred learned lessons; he did learn from his experiences. But he didn't spend the whole winter on the Isle of Athelney praying. He slowly but surely reconstituted his army, and by the spring, he was prepared to come out of the marshes and fight. He sent out a message to all of Wessex, asking the fighting men—those who had survived—to assemble at a place called Egbert's Stone. Remember, King Egbert is Alfred's grandfather; he's the one who had started Wessex off on this positive trend. No one knows exactly where Egbert's Stone was, but it may have been somewhere on the border between Wiltshire and Somerset. So the message goes out, and the men came, and they assembled into an army big enough to take on Guthrum.

Guthrum was encamped near Selwood in western Wiltshire at a place called Edington. Alfred marched to meet him, and he assembled the classic battle formation of the period, the shield wall. This is a long row of soldiers standing with their shields interlocked so that they literally form a wall. Once you had the wall in place, you just marched slowly forward until you met the enemy and his shield wall, and you pushed your shields against the other army's shields until somebody broke the line. Then there's hand-to-hand fighting, and often, one of the armies breaks and runs. And that's what happened at Edington. It's a contest of brute strength and morale, and this time, Alfred wins. He pursues Guthrum's fleeing army, he besieges them in their encampment, and finally, Guthrum surrenders. Under the terms of the

surrender, Guthrum agrees that he'll withdraw from Wessex and he'll accept Christian baptism; Alfred will be his godfather.

Alfred is probably not under any illusions about how sincere Guthrum is in becoming a Christian. This is a political act. But it does have great symbolic importance. It matters to people in the 9th century if their enemies are pagans. It's definitely seen as a triumph that Guthrum has been forced to accept baptism. After the baptism, Guthrum withdraws from Wessex, as promised.

So the Battle of Edington has been a triumph for Alfred; he has come from behind to win—literally, he has come out of the marshes to win. But he's not about to assume that Edington is the end of the Viking threat. He is going to make the most of the opportunity he has. He has breathing room; he's going to use it. He's going to put the defenses of Wessex on a sounder footing so that the next time the Vikings come, he will be ready. He decides to do three things: He's going to reorganize the army, he's going to build fortresses, and he'll create the first real English fleet of ships that will try to beat the enemy at their own game.

Let's look at these efforts in turn. Alfred decides on a comprehensive reorganization of his forces. The army of Wessex is known as the "fyrd." It's composed of levies of freemen from all the shires or counties of Wessex. (We'll talk more about shires in the next lecture; for now, I'll just say [that] these are the smaller units into which Wessex is divided—Hampshire, Wiltshire, etc.) So these are men capable of fighting, usually substantial landowners. The problem, of course, is [that] they have lands to supervise, and it's a real hardship if they're away on campaign all the time. So Alfred divides the fyrd into two halves, each serving for six months at a time. That way, Wessex is always going to be defended, but there are still going to be enough people back on their farms to get the crops in. Alfred is thus putting the army on a sounder footing. He's thinking ahead about the good of the whole realm. He's thinking like a king.

He also built a series of large fortresses known as "burhs," and this is where we get our word "borough" from, and it's why you get "borough" or "burg" in a lot of place names. The reason for building these burhs was to concentrate his defenses at strategic points. A lot of these burhs are built in

places that are already significant settlements, like London and Winchester. London had fallen to the Vikings earlier, but Alfred recaptures it in 886. Other burhs, he just builds at a good strategic point, and later, they develop into substantial towns simply due to the trade that's going to be attracted to a place where a lot of soldiers are concentrated.

Archaeologists have done some very, very interesting work reconstructing these burhs, and they've discovered that the planning involved was extensive. The streets in the burh were laid out in a careful grid pattern. There's usually a high street running through the middle of the burh, with side streets opening off of the high street, and then, there's a wall street running around the inside of the fortified wall. This makes it easy to transport troops and materials within the burh. You can see this street pattern in the burhs at Winchester, at Oxford, at Wallingford, and even London. In London, Alfred has to rebuild the city practically from scratch; there's just a shell left over from the Roman period, but Alfred builds it up again. It's a masterpiece of urban planning.

One of the reasons we know as much as we do about the burhs, besides archaeology, is [that] we have a document that spells out how they're supposed to be paid for; all of that planning, all of that building is obviously going to be expensive to carry out, and later, you're going to have to maintain it. This document is known as the Burghal Hidage. Remember the Tribal Hidage from Offa's reign in Mercia in the 8th century? That was a record of the tribute that was owed to King Offa from various places, based on how many hides of land they had: so much money due per hide. The Burghal Hidage works in a similar way. It lists a total of 31 burhs, and each one is assigned a certain number of hides. The system for deciding how many hides each burh requires is extremely systematic. The bigger the burh, obviously, the more resources it needs to maintain itself. The Burghal Hidage spells out how many men are required to defend a given length of wall and then uses this formula to assign the required number of hides to each burh, depending on its size.

This is quite a remarkable level of administrative sophistication for the 9th century. Modern scholars have checked the math, and it's pretty good. In the case of Winchester, the Burghal Hidage assigns 2,400 hides to cover 3,017 meters of wall. Modern archaeologists have measured the wall. It's

3,033 meters. So in the 9th century, they were off by 16 meters out of about 3,000. That's not bad. What it means is [that] very accurate records were kept of the burhs as they were being built, so later on, they'd be able to calculate how much they needed to pay for them. This is a very elaborate, very impressive operation.

So far, then, Alfred has reorganized the army, the fyrd, and he's begun a network of defenses that will ultimately protect all of Wessex and spread into Mercia, as well. The third effort I want to talk about more briefly is Alfred's decision to build a fleet. This is something that Anglo-Saxon monarchs hadn't really undertaken systematically before. We saw that the original Anglo-Saxon settlers were seafaring peoples, but as soon as they became rooted in English soil, they pretty much forgot all about the sea. The English are not especially great sailors. Certainly, there were trading vessels, but England isn't really known for shipbuilding.

Alfred drew a conclusion that might have seemed obvious to anyone. If you've got enemies that are coming by ship to raid you, why not build your own fleet, intercept them at sea, and stop them from even getting on shore? So Alfred designed a new style of ship. This aspect of Alfred's efforts is probably the least successful. The ships he designed weren't, in fact, all that effective; they weren't really very well suited to coastal fighting. But still, his fleets do score some important victories, and they set a precedent for the future. Later kings of England are going to do a lot more with ships than Alfred had been able to do.

Thus, Alfred did a lot to improve England's defenses on a structural level. But there's progress on the political front, as well. One of the most important developments of the years after the Battle of Edington is Alfred's success in dominating Mercia. Mercia had become essentially a Danish client kingdom in recent years. We talked in the last lecture about dividing up Mercia, and some of it is settled by Danes. But after the Battle of Edington, there is scope to somewhat restore Mercian independence. But Alfred doesn't do that; he doesn't put a king back on the throne of Mercia. He, instead, takes one of the Mercian nobles, an ealdorman (that's a royal official), a guy named Æthelred, and he marries this guy Æthelred to his daughter Ethelfleda. The idea clearly is that Mercia is going to be ruled as an outpost of Wessex. Ethelfleda is

a very interesting figure. She is maybe the most talented politician among Alfred's children. She certainly made a great success of her career in Mercia. The Mercians loved her. She was called "Lady of the Mercians," and she seems really to have eclipsed her husband, Æthelred. Nobody thought a lot about Æthelred. He died halfway into her rule in Mercia, and she continued in his absence for several years and [did] quite well in ruling Mercia on her own. And this meant that Alfred didn't have to worry about Mercia.

So far, we've talked about Alfred's successes as a military leader and as a politician, but his reign is very well known for other accomplishments, as well. He did a lot for English culture. Alfred had a lifelong devotion to learning. There's a wonderful story from his biography that when he was a young man, his mother set up a contest among the children in the family to see who could memorize a book of English songs the fastest, and Alfred won. Well, whether that's the trigger, or whether it's the trip to Rome, or something else, one of Alfred's priorities as king is to foster learning in England.

Alfred was one of the most literate kings of his age. He has to struggle hard to achieve literacy, but he does. He's literate both in English and in Latin. Think of what it must have been like to try to memorize Latin declensions [with] Vikings coming over the next ridge, but he's dedicated, and he does it. And Alfred wants other people to have access to the riches of classical and Christian texts, the things that he saw in Rome as a child. He looked about him in England, and he was dismayed by what he saw. He saw the terrible state in which learning found itself. There's hardly a churchman left in England who could read Latin adequately, we're told, let alone any laymen who are able to do so. So Alfred decides that the only course open to them is to translate as much as they can from Latin into the vernacular. Thus, Alfred's great translation project begins.

He commissions a bunch of people to translate works from Latin into English, but here's the really remarkable part: He does a lot of the work of translating himself; even [while] being king, he also does a lot of translating. He personally translates Pope Gregory the Great's treatise on rulership, a work called *Pastoral Care*. He also translates *On the Consolation of Philosophy*, a very, very difficult philosophical treatise by Boethius from the

6th century. Alfred thinks these two works, among many others, are going to help the priests of England do their work of inspiring the people. Pope Gregory's work, *Pastoral Care*, is essentially a manual for how to lead people effectively. It's directed at bishops, but many of the lessons in it can be applied equally well to kings, and that's how they read the text in the 9th century. Boethius's work was written when the author had been unjustly imprisoned, and basically, it's about what you do when you are faced with great misfortune; how do you bear up? Both of these works were quite relevant to the sorts of situations that Alfred had faced personally. I think they were personally meaningful to him.

Alfred's interested in other kinds of texts, too. Alfred's reign is when *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* starts being compiled. I've mentioned it several times. This is a record of the English past; it goes all the way back to the beginning of the royal family of Wessex, the line of Cerdic, in the 5th century. But it's only started in the 890s; that's when you start to get it being compiled year by year. In the 890s, they sort of went back and compiled all the other annals retrospectively. There's some debate among historians about Alfred's role in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. We're not sure whether Alfred actually commissioned *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*—did he actually start it off officially—or maybe it just grew out of the atmosphere that Alfred was encouraging, where learning and history are respected. But either way, historians ever since have been enormously grateful for *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. There's a lot we would not know if we didn't have it.

The most important texts for Alfred's day-to-day rulership were probably the legal texts that he produced. Alfred decided that it was important to gather up all the old laws that had been written down in the past, choose the best ones, and make a new law code. Now, the legal philosophy in this period had traditionally been that the king *found* the law; he didn't *make* the law. He was just the one who declared officially what the traditional law of the people was. But when Alfred made his legal compilations, he did some picking and choosing and tweaking, and this pushed things in the direction of the king being a lawgiver. And this idea of Alfred as a lawgiver was one of the most important things that people in England remembered about him. We're moving away from the society we began with: When the Anglo-Saxons arrived in England, then the law is something that the people

administer themselves. We're moving toward the law being something that the state is in charge of. It's a slow process, but it's definitely underway from now on.

So Alfred has a very busy reign. The last few years of his reign tested the defensive arrangements he made, because the Vikings did come back, but the defenses of Wessex basically held, and Alfred left a strong legacy to his successors.

Over the next few decades after Alfred died in 899, his son Edward the Elder and his grandson Athelstan slowly but surely reconquered the English kingdoms that had been lost to the Danes. Athelstan's royal charters even call him "emperor of Britain," and it was only a little bit of an exaggeration. The house of Wessex had come a long way since Alfred's lonely time in the marshes of Athelney. The Vikings had done Wessex a favor by getting rid of all their rivals, and Wessex had taken advantage of the opportunity to create the first-ever united English kingdom. England had peace and prosperity unmatched since the days of Roman rule in Britain. In our next lecture, we'll look in detail at how Alfred's successors ruled their unified kingdom.

The Government of Anglo-Saxon England
Lecture 8

The economy is very much tied to how effective the government is. If the government succeeds in its main job of providing peace and security, prosperity will tend to follow.

Over the course of the 10th century, the kingdom of Wessex created a new English kingdom. But what did that mean on the ground? How was this kingdom actually governed? What was this new state like? In fact, the unified England was probably the best-governed country in Europe in the 10th century. In this lecture, we'll examine the hierarchy of early English government, the role of the king, and the English system of justice. We'll end by talking about the Anglo-Saxon monetary system and how it fit into the economy of this prosperous new nation.

The average citizen never saw the king but had a lot of direct interaction with local officials and bureaucracies. The most important administrative unit in Anglo-Saxon England was the **shire**, or county, a term that originally referred to the local war band. In fact, in the 10th century, the army was still organized shire by shire. Shires were typically named after the most important town in the area: Cambridgeshire, Lincolnshire, Warwickshire, and so forth. Shires were under the control of officials called ealdormen, whose main job was to lead the shire's army. Ealdormen typically had large local landholdings. Originally, there was one ealdormen to one shire, but as the 10th century went on, kings gave important followers more than one shire to rule. Importantly, being an ealdorman was a life appointment; the son of an ealdorman was not guaranteed to inherit his father's power. When an ealdorman had too much land to manage by himself, he would appoint a shire reeve, or **sheriff**. Sheriffs would be the bedrock for English royal administration for many, many centuries, to come.

Below the level of the shire was unit called the **hundred**. The number of hundreds in a shire varied, but each hundred was made up of about a hundred hides of land. They were run by hundredmen, usually local landowners with social or economic clout in the neighborhood. Each hundred was further

divided into tithings, groups of 10 able-bodied men whose military readiness was periodically inspected by their leaders, the tithingmen. The tithingmen reported to the hundredmen, and the hundredmen reported to the sheriff, and on up the line, in theory all the way to the king.

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Anglo-Saxon kings controlled the economy by controlling coinage.

So what was the point of all this organization? Mainly, defense: This was how manpower in England was mobilized. If you put all the fighting men from all the tithings and hundreds and shires together, you had the fyrd, which was more or less what today we would call a militia. The real core of the king's army was his own close followers, the thegns—the substantial landowners who spent a lot of time at court. Their role is even more important now that England has become a larger, more unified state. Finally, if necessary, the king could supplement the army with mercenaries from the Low Countries.

Besides defense, the early government of England was responsible for various public works. As we saw with the old Anglo-Saxon justice system, public works were a community obligation. Each citizen was expected to support the *trinoda necessitas*, or threefold necessity: fortresses (*burhs*), bridges, and ships. Support might be given in the form of money or goods, or it might be given as labor, but everyone was expected to contribute to these public goods.

The king probably spent quite a bit of his time on questions relating to land; ownership and control of land was really the only solid basis for wealth in English society. But ownership was sometimes hard to determine. Physical records were scarce; most records were kept by memory, with boundaries agreed on verbally and a symbolic transfer of ownership performed in church in front of witnesses.

If ownership of a piece of land was in dispute, the problem was brought to the king. His decision was issued as a diploma, which was a general term for a formal, written royal ruling. Less formal royal documents were called

writs. Primarily they were verbal orders recorded on scraps of parchment; they were like modern memos—immediate orders not meant to be preserved, so we are lucky that we have any at all. Writs were written in Old English, rather than Latin.

Like all rulers, the king had an inner circle of trusted advisers to help him with major decisions. These were called the **witan**, meaning “wise men.” They were usually thegns and churchmen, but there was no fixed or formal membership unless there was an unusually great matter to discuss, such as the choice of a new king. Then the wise men of the realm met as the witanagemot.

Unlike their tribal predecessors, the kings of the unified English state were responsible for the administration of justice. The wergild system was still in place, but the state helped to run it. Also, for the first time in Anglo-Saxon society, it was possible to commit a crime against the state itself—really, against the king.

The court system was administered in the same way as the shire system. The sheriff presided over a shire court, which met twice a year to hear the most important cases. Below the shire courts were the hundred courts, led by the hundredmen, which met every four weeks to hear cases both great and small, although matters could be referred up to the shire courts. The legal system was based on ancient laws called dooms. The kings began to write these down around the time they converted to Christianity, when literacy was becoming fashionable, but the laws dated to before the Anglo-Saxon migration.

When accused of a crime, a person had two main ways to prove his or her innocence. The first was compurgation: The accused swore an oath of innocence and got a lot of other people, called oath helpers, to swear to it as well. You needed different numbers of oath-helpers depending on the seriousness of the crime and the importance of the victim. The theory behind compurgation was that people were essentially honest—either by nature or from fear of retribution—though they undoubtedly lied on occasion, just like witnesses today.

The second method of proving your innocence was trial by ordeal. The ordeal is one of the most fascinating and most controversial of medieval phenomena, the principle behind it being that God delivered the ruling. There were types of ordeal: by hot water, by cold water, and by hot iron. In the case of the hot ordeals, how well you healed was proof of your guilt or innocence; in the case of the cold water ordeal, floating was proof of guilt, and sinking was proof of innocence. (Unfortunately, the price of innocence could easily be drowning.) Before we dismiss this whole system as ridiculous, we need to think about how difficult delivering justice was in a society with no crime labs, no security cameras, and so forth. In the absence of science, the Anglo-Saxons turned to faith, in this as in other matters, and trial by ordeal was undertaken very carefully and with great reverence and awe, if not without personal bias.

In the absence of science, the Anglo-Saxons turned to faith … and trial by ordeal was undertaken very carefully and with great reverence and awe, if not without personal bias.

The last major area of royal responsibility we will discuss was the monetary system and market regulation. This encompassed everything from coinage to standardizing weights and measures to enacting contract law. Coinage was not new to England; King Offa had struck silver pennies in the 8th century. But the English economy expanded considerably over the course of the 10th century, and more and more, people traded in coin rather than barter. The kings decided to provide good coins for two reasons: first, the kings actually earned money on the coinage, and second, coins were very convenient for paying taxes.

The coinage system was highly regimented. Every six years, the king issued new standard dies for striking silver pennies—the only coin in circulation. The dies were purchased by individual metalworkers, so while the dies were government issue, minting was a private concern. Coins were struck one at a time. Each time a new die was issued, all the coins in England were exchanged for new ones. It was a very sophisticated system, and

when the Normans came along in 1066, they found it difficult to keep it running effectively. ■

Important Terms

hundred: Anglo-Saxon unit of local government that survived the Norman Conquest, consisting of groupings of perhaps a hundred hides. Hundred courts assessed taxes and met every four weeks to hear cases of local importance.

sheriff: From “shire reeve”; beginning in the 11th century, the royal official in charge of administering the shire on behalf of the king. The sheriff accounted for the expenses and revenues of the shire at the Exchequer and, from the Norman Conquest onward, presided over the shire court.

shire: Largest unit of local government from the Anglo-Saxon England onward. The shire was administered by an ealdorman or later by a sheriff, who was responsible for judicial, financial, and military matters within the shire on behalf of the king.

witan: Anglo-Saxon royal council, consisting of the “wise men” of the realm. The witenagemot was a formal meeting of these advisers.

writ: Legal document recording a royal order, first used by the Anglo-Saxon kings, when writs were written in English, and adopted by the Normans, who changed the language of the writs to Latin. Under Henry II, many forms of writ proliferated to streamline legal procedures and increase the prestige of the royal courts.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Government of Anglo-Saxon England
Lecture 8—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we saw King Alfred defeat the Vikings and lay the groundwork for the creation of a unified English kingdom. His successors managed to expand the territory under their control so that the kingdom of Wessex, in effect, took over all the rest of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. Basically, the Vikings had done them a favor; they had gotten rid of their rivals, and Wessex had taken advantage of that fact.

Over the course of the 10th century, the kingdom of Wessex creates a new English kingdom. But what does that mean? What does that mean on the ground? How is this kingdom actually governed? What is this new state like? Well, the government of the Anglo-Saxon state is made up of a variety of institutions. Some of them have very old roots in the ancient Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. A lot of the units of land measurement and also units of very local government—these units are old. But on top of that, the Wessex government imposes a new system of counties, or shires, throughout the country. These are larger units; they can be governed by trusted followers of the king. The combination of these two kinds of units—the ancient smaller units and the new larger units—creates a very effective, very flexible hierarchy of government institutions. It makes the Anglo-Saxon state probably the best-governed country in Europe in the 10th century.

What I want to do in this lecture is to explain how the Anglo-Saxon state worked. We're going to cover three main areas of government. We're going to go through the levels of local government from top to bottom. We'll start with the county; we'll move down to the more local level. Then, we're going to look at some of the aspects of royal rule more generally: What did the kings actually do? Finally, we'll look at the system of justice: How has it changed from the early Anglo-Saxon period? At that point, we see that the law is mostly self-help. But we'll see that things are quite different by the 10th century; you're actually going to see a very elaborate court system at work. So those are going to be the main topics of the lecture today. But at the very end, I want to say just a very few words about the Anglo-Saxon economy, because naturally, the economy is very much tied to how effective the government is. If the government succeeds in its main job, which is to

provide peace and security, then prosperity is going to tend to follow. But the government is also responsible for the economy in a very direct way because the government issues the coinage. So we'll end by talking about the Anglo-Saxon money system and how it fits into the economy as a whole.

But let's start with local government; that's where most English people would experience government on a daily basis. Most people are never going to see the king in person, but they will see their local leaders, and they will have a lot of direct interaction with their local units of government. The most important unit, the most important administrative entity, in Anglo-Saxon England is the "shire," or county. Many of the names of English counties to this day have -shire at the end: Cambridgeshire, Hampshire, Buckinghamshire. What is a shire? The word "shire" originally meant the local war band, so at some point in the distant past, "shire" probably referred to the fact that you call out all of the fighting men of a certain local area. They're the local war band, and that ends up standing for the local area. In fact, the army usually is summoned shire by shire throughout this period, so this meaning of the "shire," this connection to the military, is still resonant in the 10th century.

But shires have evolved; they have a lot of other functions. Where do they come from? They come from Wessex originally. Wessex is a pretty large Anglo-Saxon kingdom, and we saw that one good thing for Wessex was that they were able to expand; they could expand into the southwest. Fairly early in the history of Wessex, the kings divided up their lands into shires so it was easier for them to govern. This system worked very well in Wessex, so when the Wessex kings begin to take over other kingdoms in the 9th and 10th centuries, they merely extend the shire system to those other kingdoms. They create shires in the rest of England. So it's a system that starts in Wessex and then spreads slowly over the rest of England as the Wessex kings become more powerful. When they get control of Mercia, they impose shires on Mercia. This process takes the whole of the 10th century, and in fact, it's not complete until well into the 11th century. The north of England is the last place to get shire boundaries. Historians actually talk about this period as the "shiring" of England.

So now we've got shires all over England; what do we do with them? The Wessex kings put the shires under the control of officials called "ealdormen." The most important job of these ealdormen is still to lead the army contingent of that shire. These are the king's commanders in the shire—the men on the spot—and they're usually chosen, maybe, because they have some sort of local connection, maybe they own a lot of land in the shire—that would be one reason—or they could just be favorites of the king. Originally, there is one ealdormen per shire, but as the 10th century goes on, kings often give a very important follower more than one shire to rule. That's a way of giving an extra bonus to somebody you want to reward. For example, there's an ealdorman in the mid-10th century who rules all of East Anglia. That's rather an extensive area. He was referred to as Athelstan "Half-King," because he had so much power, it was almost like he was a king; he was half a king. But one very important thing to note here is that these arrangements are temporary; they're not hereditary. Athelstan's sons—the sons of Athelstan Half-King—are important men, but they don't have nearly the same authority their father had. They don't inherit it from their father. These are not noble dynasties; this is not an aristocracy, an inherited aristocracy, in the way you start to see already on the continent in this period. These are arrangements that the kings make to suit themselves.

But this period when ealdormen rule more than one shire does lead to the creation of a very important kind of official. If you have somebody like Athelstan Half-King who's trying to rule a couple of shires at once, then really, you need somebody on a more local level in each shire to keep things going. So you see a new kind of official coming in called the "sheriff." "Sheriff" comes from the two words "shire" and "reeve." A reeve is somebody we've met before; it's an official who takes care of something. You could have a reeve for a single estate; we talked about this when we talked about the Anglo-Saxon kings' estates and how they have reeves on them to run the estates for the kings. So a "shire reeve" is somebody who takes care of a whole shire. And sheriffs are going to be the bedrock of English royal administration for many, many centuries, long beyond the Anglo-Saxon period.

So that's the shire, headed by an ealdorman or, later, by a sheriff. Below the level of the shire, you have another unit, a smaller unit, called the "hundred."

The number of hundreds that you had in each individual shire would vary. There might be 6 [or] there might be 10, depending on the shire, how big it is. But the idea is that each hundred is made up of 100 hides of land; a hide, remember, is roughly the land it takes to support one family, so a hundred is a fairly local unit. Hundreds also seem to have had a military origin, just like shires. This is where the men of a locality would gather up before they all went off to join the rest of the men of the shire. And hundreds, like shires, seem to have spread to the north and the east, just as the Wessex monarchy expands. So they go up along the chain with the shires.

Hundreds are run by "hundredmen," and they're responsible for law and order in their hundreds. They, of course, are going to be local landowners; these are people with clout in the neighborhood. Now, each hundred is then further subdivided into "tithings." Tithings are groups of 10 able-bodied men, and they're people who have to show up periodically to be inspected; they're inspected by their leaders, who are called "tithingmen." The tithingmen report to the hundredmen, and the hundredmen report to the sheriff, and on up the line, in theory, to the king. It's a pretty orderly system.

What's the point of it all? What's this hierarchy of government units supposed to do? The most important job, without question, is defense. This is why the king wants this orderly system, because the reputation of a king depends, first and foremost, on his ability to protect English lands. A king who can do that is a successful king; a king who can't is a failure. Obviously, it's also a big bonus if the king can expand the land under his control; this is what the Wessex monarchs did. But once you've got the land, you have to protect it.

So the shire, the hundred, and the tithing are organized to provide for the common defense. This is how manpower in England is mobilized. If you put all the fighting men from all the tithings and hundreds and shires together, you have an army, and in this period, the army is called the "fyrd." In the last lecture, we talked about this, about how Alfred reorganized the fyrd to make it more flexible and mobile.

But the fyrd is not the only force that the king can rely on. The fyrd is sort of like the militia; you can call it out when you need it. The core of the

king's army is his own group of followers, the king's thegns. These are the substantial landowners, the people who spend a lot of time at court. We've met them before, but their role is even more important now that England has become a larger, more unified state. The king relies on them for day-to-day military operations. This core group of thegns is essential.

Now, it takes more than just soldiers, though, to defend a country. You need public works of various kinds. In England, there's a system that had developed back in the early period when there were many different kingdoms. It seems to have been fairly universal. It's the idea that there are certain public obligations that everybody has to meet. Everybody, just because they're in England, they have to meet these public obligations. The tradition is that there were three of these, and you can't get around them. You can get all sorts of tax breaks and exemptions, but not these three. These are the three things you have to do. In fact, they were called the *trinoda necessitas*, which means the "threefold necessity." The three public works you have to support are: fortresses or burhs, bridges, and ships for the royal fleet. Those are things everyone has to support. There are various ways you might be called upon to do this. You might pay money to help with the upkeep of a fortress; we talked about that when we talked about the Burghal Hidage, how much it actually costs to run a fortress. You might be called on to do some physical labor or even to perform guard duty in one of these fortresses. But the important thing to keep in mind is [that] there is this concept of the public good, that there are things that are necessary for the defense of the realm, and everybody has to pitch in.

It sounds very public-minded, and it is, but it could also be somewhat inefficient. So the king might also need to hire mercenaries to supplement his forces. These might be local men, but they might come from overseas also. The Low Countries traditionally provided mercenaries in large numbers; for some reason, there always seems to be a manpower surplus in the Low Countries. There are people looking for work. But if you take it all together, you have the fyrd, which is the people's army; you have the thegns; you have everybody keeping up the roads and the bridges; and you can top that off with mercenaries when you have to. Overall, it's a pretty workable system.

So that's defense. But the thing that kings are defending is, of course, in a very basic sense, land. I want to talk for a few minutes about how land works in this society, ownership or control of land, because the king probably spends the bulk of his time when he's not defending the realm on questions relating to land. Ownership of land or control of land is really the only solid basis for wealth in this society, so regulating who has land is absolutely vital. Kings, for example, could confiscate land if the owner of the land does something to make the king angry, so you have to stay on the king's good side for that reason alone.

But there were other problems related to land. It could be very hard to tell who really had a right to a particular piece of land. Records were scarce. This is a society that uses writing, but it uses it rather sparingly. Many times, land would change hands and there would be no written record of the transaction at all. We have some written records that survive, but they must be only the tip of the iceberg of all the land transactions that took place. You might say, how did anybody know, then, whose land was whose? Well, you have people in preliterate societies or minimally literate societies [who] come up with methods to train their memories so that they can remember things for long periods of time. There were a whole series of such methods that were used to help people remember the details of a land transaction.

Suppose you have a guy named Wulfgar. Wulfgar wants to sell a piece of land to his neighbor, Alfstan. What they might do is actually walk around the property together, describing, as they go along, what the boundaries of the property are: Here's the big rock; here's the stream that divides my field from yours. Then, after they've done that—after they've both together made sure they know exactly what piece of land they're talking about—they might go to church together, and Wulfgar, the guy selling the land, might take a clod of earth from the land he's selling and put it on the altar of the church. Then Alfstan, the guy buying the land, might pick up the clod of earth and take it. This is a symbol of the transaction, and it's meant to be remembered. We know people did this, because later on, when they do start writing a lot of these things down more extensively, there was kind of a transition period when people still would do the whole thing with the clod of earth, and then, they would write a charter up that described the fact that they did it. So we actually have records of people doing these kinds of things.

There's another rather funny way that people remembered that a sale of land had taken place. Sometimes, the youngest person present at the sale—suppose a little boy is there watching—would be given a big slap, a good clout on the ear. The idea is [that] they're going to remember that slap; they're going to remember it for the rest of their life, and they're going to remember the occasion when they got the big slap, and thus, they're going to be able to testify about the sale if there are ever any questions later on. Of course, you slap the youngest person, because then, you're buying the longest term of memory of the transaction.

What does this all have to do with the king? Often, despite all these precautions, there are problems with land transactions. People might be getting harassed by someone who claims they're the real owners of some piece of property; they might come to the king to ask for help. And the king would have to decide who really has a right to the land. And then the parties concerned, after the king has made a decision, might at that point get a document drawn up, and it would prove that the king had ruled one way or the other. This would be something that they would preserve. Such a document was called a "diploma." This is not like the diploma that you get when you graduate from high school or college. It's a more general term; it refers to a formal royal document that says, this is what I, the king, have ruled. It might be in Latin, or it might be in Old English.

But there were other kinds of royal documents, much less formal ones, and they give us a really fascinating view of the king's day-to-day activities. These other documents are called "writs." These are much less formal pieces of writing. Really, they're just records of verbal orders that the king had given, and they're written usually just on scraps of parchment. A diploma can be a beautiful document, very carefully written; writs are really kind of scrappy things. They're not really meant to be kept. You know, once the order's carried out, you don't really need to keep it, so we're lucky that we have any of these things at all. One very interesting thing about writs is that they're in Old English. They're meant for the secular royal administration, for the king's lay officials, simply to tell his men what they need to do. They're essentially memos. They might tell the sheriff of a particular county [to] put someone in possession of a particular estate; that's the sort of thing that you might have in a writ.

So the king deals a lot with legal business of this kind; a lot of people are always asking him to do this and that for them: Settle this dispute; help me with this transaction. How does the king know what to do? How does he know what to decide? Well, the king is never without advisers. He always has people around him, of course, and the inner circle of his advisers is called the "witan." The word "witan" simply comes from the word for "wise," and the word "wise" is related to the word for "knowing," as in "wisdom." So the witan are the wise men of the country who are going to give the king good advice. His thegns might play this role, but he's also very likely to be surrounded by churchmen. Bishops were very often at the royal court; important abbots are always there, as well. So you really have a mixture of lay and clerical advisers.

The reason is that in this period, there's no concept of the separation of church and state. Both lay advisers and clerical advisers are equally important. Another thing that's important to know about the witan is that membership in the witan isn't fixed in stone. It's not an office that you hold. We don't have any sort of membership list of the witan at any one time; it's not as formal as that. But when there are important matters to discuss, like for example, choosing a new king, the full witan might meet together in a formal session. This is called the "witanagemot." Such occasions are rather rare. Usually, the king is just consulting his wise men, his witan, informally. But there are a few times when you want this formal meeting of all the wise men of the kingdom; that's crucial to making a big decision.

So we've talked about defense, and we've talked about land. Another thing that the kings are ultimately responsible for is the administration of justice. Here, we see that quite a bit has changed since the early migration period. Now, there's quite a lot of state apparatus for administering justice. You still do have the wergild system. People are responsible for compensating their victims if they injure them. But now the state is helping to run the system. Also, a new element has entered. You can actually commit a crime against the state, or really, it's against the king. And the king's justice is there to take care of that.

How does this system work? Well, there are courts that go along with all the different administrative levels that we talked about at the beginning of

the lecture. The highest court is the shire court. The sheriff presides over the court, but the people who really run it on a day-to-day basis are the important local freemen (that is, people who are not slaves; it's understood that you have to be free to participate in the courts). The shire court would meet twice a year to hear the most important cases in the shire. These might include cases that involved large estates, for example, that stretched over more than one hundred, more than one administrative unit. Anything really complicated or anything perhaps politically sensitive that the people on the level of the hundred can't cope with—that's dealt with at the shire level.

Below the shire courts, you have hundred courts, and these are led by the hundredmen. Hundred courts are really the workaday courts of Anglo-Saxon England. They meet much more frequently than the shire courts, usually every four weeks. They hear all cases, no matter how important or how trivial. Cases can be referred up from the hundred court to the shire court, as we've seen, but most business is dealt with on the level of the hundred.

What is the law that these courts operate under? The legal system is based on ancient laws called "dooms." Many of these dooms are the same legal customs we've met before; a lot of them date all the way back to the migration period. Starting from the very early days of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, though, kings had begun writing down these laws. This was something that became fashionable when kings converted to Christianity; it was seen as something that enhanced the king's authority, [to] issue a written law code. But the idea is that the kings are codifying law that already exists. It's the law of the people; they're not making new law. We saw in the last lecture that King Alfred starts to tinker with this practice; he starts to change the laws a bit to suit himself. But generally speaking, the laws are seen as coming from the people. When the king issues a law code, he's supposed to be, in effect, stating the obvious: These are the customs that we all know.

One way in which the justice system under the Anglo-Saxons is really different from ours is the way in which you decide if people are innocent or guilty. There are two main ways to prove your innocence. The first is called "compurgation." Compurgation is when the accused swears an oath that he's innocent, and he gets a lot of other people to swear he's innocent at the same time. That's why it's com-purgation; it's swearing with someone. You

are purging yourself of the accusation by getting other people to swear your innocence. The people who swear your innocence are called "oath-helpers." They actually help your oath along; they help make it credible. The theory behind compurgation is, obviously, that it should be hard to get a lot of people in your neighborhood to swear something that they know isn't true, because they have to live there and they don't want to be seen as liars. This is a face-to-face society; oaths matter. You needed different numbers of oath-helpers depending on how serious the crime was or how important the victim was. Compurgation is a kind of very formal peer pressure.

Now, were there cases where people cheerfully swore things that weren't true just to help out a friend? Undoubtedly, there were. But this society is working with the tools it had. Peer pressure is one of the better things they have going for them.

But besides compurgation, there's another kind of proof the Anglo-Saxons use, and this one, I think, is a lot better known. I'm talking here about the ordeal. You can often see references to the ordeal in books or films about the Middle Ages. The ordeal is one of the most fascinating and most controversial of medieval phenomena. The principle behind the ordeal is [that] you get God to actually rule on the guilt or innocence of the accused. You set up a system whereby God has to give you a verdict. There are three ways to do this: the ordeal by hot water, the ordeal by cold water, and the ordeal by hot iron.

In the ordeal by hot water, the defendant has to plunge his hand into a cauldron of boiling hot water. How far in he had to plunge his hand depended on the severity of the case. It might be just to the wrist; that was called the single ordeal. Or if you were accused of something really bad, you might have to undergo the triple ordeal, in which you had to plunge your arm in all the way to the elbow. Then you get to pull your arm out again, and then it's bandaged up, and it's allowed to heal for three days. At the end of that time, the bandages are taken off, and if the blisters are healing cleanly, you're innocent; if they're festering, you're guilty.

The ordeal by hot iron is very similar, except instead of plunging your hand into hot water, you have to pick up a hot iron object and carry it a specified

distance in your bare hand. Then, again, your hand would be bandaged, and after three days, you'd see how it's healing.

The ordeal of cold water is in some ways the most bizarre. It's the one most often used on women. In the ordeal of cold water, you'd be thrown into a body of water, and if you floated, that meant the water is rejecting you, and you must be guilty. If you sank, then the water is graciously receiving you, and you're innocent. This is obviously a little bit problematic. There's not a very long window of time in there between discovering the defendant is innocent and watching her drown before your eyes.

But before we dismiss the whole system of ordeals as ridiculous, we need to think about what's really going on. First, the society is using all the sanctions it knew how to use to try to get at the truth when they aren't able to figure it out any other way. Remember, they don't have modern crime labs, so they make use of peer pressure with compurgation; they make use of religious awe about the ordeal, because priests participate very actively in the ordeal. There were special rituals for blessing the instruments of the ordeal: the cauldron in which they heated the hot water, the anvil where they heated the iron. In addition, some scholars think the ordeal isn't really as completely hit or miss as it sounds. When the bandages come off and you have to decide whether the wound is healing nicely or not, it's often the local community that pronounces on whether the wound looks like it's healing well or not. This could, of course, be a matter of opinion: "Looks good to me," or "No, that looks like it's full of pus." Really, what you end up getting is the verdict of the local community on the crime, based on local knowledge. So really, it's the basic community verdict anyhow, but you've got a sort of a supernatural sanction for it.

Well, maybe we're not going to give Anglo-Saxon justice a whole lot of credit for being ahead of its time, but the same can't be said for the money system; that was quite advanced, and it's the last major area of royal responsibility that I want to talk about. It's one of two aspects of the Anglo-Saxon economy that the kings are involved in. The other is the regulation of markets. There are actually rules for where and when markets can be held, [and] there were certain very basic regulations about weights and measures, about not carrying out transactions without witnesses, that sort of thing.

The coinage system in the 10th century is designed to meet the needs of a population that's increasingly involved in trade. The economy had expanded considerably in the course of the century; towns are growing, especially the burhs that Alfred had founded. More and more people need coins for their transactions. That's not to say there isn't a lot of barter; a lot of exchanges get made in kind, with people trading goods back and forth. But a lot of trading is also done using money, and the kings made sure to provide an excellent coinage system. They had two good reasons they wanted to do this. The first is [that] the kings actually earned money on the coinage, and the second reason is that coins are very convenient for paying taxes.

Coinage in England dates back to King Offa in the 8th century. Offa had struck silver pennies in imitation of the pennies of Charlemagne—remember Offa and Charlemagne and their kind of rivalry. This starts a trend, and by the early 9th century, all the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms are striking their own coins. As the Wessex monarchy expands in the 10th century, the system gets more and more sophisticated and standardized. Here's how it worked: In the mid-10th century, under King Edgar the Peaceable, there's a big reorganization of the coinage. Every six years, standard dies would be issued for the silver penny, which was the only coin in circulation. These dies would be purchased by moneyers, so that makes money for the king. These were metalworkers who would set up shop throughout the country. So there were dozens of individual mints, mostly in the important towns. In these mints, the moneyers would strike coins, one by one. They were, in effect, independent contractors.

After six years or, later, after three years, a new set of dies would be issued, and the moneyers would have to pay a fee for the new ones, and all the coins of England would be exchanged for the new issue. Over the course of the run of one issue of coins, the coins would be struck lighter and lighter, with less and less silver in them. This is so that they [would] match up with the coins that are already in circulation that have been a little bit worn, or these coins might also have been clipped; people liked to shave off little bits of silver and save them up. You're not supposed to do this, but it happened all the time. So the money system is designed to take all these things into account.

It's a very sophisticated system, and when the Normans come along in 1066, they find it difficult to keep it running effectively. The coinage system is just one aspect of an Anglo-Saxon state that I think is actually pretty impressive. Defense, justice, the economy—the English kingdom in the 10th century does a pretty reasonable job, certainly by comparison with any other state in Europe at the time. In our next lecture, we'll look at the art and learning that this stable, prosperous state made possible.

The Golden Age of the Anglo-Saxons
Lecture 9

[*The Battle of Maldon*] is saying something about whether it's a good idea to pay off the Danes, and whether the king needs to support his commanders in the field more effectively, hint, hint. … It suggests that there may have been a lively debate about current events, and people were using this kind of literary work to engage in it—again, evidence for quite a bit of sophisticated learning out there in the lay community.

The kind of stability the kings of Wessex had developed for the unified English kingdom is exactly what you need if you want learning and the arts to flourish, and that's just what happened in England in the 10th and early 11th centuries. Kings and nobles now had the leisure and the financial resources to patronize the arts on a large scale. Patrons commissioned works of art and fostered learning to glorify God and to bolster their own prestige. And in this period, the center of both the church and education was the monastery.

The monasteries had suffered greatly in the period of Viking invasions. Many had been completely destroyed; others dwindled from lack of financial support. By the early 10th century there were scarcely any monastic communities, for men or women, in all of England. This was a serious problem for England's spiritual and intellectual life. Restoring the monasteries thus became a priority of England's 10th-century kings.

Glastonbury, in Somerset, Wessex, had long been one of England's most important monastic communities, but by the 930s, all that remained was a small school. A young man named Dunstan who was a distant relative of the royal house had studied there before being called to serve at King Athelstan's court. Dunstan's fortunes rose and fell, but eventually he won the king's favor and was made abbot of Glastonbury, with a promise of unlimited resources to restore the community. This was the beginning of about half a century of deliberate royal support for the monastic life in England, not to mention an

illustrious career for Dunstan, who proved himself a capable administrator and was eventually made archbishop of Canterbury.

Saint Aethelwold's career was similar to Dunstan's, from monk to abbot of Abingdon to bishop of Winchester. His special genius was for founding or refounding monasteries, such as Peterborough in Northamptonshire and Ely in Cambridgeshire. This job entailed acquiring monks and/or nuns; building or restoring a church, living quarters, workshops, storage buildings, and the like; and, most importantly, acquiring a landed endowment to support it. We have a wonderful record of how he went about this preserved by the monks of Ely. Aethelwold got the king to donate some of the land; some came from other nobles, some he bought, and some he got through nothing short of extortion. As a result of his skill, the monasteries Aethelwold founded were some of the richest in England.

Saint Oswald was an Anglo-Danish monk who rose to become bishop of Worcester and later archbishop of York. He founded some very important monasteries, including Ramsey in Huntingdonshire. He was politically well-connected within the church, as well as handsome and talented, and like Aethelwold, he was a very hard-headed businessman. These men of God were very, very careful about the bottom line.

Why did the English kings, especially King Edgar the Peaceable, think it was so important to found all these monasteries? For one thing, many of these monasteries were founded in areas that had belonged to the Danish and were just coming under Wessex's control. These communities were essentially royal outposts, anchors for royal rule. It did not escape the people that these new monasteries might be intended as a way of keeping the natives from getting restless, and in fact, after Edgar the Peaceable died in 975, a lot of monasteries came under attack. This episode has become known as the anti-monastic reaction. Equilibrium was eventually restored, but it was a reminder that the church needed the support of the king if it was going to thrive.

Up to the 10th century, there had traditionally been an important distinction between a monastery and a cathedral: The former was a community of and for monks, while the latter was meant to serve the lay community. Now

the prevailing feeling among churchmen in England was that monasticism was the best way to serve God, and bishops began setting up monastic communities at their own cathedrals. These hybrid communities had to look outward as well as inward, and as a result, they produced something new: the vernacular sermon. These texts were not only preached from the pulpit; they were circulated in manuscript, which tells us that there was a substantial proportion of English-literate people among the population. Alfred's efforts at broadening literacy seem to have worked.

The most famous vernacular summon was written in 1014 by a bishop named Wulfstan and was called "The Sermon of the Wolf to the English." In it, Wulfstan blames the current sufferings of the English people (they were once again under attack by the Danes) on the sins of the people themselves. What is interesting is that he addresses people of every social class and every region. To Wulfstan, England was a whole, a nation. No doubt the flowering of English learning contributed to this sense of English unity.

Secular literature also flourished in the 10th century. At some point in this period—we're not exactly sure when—the greatest masterpiece of Old English literature was composed: *Beowulf*. This narrative poem, written in alliterative verse, tells the story of the hero named Beowulf and his victories over a series of monsters. The events in the poem are set in the distant past, and in fact, they don't even take place in England, and the poem may preserve actual traditions that had been passed down for centuries in England. Linguistic analysis hints that *Beowulf* was composed in the 8th century, but it was probably the prosperity and the spread of learning in the 10th century that led it to be written down. Only one medieval copy of *Beowulf* survives; called the Cotton manuscript, it dates to about the year 1000 and was nearly destroyed in a fire in 1731. *Beowulf* is a very complicated poem and subject to many interpretations, but it clearly concerns Anglo-Saxon warrior values. Beowulf's own ambition and desire to prove his bravery drives most of the action. The duty of a follower to his lord and a lord to his followers is also an important theme. There are lots of ambiguities in the poem, and they hint at tensions within this society.

Another important Old English poem, called *The Battle of Maldon*, engages with similar issues. It preserves the memory of a commander

named Byrhtnoth, who refused to pay off the Vikings and perished in battle with them. Although the battle took place many years before the poem was written, the poem was likely intended to be read as a commentary on the politics and ethics of its own day. So the lay community was engaging with these issues on a very sophisticated level.

At some point in this period—we're not exactly sure when—the greatest masterpiece of Old English literature was composed: *Beowulf.*

Other arts besides writing flourished in this golden age of Anglo-Saxon culture. Many leading churchmen did metalwork, and beautiful ornaments and religious objects were produced in this period, although many were later melted down for the value of their metal, so we have few examples. Few textiles survive from the period because they are so fragile, but we know that the fancy textiles called English work had an excellent reputation throughout Europe. Probably the most famous artistic works of the period are the gorgeous illuminated manuscripts produced in the monasteries.

So Anglo-Saxon England was a prosperous society that was able to devote considerable resources to artistic expression. Although that expression was mostly centered on the church, the lay public was also eager and able to consume works of learning and literature. In the 10th century, a new self-consciously English public comes into its own. ■

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Golden Age of the Anglo-Saxons

Lecture 9—Transcript

Welcome back. Over the last two lectures, we've watched a unified English state come into being. We looked in the last lecture at the way the kingdom was governed, and we saw that there were now pretty sophisticated mechanisms in place to defend the realm, to administer justice, and even to regulate the coinage. This is the kind of stability you need if you want art and learning to flourish, and that's just what happened in England in the 10th and early 11th centuries, because now, the Anglo-Saxon kings and nobles have the leisure and the financial resources to patronize the arts on a large scale.

Now, I need to say something here about what it means to be a patron of the arts in the 10th century. A 10th-century person would not have understood the term "patron of the arts." In modern life, we're familiar with art for art's sake. There are museums and art galleries [that] exist just because people want to experience great art. But that's not how it worked in the 10th century. When people in that period commissioned beautiful works of art, they mostly did it for the glory of God. Well, partly. And also to look impressive to their friends and maybe rivals; human nature hasn't changed *that* much. But artistic patronage in our period is all about the church. So we'll spend a lot of time in this lecture talking about the church, especially about the monastic church, because the monastic church is really the driving force in the church in the 10th century. That's where the religious center of gravity is.

You'll remember that one of the reasons Alfred had commissioned translations of important texts is that he was afraid that the level of learning in the English church was too low. It was pretty tough to concentrate on learning Latin when you're worried about Vikings. One area of the church that had suffered especially under the Vikings was monastic life. A lot of monastic communities had been destroyed by Vikings in the course of their raids, but also a lot had simply dwindled away over time due to lack of support. The lay community had other priorities during this period; you had to stay one step ahead of the Vikings. So many of the monasteries of the early Anglo-Saxon period just weren't there anymore in the early 10th century; they weren't up-and-running concerns. By the early 10th

century, there are scarcely any monastic communities, for men or women, in all of England.

This was a very serious situation for the English church because the monastic life is highly respected. It tends to produce the most important intellectuals. These are the people who have the leisure to copy manuscripts and also to write new works. And monasteries have a very special status simply as repositories of holiness. Lay men and women liked for there to be monasteries around because they value the prayers of the monks and nuns. It's just a good sign for the country as a whole if there are lots of monks and nuns in it.

So the English kings in the early 10th century start trying to restore some of the monasteries that had been destroyed and found new ones. One of the most important of these was Glastonbury, in Somerset, in Wessex. Glastonbury had been the site of an ancient monastic community, but by the 930s, it had dwindled away to the point where all there is left is a small school. A young man named Dunstan spent some happy years of study in this little school, but he was distantly related to the royal house, so his kinsmen pulled him away to serve at the court of King Athelstan, and he continued to do that even after he took vows as a monk. But Dunstan fell victim to a court intrigue, and he found himself in disgrace. All was not lost, though. We get this story from a later biographer of Dunstan, and it would be nice to think that it's true. Dunstan was devastated, obviously, at losing royal favor, and he was just about to go overseas into exile when the king was riding along on the top of a cliff [and was] carried away by his horse; his horse bolts. The horse is taking the king straight toward the Cliffs of Cheddar; he's going to be flung to his death. Then, it pops into the king's mind [that] perhaps he may have done Dunstan an injury. He resolves instantly to right the wrong, the horse turns aside in time, and the king and Dunstan ride off together to the site of Glastonbury. The king installs Dunstan as abbot and promises to give him whatever resources he's going to need to restore the community there.

This is the beginning of about half a century of very deliberate royal support for the monastic life in England. Dunstan makes a great success of his time at Glastonbury. He works very well with successive English kings; he's always managing to get them to grant even more land to the abbey, and this

was really the most important job of an abbot. An abbot is sort of like a university president today. University presidents have to go solicit donations from alumni; they have to try to get grants from federal agencies. Abbots in this period have to do a similar kind of thing, only they're hitting up the king and the nobles. So Dunstan's very good at this, and people think of him as a very holy man, and the result is that Dunstan is made archbishop of Canterbury in 957. He holds the post for more than 30 years. He works especially closely with King Edgar the Peaceable, who rules from 959 to 975. Edgar is the greatest royal patron of monastic life in the 10th century.

One of the notable things about Dunstan is that he's a famous metalworker. He's an expert silversmith and blacksmith. Quite a few of the prominent religious figures of this period have some sort of special artistic competence, as well—besides being monastic leaders. Dunstan's skill with blacksmith's tools gave rise to a very famous story about him. Apparently, once, he is working away at the bellows when the devil appears to tempt him. Dunstan reacts as any quick-thinking blacksmith would. He takes his blacksmith's tongs, and he seizes the devil by the nose, and he holds on for dear life while the devil howls in pain, and finally, the devil has to let Dunstan go. This encounter between Dunstan and the devil made its way into English folklore. There's a wonderful little English rhyme about it, and it goes like this:

> St. Dunstan as the story goes
> Once pulled the devil by the nose
> With red-hot tongs, which made him roar
> That he was heard three miles or more.

So that's St. Dunstan. But I want to introduce two other monastic leaders, because they're just as important in encouraging the monastic reform and the artistic patronage of the 10th century. The first of these men was St. Ethelwold. Ethelwold's career is very similar to Dunstan's. He starts out as abbot of an important monastery, Abingdon in Berkshire, and then he's made bishop of Winchester. That was a very important job in the church; Winchester was the most important town in Wessex.

Ethelwold's special genius seems to have been founding or refounding monasteries. In addition to being abbot of Abingdon, he also sets up new

monastic communities at many sites where there had been monasteries in the past, but where the Vikings or some other factors had caused the communities to disappear. He's very active in eastern England; of course, that's an area that suffered a lot from the Viking raids. The two most important monasteries he refounds are Peterborough in Northamptonshire and Ely in Cambridgeshire.

Now what does it mean to found or refound a monastery? What would that actually entail? First, we need to think for a moment about what a monastery needs. Obviously, the first thing it needs is monks or nuns. So you have to recruit the right people. Then you need to build a church if there isn't an adequate one there already. You're going to need lots of other buildings, too, for the monks to live in and work in. But without a doubt, the toughest challenge is coming up with a landed endowment. These are the estates that the monastery owns that they're going to use to support the community. The monastery would farm some of its land directly, so that would supply food and clothing for the monks. But they would also rent out some of the lands to earn cash so that they could buy things they needed, like altar vessels and vestments, that sort of thing. All in all, it takes a lot of land to support a monastery. So when St. Ethelwold takes on the task of founding all of these monasteries, he's going to have to gather up a lot of land.

We have a wonderful record of how he went about this, because the monks at Ely preserved a record of how they acquired each one of their estates, all of the different parcels of land that made up their landed endowment. Some of the lands Ethelwold got the king to donate; some was donated by other nobles; some land Ethelwold bought; and some he got out of people by rather nefarious means. I've got an example for you, and it concerns land owned by a guy named Oslac. Somehow, Oslac got in trouble with King Edgar, and the king confiscated his lands. Remember, in the last lecture, I mentioned [that] kings could do that. Oslac asked Bishop Ethelwold to intercede for him with the king: "Help me get my lands back." The bishop did this, and the king did give Oslac back his land, but he exacted a fine of 100 mancuses (that would amount to about 3,000 silver pennies, so that's a big fine in the 10th century). Oslac didn't have 100 mancuses, so he borrowed 40 mancuses from Bishop Ethelwold, and he gave some of his lands as security for the loan. Things went back and forth, and ultimately, the bishop

had to exert quite a lot of pressure, but ultimately, when Oslac couldn't pay the whole amount, he ended up giving the bishop a combination of cash and land worth 40 mancuses. Once Ethelwold had the land, he gave it to Ely. So the process of endowing these monasteries could be pretty messy. Certainly, Oslac wasn't left with a good taste in his mouth about this whole transaction. It could involve court politics; it could involve complicated legal maneuvers. But the result is that the monasteries that Ethelwold founded were some of the richest in England.

I want to briefly introduce the third of these monastic founders, a guy named St. Oswald. St. Oswald was bishop of Worcester and, later, also archbishop of York. Oswald was of mixed English and Danish ancestry, and he was related to a previous archbishop of Canterbury, so he's very well-connected. His biographer tells us that he was very physically handsome and he had a special love for the poor. He apparently also had a very fine singing voice. In addition to being bishop of one see and archbishop of another, he also founded some very important monasteries, including Ramsey in Huntingdonshire, which is right in between Peterborough and Ely. But Oswald, like Ethelwold, is a very hard-headed businessman. We have records of the leases that he made of some of the Worcester lands—remember, I said that you would rent out your lands so that you could have a cash income—and these leases were very sound investments. These men of God are very, very careful about the bottom line.

Now I want to say something about why these three men enjoy such royal favor. Why do the English kings, especially King Edgar the Peaceable, think it's so important to found all these monasteries? I think it helps a little bit to think about the map of England and to think about where most of the new monasteries are. They're mostly in Mercia and East Anglia; these are areas that had been under Danish rule and that the Wessex monarchy is only now getting control of. They were trying to integrate these old Danish-ruled territories into the new unified English state, and monasteries are one way to do that. These communities are essentially royal outposts, royal settlements, and they're going to create anchors for royal rule in these territories. That's why King Edgar is so eager to found these monasteries, or certainly, that's a large part of the reason why.

Of course, they're also very tempting targets. It doesn't escape the people in a place like eastern Mercia that these new monasteries are showing up as part of a way of to keep the natives from getting restless. We've already seen how the ways in which the monasteries got their land could be a bit questionable. Some of these land transactions could leave rather bitter resentments behind. That seems to have been what happened after Edgar the Peaceable died in 975 and his young son Edward succeeded to the throne. It was as if the floodgates opened, and a lot of monasteries came under attack. A lot of old resentments showed up. This episode has become known as the anti-monastic reaction. This is not really a good term for it; nobody involved in these attacks is really questioning the premise of monasticism. They just don't like the way that particular monasteries had acquired particular estates. For several years, things are tough before equilibrium is restored. But it's a very good lesson that the church needs the support of the king if it's going to thrive.

So far, I've talked almost exclusively about monasteries, and that's because the 10th century is a very monastic century in England. One of the distinctive things that develops in England in this century is the so-called monastic cathedral. So far in the history of the church, there had typically been a distinction between a monastery, which is a community for monks who do their own thing—they're praying as a community—and a cathedral; a cathedral is the chief church of a bishop and it has an important role in the religious life of the whole lay community. But the monastic tide is so strong in the 10th century—this feeling that being a monk is really the best possible way to be a churchman—that many bishops set up monastic communities at their own cathedrals. Of course, many of these bishops are monks themselves. St. Ethelwold does this at Winchester; St. Oswald did it at Worcester, for example, and there were plenty of others.

These hybrid cathedral monasteries are thus really serving two audiences: the monks within the monastic community itself and the lay congregation of the cathedral. The cathedrals have to look outward as well as inward, and as a result, they produce a new kind of literary text: the vernacular sermon. These are sermons preached in the vernacular, in English, rather than in Latin—you could preach in Latin to the monks, but you would want to preach in English to the laity—and they're meant for an educated lay audience of

people who would come to services in the cathedral. But beyond that, they also circulated in manuscript, so there was apparently an audience of people who wanted to read these sermons on their own. That tells us that there was, in fact, a substantial population of literate laymen (probably laywomen, as well); these are people who could read in the vernacular. Alfred's efforts to broaden literacy, especially in English, really seem to have worked.

These sermons could be rather tough reading, in the sense that the churchmen who preached them were not shy about taking their flocks to task. I want to tell you about one of these sermons; it's the most famous one of the whole Anglo-Saxon period. It's by Wulfstan, who was, first, bishop of London, and then, he was bishop of Worcester, and finally, he was archbishop of York. So he's a very prominent figure. He wrote a sermon called the "Sermon of the Wolf to the English"; he wrote it in 1014, and that was a very bad time in England. We're going to get to this later on, but England was being attacked again by the Danes at this point, and a lot of bad things had been happening.

So Archbishop Wulfstan preaches this sermon, in English, to try to make sense of why all of these disasters are occurring. It turns out that it's because of the sins of the English; I'm sure you're not surprised to hear that. Wulfstan lists all the terrible evils that are being done in England: Churches are robbed, poor people are sold into slavery overseas, lords are betrayed. It goes on, and on, and on in this general vein. It doesn't make really exciting reading today, but one thing about the sermon is really striking. It talks to the whole English people. It addresses the concerns of the English people of every social class. These vernacular sermons, I think, contribute to creating a sense of nationhood. In Wulfstan's sermons, you're not hearing about Wessex anymore; you're not hearing about Mercia. He's addressing the English. So one of the effects of the flowering of learning at the great churches of the 10th century is to help create a sense of an English nation.

But religious literature is by no means the only kind of text being produced in the 10th century. Secular literature is also flourishing. At some point in this period—we're not exactly sure when—the greatest masterpiece of Old English literature was composed. I'm talking, of course, about *Beowulf*" *Beowulf* is a narrative poem, written in alliterative verse. That means you have sounds repeating themselves within each line of poetry; there isn't any

rhyme. It tells the story of the hero named Beowulf and his encounters with a series of monsters, whom he slays. (Though at the very end of the poem, he dies after killing the last monster.) The events in the poem are set in the distant past, and in fact, they don't even take place in England. They're set in the pre-migration period when the ancestors of the English had not even left the continent yet. The poem may preserve actual traditions that had been passed down for centuries in England. The reason scholars have had such a hard time figuring out when the poem was written is that it may have taken shape over a long period of time. A lot of things in the poem look as though they should come from the 8th century—that's what linguists say from the language of the text. But it's written down in the 10th century, and it's probably the prosperity [and] the spread of learning and manuscripts in the 10th century that leads it to be written down at that moment.

There's one really interesting thing about the manuscript of *Beowulf* that you might not know. We have only one medieval manuscript copy of the poem, and it probably dates from about the year 1000, give or take a few years. The manuscript ended up in the library of Sir Robert Cotton in the 17th century. He was a great antiquarian collector; he would go around England, buying up as many old manuscripts as he could find. So he had this huge library, and it was preserved intact after he died. Then, in 1731, there was a huge fire in the library. We have eyewitness reports of what happened. The chief librarian was seen staggering out of the building; he was carrying one of the most priceless manuscripts cradled in his arms. Some of the librarians actually threw manuscripts out the windows to save them. Happily, one of the manuscripts that was saved was the one that had *Beowulf* in it, though it's still a little singed. That's how close we came to losing the only manuscript of this incredible poem.

Now, *Beowulf* is a very complicated poem; it's subject to many interpretations. Roughly speaking, though, I think we can say [that] it expresses the values of the Anglo-Saxon warrior class. One of the obvious themes is the importance of doing great deeds. Beowulf comes to the hall of King Hrothgar because he knows they've got a monster problem. The problem is that Grendel, the monster, has been coming at night and killing people in the hall. He, Beowulf, wants to solve it. I'm just going to give you a sample of the way Beowulf talks. This is from the superb verse translation

by Seamus Heaney. It talks about Beowulf arriving and telling the people why he has come:

> I had a fixed purpose when I put to sea.
> As I sat in the boat with my band of men,
> I meant to perform to the uttermost
> What your people wanted or perish in the attempt,
> In the fiend's clutches. And I shall fulfill that purpose.
> Prove myself with a proud deed
> Or meet my death here in the mead hall.

That's pretty stirring stuff.

So bravery is very important, but the bond between a king and his followers is also very important. Beowulf is a loyal servant to his lord, unlike some, and that's definitely a good thing. Conversely, it's clearly important for a king to reward his followers well; you've got to give them treasure. King Hrothgar is praised as a "ring-giver"; he gives rings, and jewelry in this period is seen as kind of a fungible asset. Another theme is the danger of feuds; there are a couple of very nasty ones in the poem that we find out about along the way. Over everything, though, towers the importance of reputation, the reputation of the hero. There are lots of ambiguities, lots of subtleties in the poem, and they hint at some tensions in this society. Is it right for Beowulf to fight that one last monster? He's clearly too old to be exposing himself to such danger, and of course, he does die. Does Beowulf betray his responsibilities to his people by going after reputation when it's too late, or is his death a glorious one? It's not completely clear. I think it says a lot about the sophistication of the audience in Anglo-Saxon England that we have a text like *Beowulf* from this period. It really is a masterpiece.

Of course, it's not the only work of poetry to survive from this period. We've got a much shorter poem but a very interesting one from a political point of view; it's called "The Battle of Maldon." It's about a battle that took place in 991 between the men of Essex and a group of Vikings; this is the period when the Vikings have come back for a second great wave of attacks on England. The poem tells the story of the battle; it talks about how the Vikings sent a messenger to the English commander, Byrhtnoth, the ealdorman of

Essex. They ask Byrhtnoth to pay tribute to the Vikings. Well, he hurls back a defiant reply:

> Tell your people the unpleasant tidings
> That over here there stands a noble earl with his troop—
> Guardians of the people and of the country…
> Who'll defend this land to the last ditch.

Well, that sounds great. Byrhtnoth does go to meet the Danes in battle, and he perishes. But the poem preserves his memory, and indeed, I think it was probably meant as a kind of political commentary on the state of affairs in England in the late 10th century. The poem is probably trying to say something about whether it's a good idea to pay off the Danes; whether, perhaps, the king needs to support his commanders in the field more effectively, hint, hint. But I think the important thing about this poem is [that] it suggests there may have been a lively debate about current events, and people are using this kind of literary work to engage in it. Again, evidence for quite a bit of sophisticated learning out there in the lay community.

I've talked about various kinds of texts, religious texts and secular texts, that were produced in this period, but there were all kinds of other works of art that come out of the monasteries and workshops of England. I mentioned earlier that St. Dunstan is a skilled metalworker, and in fact, many leading churchmen did metalwork. We don't, unfortunately, have more than a fraction of the beautiful artifacts that must have been produced. Gold and silver objects, of course, represent capital, and they could literally be liquidated. They were sometimes melted down if the owner needed money, and in fact, we have records of churches having to do this. They might have to strip the gold and silver ornaments off of a shrine, for example, if they were short of cash. So a lot has been lost. But enough survives for us to see how stunning some of these objects were. There were altar vessels, reliquaries, bishops' crosiers (that's the staff of office that the bishop carries), all sorts of beautiful objects. The churches of England must have literally shined. And probably a lot of the same motifs that we see in these metal objects were used in other kinds of carving that are less likely to survive, things like wood and ivory.

I want to say a special word here about another class of artifact that we don't have a lot of surviving examples of, namely, textiles. English textiles were very famous in this period; the fancy textiles produced in England were referred to as "English work," and they had an excellent reputation throughout Europe. Some of the most elaborate garments made were liturgical vestments. A lot of these vestments included elaborate gold and silver fringes or decorative panels worked with gold and silver thread. So the monasteries were very important clients for the best embroiderers of the day, but we also have records of English queens employing embroiderers, so there must have been an extensive clientele for these textiles among the upper classes of England, as well.

Probably the most famous artistic works of the period are the gorgeous manuscripts. The manuscripts use many of the same motifs as you might see in the metalwork and other kinds of art; there's a lot of artistic unity in this period. The monasteries produced beautiful manuscripts of the Bible [and] all sorts of other liturgical texts. They're meant to be displayed publicly in the church so that the faithful can see them and be impressed by them, and I have no doubt that they were impressed, just as we are.

What are the main points to take away from this look at art and faith in the 10th century? I think there are three: First, this is a prosperous society; it's able to devote considerable resources to artistic expression. Second, that artistic expression is mostly centered on the church. But third, there's a rather extensive lay public out there that is eager to consume works of learning and literature. This, I think, is what makes the golden age of the 10th century different from the last golden age we looked at, the Northumbrian Renaissance of the 7th and 8th centuries. There, we saw literary and artistic efforts almost exclusively centered on the church, and it's a regional movement; it's just in Northumbria. In the 10th century, a new self-consciously English public is beginning to come into its own.

But as I've already hinted in this lecture, things are about to get difficult again, because the Vikings are coming back for round 2. We'll find out what happens when they do in our next lecture.

The Second Viking Conquest
Lecture 10

Cnut was the man on the spot. … Cnut was already in control of large sections of England. He seemed up to the job; after all, he had fought Edmund Ironside to a stalemate. And so it proved: Cnut's reign as king was largely successful, and it was mostly remembered fondly by the English. That may seem remarkable; he was a foreign conqueror after all. But the change from Aethelred seems to have been a welcome one.

Even during Anglo-Saxon England's golden age, there were hints of trouble on the horizon. England was hit again by Scandinavian raiders, starting in the 990s. This second Viking conquest was a very different sort from the first one; England had changed, and so had the Vikings. England was now a unified nation with an organized military, although the north was not as securely under Wessex rule as other regions were. Meanwhile, unified kingdoms had been forming in Scandinavia as well. At the end of the 10th century, Viking forces were led not by local leaders but by kings. So now you have a more unified England going up against a more unified Viking invader. These factors raised the stakes considerably; to capture all of England, the Vikings needed only to defeat one king.

The kingdom of Denmark coalesced and was Christianized under King Harold Bluetooth in the mid-10th century. Around the same time, Olaf Tryggvason brought Norway under control, also as a Christian king. Christianity didn't change the Vikings' attitudes toward war very much; only now, they have Christian sanction behind them. England was an attractive target to these leaders both because of its prosperity and because it was already home to large numbers of Danes. The Danes in Denmark figured that if they invaded England, these English Danes might help them. Finally, a succession crisis in England, and the weak king who emerged from it, made the country look ripe for invasion.

The succession crisis began in 975 when Edgar the Peaceable died, survived by two sons by two different mothers. The older son, Edward, succeeded the father, but the younger son, Aethelred, had a very powerful mother,

Aelfthryth. Naturally, she wanted her own son on the throne. Both boys were underage, so the real fighting went on not between the heirs but between their supporters. Three years into his reign, Edward was assassinated, and Aethelred came to the throne. Almost immediately, Edward was being venerated as Saint Edward the Martyr; Aethelred's entire reign was haunted by Edward's death.

The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 1010 tells us, "when the enemy were in the east, then the army was kept in the west; and when they were in the south, then our army was in the north."

Aethelred is one of the most maligned of all English kings; the best-known thing about him is his nickname, Aethelred Unraed—often translated as Aethelred the Unready, but more closely meaning Aethelred of Bad Counsel. He earned this very unflattering nickname by failing to defeat the Vikings.

The Viking raids of England began again in 991 under Olaf Tryggvason, leading to the Battle of Maldon. Where Byrhtnoth had refused to pay off the invaders, Aethelred later agreed. This was the first of the payments that would become known as **Danegeld**, essential tax that was collected at irregular intervals down to the 12th century, long after the Viking invasions had ceased. This payoff bought the English only a little time; in 994, King Swein Forkbeard led a Danish invasion. The king paid them off, and again in 1002, and in 1007, and in 1012, and each time the amounts got bigger and bigger. Unlike Alfred, Aethelred failed to take advantage of the time he had bought, and thus he had to keep paying. And also unlike Alfred, Aethelred was an ineffective military commander. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* for the year 1010 tells us, "when the enemy were in the east, then the army was kept in the west; and when they were in the south, then our army was in the north." When Aethelred sought the witan's advice, "whatever was then decided, it did not stand for even one month."

One decision Aethelred made had huge implications for English history. Concerned about the Vikings getting support from their distant relations in Normandy, France, Aethelred decided to marry Duke Richard of Normandy's

sister, Emma, in 1002. Aethelred already had sons by his earlier marriage, including Edmund (later Edmund Ironside); Emma bore him two more, Edward and Alfred. But more importantly, she had a grand-nephew named William who became the duke of Normandy.

In 1013, Swein Forkbeard succeeded at last in conquering England, and Aethelred fled to Normandy. But Swein died in 1014, leaving his teenage son, Cnut, as king of England. At that point, the English magnates decided to invite King Aethelred back, but according to the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, under one condition: "If he would govern them more justly than he did before." He returned to a country divided into English and Danish factions and died soon thereafter, in 1016. Edmund Ironside took up his father's crown. Edmund successfully defended London from a Danish attack, and he beat Cnut's army at the Battle of Assandun in Essex. Edmund and Cnut then apparently made an agreement to partition England and rule it jointly.

In the fall of 1016, Edmund Ironside died suddenly, perhaps due to foul play. Edmund's infant son was obviously not ready to rule. Edmund's half-brothers, the sons of Aethelred and Emma of Normandy, were also very young. The decision fell to the witan, who offered the throne to Cnut. Cnut was mostly popular among the English; despite being a foreign conqueror, he was a capable leader, which was a welcome change, and an astute politician. Not only did he keep most of the familiar English mechanisms of government intact, he married Aethelred's widow, Emma, as a gesture of continuity. When Emma bore him a son, Harthacnut, he sent his previous lover (whether she was his wife or his mistress is unclear) Aelfgifu of Northampton and her son Swein to manage his lands in Norway; in part, this was to stop the competition between Aelfgifu and Emma that was causing friction at court.

Despite this colorful private life, Cnut was a committed Christian who patronized the most powerful churches of England. He also made a very public and very splendid pilgrimage to Rome in 1027, timed to coincide with the coronation of the German emperor. He dealt ruthlessly with troublemakers in his court—with deadly force when necessary. Cnut also created a new royal bodyguard, the **housecarles**, an elite fighting force who would become the most reliable part of the English army.

Perhaps most importantly, Cnut eased tension between the English and Danish by allowing both groups equal access to royal patronage and promoting marriages between their important families. One of these would have enormous consequences for English history: the marriage of his distant relative Gytha to an English nobleman named Godwine, whom he also appointed earl of Wessex. (Creating the office of earl—similar to earldormen, but fewer in number and ruling a large number of shires—was one of Cnut's few changes to English government.) Gytha and Godwine's son, Harold Godwineson, would eventually become the last Anglo-Saxon king of England. ■

Important Terms

Danegeld: Tax imposed on England for the first time in 991 by Aethelred II to buy protection from the invading Danish armies. After the victory of Cnut, the tax was known as the heregeld and was used to pay for the king's bodyguard, the housecarles. It later became a tax levied regularly to pay for the defense of the realm. It was collected for the last time in 1163.

housecarles: Danish royal bodyguard serving in England from the time of Cnut, paid for by the heregeld.

Suggested Reading

Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Second Viking Conquest
Lecture 10—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we talked about the Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon England, and we looked at the art and literature of this very rich time in English history. But we also got some hints of trouble to come, because England was going to be hit again by raids from Scandinavia, starting in the 990s. We might call this a second Viking conquest of England, but it's a very different sort of conquest from the first one, in the 9th century. The reason why it's so different is that England had changed and the Vikings had changed. We've seen that the house of Wessex had been able to take advantage of the Vikings knocking off the other Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. They were the last man standing, and so when it was time to reconquer England, they were the ones to do it. And that's what exactly happened over the course of the 10th century. You have a much more unified England by the end of the 10th century, although it's a little bit different still in the north, not as well integrated into the kingdom as a whole.

But things had been changing in Scandinavia, too. They have also been forming more stable, unified kingdoms. When the Viking Age began, you'll remember, we saw lots of little raids by a few boats at a time; then you start to see large groups of maybe 50 boats, with one powerful, charismatic leader in charge. But what changes at the end of the 10th century is now you get Viking forces led not by individual leaders but by kings. The Scandinavian kings are now powerful enough to lead an invasion fleet. So now you have a more unified England going up against a more unified Viking invader.

This is good news and bad news for England. The Vikings can't pick off English kingdoms one at a time the way they did in the 9th century. But on the other hand, if you defeat the English king now, you've won the kingdom, or at least you've got a pretty good chance of doing that. So unity can have a downside, as well.

Let's look at what happens in Denmark in the 10th century that makes all of this possible. The kingdom coalesces under the reign of King Harold, surnamed Bluetooth (another nickname we can't really explain, but it doesn't really sound very good). Harold is a canny politician; he's trying to

make sure he doesn't have to worry too much about Germany to his south, so he gives some scope to Christian missionaries in Denmark. This mollifies the Germans, and he ultimately accepts the Christian faith himself. In 985, he's succeeded by his son, Swein Forkbeard—and at least that's a nickname we probably can figure out. Norway, too, has been getting its act together in the late 10th century. This is thanks to a very energetic king named Olaf Tryggvason, and he also becomes a Christian. Just because the Vikings are Christians now (or a lot of them are), that doesn't mean they've lost their appetite for expansion. It's just now they don't have the pagan stigma attached to them, and they can also command much more support than the earlier generation. These are much more sophisticated, much more unified enterprises, even in those big armies that were led by freelance entrepreneurs in the 9th century.

Now, the Danish and Norwegian kings are on the rise, and England in the late 10th century is a tempting target. We saw in our last lecture England is prosperous, certainly in large part due to the stability that the Wessex dynasty brings. In addition, England had another very important attraction to the Danes: There are a lot of Danes in England.

We saw that large parts of the country had been settled heavily by Danes in the 9th century, and those parts of England are probably bilingual throughout the 10th century, and there are certainly plenty of trading contacts and other kinds of ties back to Denmark—they're still very much in operation. And the Danes from Denmark figure that the Danes in England could act as sort of a fifth column in England. If there's a Danish invasion of England, these English Danes might switch sides and help the invaders.

These are two very powerful reasons why the Danes might try to conquer England: It's rich, and we have fellow countrymen there who might help out. But there's another reason that may or may not have been part of the actual planning process of the Danes, but it certainly helped. The saving grace of the English in the 9th century had been the leadership of King Alfred. In the late 10th century, England does not have an Alfred. It's possible that the Danes knew this and thought it was a good time to strike.

Who is ruling England in the late 10th century? Last time, I talked about Edgar the Peaceable, the king who was such a sponsor of monastic reform. He died in 975, and he was succeeded by Edward, the son of his first wife, Ethelflæd. Now a wicked stepmother enters the picture, at least that's what we get in the rumors that circulated at the time, because Edgar had married for the second time a woman named Elfthryth. By this second marriage, he had a son named Æthelred. Elfthryth was a very powerful woman—she had many friends at court— and naturally, she wanted her son, Æthelred, to be king instead of his older half-brother, Edward. Since both boys are underage, it really turns on a faction fight between the noble supporters of each prince, and three years into Edward's reign, he is assassinated. He was arriving on horseback for a sort of informal get-together with his half-brother and stepmother, and at first, his brother's attendants came out to greet him, and at first, they offered the king ostentatious signs of respect, but then they surrounded his horse, grabbed his hands, and stabbed him.

Fingers pointed, naturally enough, at Queen Elfthryth. If you ask who benefits, well, there you are. It's not a crime we can solve this far after the fact, but I do think it's suspicious that nobody was ever punished. The consequences were momentous though, because it meant that Æthelred did come to the throne. He was too young to have been personally involved in the murder, but his whole reign was tainted by it. The nobles were split into factions. The murdered King Edward was venerated as a saint almost immediately. People called him Edward the Martyr. That's a lot to live up to.

And poor Æthelred did not manage to live up to it. He's one of the most maligned of English kings; we'll meet some others—King John, for example, doesn't have a good reputation. But for sheer haplessness, you don't get much worse than Æthelred, and that's certainly how his subjects thought of him at the time. One thing a lot of people do know about Æthelred is his nickname. He was called Æthelred Unræd. Now, most of the time this is translated into modern English as Æthelred the Unready, as if he were not quite ready for prime time or something like that, but that's not exactly what it means in Old English, though I think Æthelred the Unready also fits. The word "ræd" means "counsel" or "advice." Thus, the word "unræd" means "no counsel" or "bad counsel," so the king is being called Æthelred "Bad Counsel." Now, this is a play on the king's name, because the name

Æthelred means “noble counsel.” So the king’s nickname made him “noble counsel, bad counsel.” That’s not very flattering. How does he earn this very unflattering nickname? He earns it by failing to defeat the Vikings.

Starting in 991, the Vikings returned. I talked in the last lecture about the raid that led to the Battle of Maldon at which the English commander Byrhtnoth was killed. That was part of a substantial raid led by the king of Norway, Olaf Trygvasson. You’ll remember that the Viking commander at Maldon had offered to accept tribute from the English, but Byrhtnoth had stubbornly refused. Later that year, King Æthelred does agree to pay the tribute. At any rate, this payment in 991 is the first of the payments that will become known as Danegeld. This payment turns into a tax that is collected at irregular intervals down to the 12th century, long after there are any Danes around to worry about. But apparently, the English kings found it hard to abolish a tax—it was a useful form of revenue.

But anyway, the payment of this protection money only bought the English a little time, because in 994, the Danes arrived, led by their king, Swein Forkbeard. Once again, the king paid them off, and again in 1002, and in 1007, and in 1012, and each time, the amounts got bigger and bigger and bigger. Remember what Kipling said, “If once you have paid him the Danegeld, you never get rid of the Dane”? You’ll remember that King Alfred had paid off his Viking enemies; why wasn’t it okay for Æthelred to do it? The simple reason is because Æthelred lost.

Alfred is an effective commander; Æthelred isn’t, and people at the time are quite aware of this. We have a very damning description of the military situation in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; that’s the year-by-year record of events in England that starts under King Alfred, but it’s still being added to year by year at this point. Under the year 1010, we read, “When the enemy were in the east, then the army was kept in the west; and when they were in the south, then our army was in the north.” Clearly, no one really knows what’s going on. So the king tried getting some good advice. *The Chronicle* goes on to say: “Then all the councilors were ordered to the king, and it had then to be decided how this country should be defended. But whatever was then decided, it did not stand for even one month.” And I think this is the

sort of thing that got the king nicknamed "Bad Counsel": He can't settle on a coherent policy and stick with it.

King Æthelred does make one decision, though, that is going to have huge implications for English history down the road, and whether they're good or bad is something I'll leave open. The king is concerned about the Vikings getting support from Normandy. Normandy is, of course, right across the English Channel in France, and it's territory that had been settled by Vikings early in the 10th century. Their leader, Rollo, had accepted baptism from the French king in exchange for lands in western France, and that becomes Normandy, and it's named Normandy after the Northmen who settled there. By the late 10th century, the Normans have pretty much settled down and become Frenchmen. They're not speaking Old Norse anymore; they're speaking French, but they still have ties to Scandinavia, and they were sometimes letting Viking fleets refit on their coast. So Æthelred decided on a diplomatic maneuver to try to short-circuit this connection. He decides to marry the duke's sister, Emma, and the marriage takes place in 1002.

By this point, the king has been on the throne for 24 years. He has children from an earlier marriage already. Emma was quite young when she came to England, but she did bear the king three children—two sons, Edward and Alfred, and a daughter, Godgifu. The relationship doesn't really end up helping England against the Vikings very much, but it's successful in one sense: Normandy is available for King Æthelred to flee to when he ultimately loses his kingdom. Duke Richard of Normandy does end up taking in his hapless brother-in-law, who was kicked off the throne. The importance of the marriage in the long run, though, is that Emma of Normandy ends up having a great-nephew named William, duke of Normandy; we'll get to him in the next lecture. For now, though, let's go back to England's Viking problem in the early 11th century.

Throughout the 990s and the first decade of the new millennium, England had been facing the threat from Swein Forkbeard of Denmark. Sometimes Swein raided, sometimes he accepted Danegeld, but he never just went away. In 1009, he makes a huge effort at final conquest in England; he doesn't quite pull it off. He accepts one final Danegeld payment three years later,

in 1012. But in 1013, he comes back with a bigger, stronger army, and this time, he succeeds.

Æthelred's supporters had never been a very unified bunch. There have been factional splits since the start of his reign; they've never really gotten any better. Once Swein arrived in 1013, many of the English king's followers began to defect to Swein. They saw brighter prospects ahead under the Danes. And the Danish card paid off. The area of Danish settlement in eastern England backed Swein wholeheartedly. The king of England is forced to flee; he takes refuge in Normandy with his wife's relatives, and most English people accept Swein as their king.

But the story's not over yet; there are going to be several more twists and turns.

In 1014, Swein Forkbeard dies. He's been king of England for just a year. He leaves behind a son, Cnut, who was very young at the time—only in his teens. And at that point, the English magnates decide to invite King Æthelred back from Normandy. But they impose a very interesting condition on the king, and I think it's very telling; it shows us just what people were worried about. Æthelred could come back and rule them again, but only "if he would govern them more justly than he did before." That's what *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says. So there's obviously some very hard bargaining that's going on before Æthelred is allowed to come back.

But come back he did. He faced the same faction fights as before, and the Danes are still there; they still control large sections of England. And finally, in 1016, the king dies. The English cause is now taken up by the king's oldest son, Edmund, the son of his first marriage, not the son of Emma of Normandy. Edmund has a much more encouraging-sounding nickname than his father. He is known as Edmund Ironside, and he's a successful warrior. Edmund successfully defends London from a Danish attack; he beats Cnut's army at the Battle of Assandun in Essex. Then, the two commanders, Edmund and Cnut, seem to have made a kind of agreement to partition England and rule it justly; this was an admission that neither side was strong enough to defeat the other completely.

Who knows how long such an agreement might have worked in practice? In the fall of 1016, Edmund Ironside died suddenly; some people suspected foul play. So who's going to be king? Edmund has a very young son, just a baby, so that's not a good option. His half-brothers, the sons of King Æthelred by his second marriage to Emma of Normandy, were also very young. The decision fell to the English "witan."

I talked about the witan a in a previous lecture; this is the council of advisors to the king, and they have to figure out what to do in 1016, and they make a fairly obvious, realistic choice: They offered the throne to Cnut.

Cnut is the man on the spot. We'll see at several points over the coming lectures that when you have a disputed royal succession, it helps a lot to be the man on the spot. Cnut is already in control of large sections of England. He seemed up to the job; after all, he had fought Edmund Ironside to a stalemate. And he does prove up to the job. Cnut's reign as king is largely successful, and it's mostly remembered fondly by the English. That may seem remarkable; he's a foreign conqueror, after all. But the change from Æthelred seems to have been a welcome one.

Several things, I think, went into making Cnut a popular king. For one thing, he's good at public relations. He makes a very adroit move the year after he takes the throne: He marries King Æthelred's widow, Emma. This provides a kind of continuity; the English now have the same queen they had before. So there's a lot in it for Cnut to marry Emma. But I think the more interesting question is: Why does Emma marry Cnut? I mean, this is the son of the man who drove her first husband into exile. He's substantially younger than she is, although maybe that's an incentive; nobody knows. We have a biography of Emma written later in her life, but it doesn't go into the queen's motivations; that's not the sort of thing people wrote about in the 11th century. I think we can be fairly safe in speculating that life as a widow isn't nearly as exciting as life as a queen. Emma seems to have been a fairly ambitious person. She doubtless wanted to be back at the center of things, and she does do her dynastic duty by Cnut also; she bears Cnut a son named Harthacnut and a daughter, who died relatively young.

Cnut had a rather colorful private life, though, because Emma is not the only lady in his life. He had been involved, since at least the time he came to the throne, with a noble Englishwoman named Ælfgifu of Northampton. Whether they're ever married in the formal sense isn't clear; in Scandinavia in the 11th century, they're not that fussy about that sort of thing. Now, after Cnut marries Emma, he does not by any means put off Ælfgifu. There are, practically speaking, two queens in England, and each has patronage networks, and each has children to promote. Ælfgifu had a couple of sons, we think. It's not entirely clear; there were lots of nasty rumors at the time about the parentage of her sons. It may be, though, that the situation got too tricky even for Cnut to handle, because in 1030, Cnut sent Ælfgifu off to Norway with her older son, Swein, to help rule the lands that he controlled there. Still, for over a decade, both of these women—Ælfgifu and Emma—are at the center of English politics. It's a unique and very intriguing episode in English history; there have been many powerful royal mistresses since then, but never anything quite like this.

Despite having a very colorful private life, Cnut is a committed Christian on 11th-century terms, and he certainly seems to have seen the public relations value of being seen to be a good Christian. He and Emma together patronized a lot of powerful churches in England. The memory of this patronage is preserved in the chronicles of these monasteries. There's a wonderful example from the chronicle of Ely in Cambridgeshire. Ely is in the fen country of eastern England, and at that time, it was basically an island surrounded by marshes and streams. The best way to get there was by boat. But Cnut thought it was worth going to see it, so he and Emma came one year to celebrate the Feast of Candlemas on February 2. As their boat is approaching the church, the king hears the beautiful sound of the monks singing; the music is drifting down from the church to his boat. And he's so moved that he composes a little song in English, and it starts out "The monks in Ely sweetly sang," and it goes on to say that his men should row closer to shore so he can hear the music of the monks more clearly. The Ely chronicler, who is writing over a century later, says that the song is still sung in Ely.

That's a charming story. Whether Cnut wrote the song himself or not isn't really important. What matters is he's remembered as someone who was

devoted to the church, and that counts for a lot. He also made a very public and very splendid pilgrimage to Rome in 1027. He timed his pilgrimage so that he could be present at the coronation of the German emperor. This is a way of enhancing his status with the pope and with all the important rulers of Europe. So Cnut is a very astute politician.

He also did a lot of things right on the political front at home. Even though he's a Dane—he's a conqueror—he's careful to work as much as possible within the existing English political framework. He doesn't change the system of local government very much at all; he pretty much leaves it alone. It's not broken; not going to fix it. This certainly helps in conciliating public opinion. He also doesn't shut out the English from royal patronage, and this may have been the most important policy of all. It's true that he could be ruthless. It was clear, for example, that factionalism had been behind most of the troubles of Æthelred's reign. Cnut is not going to have that same dynamic repeated under his rule. So in the first few years of his reign, he really quite ruthlessly purged his court of troublesome elements, and by that, I mean that he just basically had people murdered. It was brutal, but it was effective, and the people who were loyal to Cnut stayed loyal, and in fact, he accomplished a pretty remarkable feat: He managed to create a fairly united Anglo-Danish aristocracy. He fostered marriages between Englishmen and Danes, and a lot of those marriages worked out very well.

The one that would have the most important long-term implications was the marriage between an English nobleman named Godwin and a Danish noblewoman named Gytha, who was related by marriage to Cnut himself. This marriage would produce Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon king of England (more about him in the next lecture).

I mention Godwin here not just because of his marriage, though. He's also important because he is an example of one of the two important things about English government that Cnut *did* change. Up until this point, the most important administrative unit in England was the shire, or county. Each shire was ruled by an ealdorman or, increasingly, by a sheriff. For example, Byrhtnoth, the English commander at the Battle of Maldon, was ealdorman of Essex. There were thus potentially quite a few ealdormen at any one time, because there were several dozen English counties; we saw

in an earlier lecture sometimes several shires would be grouped together. But Cnut decides to take this trend much further by appointing only a few commanders, each of whom would rule a large group of shires, and they would bear the Scandinavian title "earl." Earl is later going to be a very important title within the English aristocracy, and it all comes from Cnut's reign. Cnut put Godwin in charge as earl of Wessex. There were also earls of East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria. In effect, Cnut is reconstituting the old Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, but now, they're administrative units of a unified English state. This change is going to have important consequences after Cnut's death, because what it means is there are going to be a small number of very powerful nobles who are going to compete for power. This is fine as long as a king as strong as Cnut is in charge, but it might spell trouble if the king is weak.

The other major change that Cnut makes, though, is unambiguously positive. He creates a new royal bodyguard composed of his best Scandinavian troops, and these men are known as the housecarls. They are an elite fighting force, and they are always going to form the nucleus of the king's army. In the future, they are going to prove to be the most reliable part of the English army by far.

The last thing I want to say about Cnut is that he is the star of one of the most famous royal anecdotes in English history, and one reason I like it so much is that it illustrates so perfectly what makes the job of a historian difficult and intriguing. The problem is that we've got the story in two versions, and they're contradictory.

It's the story of Cnut and the tides. Here's how the first version of the story goes: One day, when Cnut is at the height of his power, he goes down to the seaside and he orders his royal seat to be placed on the shore as the tide is coming in. Then, he tells the tides that since he is king, they should obey him and not presume to come onto his land and wet his royal person. Of course, the tides don't listen, and the king gets splashed. He then leaps up and proclaims that earthly power is worthless, and ever afterwards, he refuses to wear his gold crown but places it instead on the image of Jesus affixed to the cross. In this version of the story, you have an arrogant king who is humbled; he learns a lesson and gets his priorities straight.

But there's another version of the story. In this version, Cnut is being plagued by a bunch of obsequious yes-men at court who keep telling him how wonderful he is. So to teach them a lesson, he takes them all down to the beach, tells the tides not to come in, and when they come in anyway, he turns to his courtiers and says, look, I'm just a man like you are. In this version of the story, Cnut is humble all along—he knows how the world really works—it's his courtiers who are taught a lesson.

Did either version of the story really happen? Both are recorded over a century after Cnut's death. Each story is tailored to fit the larger theme of the respective works in which they occur; clearly, I think what's happening is these two authors are taking a folk story about Cnut and interpreting it in a way that's going to help them make a larger point. I think it's possible to say, though, that both versions reflect well on Cnut in the end. Whether he starts out humble or only gets that way after he gets splashed by the tides, he's a king who has a realistic view of what kings can do. And he's remembered kindly on the whole.

But Cnut does fail at a very important task for a medieval king: He does not manage to produce a viable successor, despite having two queens. He has three sons, we think—two by Ælfgifu of Northampton, one by Emma. The older of the two sons of Ælfgifu, Swein, is in Norway at the time of Cnut's death and not in a position to come to England; he's in the process of being driven out of Norway. At any rate, he dies in Denmark just a few months after his father. Harthacnut, the son by Emma of Normandy, is ruling as regent in Denmark, because Cnut is still, of course, king of Denmark, as well as king of England. Harthacnut can't leave because Denmark it's about to be invaded, and Harthacnut has to stay and defend Denmark. So Cnut is succeeded by his second son by Ælfgifu of Northampton, Harold Harefoot (and that's "hare" like "rabbit"—presumably, he's either a fast runner or he has very big feet). He only lasts five years, and then Harthacnut comes back from Denmark, rules for two years, and when he dies in 1042, that's the end of the Danish line in England. The second Viking conquest of England came to a close with a dynastic whimper. Next time, we'll see what happens when the line of Cnut runs out.

The Norman Conquest
Lecture 11

William had to spend his childhood and young adulthood fending off serious challenges to his rule. But … he was able to consolidate ducal control of Normandy as never before. So William had good reason to think he was capable of taking on a challenge as big as conquering England. But did he have a right to do so, and did it matter whether he had a right to or not?

So far, we've seen Britain fall to several waves of invaders—Roman, Germanic, and Scandinavian—but now we will turn to the most complete and lasting invasion of the island: the Norman Conquest. We'll begin with the reign of the last two Anglo-Saxon kings, Edward the Confessor and Harold Godwineson, and then examine the succession crisis that unfolded early in 1066, following the main claimants to the throne as they try to establish power in England.

Cnut's son Harthacnut did not live up to his father. Dying childless in 1042 after an unpopular reign, he left the throne to his half-brother Edward, known to history as the pious Edward the Confessor, the son of Emma and Aethelred. Unfortunately, Edward was not a whole lot readier to rule than his father had been. Driven into exile during the Danish invasions, he had spent the previous three decades at the Norman court. With few supporters in England, Edward had to court the approval of the existing English elite. This included Godwine of Wessex and his family, the Godwinesons. Godwine was a very able courtier, a talented politician, not initially inclined to support Edward. But Godwine had a large family with many sons to promote. The price of his loyalty was twofold: Edward was to give the earldom of East Anglia to Godwine's very talented son Harold, and Edward was to marry Godwine's daughter, Edith. Thus the Godwinesons directly controlled more than half of England and had a grip on the crown as well.

The trouble was that the marriage remained childless. No one knows why, but this state of affairs would have tremendous consequences for English

history because it would provide the opening for William of Normandy to claim the English throne.

Edward and Edith's lack of children was not the only tension between the king and the Godwinesons. In short, the Godwinesons' power was too great for the king's comfort, as well as for his supporters'. In 1051, one of Edward's French relatives, Eustace of Boulogne, landed at Dover and demanded provisions from the townspeople. They defied this order and roughed up Eustace's entourage. The king ordered Godwine, who was in charge of Dover, to punish the townspeople, but Godwine refused, expecting the backing of other English nobles. None was forthcoming. The king summoned Godwine to appear for judgment, but he refused him safe conduct. Godwine felt he had no option but to flee England. But it turned out that Edward could not rule England without the Godwinesons. By the next

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Harold Godwineson was the first English king to be crowned at Westminster Abbey, inaugurating a tradition unbroken to this day.

year, 1052, they were back in England and back in power. Ironically, their biggest problem was to come from within.

In 1053, Godwine died, and Harold became earl of Wessex. Two years later, Harold's brother Tostig was named earl of Northumbria. Tensions developed between the powerful brothers, and in 1065, when the Northumbrians drove Tostig out of Northumbria, and Harold refused to back him, Tostig fled to his wife's homeland of Flanders and decided to get revenge on his brother.

That autumn, King Edward fell ill. He spent his last days in the new abbey church at Westminster, and his death in January 1066 left no clear heir to the English throne. The first main claimant was Harold Godwineson, the most powerful man in England, distant relation of Cnut, and brother-in-law to Edward. The witan chose Harold within days of Edward's death; he seemed the best able to take up the burden, and some witnesses claimed that Edward designated Harold as his heir on his deathbed. Harold was crowned at Westminster Abbey by the bishop of London.

The second claimant was Harold Hardrada, king of Norway. He claimed the throne via his relationship to King Cnut, who had ruled Norway for a time as well as Denmark and England. Harold Hardrada also had a long and successful military career behind him, and he may have hoped to take advantage of any pro-Scandinavian sentiment that might be lingering in certain regions of England.

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The Bayeux Tapestry chronicles the events leading up to the Norman Conquest—at least, the Norman version of those events.

The third claimant was William, duke of Normandy, the illegitimate son of Robert III of Normandy. His claim was in many ways the most tenuous and also the most complicated. William was only about 36 years old in 1066, but he had already experienced a lifetime of military campaigns and political intrigue. His father had had to work hard to get William accepted as his heir, and his father's death in the 1030s left eight-year-old William at the mercy of his father's hostile nobles. William spent his childhood and young adulthood successfully fending off challenges to his rule, so he had good reason to think he was capable of taking on a challenge as big as conquering England.

William claimed the English throne on two grounds. First, King Edward's mother Emma was also William's great-aunt. Second and more significantly, William insisted that in 1064, when William had ransomed Harold out of imprisonment by the count of Ponthieu, Harold had promised to support William's claim to England. Anglo-Saxon culture valued oaths very highly, so to accuse Harold of oath breaking was to hold him up to serious public criticism. The problem is that the sources for this story about Harold's oath are all Norman. To further bolster his claim, he sent an envoy to Pope Alexander II, who, based on the claims of Harold's perjury, gave his blessing to the invasion of England.

King Harold had another problem, besides the two men who claimed his throne: His brother, Tostig, chose this moment to take his revenge. In May 1066, Tostig threw his support behind Harold Hardrada and went to Norway to help prepare an invasion of England. By that summer, Duke William had built hundreds of invasion ships and had assembled a force of 7,000–8,000 men, including horsemen. So King Harold was facing a threat on both fronts, but he was more afraid of William. He assembled his forces on the southern coast to meet the invasion, but winds bottled up William's fleet across the channel for week after frustrating week. Harold had to release some of his soldiers for the harvest, leaving him mainly with the housecarles. Almost immediately, he got word that Harold Hardrada and Tostig had invaded Yorkshire.

King Harold raced north to meet the threat, covering a tremendous amount of ground in very short order. On September 25, King Harold faced the invaders at Stamford Bridge and defeated them decisively; both the king of

Norway and Tostig were killed in the battle. But two days later, the winds in the English Channel shifted, and on September 28, William's fleet landed and occupied the Sussex port of Hastings. Harold rushed south again, meeting William's forces at Hastings on Saturday, October 14, and changed the course of English history.

The battle turned out to be a very close contest. Harold had the clear advantage; he held the high ground and could use the traditional Anglo-Saxon shield formation there to best advantage, while William's job was to break it. Having no success breaking Harold's line with his foot soldiers, William sent in the cavalry. Their first assault on the English line failed, and they retreated. Then suddenly, a cry went out among the Norman soldiers that Duke William had been killed. William had to take swift action. He rode out in front of his army, across the ranks, with his helmet's visor lifted to show his face. This was enough to stem the rout. Meanwhile, the English broke ranks and ran down the hill after the retreating cavalry, leaving themselves vulnerable to counterattack. Many of them were cut down. William cleverly saw the potential in this maneuver and faked two more retreats to lure the English to the lower ground. Ultimately, there were not enough soldiers uphill to maintain the shield wall. At last, it was Harold, not William, who was killed on the battlefield, supposedly struck by an arrow in the eye. The English forces fell apart, and William took the day.

William spent the next two months maneuvering in a wide circle to the north and west, from Hastings to London. On Christmas Day 1066, he was crowned king in Westminster Abbey, less than a year after the consecration of his unfortunate predecessor. ■

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Norman Conquest
Lecture 11—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we saw England fall to Danish invaders, but we also saw that the line of Danish kings ended abruptly in 1042. In this lecture, we'll see England fall to invasion again, but the consequences are going to be far more lasting. We'll pick up our narrative with the reign of the last two Anglo-Saxon kings, Edward the Confessor and Harold Godwinson, and then we're going to spend the bulk of the lecture looking at the Norman Conquest. We'll look at the succession crisis that came about when Edward the Confessor died without heirs early in 1066, and we'll follow the main claimants to the throne as they try to establish power in England. We'll see that it took a combination of luck, and planning, and sheer determination to win the English kingdom.

In the last lecture, we talked about the reign of King Cnut and of his two sons, neither of whom could live up to their father even remotely. Both died childless. The second of these, Harthacnut, died in 1042, leaving the throne to his half-brother, Edward. Now, Harthacnut had been the son of Cnut and Emma of Normandy. Edward was also the son of Emma of Normandy, but *his* father was Emma's first husband, Æthelred Unræd (the Unready). Unfortunately, Edward was not a whole lot readier to rule than his father had been, though he was considerably more religious, and that's how he got his nickname, Edward the Confessor. He also had had a rather unpromising upbringing for a king of England. Edward had been driven into exile as a young child during the Danish invasions, and so he spent three decades at the Norman court with his mother's relatives. He's a ward of the Norman dukes. He had very little contact with England for about 30 years.

There is some evidence that the dukes of Normandy saw Edward as the legitimate claimant to the English throne throughout the period of Danish rule in England. During the reign of Harold Harefoot, in fact, the Normans probably backed an expedition to England led by Edward's younger brother, Alfred. This was meant to sort of test the waters to see if there was any support for the legitimate English line, maybe to prepare for Edward himself to come later. But the expedition ended in disaster. Alfred was captured by agents of King Harold Harefoot; he was taken to Ely in eastern England

and blinded; and he died of this treatment shortly afterwards. That was not a very encouraging sign for the legitimate English dynasty. But things changed when Harthacnut came to the throne in 1040. In 1041, Harthacnut seems to have asked his half-brother, Edward, to come over to England from Normandy to rule as a sort of associate king. Edward at this point has spent three decades as an exile, but now he's coming back to England. When Harthacnut died in 1042, Edward was there on the spot to take over.

But Edward hadn't been around in England very long. He hadn't had time to build up a network of supporters. So he pretty much had to accept the existing noble power structures. And as a result, Edward's reign is dominated by a very difficult relationship with a powerful family known as the Godwinsons, headed up by Earl Godwin of Wessex. The Godwinsons are a noble English family; they'd married into the Danish aristocracy, and this, as we saw last time, was their ticket to rise to power under Cnut. As we also saw, Cnut created a number of earls—great nobles who were entrusted with large sections of England to rule under royal supervision—and Earl Godwin is one of these powerful earls.

Godwin is a very able courtier. He manages to survive various changes of regime not so much because of his military abilities—he's not a particularly good soldier—but he's thought to be a very good politician. One source has an interesting thing to say about him: It says that he knew when to talk and when to hold his tongue. So Edward the Confessor essentially inherits Godwin when he comes to the throne. Godwin is a power to be reckoned with and can't be shunted aside. Now, Edward might have had a very good reason to want to shunt Godwin aside; Godwin seems to have been directly involved in the murder of Edward's brother, Alfred. He may have coordinated the whole thing at the orders of King Harold. It goes to show how dominant Godwin is that King Edward does not feel able to get rid of him when he comes to the throne in 1042.

And Godwin has a large family that needed to be provided for. He had at least four sons and several daughters, and so he induces King Edward to give the earldom of East Anglia to his very talented son Harold.

Harold also has a younger brother named Tostig, who is also quite gifted but a little volatile, as we'll see. There are other brothers, as well; they mostly tend to act as supporters to Harold and Tostig. Together, the Godwinson family directly controlled more than half of England. Godwin also provides for his daughter Edith rather spectacularly. He marries her to the king. So Godwin is now the king's father-in-law, and doubtless, he's hoping to become the grandfather of the future king of England.

The trouble is that the marriage remains childless. No one knows why. There were later pious legends associated with Edward the Confessor; they maintain that he remained chaste during his marriage. There's not much reason to believe this. At a low point in relations between the king and his in-laws, he puts his wife Edith aside and he's making efforts clearly to find a new wife, so he probably did at least try to get an heir, because he was actively trying to find a new woman to try this out with. At any rate, whatever the cause, the childlessness of this marriage between Edward and Edith is going to have tremendous consequences for English history because it provides the opening for William of Normandy to claim the English throne.

But let's back up for a minute to look at why relations between the king and the Godwinsons fall apart. There have probably been tensions for many years. The amount of power that the Godwinsons had accumulated was simply too great for any king to tolerate, and his other noble supporters were probably actively conspiring against Godwin at court. Godwin's greatest enemy is the Norman-born archbishop of Canterbury, Robert of Jumièges. Robert may have been promoting a plan at court to have William, duke of Normandy, named the heir to the English throne, and this would have been a serious threat to the power of the Godwinsons.

Whatever the underlying causes of the tension, in 1051, matters come to a head, and the Godwinsons rebelled. The rebellion is touched off by an incident at Dover. One of King Edward's continental in-laws, a man named Eustace of Boulogne, lands at Dover and demands provisions from the townspeople. They defy this demand and they rough up Eustace's entourage. The king orders Godwin, who's in charge of Dover, to punish the townspeople for this affront by destroying their property. Godwin refuses to

comply. He clearly expected that the other English nobles would back him, but there's no backing forthcoming.

The king summons Godwin to appear for judgment, but the king refuses Godwin a safe conduct; that means Godwin has reason to fear that he might be seized and imprisoned or worse. Godwin feels he has no option but to go into exile, so he and his family flee England.

But it turns out that Edward simply can't rule England without the Godwinsons, and by the next year, 1052, they are back in England [and] back in power. Perhaps it simply took them that long to gather the noble support they needed to put pressure on the king. The result of their return to power is there's something of a purge of the Norman influence at court, and the big casualty is a significant one: Robert of Jumièges, the archbishop of Canterbury, is driven into exile; he's replaced by an English-born archbishop named Stigand. He's a rather questionable churchman. He's bishop of Winchester at the same time as he's archbishop of Canterbury; this is a definite no-no according to canon law. At any rate, the power of the Godwinson family remains basically unchallenged after this triumphant return. Ironically, their biggest problem is to come from within—that's later on.

In 1053, Godwin dies; Harold takes over as earl of Wessex. Two years later, his brother Tostig is named earl of Northumbria; the previous earl had died leaving a son who was too young to rule. So once again, the Godwinsons are dominant; they control the opposite ends of England. But cracks appear in the relationship between the two brothers, between Harold and Tostig. In 1065, the Northumbrians rebel against Tostig. There's a sense in our sources that Tostig, a southerner, doesn't really understand the way the northerners do things; they don't get along. Tostig is driven out of Northumbria, and Harold refuses to back him. Tostig ends up taking refuge in Flanders, and he's furious with his brother Harold, clearly determined to take revenge.

Politics in England are in a very unsettled state, and then, in the fall of 1065, King Edward the Confessor falls ill. He knows his end is approaching, so he has time to arrange to die in Westminster Abbey. Westminster Abbey was a new church that he had built in the western part of London, and it's probably

his most lasting legacy to English history. But his death in January of 1066 leaves no clear heir to the English throne. There were three main claimants, though, and I'll set out their claims to the throne in turn.

First, there's the man who ultimately succeeds in becoming king, Harold Godwinson. He's the most powerful magnate in England, and he, again, is the man on the spot. The king's council, the witan, chooses Harold within days of Edward's death, and there are two reasons why they choose Harold: First, he seems the best able to take up the burden—he's an experienced leader; and the second reason is (and it depends on which source you believe) that the king, Edward the Confessor, seems to have designated Harold as his heir when he was on his deathbed. So Harold has proximity going for him. Harold is crowned king at Westminster Abbey by the bishop of London; normally, the archbishop of Canterbury would have done this, but the archbishop at this time is Stigand, and there are doubts about whether he is a totally legitimate archbishop. Consecration is something you don't want to mess around with; you don't want there to be any reason why you want to question its validity.

Who's the second claimant? The second claimant is Harold Hardrada, king of Norway. He claims the throne via his relationship to King Cnut, who was also king of Norway for a time, as well as of Denmark and England. The relationship between Harold Hardrada and Cnut isn't especially close, but Harold Hardrada is a formidable warrior and he wants to ride this horse as far as he can. (Incidentally, I'm sorry that everybody in this lecture seems to be named Harold!) But anyway, Harold Hardrada has a long military career behind him, and he's also probably hoping to take advantage of any lingering pro-Scandinavian sentiment that might be still alive in certain regions of England; he wants to do what the Danes had done earlier in the century: take advantage of that fifth column.

Now we come to the third claimant, William, duke of Normandy. His claim is, in many ways, the most tenuous and also the most complicated, but before I explain why William thinks he has the right to be king of England, I'm going to say a little bit about his background and his personality. I think that will help us understand why William feels bold enough to embark on this very risky venture. He is going to attempt a seaborne invasion of England.

Napoleon does not pull that off; Hitler doesn't pull that off. Where does William get the self-confidence to do such a thing?

Well, William is a still a young man when he contemplates invading England; he's only about 36 years old, but he has already experienced a lifetime of military campaigns and political intrigue. He's the illegitimate son of Duke Robert III of Normandy and a woman named Herleva. Herleva was probably the daughter of some sort of royal official in the Norman town of Falaise. The church at this period is starting to crack down on illegitimacy, so Duke Robert has to work hard to get his nobles to accept his son William as his heir, despite the fact that he is a bastard. In fact, one of William's nicknames is William the Bastard (although I don't think that's the one you wanted to use to his face).

Things got even worse for little William in 1035, because his father went off on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and he died on the return journey. Eight-year-old William was left at the mercy of warring factions of Norman nobles. William has to spend his whole childhood and young adulthood fending off various challenges to his rule. But William the Bastard is made of stern stuff, and he perseveres against his noble enemies. He's able to consolidate ducal control of Normandy as never before. So William has good reason for thinking he's capable of taking on a challenge as big as conquering England; he's already accomplished quite a lot.

But does he have a right to do it? Does he have a right to the throne? William claims the throne on two grounds: One is his relationship to Edward the Confessor. Edward's mother, Emma, is also William's great-aunt. So they are related by blood, although not terribly closely. One would think that the relationship should have to flow through the male line for it to provide a claim to the English throne (and William's not related to any English king), but in this period, notions of descent are still forming, so there's a ghost of a rationale for the claim via William's relationship to Emma.

The more potent of the two grounds for claiming the English throne is William's contention that Harold had promised to support William's claim, and he'd broken that promise, and by breaking the promise, Harold had perjured himself. The story behind this claim is fascinating. William asserts

that in 1064, Earl Harold had been traveling to Normandy, when he was blown off course, and he landed in the county of Ponthieu, which is in France just to the north of Normandy. There, he fell into the hands of the hostile count of Ponthieu, who held him for ransom. Duke William arranged for Harold's release, and in exchange, he made Harold swear that Harold would back William's claim to the throne when the time came. Now, this is a culture that values oaths very highly, so to accuse Harold of breaking an oath is to hold him up to serious public criticism.

The problem is the sources of this story about Harold's oath are all Norman, and they're all potentially self-serving. Some historians believe the story; some don't. At any rate, William seems to have felt that this story is going to give his effort to take the English throne legitimacy. The reason he needs legitimacy is he wants papal backing. He sent churchmen from Normandy to Pope Alexander II to try to get the pope to bless the invasion as a means of bringing the English church into stricter compliance with papal policy. Pope Alexander found this argument that Harold had broken an oath very persuasive. He already didn't like Harold because of the Godwinson family's role in getting rid of Archbishop Robert of Jumièges and putting in Stigand. So the oath argument tips the pope over the edge, and he does, in fact, approve of the invasion. He even provides William with a special papal banner that he can fight under.

To those are our three claimants: two Harolds and a William. Let's go back to Harold Godwinson, now on the throne as Harold II. Harold has a big problem in addition to the fact that the pope doesn't like him. The big problem is his own brother Tostig. You'll remember that in the previous year, Tostig had been driven into exile when his subjects in the Northumbrian earldom rebel against him. Harold had rather ostentatiously refused to support his brother, and Tostig had gone off to lick his wounds in Flanders. Tostig then had to stand by and watch from across the English Channel while his brother seized the throne of England. Of course, this infuriates Tostig even more, and he determines to cause trouble for Harold.

In May of 1066, Tostig crossed the channel and he tried to harry the southern coast of England, particularly the Isle of Wight; he was trying to drum up support for his cause. These efforts were largely unsuccessful, so Tostig then

turns to an alliance with the king of Norway, Harold Hardrada (although they might have been acting together all along; we're not sure). At any rate, Tostig goes off to join Harold Hardrada in Norway to prepare to invade England.

King Harold, in England, is certainly aware of this growing threat from Normandy—news travels fairly quickly—but he also knows that trouble is brewing in the south. By the summer of 1066, it's well known in Europe that Duke William of Normandy is planning to invade England. It is simply not possible to keep such a huge project a secret. Word undoubtedly filters back to England that hundreds of ships are being built in Normandy, and the most splendid of these is the gift of the duke's beloved duchess, Matilda. The best estimates that we have of the size of William's force are about 7,000 to 8,000 men; maybe 1,000 to 2,000 are horsemen. These soldiers come from Normandy itself but also from Brittany and Flanders; these are two areas to which the Norman dukes have very close family ties. There are also men from other parts of France, so it's a fairly mixed group, not just Normans. The important point is that this is a huge army for this period.

King Harold is more afraid of William with his huge army than he was of Harold Hardrada, so the king assembles his forces on the southern coast of England to meet the invasion. However, contrary winds bottled up William's fleet across the Channel for week after frustrating week, and ultimately, Harold has to let some of his soldiers go home because it's harvest time. Harold is thus forced to rely almost exclusively on his personal military retainers, the housecarls; the good thing is these are by far his most effective fighters, but still, he's a little bit under-strength in the field.

Just after Harold dismisses some of his soldiers, he gets word that the king of Norway, together with his own brother Tostig, has invaded Yorkshire in the north of England. So King Harold is at the wrong end of the country. Now, the choice of Yorkshire is doubtless no accident. As we saw, York was the center of a Viking kingdom in the 10th century; there was still substantial sympathy in that part of England for the Scandinavian cause. In fact, Harold Hardrada and Tostig did score a significant success right away. The northern fyrd under Earls Edwin and Morcar tried to meet the invading force at Fulford on September 20, but they were soundly defeated. This victory has to have been especially satisfying for Tostig, because Edwin and Morcar

were his personal enemies. Morcar had, in fact, replaced Tostig as earl of Northumbria in 1065. So there's a personal grudge at stake in the Battle of Fulford. Both Edwin and Morcar, though, survive the battle.

The invasion in Yorkshire is a genuine emergency, and King Harold raced north to meet the threat, covering a tremendous amount of ground in very short order. On September 25, just five days after the Battle of Fulford, King Harold faces the combined forces of Harold Hardrada and Tostig at Stamford Bridge. He defeats them decisively. Both the king of Norway and Tostig are killed in the battle. One of the serious threats facing King Harold has been dealt with, but two days later, the winds in the English Channel shifted. This favorable change in the winds has led one historian to quip that William should be called not William the Bastard but William the Lucky Bastard.

On September 28, Duke William's fleet arrives off the Sussex coast in the southeast of England at Pevensey, and they occupy the port of Hastings. They immediately build a makeshift castle; it's just a big mound of earth, really, with a wooden tower on top. King Harold hears of these events and immediately rushes south again to confront William.

This action of Harold's has been very controversial among modern historians. Some think he should have waited to gather his forces together; others argue that Harold's forces were large enough to face William, but his real strategic error is risking a battle with the Normans at all—they should have simply hemmed them in on the coast until they ran out of supplies. That would have been a standard thing to do in this period. I'm not sure we can solve the question of whether Harold is wise or foolish to fight William at Hastings; we know, of course, what he didn't. We know he's going to lose. But he had just staked everything at Stamford Bridge and won, so from his perspective, he's simply expecting to repeat his recent success.

On Saturday, October 14, 1066, the Battle of Hastings decides the future course of English history. Recent trends in historical writing have tended to play down the significance of the Norman Conquest. Historians have pointed out that many things stay the same in England despite the arrival of the new regime. They emphasize continuity over change. I have a lot of sympathy with this point of view. It is a good correction to an earlier belief that the

conquest is a cataclysm that destroys English society and makes it something totally different. That's an exaggeration. Nevertheless, there's no doubt that the consequences of the Battle of Hastings are momentous. English history would simply look entirely different without it. We'll spend considerable time on this in the lectures to come, but for now, let's follow the English and Norman armies into battle.

As I said, Harold had marched south and had gathered some of his supporters a few miles north of Hastings on a ridge, where he drew up the classic Anglo-Saxon defensive formation, a shield wall. This is undoubtedly a sound strategy in the abstract. A shield wall on an elevated position is notoriously hard to break. All Harold really has to do is hold the shield wall in the face of Norman attack, and he's going to win simply by not losing. And the battle turns out to be a very close run thing indeed.

Duke William's task is much more challenging. He has to break the shield wall. In order to do this, he draws up his forces in the classic three "battles," or divisions. He himself commands the center; he puts the Breton troops under their count, Alan, on the left flank; and on the right, there are soldiers from among his other French allies. Now, these soldiers are all foot soldiers. William is not sending in his cavalry right away. He's keeping them in reserve because it's not all that effective usually to have cavalry charge uphill. William wants to break the shield wall first before sending in the cavalry, but unfortunately, the infantry make very little headway against the English.

Apparently, the English are raining down missiles of various sorts on the attacking Normans, though they don't seem to have had any archers; they're throwing spears and things like that. The Normans, on the other hand, are having trouble bringing their archers to bear; they're having trouble getting the angle right. Either the arrows would hit the English shield wall, or they'd shoot right over the English army and land behind them, or the English would manage to hold their shields at exactly the right angles to repel the falling arrows. William decides he has to send in the cavalry after all.

At first, the horsemen had no more success than the foot soldiers had had. The English shield wall stubbornly held. And it must be said [that] the

English housecarls are a formidable obstacle. They fight with two-handed axes; they're more than capable simply of cutting off a horse's head. Now, when faced with this sort of treatment, it's perhaps not surprising that the Norman cavalry ends up retreating.

At this moment, the battle takes a dramatic turn. The cry goes out among the Norman soldiers that Duke William has been killed. Now, this would have been a disaster for the Norman forces. The fate of armies whose leaders die on the field is almost always dire. Usually, discipline collapses. So William has to take swift action. He rides out in front of his army, across the ranks, with his helmet lifted to show his face, shouting defiance. This is enough to stem the rout. At the same time, the English get a bit ahead of themselves. The English right pursues the fleeing Norman left, but once they had run downhill, they found themselves in disorder; they were vulnerable to a Norman counterattack. Many were surrounded and cut down by the Norman cavalry.

This incident seems to have given Duke William—this is a man who could think on his feet— it gives Duke William a brilliant idea: If a *real* retreat by the Normans, in fact, had turned out so well, what about a *feigned* retreat? According to several Norman accounts of the battle, William has his forces perform the same maneuver deliberately twice more, this time, drawing the English down to lower ground, out of the protection of the shield wall, and they can, of course, be more easily attacked that way. This method results in the weakening of the shield wall. There are simply not enough soldiers left at the top of the hill to maintain the line.

It might seem odd that the English fell for this, but I think it's important that we realize medieval warfare just isn't very much the same as modern warfare. People don't drill; there's no elaborate chain of command. So there's nobody really able to get the English soldiers to stay up in the shield wall where they're going to make more of a difference.

Orders were given on the battlefield, certainly, but that doesn't mean they're going to be obeyed; only very charismatic leaders, like William, had a good chance of being followed into very obviously dangerous situations, and even then, the confusion of a medieval battlefield meant that soldiers

often simply did what the man next to them was doing. It was extremely common for armies to break and run if the shield wall failed, so the English soldiers at Hastings are not being uniquely incompetent when they fall for William's maneuver.

The battle finally ended, though, in a kind of reversal of what the Normans had feared at the beginning. King Harold was in fact killed, and his death precipitated the final rout, just as William had worried would be the case if he were thought to be dead. Remember the difficulties that the Normans were having early in the battle bringing their archers to bear? They seem to have figured things out later on, because Harold was apparently struck by an arrow in the eye. We can't be sure about this; as with much else about the battle, there are different accounts.

But that's what people very quickly came to believe about Harold's death, because two generations after the battle, the story was told that William had specifically told his archers to aim their arrows high so that they would fall on the English soldiers from above. This story sounds as if it was concocted to give William credit for a brilliant tactical maneuver when we're probably just talking about a lucky accident—lucky for the Normans, that is.

William had eliminated his rival, and he's now poised to take the throne of England. He spends the next two months maneuvering in a wide circle to the north and west from Hastings on his way to London, where on Christmas Day, 1066, he was crowned king in Westminster Abbey, less than a year after the consecration of his unfortunate predecessor.

Along the way, he gathers support from various English magnates who are eager to make their peace with the new regime. In the next lecture, we'll follow William as he uses all his administrative talent and determination to make Norman rule in England a reality.

The Reign of William the Conqueror

Lecture 12

The king had won by using a combination of methods. He always seemed to know just the right mixture of bribery and ruthlessness—who did you pay off, who did you crush. So that was the lesson of this great northern revolt. William would do what it took to maintain control of England. From this point on, the English mostly got the point.

William began his reign thinking he was going to be able to simply step into the existing system. As it turned out, he had to exert a lot more pressure than he expected to make the English submit. He spent the first five years of his reign responding to revolts by Englishmen; later, he had to deal with revolts by some of his Norman followers as well. How did he ultimately succeed? By making effective use of England's resources and binding his supporters to him tightly.

One of William's first moves was to take London, but he went about it obliquely. He made a long arc around London to the northwest, burning and harrying as he went. This was not only a display of power and ruthlessness but a practical move to cut the capital off from supplies and reinforcements. At the same time, he put out feelers to prominent English leaders—lay and clerical—who one by one came over to William's side. Even Edgar Aetheling, the great-grandson of Aethelred whom the witan had chosen as Harold's **aetheling**, or heir, after the Battle of Hastings, submitted to William's claim.

After entering London and being crowned by the bishop of York, William's first priority was to shore up his defenses. He began construction on the Tower of London, the first of many castles he constructed throughout England. He also held talks with leading Englishmen, promising that little would change from the way Edward the Confessor had managed the country. And he kept that promise: Writs continued to be written in Old English, and the courts met as usual. In fact, the transition was so smooth, William's position so secure, he was able to return to Normandy to deal with troubles there during the first year of his reign. Of course, he didn't do so without

some insurance; he took several prominent English noblemen and high-ranking church officials with him, as his “guests,” including the archbishop of Canterbury, earls Edwin and Morcar, and Edgar Aetheling. His mistake was letting his guests go too quickly.

Starting late in 1067, rebellions started breaking out in the west of England. Then, in 1068, Edwin and Morcar, with another leader named Gospatric, asked the Danish king, Sweyn Estrithson, if he would help them get rid of William in exchange for the throne. Meanwhile another group of earls were supporting Edgar Aetheling, who had settled himself in Scotland. William responded to all of these plots and rebellions with vigor, building castles and demanding submission wherever he went. Then a serious rebellion broke out in 1069 in Durham, starting with the murder of a Norman official, and spread to York. Edgar was poised to strike from Scotland, but he was not fast enough. King Sweyn sent one of his sons to try to take England by taking a fleet up the Humber River. Edgar and other northern magnates joined in this revolt. York was retaken from the Normans. The Scottish king, Malcolm,

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The Tower of London was the first of William I’s many castles.

married Edgar's sister Margaret as a show of solidarity. Things looked bad for William.

This time, as William traveled north, he took up a policy of destruction rather than construction. They destroyed every farm and village in their path, killed every male they came across, and killed all the livestock they could get their hands on. William retook York rather easily, then he ordered his troops to fan out across the countryside and continue the devastation. The revolt finally ended with William's winter attack on a group of English rebels holding out near Chester. The Danes, discouraged, accepted a bribe from William and sailed out of the Humber.

As William traveled north, he took up a policy of destruction rather than construction.

William faced one more invasion in 1070, when King Sweyn invaded in person, with Edwin and Morcar's support and that of the English thegn of Lincolnshire, Hereward. They sacked Peterborough Abbey. William simply bribed Sweyn into leaving and went after Hereward, who fled to the marshes of Ely. Most of Hereward's rebels surrendered after a brief siege; somehow, Hereward disappeared, and no one knows his fate. Edwin was betrayed and killed by his own followers. Morcar was imprisoned. Edgar resubmitted to William and settled down to a relatively quiet life. William had quelled this great northern revolt, the last English revolt of his reign. From here on, his troubles would come from the Normans.

After all this, of course, William had to rethink his policies. He began putting more of his own people into positions of power, replaced English clergy with Normans, and began issuing writs in Latin. He carried out systematic confiscation of English lands and redistributed them to Norman supporters. The English were almost completely shut out of power overnight, but for the people living on these lands, little changed. William's method of redistribution was rather haphazard, however, and one lord's various holdings might be scattered throughout England. As a result, the nobility didn't have secure territorial power bases that they might hold against the

king. In addition, these noblemen had a stake in the welfare of the whole of England, not just one corner of it.

In a few places, William deliberately created one large chunk of land for one particular magnate to rule, including Chester near the Welsh border and Durham near the Scottish. He would rather have a lord with a secure power base than have weak borders. These compact lordships were called palatinates, and they were ruled over by an earl in Chester and a bishop in Durham.

There is a big debate among historians about whether or not William introduced feudalism to England—and in fact about the value of feudalism as a formal concept at all. In essence, feudalism is the exchange of fiefs—that is, pieces of land—for service, usually military service. The idea that an 11th-century king engaged in formal distribution of fiefs is a fallacy; in the 11th century, little about kingship was formalized. Historians are also divided over how important fiefs were before the Norman Conquest. But it is probably fair to say that William increased the importance of fiefs in England.

That said, in 1075, William had to face a major rebellion by those very Norman lords he had just given land to. The earl of Hereford and the earl of East Anglia, both Normans, felt the king wasn't giving them enough favor. This revolt never amounted to much militarily, but it shows that William had his problems with his Norman supporters just as much as he did with his English subjects, if not more so. William tried to promote the idea that in theory all land in England was held of the king. But he injected a new kind of discipline into this feudal structure. In August 1086, William gathered all the great landowners of the country at Salisbury and demanded they swear a personal oath of loyalty to him. This Salisbury Oath had an important implication. Normally, a feudal lord's loyalty was to the lord immediately above him in the pyramid. With this oath, William made the claim that every landholder, from the top to the bottom of the chain, was ultimately beholden to the king. This is a new idea in feudal kingship.

When William died in 1087, the English accepted his son, William II, as king, without a murmur of opposition. That was quite an achievement for a foreign conqueror with a dubious claim to the throne. ■

Important Term

aetheling: Anglo-Saxon title designating the heir to the throne.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Reign of William the Conqueror
Lecture 12—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the Norman Conquest, and we saw William, duke of Normandy, win the Battle of Hastings in October of 1066 and get himself crowned king at Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day. I want to back up a bit now and say a little bit more about the process that got William from Hastings to Westminster Abbey, and then I want to talk about how he went about consolidating his rule over England. It's not a smooth process; there are some significant bumps along the way, and these bumps may have had a big impact in determining how William was going to develop his policies toward the English. He started out thinking he's going to be able to just step in as king and work with the existing system. It turned out he was going to need to exert a lot more pressure than he thought to make the English submit to the new regime. He had to spend the first five years of his reign responding to revolts by Englishmen, and later, he also had some revolts to deal with by Norman followers, as well.

But he was ultimately successful. How did he do it? He made use of some existing English administrative structures, things we've already talked about; he also created new power bases for his supporters. He tried to bind his supporters very strongly to him by means of a special oath. And he tried to make the most effective possible use of the resources he had in England. All of these factors together made William just as successful as king of England as he had been as duke of Normandy. So let's follow William from the battlefield at Hastings on his way to London to get crowned.

Of course, London is the big prize. As soon as the Battle of Hastings had been won, William set his sights on London, but he didn't want to head straight for the capital. He wanted to prepare the ground first, in a couple of ways. One of these was military, because a frontal assault on London was a very bad idea—it was a walled city; it could have held out for a long time. So William made a big arc to the northwest of London, harrying and burning as he went along. This process was meant to convince the English that William meant business. It also isolated London from reinforcements. If you've burned a lot of supplies in the area immediately around a city, it's hard for that city to hang on in a siege. That was the military approach.

But William was also a very smart politician. At the same time as he was out taking care of the military side of the operation, he's also putting out feelers to prominent English leaders, noblemen and churchmen, to see if they might be willing to come over to his side. One by one, the English leaders did this. I think they began to see a sort of inevitability about William's conquest. One of the leaders to submit is Archbishop Stigand; this is that questionable archbishop of Canterbury that we've talked about before. Also, the earls of Mercia and Northumbria, Edwin and Morcar, came and submitted to William; these were actually the brothers who had lost the battle against Harold Hardrada five days before King Harold beat Harold Hardrada at Stamford Bridge. They had fled that battle, but here they are again, accepting William as king.

One of the most interesting people to submit to William is actually a man who has a much better claim to the throne, at least by genealogical reckoning, than anybody else in England. I'm talking about a man named Edgar Etheling. (The word "etheling" just means prince or possible successor to the throne.) He's called prince because he is the grandson of Edmund Ironside, and thus, he's the great-grandson of Æthelred the Unready by his first marriage.

Edgar's story is fascinating, because he strikes me as one of the most amazing survivors in English history. Every time you think there's no way Edgar can get out of this mess, he does. Let's back up for a second to the time of the Danish invasions in the early 11th century. Edmund Ironside dies in 1016 and he leaves Cnut in control of England, but Edward Ironside had had a young family, including a son named Edward. This young family was spirited away into exile on the continent; they actually wound up in Hungary, of all places. Little Prince Edward grew to manhood, got married, and produced three children—a boy, Edgar, and two girls, Margaret and Christina. Then, in the 1050s—he's living happily in Hungary all this time—all of a sudden, a messenger arrives from the court of Edward the Confessor in England, asking Edward, the son of Edmund Ironside, to come to England. So he came.

The theory is that Edward the Confessor is getting old in the 1050s and he knows he's not going to have any children, so he's trying to find somebody who can represent the legitimate line of the Wessex dynasty, and that would

be Edward from Hungary. But when Edward arrives in England, the king refused to see him, and nobody knows why. Maybe he changed his mind about naming Edward as his heir; we just don't know. But shortly after arriving in England, Edward died, leaving his son and two daughters behind. One daughter, Christina, became a nun; the other daughter, Margaret, later on married the king of Scotland. The son, Edgar, is treated with honor and given the epithet "ætheling," which carries with it the implication that he's worthy of succeeding to the throne. But in January of 1066, when Edward the Confessor dies, Edgar is not chosen. Maybe he's too inconsequential; he's too young—he's just a teenager—but nobody thinks of him as a serious candidate for the throne. In the fall of 1066, after William the Conqueror wins the Battle of Hastings, the English witan, the English council of advisers (at least, the ones that are still alive after Hastings) offer the throne to Edgar Etheling, because otherwise they're going to be ruled by this foreign conqueror, and maybe Edgar Etheling is a better bet. But when it was clear that William had been able to cut off support for London, Edgar submitted to William. Edgar doesn't want to fight for his right to the throne; he's mostly interested in surviving.

A few days before Christmas in 1066, William of Normandy can enter the English capital. He is crowned in Westminster Abbey on Christmas Day. But the coronation doesn't go off perfectly. Because the audience has in it both English speakers and French speakers, William is proclaimed king in both English and French. The people present take up the shout, and it's apparently so loud that the king's troops who are outside the abbey mistake the noise for a riot, and they take action. They set fire to several houses near the abbey. This is obviously not exactly the way the day was planned to go, but still, William is king. And just like Harold Godwinson, William avoids being consecrated by Stigand. He gets the archbishop of York to do it instead, because you can't be too careful about the validity of a consecration.

Now William is well and truly king of England. What's his first priority going to be? Of course, he needs to shore up the military situation even further, so one of the very first steps he takes is to begin the construction of a great fortress in London, and this becomes known as the Tower of London. If you go to the Tower today, you can still see the original tower that William had built; of course, since then, the Tower complex has grown tremendously—

lots of new towers were built, walls and other buildings. But already with this first tower, the new ruler of England is making a statement, because castles were very, very important to establishing control of the countryside in this period. If you have control of a castle (even of a very basic one, just one tower on a hill), you can control the countryside—and people have calculated this—around you for about a 10-mile radius. William built many other such castles throughout England within a very short [time], a few short years, and they helped him achieve control over England and maintain it.

William also held talks with leading Englishmen. He basically promised that he was going to rule England in the manner it was accustomed to. He didn't have any big plans to change things. One reason he's saying this is that he's basing his right to rule England on being the person that Edward the Confessor had chosen as his heir. He wants to stress the legitimacy of his rule, so doing things the way they'd always been done in the past is a good way to smooth over the rupture caused by the conquest: Let's forget all about the fact that I had to come and take England by arms.

William doesn't make any big changes at first. Writs continued to come out of the royal writing office. They're still written in Old English, which means that the same clerks are still at work; the Normans certainly didn't bring anyone with them who knew English. So the same people are doing the same jobs. The courts at all their various levels (shire court, hundred court) are meeting as usual. In fact, William felt so secure that the English administration was going to be going on as normal that he felt perfectly safe going back to Normandy a few months after he was crowned king of England. Normandy was always a bigger worry than England was; there tended to be more trouble from the nobles in Normandy than there was from the nobles in England, so William felt he was needed on the Norman side of the Channel. In fact, this was going to be the pattern for the next century and a half. During all this period that English kings also had a lot of land in France, they often have to spend more than half of their time in France because it's a lot easier to leave England to its own devices than to leave the French lands to their own devices. The French lands are going to cause you much more trouble.

William does take some sensible precautions before he leaves for Normandy. He takes English hostages with him to Normandy. These are prominent English figures he wants to keep an eye on. These are people like Archbishop Stigand, like the earls Edwin and Morcar, and naturally enough, Edgar Etheling. William doesn't want them in England, where they could possibly serve as rallying points for rebellion. So they go with him to Normandy. They're not really prisoners; they're just guests who can't exactly leave when they want to. But of course, later on, they do.

But the honeymoon period doesn't last, and William has to spend the next five years fighting off various rebellions in England, starting from late in 1067, only a year into William's reign. In the western part of England, a shadowy figure named Edric the Wild is on the loose in the border areas between England and Wales. He attracts some significant support. There's also an uprising in Exeter in the southwest.

But the most serious uprising happens in the north of England, and this is always where the biggest problems happen. It turns out that William had been right to bring those hostages with him to Normandy. As I said, they don't stay. He lets most of them go shortly after they arrive in Normandy; that was probably a mistake. In 1068, the earls Edwin and Morcar join up with another northern English leader, a guy named Gospatric. These three English leaders send feelers out to the Danish king, Sweyn Estrithson. Sweyn is related to King Cnut, so he has something of a claim to the English throne himself. The English nobles want Sweyn to come to England and help them get rid of William. At the same time, the earls also begin to push the claims of Edgar Etheling. Edgar Etheling had gone to Scotland when he was tired of hanging out with William the Conqueror in Normandy.

But William found out about this little project; as I've said, it's hard to keep a secret in the 11th century. William responded vigorously by campaigning throughout England, especially by making a bold northward thrust up to York and then down south to Cambridgeshire. All along the way, he's building castles and he's demanding the submission of English leaders; wherever he goes, he does this. This is a very effective method. He's showing the flag; he's saying, "I'm going to show up and I'm going to make sure that you do

what I want." And it works, at least temporarily. The rebels in the north are intimidated for the moment.

But early in 1069, an incident in the far north, in Durham, sets off a major revolt. A Norman official is sent up to Durham to take control there. And somehow he gets involved in a piece of local unpleasantness—I've said before things in the north can be a bit different; it's a very old feud and he ends up in the middle of it. He's set upon in a house and burned to death. This is the trigger for a widespread revolt, and it quickly spreads south to York. Edgar Etheling is getting ready to move south from Scotland, but he's not fast enough for William. The king moves north again at a breathtaking pace and he retakes the city of York.

The situation gets more serious, though, a bit later in the year, because the Danish king, Sweyn Estrithson, finally acts on the earlier call for help that the English nobles had sent him. Just like the Danish kings in the early 11th century, Sweyn is hoping to capitalize on any pro-Danish feelings that might still be out there in the north and east of England, so he sends one of his sons to England with a fleet. This fleet anchors in the Humber River; Edgar Etheling and other northern magnates join in the revolt. York is retaken from the Normans; York is changing hands at a dizzying pace. The local peasants around York welcome the Danish soldiers, as expected; they seem to have looked on them as liberators.

There are repercussions in Scotland, as well. I mentioned Edgar Etheling being in Scotland. Well, now that things are looking more positive for Edgar. The Scottish king, Malcolm, decides maybe it would be a good idea to marry Edgar's sister Margaret. I think King Malcolm is hoping that he's marrying the sister of the future king of England. It didn't work out that way, but ultimately, this marriage is going to be very important in English history (we'll see that in the next lecture) because it would produce a very important queen of England.

But let's go back to the revolt in 1069. It looks bad for King William. He has a Danish force on English soil; his rival for the English throne, Edgar, is now related by marriage to the Scottish king. But William is up to the challenge. He responds immediately. He heads north.

Along the way, he engages in a deliberate policy of destruction. He tells his troops [to] destroy all the crops, burn down the houses, destroy everything in your path. They kill every male they come across; they kill all the livestock they could get their hands on. It's basically like Sherman's March to the Sea in Georgia during the American Civil War, but worse, and it gets an appropriate name: People refer to it as the "harrying" of the north. The king got to York and he retook the city rather easily, and then he orders his troops to fan out across the countryside of Yorkshire to carry out the same kind of destruction that they'd engaged in on the way north. This destruction is so profound that its effects are still visible two decades later in Domesday Book, a great survey of English lands that we're going to be talking about in the next lecture, and you can see the results of the harrying of the north in that book.

There are still some rebels holding out near Chester in the northwest, so the king heads to Chester next. It's winter at this point, usually not a time when soldiers in the Middle Ages expect they're going to be fighting—you usually take the winter off—and William's soldiers are exhausted. They almost mutiny on the way to Chester, but the king somehow rallies them—he has amazing powers of leadership—and they get to Chester before the rebels are ready to meet them. And that's effectively it; that's the end of the English side of the revolt. The Danes are still on the loose, but they're discouraged at this point. The king manages to pay them off. He pays the Danes a bribe, and the Danish fleet in the Humber ups anchor. Essentially, you've got a Norman king paying Danegeld—kind of ironic. William had just come through a relentless, tiring campaign, and it seemed a good tradeoff to him.

But remember what Kipling said about Danegelds? William was not rid of the Dane this time either. The next year, 1070, King Sweyn comes back; this time, he's leading his fleet in person. Edwin and Morcar join in also. The Danes meet up with an English rebel force; they're led by an English thegn (an English nobleman) from Lincolnshire named Hereward. Together, this rebel force attacks Peterborough Abbey in Northamptonshire and sacks it. (It's got a Norman abbot at this point, which maybe justifies the sack a little bit.) The monks of Peterborough remember this attack for many years to come with horror.

William responds by bribing Sweyn to go home again, and Sweyn does go home again. This leaves William free to go after Hereward. Hereward takes refuge in the Isle of Ely. Remember Ely from our discussion of Cnut's reign? This is the church where Cnut was charmed by the singing of the monks. Well, you'll also remember it's a marshy area; you're best off getting around by boat in that part of the country. It's a pretty good place to hole up and disappear. William surrounds the rebels and tries to starve them out. There are wonderful stories about Hereward's adventures during the siege. Supposedly, he disguised himself as a poor potter—he dressed in poor clothes and actually appropriated somebody's pots—and made his way into King William's camp to gather intelligence; there's all sorts of stories like this. Later on, very similar stories are going to get attached to the Robin Hood legend, and we'll come to that later in the course. Despite all of Hereward's heroic efforts, most of the rebels surrendered after a brief siege. Somehow, Hereward melts away and nobody really knows what happened to him. Of the other rebels, we do know something. Edwin is betrayed by his own followers and killed. Morcar is captured and imprisoned, and he's imprisoned for the rest of William's reign. But the bottom line is that William once again defeats his enemies.

The king wins by using a combination of methods. He always seems to know just the right mixture of elements: You need a little bit of ruthlessness, a little bit of bribery; you need to know who you pay off, who you crush. I think that's really the lesson of this great northern revolt: You have to conclude William will do whatever it takes to maintain control of England. From this point on, the English mostly get the point. They're largely loyal to the king from this time on, including Edgar Etheling. He settles down quietly to life as a member of the comfortable classes. I think William quite rightly concludes that Edgar isn't much of a threat. In fact, Edgar later becomes very good friends with William's oldest son, Robert; the two go off on crusades together. And after a very long life of getting in and out of scrapes (I think largely because he's not very dangerous, people don't think he's much of a threat), Edgar Etheling dies in his bed in around 1125, in his mid 70s. The remaining revolts of William's reign are actually led by Normans, not by Englishmen, and the king is just as good at crushing those. I'll talk about one of these Norman revolts in a moment.

For now, though, let's think about what the northern revolt meant to William. It does seem to have caused him to rethink his method of ruling England. He had been trying to rule through the existing structure, and to a large extent, that continues. The shire courts, the hundred courts—they keep meeting as usual. But he does start bringing in more of his own people. His writs start being issued in Latin rather than English; clearly, he has gotten rid of the English clerks [and] brought in Norman ones. He also begins systematically replacing English bishops and abbots with Norman ones. He wants churchmen in place who he feels comfortable working with.

But undoubtedly the biggest changes take place with regard to the ownership of land. At first, William hadn't even really carried out any systematic confiscations of English land; he had taken away land from Englishmen who were actually in the field against him at Hastings. People who had stayed out of the battle had kept their lands up till now. After the great northern revolt, William gets a bit more hard-nosed. He starts confiscating lands of English magnates and redistributing [them] to his Norman supporters.

There's a lot of controversy among historians about just how devastating a change this is, and I think it kind of depends on how you look at it and particularly on where you are on the social scale. Obviously, for the English elite, it's a disaster. They're almost completely shut out of power, since land is the source of power. Virtually overnight, the old elite goes out; the new elite comes in. But these lands that were confiscated, they had people living on them, paying rent to their owners, owing labor services, and a lot of the time, those people just stayed exactly where they were. Instead of paying rent to a guy named Wulfgar, now they're paying it to a guy named Robert. It doesn't necessarily make a huge amount of difference to them.

But the way in which the lands were distributed had long-term consequences for English history. King William gave out lands to his followers in a rather haphazard fashion; often, he simply made them the "heirs," the successors, of various English nobles who had forfeited their lands. These lands tended to be widely scattered; they don't form compact, contiguous lordships. That's much more the way it worked in Normandy, not in England. The result is that the nobility in England doesn't have the same kind of secure territorial power bases that Norman lords do. This has several implications for English

history. First, it means English lords are not going to find it as easy to defy the king as Norman lords can. They couldn't rely on a big block of territory that they could hold against the king; this sort of thing is much more possible in Normandy, and this is one reason why Normandy is more of a problem than England is. The second result of this scattered distribution of land is that nobles have a stake in things that are happening all over the country. They have kind of a national interest. And this is going to make a difference in the development of English politics and also in several major revolts in English history. We'll get to that in future lectures.

For now, let's get back to William the Conqueror and his plans for English land. As I've said, most of the lands he confiscated were scattered estates, but there are several places where the king does create large territories for one particular magnate to rule. The two most important places he does this are at Chester in the northwest and Durham in the far north. In both of these areas, it's for strategic reasons; he's worried about enemies on his borders. In Chester, it's the Welsh; in Durham, it's the Scots. He makes the calculation that he'd rather risk having a lord with a pretty secure power base if he's going to be able to defend the country. So he sees it as better to have somebody on the spot because he can't possibly be on the borders all the time. These compact lordships are going to have a long future in English history; they're called palatinates, and they're ruled over by an earl in Chester and a bishop in Durham.

There's one more important thing to say about what William does with land in England, and this touches on a big debate among historians. The debate is whether William introduces feudalism into England. Feudalism is one of those concepts that has so many problems with it that historians would really like to kill it, but it just won't die. In essence, feudalism is about fiefs; fiefs are lands that somebody accepts from a lord in exchange for some kind of service, usually military service. The king gives you a piece of land; in exchange, you show up and fight in his army when he summons you to do so. It's really the "ism" part of feudalism that historians don't like because they recognize that it was never a system; it's not systematic at all. Not all land was held in this way. Historians are divided over how important fiefs were before the conquest. But I think the important thing to stress is that William the Conqueror does increase the importance of fiefs in England.

But while William is in the midst of this whole-scale redistribution of lands, he has to face rebellion on several fronts from those very supporters that he's given land to. Remember I said the English had learned their lesson? Well, the Normans had not. In 1075, there's a major conspiracy; it's led by the earl of Hereford and the earl of East Anglia, both of whom are Normans. The grievance is simply that the king isn't giving them enough favors, not confirming them in their lands, their offices; unlike the English revolts, this one is thus really entirely personal. The plot is actually hatched at a wedding feast. The reason I mention this revolt—it doesn't amount to much militarily—is because it results in the last execution of an Englishman for treason in William's reign. Now how is this? It's a Norman revolt. Among the wedding guests where the plot is devised is an English nobleman named Waltheof, and the reason he's there is that he has married the niece of William the Conqueror, and somehow poor Waltheof gets swept up in the conspiracy. When word of it gets out, Waltheof is actually the first to surrender; I don't think his heart was ever in the rebellion. But the king decides that he's going to treat the rebels separately according to their nationality: Normans will be dealt with by Norman law; English, by English law. The penalty for treason under English law is beheading. So the Norman lords get off with the loss of their lands and liberty; Waltheof is executed. Justice in England is not yet entirely evenhanded.

Still, this episode shows that William had his problems with his Norman supporters just as much as he did with his English subjects, if not more so. What's the solution? William tried to a certain degree to increase the authority of the crown with respect to the great lords, and he did this by articulating the principle that he's at the top of a hierarchy of landholding; everyone else comes underneath him. In effect, William is making it clear that all the land in England is held of the king. The next layer of landholders under the king are the so-called tenants-in-chief. Tenants-in-chief are people who hold their lands directly of the king; he is their immediate lord. They are accountable directly to him for their military service. Under the tenants-in-chief are people called subtenants; these are people who owe service to the tenants-in-chief, who owe service to the king. So there's essentially a pyramid with the king at the top. This is a simplification, but broadly it holds.

But William injects a new kind of discipline into this feudal structure. The clearest expression of this came in August of 1086, toward the end of William's reign, with the so-called Salisbury Oath. This is an occasion when William gathers all the great landowners of the country at Salisbury and he demands a personal oath of loyalty. He wants you to swear the oath whether or not you're a tenant-in-chief, that is, whether or not you held your land directly of the king or whether there's another lord between you and the king. William is making it clear that he's the king of all the landowners, not just of the men who are his own vassals directly, and this had very important ramifications.

In the normal feudal way of things, your loyalty is to your lord full stop. If your lord rebels against *his* lord, you rebel with him. But William at Salisbury is articulating the claim that everybody needs to be loyal to the king, not to their own lord one step higher up in the feudal chain. William is trying to short-circuit the normal channels of rebellion that are so much of a problem in Normandy. In fact, it does prove far less common in England for the lords at the bottom to follow their lords into revolt against the king. Part of the reason is these scattered lordships all over the country. But part of it is also that the English kings are asking for the loyalty of *all* their subjects.

What we're seeing is the creation of the very strong kingship. In contrast to what's going on in France at the time (there, the king is just having to fight to survive against his nobles), the English kings start from a presumption of strength. Of course, they're building on a strong foundation laid by the Anglo-Saxon monarchy. But a lot of the credit goes to the personality of William the Conqueror. When William dies in 1087, he is actually in Normandy. Nevertheless, the English accept his son, William II, as king, with not a whisper of opposition. That's quite an achievement for a foreign conqueror with—let's admit it—a dubious claim to the throne. In our next lecture, we'll look at the implications of the Norman Conquest for the mass of English people on the ground, as they try to come to grips with conquest and create a new people out of the English and the Normans.

Conflict and Assimilation

Lecture 13

People came to feel that the information in Domesday Book was supposed to last until the end of time, hence "Domesday." But William wasn't thinking about the end of time; he was thinking about right now. … Essentially, the king wants to know everything he can about the productive capacity of England. How rich are we?

Although the changes the Norman Conquest brought to England were slower and more subtle for most English people than they were for the ruling elite, the contact between English and Norman cultures would eventually filter down to everyone. One of the best sources we have for life in England shortly after the conquest is the famous Domesday Book. Essentially a catalog of the resources of the nation, it is an extremely complicated document that raises a lot of controversy among historians. Why did William undertake this enormous project? What did he intend to use this information for?

What isn't in dispute among historians is how lucky we are to have the Domesday Book. In 1086, William sent his agents to gather data about how many hides (that is, pieces of land meant to support a single family) England contained; how many hides belonged to the king, the various barons, and the bishops; how much revenue these hides could produce; and, interestingly, what these lands *used to* produce in the time of Edward the Confessor. This last would tell him how the economy had changed in the 20 years since the Norman Conquest.

Nothing like this survey had ever been attempted before. Hundreds, possibly thousands of people were involved in creating the final product. William created commissions, small groups of officials who were assigned to one of seven circuits, or territories, made up several counties. In each county, the commissioners convened juries of local men from each hundred, and asked the jurors a series of questions about the land in that hundred: Who owns what land, where, and how much is it worth? They were asked about the land's value now, "in the time of King William," as well as its value "in the

time of King Edward." (The commissioners probably gathered information from written records as well, but none of those records survive.) The juries were also sometimes asked to pronounce a verdict on lands in dispute, although occasionally they were unable—or unwilling—to do so.

Ironically, some of the differences in value can be directly traced to William's harrying of the lands around London and the harrying of the north he carried out to secure his throne. However, there wasn't a consistent pattern across England of how land values had changed—the economy was fairly localized—but in general lands that had not been crossed by any armies fared better than those that had.

Finally, the commissioners recorded their information on sheets of parchments called briefs. The briefs were brought to a central location, where scribes consolidated and sometimes abbreviated the data.

So we understand the process of creating the Domesday Book, but we still can't be certain why William created it. There are several prominent theories. Some historians think the king wanted to impose a new kind of tax in England based on a unit called the ploughland. But the information in the Domesday Book is not ideal for collecting taxes; it is organized first by county, then by landowner. If someone owns more than one piece of land, the government would have to levy lots of little taxes on each person. But the biggest problem with this argument is that William didn't change the tax system when the book was complete.

One of the most interesting theories ties the Domesday Book to the Oath of Salisbury: One historian has argued that the king extracted the oath in exchange for the Domesday Book. In other words, it's a quid pro quo: You promise to serve me loyally, and I'll ratify the titles to your land. Other historians have pointed out, though, that most people weren't worried about how secure their title was.

At the end of some of the county records in the Domesday Book, there is a section called ***clamores***, meaning "complaints," those tricky disputes where the juries didn't want to get involved. A remarkable number of these disputes were addressed in the royal courts in the decades after the Domesday Book

was compiled; the last of these was settled well into the 12th century. On a more general level, for centuries afterward, people who found themselves arguing over a particular piece of property would point to the information in the Domesday Book as evidence of their rights. While settling land disputes may not have been the book's intended purpose, it was certainly one of its main uses.

We can learn a tremendous amount about the English economy at the time of the survey simply by crunching the Domesday numbers.

The book has now been digitized, so we can learn a tremendous amount about the English economy at the time of the survey simply by crunching the Domesday numbers. The data points to a society where the social structure varied somewhat from region to region. There were large numbers of slaves and serfs in England in 1086; but in some areas, especially in eastern England, there were many free men, people who either owned their land outright or owed very minimal obligations for it. The overwhelming majority of England's people were directly dependent on agriculture, and most farmers worked on manors owned by lords. Two-field crop rotation was being replaced by three-field crop rotation, which meant more land under cultivation at any one time. Major crops included wheat, rye, and legumes. Most farmers still plowed with teams of oxen, often communally owned by the village, so oxen were a particular item of interest in the Domesday Book.

The most dramatic change in the landscape was undoubtedly the creation of the **forest law**. William the Conqueror created a brand-new institution; certain areas of England were declared the royal forest, and special laws would apply there. Hunting and trapping game were restricted, and only the king could hunt for deer; harvesting timber was prohibited; and the punishments for violating these laws were severe. Given how important wild animals and plants were to making a living in England, these restrictions could be a real hardship to a community.

Changes in the lives of those higher up the social ladder were undergoing significantly more change in the early years of Norman rule. Intermarriage between English and Normans began almost immediately, with the king's

encouragement; one of the easiest ways to transfer property was to marry an English heiress to a Norman lord. The children of these marriages often grew up bilingual in French and English. Upwardly mobile Englishmen did what they could to learn French, because it was both socially prestigious and practically advantageous. Fewer Normans learned English; the higher up you were, the less you had to bother with it. The English also began giving children Norman names—fewer Wulfrics, more Williams. Fortunately, the conquest stimulated a passion for English history that cut across ethnic lines. Many works of English history were written by historians of every ethnic background. They tended to write in Latin, although Geoffrey Gaimar translated the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* into French.

This is not to say that there was no ethnic tension. The highest offices of church and state were out of the reach of English men. And there are signs that the Normans looked down on the English, at least for a generation or two. For example, King Henry I, who ruled in the early 12th century, sought out and won the hand in marriage of the great-granddaughter of Edmund Ironside. Henry asked that his son, William, be known as aetheling, but some of his Norman subjects mocked him for this. But overall, England came through the conquest with less ethnic conflict that one might expect. ■

Important Terms

clamores: From the Latin for "outcries"; complaints recorded in the Domesday Book about unjust seizures of land following the Norman Conquest. The *clamores* were presented by juries with knowledge of the history of local estates.

forest law: Law applied to areas of England set aside for hunting by the king after the Norman Conquest. Interference with animals in areas designated as forest (which were not necessarily wooded) could be punished by mutilation or death until the granting of the Forest Charter in 1217, which accompanied the reissue of the Magna Carta by Henry III.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Conflict and Assimilation

Lecture 13—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the reign of William the Conqueror, and we concentrated mostly on what William had to do to consolidate his conquest of England. He had to cope with rebellions, certainly, and one of the ways he did this was to make a whole-scale redistribution of lands to his supporters. He essentially created a new elite in England, but he left most of the lower layers of the social hierarchy largely as they were.

For many English people, the most important immediate result of the Norman Conquest is that they get a new lord. But that was just the start of the process of creating a new society, a blend of English and Norman. In this lecture, I want to talk in a little bit of detail about what this process is like. How do English and Normans deal with one another? We'll look at the legal implications of the Conquest, but we're also going to look at the social and cultural effects of the Conquest. How did people interact with each other? How are they affected on a personal level by the change of regime?

In this lecture, we're going to use a variety of very different kinds of sources to answer these questions. The first one we'll look at is the famous Domesday Book. We're going to spend quite a bit of time on Domesday Book. This is an amazing work; it includes all sorts of information about land and people in England under William the Conqueror. It will tell us a lot of hard facts; it will tell us how many ploughs there are on the estates of the bishop of Lincoln in Huntingdonshire. But we're also going to look at chronicles and other sources to get a feel of what post-Conquest England is like. So that's the plan for this lecture.

Let's start with Domesday Book. It's really two books, one very large book and one smaller book, but they go together, and they contain information about English lands. It's organized county by county, and then within each county chapter, there are entries for the lands of each major landholder in that county. That's the basic setup of Domesday Book. It's an extremely complicated document, and it's very controversial. Many books have been written about it, and scholars disagree about almost everything to do with it,

including the very basic question of what it's supposed to be for. We can't be completely sure what the point of Domesday Book is. Why was it made? Some scholars think the king is trying to pave the way for imposing a new kind of tax, so he wants to know, how do you assess the tax throughout England? Some people think he was trying to square away who has the right to different estates. We'll deal with this question a little bit later in the lecture. First, I want to describe what Domesday is and how it was compiled, and then we'll try to figure out why it was compiled and what it was used for.

The first thing to say is Domesday Book is an amazing resource. If William the Conqueror did anything that modern historians bless him for, it was ordering the compilation of Domesday Book in 1086. Now, of course, William doesn't call it Domesday Book. That's a nickname given to it a bit later, because people come to feel that the information in Domesday Book is destined to last until the end of time, hence "Domesday."

But William isn't thinking about the end of time; he's thinking about right now. He needs information (for some reason—we're not exactly sure why), and he sets up a very elaborate process to get that information. Here's what a later chronicler says about what William wants to know: He wants to find out how many hides of land there are in England (remember, a hide is a unit of land notionally meant to support a single family); he wants to know how many hides of land the king has and how many hides the various barons and bishops have. And here it's important to remember the church owns a lot of land. The king also wants to know, what are these lands worth? How much revenue can they bring in? Also (this is quite interesting), he wanted to know what these lands used to produce in the time of King Edward the Confessor, and this is a way of getting at how the economy has changed after the Norman Conquest. Essentially, the king wants to know everything he can about the productive capacity of England. How rich are we? What do we really have?

This level of detail made a very big impression on people at the time. Nothing like this had ever been attempted before. In a later chronicler's description of this, you can hear a sort of sense of amazement about the Domesday project. He wrote, "So thoroughly was all this carried out that there did not remain in the whole of England a single hide of land, or an ox, or a cow, or a pig that

was not written in that brief." You can almost get a sense that this chronicler is a little bit oppressed by this; he's sort of feeling as if this is Big Brother going a bit too far.

But you can't help but be impressed by how William went about getting all of this information. He mobilized literally hundreds, probably thousands, of people, who all worked to create the final product. The first step is to create commissions—these are small groups of officials who are assigned to a particular part of England; that's their territory that they're going to cover. These areas are called "circuits," and each one was made up of a group of counties. There were seven of these circuits, and they're organized to make good sense geographically. For example, circuit 2 is made up of five counties in the southwest: Wiltshire, Somerset, Dorset, Devon, and Cornwall. This is a pretty coherent territory. Circuit 7 is made up of three counties in the east: Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. The idea clearly is that these are parts of the country that form a unit, and that makes sense.

Okay, you're a Domesday commissioner. You've just been told, "You're doing circuit 7." (Actually, they wouldn't have been told that exactly—these numbers have been assigned to the circuits by modern scholars.) So you've been told, "Your job is Norfolk, Suffolk, and Essex. Go find out everything you can." What do you do next? Well, you go off with the firm intention of taking full advantage of all of those elaborate administrative structures that were set up by the Anglo-Saxon state—the counties, the hundreds, all of that that we covered in a previous lecture. So the commissioners go to each county by turn, and in each county, they convene juries of local men from each hundred, each subdivision of the county, and they ask the jurors a series of questions about the land in that hundred. The idea is that people in each local area are going to know who owns what land and what it's worth. There's probably some sort of basic questionnaire that the commissioners are working from. It varies a bit from circuit to circuit; in some places, they clearly ask more questions about livestock than they did in others, but essentially, they're after the same information, the basics I mentioned before: who owns what land, where is it, how much is it worth.

One of the most interesting things that the juries were asked is, how much was the land worth in the past, and how much is it worth now? And they

expressed this based on the king who was ruling at the time. So the value of the land in 1066 is called the value "in the time of King Edward." The value in 1086, at the time the survey was done, that's "in the time of King William." So you have a record of how values have changed during this very eventful 20-year period. I mentioned in the last lecture that you could actually trace the effects of the "harrying of the north" (the results of the northern rebellion); Domesday Book is where you can do that. There are places where the value in the time of King Edward is much higher than the value in the time of King William, because those areas have not yet recovered from all the looting and burning that was done at that point in the reign. On the other hand, there are plenty of areas where the values went up. There's not a consistent pattern across England of how land values change. The economy's fairly localized; lots of factors go into determining if an area is going to grow or not. One big thing that helps is not having an army troop through your lands!

So the juries provide quite a lot of information. Probably they did have some written records to go on; these are records kept at the hundred level and the county level. These records don't survive, but we can tell from Domesday Book that there have to have been some written sources to provide this level of detail. But there were some questions that couldn't be answered just by looking them up in a document. The juries were also asked to pronounce on some controversial questions, like who really had title to a particular piece of land in the neighborhood. There might have been a dispute about that, perhaps it stretched back many years. One of the interesting things in Domesday Book are the places where the jurors claim ignorance. They simply say, "We don't know who has the right to that particular estate." One modern scholar, I think, has made a very convincing argument about what's happening here: The jurors don't want to go on record one way or the other, because they're caught between a rock and a hard place. They have to live in this neighborhood after the Domesday commissioners leave, and they're going to be rubbing shoulders with the two people who are having the dispute. So it's safest to just say, we don't know. I think this gives us a sense of the wonderful complexity of post-Conquest England. On the one hand, you've got this very sophisticated administrative machinery. You can actually go out and mobilize these juries all over the country to provide this detailed information. But on the other hand, sometimes these

people are scared to death of their neighbors. This is both assimilation and conflict at work.

So the juries have now testified. Now, you, the commissioners, gather up the information—it's on lots of separate sheets of parchment called "briefs." These briefs are gathered up, brought back to a central location, and ultimately, used to create Domesday Book. We can tell that the scribes of Domesday Book abbreviated the information in the briefs. There was originally even more detail than we have now; we know this because there are other documents made from the briefs that do have more detail. Clearly, the Domesday Book scribes figure that if they put in everything, nobody's going to be able to lift the final product!

So the work of the commissioners is done. We know what Domesday Book is; we know how it was compiled. But why was it compiled? That's a question I'm not going to go into too much detail [about]. As I've said, historians have gotten very exercised about this. I'm just going to give you the main theories, and then we're going to leave the question open. Some historians think that the king wanted to gather all this information because he wants to impose a new kind of tax in England. He's going to use a new unit called the "ploughland." That's the theory. But the information in Domesday Book is not organized in the best way for collecting taxes. It's listed within each county by landowner; this means if you want to hit up individual landowners who own land in more than one county, which is very commonly the case, you have to look at the information in more than one county. It's very cumbersome. The biggest problem with this argument is also the fact that the method of collecting taxes wasn't changed. So it's a lot of trouble to go to and then change your mind about wanting to do it.

One of the most interesting theories ties Domesday Book to the famous event that took place in August of 1086 at Salisbury. This is the occasion I mentioned in the last lecture, when King William gathers all the leading men of the kingdom and has them swear an oath of loyalty directly to him. One historian has argued that the king extracted the oath in exchange for Domesday Book, because Domesday Book was a register of who really had the right to the land, and this was something that was going to help people feel secure in their title to land. It's a quid pro quo: You promise to serve

me loyally; I'll ratify title to your land. Other historians have pointed out, though, that by this point, 20 years into the reign, most people are pretty secure about how their title is. After 20 years, some of the people who swear the oath at Salisbury are actually the sons of the first people to get the land. It's already been inherited once. So people aren't really that worried.

We aren't going to solve this. So I want to move on to say something very briefly about some ways Domesday Book was, in fact, used, whether that's why it was compiled in the first place or not. At the end of some of the county records in Domesday Book, there's a section called *clamores*. The Latin word *clamores* is what we get our word "clamor" from ("big noise"), and it means "complaints." These are records of some of the very tricky disputes I mentioned where the juries sometimes don't want to get involved. A remarkable number of these disputes actually do get addressed in the royal courts in the decades after Domesday Book; the last of these complaints is settled well into the 12th century. And on a more general level, for centuries afterwards, people who find themselves in a dispute about the right to a particular piece of property would actually go to the Exchequer, the English Treasury department (we'll talk about that in the next lecture) where Domesday Book was kept, and they would copy out the information from Domesday Book that pertained to the particular estate they were interested in. So whether it was intended to be a register of title deeds in the first place, that is what it became.

I mentioned earlier that historians love Domesday Book, even though they can't agree on what it was supposed to be. Domesday has now been digitized, so we can learn a tremendous amount about the English economy at the time of the survey simply from crunching the Domesday numbers. That's how we know about the various economic trends after the Conquest, how some areas were doing well and others weren't. We can also use this data to learn some other things about life in post-Conquest England, so I want to turn from Domesday Book itself now to talk for a few minutes about the society that Domesday Book reveals to us.

One thing that Domesday Book seems to show us is that this is a society where the social structure varies a lot from region to region. One of the most interesting aspects of this variation is that the degree of freedom you see in

different parts of the country varies. There are still a large number of slaves recorded in Domesday Book; slaves were going to decrease in number as we head into the 12th century, but still in 1086, there are large numbers of slaves. There are also many serfs—these are people who are not technically slaves; they're not owned outright, but they're tied to particular estates. Historians aren't really sure exactly when this category of people appears, these people who are sort of intermediate between slave and free. They're probably a product of the increasing power of kings and lords in the late Anglo-Saxon period. But at any rate, you see lots of them in Domesday Book, and their numbers are going to go up, just as the number of slaves will go down. But in some areas, especially in eastern England and East Anglia, there seem to have been a large number of freemen, people who either owned their land outright or owed really very minimal obligations for their land. These are people who have the right to participate in the public courts, and they have a special name: They're called "sokemen." So there are plenty of people who aren't dependent on a lord. The personal status of English people can vary quite a bit.

Despite these legal variations, it's important to stress that the overwhelming majority of English men and women are still dependent directly on the produce of the soil. This much has not changed very much at all since we last looked at English society in the Anglo-Saxon period. There are probably several million people living in England in 1086 (this is a very rough estimate); most of them are working small plots of land according to the very basic geographical divisions we've talked about before: mostly arable farming in the southeast, mostly pastoral in the northwest. And most farmers are working on estates owned by lords. These estates are called manors, and manors are the smallest units of agricultural production. A manor might include an entire village; however, some manors are big enough to include more than one village, and some villages belong partly to one manor and partly to another. That was obviously confusing, but it did happen. So manors and villages are not always exactly the same, but the manor is the basic unit of agricultural production.

Farm labor, of course, is extremely arduous, but at least there have been some improvements since the Anglo-Saxon period. Gradually, a three-field system of crop rotation is being introduced; this increases the amount of land

under cultivation at any one time. You can have only one-third of the land lying fallow while two-thirds are being used. You plant a series of crops, often wheat and then rye, but you might also plant legumes; that helps with the nitrogen level of the soil. Also, the horse collar has been introduced, and that gives horses greater traction in pulling a plow. The day of the horse is just dawning. Still, in 1086, most farmers are using teams of oxen, but we will see the horse take over down the road.

The thing about oxen is that they represent a huge capital investment. A single peasant family usually can't afford a whole team of six to eight oxen. So the teams of oxen would be shared by the families in the village. This meant that village had to cooperate in dividing up access to the oxen team. And since oxen are very hard to turn (hard to turn the team of oxen around), what they would do is arrange their land in very narrow strips, so that you could go a long way with your oxen before you had to turn them. And this gives English villages a very characteristic pattern. Usually you have a nucleus; in the center, you've got the dwellings, and then radiating out from the houses, you've got these long, long strips of land. Each family would own several of these strips, but they wouldn't be next to each other. This would reflect the fact that there was an arrangement about who got the plow; one family would get it one day, then the next team would get it the next day, and it would go sort of all the way around the radius of the settlement. Obviously, there would be arguments about this—whose strip is whose, who gets the oxen on Thursday—and for this reason, manors would have their own courts that would handle disputes like these. We'll talk more about these manor courts in a future lecture.

Manors do seem to have increased in number after the Conquest; you have more peasants (I think we can call them that at this point) under the control of lords than before the Conquest. But the most dramatic change in the landscape that's due to the Conquest is undoubtedly the creation of the forest law. I mentioned in the very first lecture that control of the forests in England is a very valuable thing because they have all sorts of resources: they have timber, of course, but sources of food. The Norman kings, starting with William the Conqueror, create a brand-new institution called the royal forest. What this means is that certain areas in England are declared to be, officially, the royal forest, and special laws will apply there. Hunting of game

is restricted; only the king can hunt for deer in the royal forest. Hunting is the quintessential royal pursuit, and the kings want to make sure that there are always going to be enough deer to be hunted. You also can't trap animals or cut down timber; it's an area of restricted access, and the laws to punish violators are very severe, often much more severe than penalties in the normal courts. Given how important wild sources of food are to making a living in this period, these restrictions could be a real hardship to the local community. And sometimes, to make matters worse, the king would declare an area to be part of the forest even if it doesn't really have a lot of trees, and this was just to increase the amount of money that he could collect in fines for the various offenses. People really hate the forest law. But the forests do at least provide jobs. We have records, starting in the 12th century, of men whose job it is to hunt wolves in the royal forests, because you don't want the wolves getting the deer either.

So life for peasants, the people at the bottom of the social ladder, maybe doesn't change all that much due to the Conquest, except in the newly afforested areas. There's a different lord, but they could live with that. There's a bit of improvement for slaves [and] a bit of a reduction in status for free peasants; the class of people at the bottom is becoming slightly more uniform from a legal point of view. But there are changes higher up the ladder that directly contribute to creating a new kind of English people, one made up of men and women of both English ancestry and Norman ancestry, all of whom think of themselves as English, and this is probably already true by the late 12th century. Within a single generation, English and Normans are making accommodations with each other; they're beginning to get along.

One way this happens is due to intermarriage. This happens right away. At the top of the scale, William the Conqueror is encouraging marriages between his followers and English heiresses. That's a very easy way to transfer land from English hands to Norman hands. One important result of these marriages is the children often grew up bilingual; they speak both French and English. And the process goes on as the result of unions that are a little bit less authorized, as well. For example, the famous Norman administrator and cleric Ranulf Flambard, who later becomes bishop of Durham, had an English mistress named Alveva in the town of Huntingdon; he later married her off to an accommodating Norman follower. Many

clerics from Normandy married English wives. They're not supposed to be marrying anybody, but the church is only just starting to crack down on marriage by priests at this point. The process of assimilation is beginning, to a large degree, behind closed doors.

Of course, language is one very important thing that changes as a result of the Conquest, because French now becomes the prestige language. Upwardly mobile Englishmen do what they can to learn French, because they know this is going to give them a leg up on the social ladder, and they certainly know they are going to be at a disadvantage without it. This was true for both laymen and clerics. There's a wonderful story from the *Life of St. Wulfric of Haselbury*, who lived from about 1080 to 1154, so really in this post-Conquest generation. He cured a man who was dumb, and after the cure, the man was able to speak both French and English. He hadn't known any French before, but now after the cure, he can speak French. This really upsets the local priest, who says to Wulfric, "Can't you give me French as well? I'm forced to keep my mouth shut when the bishop comes because I don't know any French." One really interesting aspect of the Conquest, something quite different from a lot of more modern conquests, is the English don't seem to have had any problem with French. They didn't resist it. Those who can, learn it. Fewer Normans learn English, but again, this is a factor of social class. The higher up you are, the less you had to bother learning English. If you're the king's forester, you probably do need to speak English to do your job.

The English also begin giving their children Norman names. This is a way of social climbing also, and it holds more the higher up you go on the social scale. The overall number of English-sounding names, like Wulfric, gradually goes down, and you see the rise of a lot of Williams and Roberts and Henrys. The English names don't disappear, but within a generation or two of the Conquest, you can no longer tell just by looking at somebody's name whether their ethnicity is Norman or English. For historians, this is really annoying, because it's hard then to figure out who people are and where they come from, but I think it's a sign that assimilation is proceeding on its merry way.

One very useful thing for historians, though, is that the Norman Conquest seems to have stimulated a passion for English history, and it cut across ethnic lines. There's a market for works of English history, so a lot of them were written, and we have great chronicles for the early Norman period in England. It seems as if the new residents of England want to get to know their adopted homeland. And a lot of the historians who take up this task come from ethnically mixed backgrounds. This is the case most famously for the great historian Orderic Vitalis. He was born in England, in Shropshire. His father was a Norman cleric and his mother was English. He learned Latin from an English priest, and then he's sent at the age of 10 or 11 to a Norman monastery called St. Evroul to become a monk. He talks very movingly about what a wrench this was to leave his father, and he never saw his father again. Now, here he is in Normandy. From this vantage point, he writes a history of England, and it's one of our most useful sources for this period. And it's very pro-English. There are other writers like this who are probably of mixed ancestry, people like William of Malmesbury, [who] also wrote histories of England.

Now, these writers wrote in Latin, but one of the most fascinating texts of this period is a history of England written in French. It's written by a man named Geoffrey Gaimar, and it was commissioned by a noble patroness, a woman of Norman background named Constance FitzGilbert, who was the wife of a powerful baron. Essentially, Gaimar's text is a translation of *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* from English into French. So one of the things that helped assimilation along in England is clearly the fact that the Normans who settle in England embrace the English past; they start to feel part of it. They have to read about it in French, but it was still, in a certain sense, their English history.

Now, this is not to say that there were never any ethnic tensions. There certainly were. For quite a while after the Conquest, there are certain jobs at the top of the hierarchy in both church and state that Englishmen can't get. There are hardly any English-born bishops for more than a generation, and the king's top advisers are certainly all of Norman background. This was noticed and resented and commented upon.

And there are signs that the Normans looked down on the English, at least for a generation or two. The most telling example of this, I think, comes from the reign of Henry I, who ruled from 1100–1135. We're going to talk a lot about him in the next lecture. Henry was reputed to be an Anglophile; at least he had relationships with a lot of English women, but it seems to have gone deeper than that. And he married a woman who was descended from the old English royal line, the princess Matilda of Scotland, who was the great-great-granddaughter of Æthelred and the great-granddaughter of Edmund Ironside. King Henry did this because he wanted to reconcile the two royal lines, English and Norman, and this does seem to have helped, at least with his English subjects, quite a bit. Henry even asked that his son William be known as "William Etheling"; that's the English term for a royal prince, a potential successor to the throne. So Henry is doing a lot to meet his English subjects more than halfway. But some of his Norman subjects mocked him for this. They liked to refer to King Henry and his very English wife Matilda as "Godric and Godgifu." Now Godric and Godgifu are two very quintessentially English names, and the idea is clearly the king and his wife are much too "English" for some of the Normans to put up with. Ultimately, the English and the Normans make their peace with each other surprisingly quickly. There is, of course, a little name-calling along the way.

Well, by this point, we have an England that comes through the Conquest, I think, with much less ethnic conflict than we might have supposed. It's recovering nicely from the damage caused by the Conquest, and the English and the Norman are reaching out to one another. They're creating a new English identity; it's strongly rooted in the English past. In our next lecture, we'll look in detail at the reign of a king who is a perfect model for this assimilation: Henry I, the king who was mockingly referred to as Godric. We'll see what sort of a king the youngest of William the Conqueror's sons turned out to be.

Henry I—The Lion of Justice

Lecture 14

As soon as Henry had inspected the body and verified that his brother was dead, he … hurried straight to Winchester, where he seized the treasury. The next morning, William Rufus was solemnly buried in Winchester Cathedral, with Henry in attendance. … By Saturday, Henry was in London, and on Sunday, he was crowned in Westminster Abbey. The man on the spot was now king.

In this lecture, we're going to get to know King Henry I, because besides having this pro-English outlook that he got teased for, he was one of the most important kings in English history. He consolidated the gains William the Conqueror had made, and he presided over important advances in government over his long reign. But before we get to Henry on the throne, we need to look at how he got there.

William the Conqueror died in 1087, the year after the Salisbury Oath. He left behind three grown sons: Robert, William (called William Rufus for his ruddy complexion), and Henry. William did not leave everything to Robert; instead, he divided the inheritance among them. Robert, the eldest, seems to have been his mother's favorite but got on his father's bad side a lot; he repeatedly rebelled against William.

William had a slow decline before his death, and he had the time to make careful plans for the succession. He was determined to disinherit Robert, but his barons persuaded him to let Robert have Normandy. The crown of England would go to William Rufus. All Henry got was 5,000 pounds of silver, but he used the money to buy land in western Normandy from Robert and set about building a base of support there.

Many families by this point had lands in Normandy and lands in England and were unhappy that they now owed allegiance to two men. Throughout William Rufus's 13 years as king, the English barons made attempts to secure England for Robert; conversely, William interfered with Robert's barons in Normandy. Meanwhile, Henry's loyalties flipped back and forth

between his brothers, supporting whichever gave him a better deal at that moment. But Henry's path to the crown would not be secured in England or in Normandy but in Jerusalem.

In 1095, Pope Urban II preached a crusade against the Turks. All over Europe, men took the cross; one of them was Robert. To finance his crusade, he mortgaged the duchy of Normandy William Rufus. Of course, he expected to buy it back on his return. But when he returned to reclaim his lands from William, he found Henry on the throne of England. What had happened?

As a king, William Rufus was popular with everyone but the clergy; he was not a pious man and had a habit of confiscating church revenues whenever the death or exile of a bishop gave him a chance. It was a great shock when he died in a hunting accident in August 1100. The circumstances gave rise to many conspiracy theories, but none of them has ever been proven. But on his death, Henry certainly seized his opportunity with both hands. William died on a Thursday; by Sunday, Henry had secured the royal treasury, buried William, gotten himself to London, and gotten himself crowned. When Robert returned to Normandy in September, he discovered he had been shut out of the succession once again. The one saving grace for Robert was that William's death had canceled his mortgage debt.

Henry made some prudent moves to shore up his position. He issued the Charter of Liberties to the English church pledging to respect their rights and had copies sent to every English shire. He also found himself a wife who was descended from the house of Wessex: Princess Edith of Scotland, the great-granddaughter of Edmund Ironside. (Once they were married, Edith took the French name Matilda as a gesture to the Normans.) When Robert made a half-hearted attempt to invade England and take the crown, Henry bought him off with an annuity. As it turned out, he was also buying time. In 1106, Henry invaded Normandy, the culmination of years of scheming, planning, and bribing Robert's followers. His army attacked Robert at the castle of Tinchebray in southwestern Normandy. Robert was captured in battle and was held captive by Henry for the next 28 years, until Robert's death in 1134. Henry now had no serious rival for the crown, although for many years he struggled to hold Normandy, particularly against Robert's son, William Clito.

Henry is an intriguing personality, but why was he so important to English history? Most historians give him credit for being an administrative pioneer. He made a compromise with the church over the lay investiture controversy that satisfied church officials but still gave the crown some influence over appointment of bishops. He also presided over church councils to help the church crack down on clerical marriage. He reorganized the royal household to make it more efficient. But his most famous advance is instituting the **Exchequer**—the auditing department of the Treasury—which allowed the English kings to keep much better track of their revenues than any other contemporary European monarch.

Henry liked talent, was good at sniffing it out, and promoted some skilled but less socially connected men to important posts.

We don't know exactly who came up with the idea for the Exchequer, but it was probably the brainchild of one of Henry's crack administrators. Henry liked talent, was good at sniffing it out, and promoted some skilled but less socially connected men to important posts, for which he took flack from the nobility. It was good for Henry that he had capable administrators, because like all kings in this period, Henry had to take a lot of trips and make a lot of appearances to keep the nobility in line. Henry seems to have issued a lot of writs; over 1,500 of these disposable orders survive from his reign. They cover an enormous range of topics, from regulating the courts to arranging the burial of his wife, Matilda. But many of them have to do with private land transactions. Adjudicating land disputes was not a systematic process, and there was plenty of favoritism at work. Still, this enormous mass of writs does testify to Henry's appetite for administration.

But despite all these administrative achievements, Henry was limited in how he could keep track of his subordinates, due to the difficulties of transportation and communication across the realm. The most notorious episode of royal servants going rogue took place in 1124. Henry discovered that the English moneyers were debasing the silver coins (that is, using less silver and more base metal) and skimming off the extra for themselves. The king was so furious that he ordered that all the moneyers in England should be deprived of their right hands and their genitals. The moneyers were duly

summoned to Winchester and mutilated. The two lessons to be drawn here are that the king had a strong enough administration to carry out this brutal sentence on such a large scale, but he did not have the ability to forestall the corruption in the first place.

Henry's contemporaries had mixed feelings about their king. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* praises Henry for providing law and order. But in the *Worcester Chronicle*, we have a story of Henry being attacked in his nightmares by all three "orders" of society—peasants, knights, and clerics. Obviously, some felt that the king was something of a tyrant. ■

Important Term

Exchequer: Accounting branch of the medieval English treasury. By the reign of Henry I, sheriffs would account for their expenditures at twice-yearly sessions at which counters representing various sums of money would be manipulated on a board covered by a checkered cloth. Records of the exchequer accounts were kept in the Pipe Rolls.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Henry I—The Lion of Justice
Lecture 14—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at England after the Norman Conquest, and we talked about how the English and the Normans were beginning to assimilate to each other; they're creating a new English people who share a basic pride in the history of England, and they could all identify with that, whether or not their ancestors originally came from Normandy or from England. This process took many years, of course, and we noted that still in the early 12th century, there are some tensions between the two groups; there are Englishmen who resent being shut out of the top jobs, and there are Normans who still look down on the English. This even led some people to mock King Henry I for being "too English."

Today, we're going to get to know Henry I, because besides having this pro-English outlook that he got teased for, he's one of the most important kings in English history. He consolidated the gains that William the Conqueror had made, and he presided over some very important advances in the government of England over the course of his very long reign; he ruled from 1100 to 1135. So we'll spend almost all of this lecture on Henry's career as king.

But before we put Henry on the throne, we need to back up a bit to the end of the reign of his father, William the Conqueror. William died in 1087, the year after the famous Salisbury Oath, the year after Domesday Book. William the Conqueror left behind three grown sons, Robert, William, and Henry. William did not leave everything to the eldest son, Robert; instead, he divided up his resources among the three brothers, and this caused problems among the brothers, and they wouldn't be resolved until there was only one of them left alive. So who are these three sons of William the Conqueror?

The oldest one, Robert, seems to have been the favorite son of his mother, the duchess Matilda; normally, Matilda worked very closely, very harmoniously with her husband, but the only times we know of when she disagreed with him, and even defied him, were the times when she helped her son Robert stand up to his father.

Unfortunately, Robert was on his father's bad side a lot; he repeatedly rebelled against William. It's the perpetual problem of a royal prince with not enough to do. They tended to get into trouble that way. And Robert inspired various reactions among his contemporaries. He had many good friends and, by all accounts, was an excellent companion—he was fun to be with—but he did have one of those unfortunate nicknames that we've run into before. He was called Robert "Curthose," or "short trousers." One historian has turned this into colloquial English as "Little Bobby Short-Pants." That obviously doesn't inspire tremendous confidence. William's second son, another William, has also got a nickname. He's called William "Rufus" because of his ruddy complexion. And, finally, there's the youngest son, Henry. At the time of William the Conqueror's death, he thus had three grown sons. He's king of England and he's also, of course, still duke of Normandy. How is he going to divide up his dominions?

He has a little time to think about this; he has a few days' notice that he's going to die. William is in Normandy taking care of a little border skirmish with the French. There are conflicting accounts of what happened. Here's one version: William was just in the act of sacking the town of Mantes. There are houses burning all around him, and one of the burning embers from a house that was on fire frightened his horse and caused it to bolt. By this point, William the Conqueror was a little on the heavy side, and he's thrown at an awkward angle against the pommel of his saddle, and this causes a lethal rupture. Other sources just say he came down with a fatal intestinal complaint. But at any rate, he knew he was on his deathbed, and his magnates gathered around him to find out what's going to happen after he dies.

William is determined that's he not going to leave anything to his feckless oldest son, Robert, but his barons prevail on him to at least let Robert have Normandy. They've all gotten used to Robert being the designated heir, and I think they probably also thought that they were going to have a much freer hand with Robert as duke than they had with William. But William is adamant that he's not going to give England to Robert; England goes to the second son, William Rufus. As soon as the dying king gives Rufus the okay to inherit England, Rufus leaves his father [and] heads straight for England, the idea being that he wants to head off any disturbances that might break out

when news of the king's death becomes known. And finally, there's Henry. There's no land left over, so all Henry gets is 5,000 pounds of silver. But Henry is very smart with the money; he uses it to buy land from his brother Robert in western Normandy, and he busily sets about building up a base of support there. Henry is also the only brother present at the funeral of William the Conqueror, which was a very sorry affair indeed. Apparently, the king's coffin was too short and narrow for his body—his rather corpulent body—and when his attendants tried to squeeze it into the coffin, the king's bowels burst open, releasing an extremely unpleasant smell. So that is the rather undignified end of William the Conqueror.

He left problems behind him simply because of this decision to divide up his lands between his two older sons. By this point, many families have lands both in Normandy and in England; these are people who have gotten grants of land in England, but they still have their lands in Normandy, too. It's very awkward to owe allegiance to Robert in Normandy and William Rufus in England. Throughout William Rufus's time as king—he's king of England for 13 years—there are efforts by the barons in England to try to get England for Robert, and conversely, William is always causing trouble for Robert in Normandy by interfering with his barons there.

Throughout this period, in the late 1080s and 1090s, Henry, the youngest brother, is flitting back and forth between the two brothers, supporting whichever one is going to give him a better deal at that moment. It's a very dysfunctional trio of siblings. And if we believe some of the stories, the bad feeling between them goes all the way back to their childhoods. One incident is especially telling, if true; it could be simply gossip. One day in 1077 when William the Conqueror is campaigning in southern Normandy—he's got his three sons in tow—Robert, the oldest, is entertaining his friends in their lodging; William Rufus and Henry are on the upper floor. Rufus and Henry are said to have thrown a wild party upstairs, and they top it all off by urinating on their older brother and his guests from the second floor of the lodging, sort of off the balcony.

It's not any wonder that they don't get along. But let me tell you about one deal that two of them struck that might seem rather amazing. It shows, I think, how powerful a force the Crusades were in medieval life. In 1095,

Pope Urban II preaches a crusade against the Turks. All over Europe, men take the cross. One of them is Robert, duke of Normandy. He doesn't have any money to go on crusade—Normandy is not nearly as rich as England—so he actually mortgages the duchy of Normandy to his brother William, the king of England, to raise the money for the trip. Consider the fact that for years these brothers have been fighting against each other, each of them trying to reunite the lands that their father had held. Now, Robert hands over Normandy and leaves for Jerusalem. Robert does indeed make it to Jerusalem, and he has, on the whole, pretty good experience on the crusade; he's not in the absolute top rank of famous crusading heroes, but he's solidly in the second tier.

But when he comes back to his lands to reclaim them from his brother, he finds it's a different brother on the throne of England. Henry is now king instead of William Rufus. What had happened? First, let me say a couple of general words about William Rufus as king before we talk about how he died. Rufus was a divisive figure. On the whole, his nobles liked him; churchmen didn't. His court was criticized for its extremely loose morals; William Rufus never married, and since some commentators at the time accused his courtiers of being effeminate, many people have concluded that William Rufus was a homosexual. I don't think we know one way or the other. All we know for sure is William is not a pious man, and he loved a good time. He got into a famous conflict with his archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm, and this led to the archbishop going into exile for several years. Rufus didn't miss him and cheerfully took the chance to confiscate the revenues of the archbishop while he was out of the country. Incidentally, he did this whenever a bishop died; he would put off naming a new bishop as long he possibly could because in the meantime he could collect the revenues of the see. He would leave some sees vacant as long as four years and just rake in the money. Still, he doesn't seem to have been widely hated by anybody other than churchmen, and it was a great shock when he died suddenly in August of the year 1100.

The circumstances were just the kind to give rise to conspiracy theories, and in fact, if you have to name the top unsolved mystery of medieval English history, the runner-up would probably be: What really happened when William Rufus died? The winner would be: Who killed the princes

in the Tower under Richard III? But we're going to get to that later in the course. So back to 1100. Rufus is out hunting in the New Forest in southern England—this is one of the official forest areas that I talked about in the last lecture. The bolt from the crossbow of one of his companions, a man named Walter Tirel, strikes the king, and he dies right there in the forest. The guy who shoots the crossbow, Walter Tirel, gets out of there as fast as he can. Many people have assumed that the king's brother Henry was involved in some way; as we will see, Henry does seize the throne immediately after Rufus dies, so he is the one who benefits. Other people have tried to put Tirel at the web of some sort of very complicated international conspiracy to murder the king.

These are ingenious theories; I'm not going to go into detail about them. I believe Lee Harvey Oswald acted alone; I believe Walter Tirel shot William Rufus by accident. There's no hard evidence of anybody's guilt, and hunting accidents were extremely common. William Rufus had lost a brother early in life to a hunting accident; the Conqueror had originally had four sons, not just three—one of them had died. And just that spring in 1000, a few months earlier, Robert Curthose's illegitimate son had died in a hunting accident in Normandy. So I think we can just let William Rufus rest in peace, secure in the knowledge that he simply fell victim to a rather ridiculous accident.

But what an opportunity then presented itself to young Henry! He was with his brother on the day he died. He was the man on the spot, and we've seen before how important that could be. And Henry had his wits about him. The accident took place on a Thursday. The New Forest where the accident took place is about 14 or so miles from Winchester, the seat of the royal treasury. As soon as Henry had inspected the body, verified that his brother was dead, he left instructions about the transport of the body, hurried straight to Winchester, and seized the treasury, so now he's got all the money. The next morning, William Rufus is solemnly buried in Winchester Cathedral, with Henry piously in attendance. London is about 50 miles from Winchester. By Saturday, Henry is in London, and on Sunday, he's crowned in Westminster Abbey. The man on the spot is now king. Meanwhile, Robert Curthose is on his way back from the crusade. He arrives back in Normandy in September, and he discovers once again, he's been shut out of the succession to the English throne. The one saving grace for Robert is that William Rufus's

death had canceled the mortgage agreement between the two brothers. Robert didn't need to repay the loan.

But Henry had come to the throne under very difficult circumstances, to say the least, and he had this famous crusader brother staring across the Channel at him. He seems to have made some prudent moves to shore up his support. He issued a so-called Charter of Liberties to the English church claiming that he was going to respect the rights of the church, and he had copies sent to every English shire; this is a very effective piece of early royal propaganda. He also took steps immediately to get married, and he even completed very difficult negotiations with the exiled archbishop of Canterbury, St. Anselm, so that the archbishop could come home and perform the wedding ceremony. Henry chose his wife—as we saw in the last lecture, a woman who was descended from the house of Wessex, the "legitimate" royal family of England—very much to make his English subjects happy. Her original name is Princess Edith; she's the daughter of Queen Margaret of Scotland, who was herself the granddaughter of Edmund Ironside. Once they're married, Edith takes the name Matilda, because it's just easier for the Normans to cope with the name Matilda (seems as if almost every important Norman woman of this whole period is named Matilda).

Henry seems to have liked English women, though he likes women in general. He had many mistresses and seems to have treated them rather well on the whole. He also has the highest total number of acknowledged illegitimate children in English royal history: 21. That beats the runner-up, Charles II, with 14, and he was called the "merry monarch." This doesn't mean that Henry is necessarily a soft-hearted man. He could be incredibly ruthless. Back in 1090, when he was briefly on good terms with his brother Robert, Henry was sent to help quash a rebellion in Rouen. One of the leaders was a burgess of the city named Conan. After the rebellion was put down, Duke Robert was inclined to grant mercy to the rebels, but Henry personally took Conan up to the tower of Rouen and had him thrown to his death. Some accounts say he actually pushed him himself.

So Henry was a pretty serious man, and he needed to be, because his big brother was back in town. Robert Curthose briefly invaded England, but Robert always had trouble following through, and Henry managed to buy

him off; he promised him an annuity as a kind of a compensation for giving up his claim to the English throne. But this is all about Henry buying time, because he had decided that he, not Robert, was going to be the brother who reunited their father's legacy.

In 1106, Henry invaded Normandy. The invasion is the culmination of years of scheming and planning. Henry had been busily suborning Robert's followers, promising them a little land here, a little money there. This softens up the ground for the final assault. Robert seems to have been having a lot of trouble readjusting to ruling Normandy after the crusade; he just never got a handle on the internal politics of Normandy after he got back, and that left the door open for Henry to meddle. Finally, in 1106, King Henry's army attacks Robert at the castle of Tinchebray in southwestern Normandy. Robert is captured in the battle by the king's chancellor, Waldric. Waldric's not even a knight; he's a cleric. This is deeply humiliating for a warrior of Robert's reputation. Robert is held captive by his brother for the next 28 years, until he dies in 1134. Now Henry has no serious rival for his hold on the English crown. He does have to fight repeatedly to protect his lands in Normandy, though. This is especially true later in his reign, because Robert Curthose had a son named William Clito; when William Clito grew up, he challenged his uncle for control of Normandy. But through a combination of sheer determination, hard work, and good luck, Henry I does manage to hold on to all of the inheritance of William the Conqueror. Ruthlessness pays.

This is a very interesting story, of course; Henry's a very intriguing personality. But why does it all matter for English history? It matters because [of] what Henry manages to accomplish when he isn't putting down Norman rebellions or begetting illegitimate children. His nickname is the Lion of Justice, and most historians give him credit for being something of an administrative pioneer. He did a lot of things—or rather, he got other people to do a lot of things—a lot of things that made England easier to govern.

One of the areas where he's, on the whole, successful is in his relations with the church. He gets St. Anselm, the archbishop of Canterbury, to come back from exile to perform his wedding ceremony, but then, in 1103, Anselm does go into exile again, and the issue is lay investiture. Lay investiture refers to the practice of having the ruler, the king, give the ring and staff of office to

a bishop. In the 11th century, the church had started criticizing this practice, because they thought it made church leaders too dependent on secular authorities; rulers, though, liked lay investiture because they wanted bishops to be men that they could influence. Anselm had defied King Henry on the question of investitures; the king had fought back. Finally, in 1107, they reach a compromise. King Henry officially renounces the right to investiture with the understanding that, in practice, he's still going to have a lot of say in who the bishops were.

Now, the investiture issue is a problem in other countries in Europe, as well; it was worst in Germany. There, it took until 1122 to come up with a compromise, and that compromise looks quite a bit like the one that Henry agrees to in 1107. So Henry's actually ahead of his time in straightening out this issue with the church. He also presides over church councils to try to crack down on clerical marriage. There was quite a lot of pushback on this from the priests concerned; they don't want to give up clerical marriage. And it took awhile to make any headway, but Henry did feel as if he was doing his duty in helping to set the church's house in order. Apparently, his own personal morality doesn't lead him to have a tolerant view of clerical sins of the flesh.

But really what Henry is best known for are the administrative advances that occurred during his reign. For example, he reorganized the royal household to make it more efficient, more cost-effective, to use a modern concept. We actually have an account of this reformed royal household that was drawn up shortly after his death. The household apparently consisted of 150 men divided up into various departments—the chamber, the pantry, various food departments—plus there were 50 more men who were solely responsible for the hunt. And there was one woman in the royal household, the laundress. One hopes she had help doing laundry for 200 men!

The most famous advance, though, is the development of the Exchequer. This is the auditing department of the Treasury. It allowed the English kings to keep much better track of their revenues than any other contemporary European monarch.

This is how it worked: Twice a year, the sheriffs of all the English shires would account for all the royal income from various sources that was paid in to them in that shire. They would appear before a group of auditors where the Exchequer was meeting; eventually, it became fixed at Westminster. But the accounting took a particular form. A checkered cloth (this is where we get the name "Exchequer" from) would be spread out on a table, divided into columns denoting different amounts of money. It was sort of like an abacus made out of cloth. Each amount of money to be entered for that county, each sum that had been paid in to that sheriff, would be represented by markers placed in the various columns. These columns were set up according to the decimal system, which had come in recently from the Arab world. Once the amounts were totaled up, they would be entered on long rolls of parchment, known as "pipe rolls," because they would be sewn end to end and rolled up into pipes. These pipe rolls are precious sources for historians; they actually tell us in precise detail how much money the king took in in particular years.

Unfortunately, most of the early pipe rolls have been lost. We just have one pipe roll that survives from Henry I's reign, the one for 1130, but it doesn't look like it's the first one. We have references to the Exchequer that date at least as far back as 1110 or so; it may have been created even earlier.

Now, we don't know exactly who created the Exchequer, but it was probably the brainchild of one of Henry's crack administrators. He liked to find talent. He got some flack, in fact, for promoting men in his service who didn't necessarily come from the most socially prominent backgrounds. It was said that he had "raised men from the dust," and this was remarked on in wonder, and it was not necessarily something people admired. He had a nose for people who were going to be serious about their tasks and who would devote themselves to his service. For example, there's a story about how he recruited the most trusted of his advisers, Roger, bishop of Salisbury, and this happened way back when Henry was still just the younger brother of a king with some lands in western Normandy. At that point, Roger is just a rather humble cleric in Avranches in western Normandy, and Henry happens to pass by his church when Roger is saying mass. Henry is very impressed at the rather fast clip at which Roger is getting through the service, and he decides this is an army chaplain. So he takes Roger into his service, Roger rises through the ranks, and by the time of King Henry's death in 1135, Roger

is probably the second-most powerful man in England. The story about the mass is a later story; maybe it's not wholly reliable, but I think it does say something about Henry: He valued efficiency. He was all business.

And what a busy king he was. Kings in this period had to be tremendously energetic if they were going to keep their jobs, because you really did have to show up in person periodically to keep your nobles in line. You don't want them forgetting you're there. But Henry got a lot of administrative work done despite his very heavy travel schedule. I've mentioned writs several times. These are the informal administrative orders that would be written on strips or scraps of parchment, and they would be directed at individuals or classes of individuals; they might be directed at the sheriff of a particular shire or sometimes to "all the king's faithful men." Usually writs asked people to do something the king wanted done. These writs dated well back into the Anglo-Saxon period; William the Conqueror had adopted the practice of sending out writs, but he, as we saw, changed the language of the writs from Old English to Latin.

But the number of writs issued during the reign of Henry I jumps substantially. There are over 1,500 writs that survive from his reign—probably many more have been lost—and as I've said, they're fairly ephemeral documents, but it helps that they're written on parchment; parchment is a very durable material. Henry's writs cover an enormous range of topics. Many of them have to do with essentially private concerns of the king. For example, there's a writ that confirms a grant of land that the king made to the church of Holy Trinity, Aldgate, in London, for the repose of the soul of his wife, Matilda. But other writs could have to do with pretty important administrative matters. For example, there's a writ from 1108 addressed to the bishop of Worcester and to the very powerful sheriff of Worcester, Urse d'Abitot—that's one of my favorite Norman names, Urse d'Abitot. The writ told the bishop and sheriff that they should hold the shire and hundred courts at the same intervals and in the same locations as had been the case under King Edward the Confessor. Now, what's going on here? Apparently, the sheriff had been holding courts more frequently than before, doubtless to collect more revenues from fines, and he had been holding them at places that suited himself rather than places that the community of the shire was used to. So King Henry was cracking down on that.

But many, many of these writs have to do with private land transactions. People are appealing to the king to settle disputes, just as they did under the Anglo-Saxon kings. This is not a very systematic process. Often, the party who gets to the king first gets the writ, and there's plenty of favoritism involved at every level. Still, this enormous mass of writs, I think, does testify to Henry's appetite for administration. I think he liked his job.

Despite all these administrative achievements, Henry is limited in what he can do to keep track of his subordinates. We've already seen [this] in the case of Urse d'Abitot, the sheriff of Worcester who's holding courts to suit himself. I want to talk about two instances of the king's servants not exactly following his orders to the letter. In 1129, Henry had to replace a lot of his sheriffs when it became clear they were robbing him blind and oppressing their charges. The Exchequer audit could reveal this sort of abuse after the fact, but it couldn't necessarily stop it from happening in the first place.

But the most notorious episode of royal servants going rogue took place in 1124, and it's interesting because it plays up the tensions between Henry the administrator and Henry the warrior king. Henry at this point was dealing with yet another rebellion in Normandy, and it's a pretty serious one. He has a lot of troops in the field, he needs to pay them, and he has masses of silver coins shipped over from England in order to pay the troops. When the coins arrive, it is discovered that they are seriously debased—that is, their silver content is less than it should have been—clearly, the English moneyers are keeping some of the silver for themselves. The soldiers complain. The king is so furious that he sends an order to Bishop Roger—the one who could say mass so quickly—that all the moneyers in England should be deprived of their right hands and their genitals. The moneyers were duly summoned to Winchester and mutilated.

I think we can draw a couple of lessons from this rather gruesome episode. First, Henry has an administration that's efficient enough to carry out the sentence; the king really does have a long reach. But second, his administration is not efficient enough to stop the moneyers from cheating in the first place. There are limits to how effectively the king can control his subordinates. And the third lesson to draw from the moneyers episode is that the whole thing came about because the king needed money for a war. We

need to remember that Henry is almost always multitasking; he's in the field defending his lands in France, trying to keep a handle on the government of England at the same time. Certainly, without men like Roger of Salisbury, he couldn't possibly have pulled it off, but you do have to give Henry credit for picking Roger out of that little church in Avranches.

So what are we to make of the Lion of Justice? He got a mixed press at the time. On the good side, there's a notice about Henry in *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a notice that praises Henry for providing law and order. It says, "In his time, no man dared do wrong against another; he made peace for man and beast; no man dared say anything but good to whoever carried their load of gold or silver." So that sounds great, but we hear other voices, too, voices that suggest that Henry's justice could seem oppressive and maybe even arbitrary. In *The Worcester Chronicle*, we have an account that supposedly records three nightmares that Henry had. Apparently, he's assaulted in his dreams by members of the so-called "three orders" of society: the peasants, the knights, the clerics. In the first vision, the peasants appear brandishing their pitchforks. In the second nightmare, the king sees fully armed knights who want to kill him. In the third, there are prelates holding their pastoral staffs, and clearly, they're planning to turn them against the king. The point of the nightmares is obviously that the king had oppressed every element of society. So not everybody thinks that the long reach of Henry I is a good thing.

But there's a reason why *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* waxes nostalgic about Henry's reign: It's going to seem really good in comparison with what came later. We'll find out what happened after Henry died in our next lecture.

The Anarchy of Stephen's Reign
Lecture 15

Matilda and her husband Geoffrey were ambitious people, and Matilda ended up acting just like any other adult royal child who isn't being given enough power or responsibility to keep her busy. … They were actually in rebellion against Henry I in the fall of 1135 when the king suddenly fell ill, so they were not "on the spot."

Compared to what followed, Henry I's reign would seem like the good old days to the English people. Henry died in 1135 without a clear heir. England needed a strong king with the right combination of intelligence, energy and ruthlessness to get the job done. Under England's somewhat fuzzy system of inheritance, you could end up with the wrong man for the job on the throne—or worse, not knowing which man belonged there at all. And what if the "right man" for the job turned out to be a woman?

King Henry had many illegitimate children, but only two of his legitimate children survived to adulthood. One was Matilda, who was married at the age of 10 to the Holy Roman emperor Henry V. The other was William Aetheling, who was raised at the English court and who grew up to be, in modern terms, a party animal. In November 1120, he threw a raucous party on board the White Ship, which was meant to carry him from Normandy to England that night. The ship hit a rock on its way out of the harbor and sank, taking William and two of his half-siblings to their deaths. One man who left the ship before it sailed was Stephen, count of Mortain, nephew of King Henry. His survival would shortly have a significant effect on English history.

Along with his grief, Henry was left with a serious problem. The English barons and clergy were no longer open to the idea of a bastard succeeding to the throne. At this point, Henry had been a widow for two years, so he married Adeliza of Louvain and tried to beget a legitimate son, to no avail. The next obvious choice of heir was Stephen, who was a royal favorite, or one of Stephen's brothers. But in 1125, Matilda was widowed, which made her eligible for a politically advantageous marriage. Hoping that

she could supply an acceptable grandson to be his heir, Henry summoned Matilda home.

Henry married Matilda to Geoffrey, the son of the count of Anjou, and he made his barons swear to support Matilda as his heir. This was unpopular among both English and Norman barons; they neither cared for Matilda's Angevin husband nor for the idea of a female monarch. They assumed—probably quite wrongly, given Matilda's personality—that Geoffrey would rule in his wife's name. Matilda and Geoffrey's marriage was in fact stormy; after being an empress, Matilda considered a mere count to be beneath her. But they were both ambitious and so overcame their differences to produce three sons, much to Henry's delight. They also grew impatient, like many heirs before them, and were actually in rebellion against Henry when he fell ill and died in the fall of 1135 after dining on a "surfeit of eels."

Matilda was in Anjou when she heard of Henry's death, and she moved immediately to seize Normandy. However, when Count Stephen got the news, he was in Boulogne, just across the channel from England. He set sail at once and made for Winchester to secure the English treasury, just as Henry had done. On December 22, 1135, Stephen was crowned king of England by the archbishop of Canterbury. The Norman nobles did not care for Matilda and cared even less for Geoffrey, so they accepted Stephen as their duke as well.

That's how the situation stood for the next three years, while Matilda tried to gather enough strength to claim her legal inheritance. Her strongest supporter was her half-brother Robert, earl of Gloucester, who first swore allegiance to Stephen, then rebelled on Matilda's behalf in 1138. Then King David of Scotland, who was Matilda's uncle, also invaded England, but the Scots were beaten decisively at the Battle of the Standard in Yorkshire.

In the spring of 1139, a faction fight split Stephen's court. One faction was led by Roger, bishop of Salisbury, the head of the royal administration (a holdover from Henry I's reign). The other was led by the Beaumont twins—Waleran, count of Meulan, and Robert, earl of Leicester. The Beaumonts provoked Roger's followers into breaching the king's peace, and Roger and several other bishops were arrested, which crippled Stephen's administration

and angered the clergy. Then, in September, Matilda's forces invaded; Matilda established a base at Arundel Castle in Sussex, while Gloucester made his way to Bristol, in the heart of his own lands. A civil war was about to begin.

Each of these two claimants to the English throne had strengths and weaknesses: Stephen was personally brave but a poor strategist and politician. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says he was "a mild man, and gentle and good, and did no justice." Matilda had something of the opposite problem; she was haughty to the point of arrogance (she still insisted on being called "empress"), and this arrogance would get her into serious trouble.

The war dragged on for years, fought in minor skirmishes in disputed areas, particularly in the fens of eastern England and in the midlands around Oxford. Among the more dramatic battles was the Battle of Lincoln on February 2, 1141, which began with Stephen's siege of Lincoln Castle but quickly turned to Stephen being pinned between the castle and Gloucester's forces. Stephen was captured in the battle, so Matilda headed for London to be crowned. After complicated and protracted negotiations, she entered Westminster, but in her arrogance she offended Henry, bishop of Winchester, who was Stephen's brother but had come over to her side. Worse still, Matilda offended the Londoners by responding to their petition for tax relief by raising their taxes. The enraged Londoners drove her out of the city. She fled to Oxford, from which she advanced on Winchester to besiege Bishop Henry and reclaim his allegiance. Stephen's supporters came up from London to attack her at Winchester. Matilda barely escaped, but Gloucester, her most loyal and most powerful supporter, was captured. Inevitably, Matilda exchanged Gloucester for Stephen, and the fighting continued until Matilda finally withdrew to France in 1148.

The Norman nobles did not care for Matilda and cared even less for Geoffrey.

Historians argue about the impact of this civil war on the people of England. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calls the period "a time when Christ and his saints slept." On the other hand, the functions of government seemed to

carry on more or less as normal. Things were undoubtedly worse in some areas of England than in others, and overall it was an unwelcome break from the relative peace and prosperity under the other Norman kings. It's worth noting that there has never been a King Stephen II in England. And although she left the field of battle, in a way Matilda won the war: Her son, Henry, would succeed Stephen to the throne. ■

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Anarchy of Stephen's Reign
Lecture 15—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture we talked about the reign of Henry I, the "Lion of Justice." We saw that Henry did a lot to improve the efficiency of the English government, including establishing the Exchequer, which is really the most sophisticated financial body in Christian Europe at the time. But we also saw that there's possibly a downside to Henry's love of law and order. He could act rather arbitrarily, and he could be quite cruel when he felt that he needed to set an example. But I also said that he was remembered with respect and that this fact has a lot to do with what came after Henry I. Because compared to the next reign in English history, Henry I's reign is definitely going to seem like the good old days.

The problem all came about because when Henry I died in 1135, the question of who would succeed him was far from clear. And the answer to this question mattered a lot, because England needed a strong king. The state that had grown up in England under the Wessex monarchs in the 10th century was centered on a strong monarchy. After the Norman Conquest, again, the Norman kings have further reinforced this royal rule. The king is the source of justice; he's the source of patronage. You need the king to be the right sort of man for the job. I think Robert Curthose never succeeded at becoming king of England because in a real sense, people grasped that he wasn't the right sort of man for the job, whereas his two brothers, William Rufus and Henry I, were the right sort. They had the right combination of intelligence, energy, and ruthlessness to get the job done.

So you needed the right man. There were two major problems that could arise under this system. You might end up with the wrong man; that had been the case with Æthelred the Unready, and the kingdom certainly suffered as a result. Or, and this could be worse, you might end up not knowing clearly who the right man is; this had happened in 1066. In both of these situations, England ended up being conquered, first by the Danes, then by the Normans. So you need the right man. But what if you aren't sure who that is? Or what if the right man turns out instead to be a woman? I'll explain why I ask that question in a moment.

The crisis that occurred after Henry I died goes back to an event that happened in 1120, and in order to explain that event, we need to go back to Henry I and his numerous progeny. In the last lecture, I talked about Henry's proclivity for engendering illegitimate children. Unfortunately, he was not nearly as prolific with his own wife, Queen Matilda. Matilda gave birth to two, possibly three, children, but only two lived to adulthood. These were a daughter, Matilda (another Matilda!), and a son, William. The young princess Matilda was sent off to Germany at the age of 10 to marry Emperor Henry V. As a result, Matilda was always known as "the Empress," even after she was widowed and remarried—more about that to come; just keep in mind that this title "Empress" means a great deal to her. Prince William, called William Etheling to play up his English heritage—this is definitely part of playing to the crowd on King Henry's part—Prince William receives the typical upbringing of a royal youth, rather heavy on the martial training and the partying.

Unfortunately, William was a bit too fond of partying, and this led to one of the most important dynastic catastrophes in English history. In November of 1120, King Henry had just wrapped up a rather successful campaign in Normandy, he was ready to head back to England, and he was traveling with his entourage, including his son Prince William and several of his other children, his illegitimate children.

On November 25, the king is in the harbor town of Barfleur, waiting to cross the Channel, when a man named Thomas, son of Stephen, approaches King Henry and tells him that his father, Stephen, had carried Henry's father, William the Conqueror, over to England in 1066 in his ship. Thomas, son of Stephen, wants the privilege of performing the same service his father had done, and he says he has an excellent vessel, known as the White Ship, ready at hand. King Henry replies he'd already arranged a ship for himself, but he'd be glad if Thomas would carry his son William and his noble companions, including another son and daughter—take them in the White Ship.

This is good enough for Thomas, and when his sailors hear that they're going to be carrying the king's son to England, they rejoice, and they ask William Etheling to supply them with a drink, which he does, apparently quite readily and in great abundance. The ship is planning to set out late at

night, because that's the most advantageous time to navigate, because you can take advantage of the Pole Star. Unfortunately, this allows more time for the party to continue. About 300 people had crowded aboard the ship, including some marine guards, who were already drunk and showing off. Priests arrived to bless the guards, but the guards laugh at the priests and drive them away. Some people on board sense that things are getting out of hand and they actually disembark. One of the men who gets off isn't so much struck by prudence as by a bad case of diarrhea. His name is Stephen, count of Mortain, and he is King Henry's nephew. And we will encounter Stephen again later in the lecture.

Anyway, the ship finally sets sail with a very raucous party going on. As the ship is working up out of the harbor—obviously, the steersman isn't paying very close attention—it hits a rock and two planks are split open, and the ship starts to sink. A boat is launched carrying the prince, but he turns back to the ship to try to save his half-sister, who is about to drown. Only one man of all of the 300 people on board the ship survives. The body of Prince William is never found. Meanwhile, King Henry's ship has made it safely to England. When the dreadful news is broken to the king, he's said to have fallen to the ground with grief; he had to be helped to a private room to recover. The heir to the English throne has died in a drunken sailing accident.

What's King Henry going to do now? If it had been 100 years earlier, he might have been able to get the English to accept one of his illegitimate sons as his heir; this had worked fine for William the Conqueror, William the Bastard, you'll remember. But already at that time it had been getting tricky, and by the early 12th century it simply wasn't going to fly. The church had managed to push through the notion that kings have to be legitimately born. This was a pity, in a sense, because Henry did have a very able, very talented illegitimate son named Robert, earl of Gloucester; he would probably have made a fine king, but that was not an option.

So Henry's first response was to try to beget another legitimate son. His wife, Queen Matilda, had died in 1118, so he's free to marry again, and just a few months after the wreck of the White Ship, that's exactly what he does. He marries a woman called Adeliza of Louvain, whose father has important

lands in the Low Countries. Unfortunately, the marriage is childless. Now what?

Henry did have other male members of the family, other legitimately born males he could turn to. Probably the most obvious choice would have been Stephen, count of Mortain, the one who got off the White Ship because of an attack of the runs. Stephen is the king's nephew, the son of the king's sister Adela, the countess of Blois and Champagne. Stephen was a royal favorite. King Henry showered him with estates and other good things. It might have made sense to build Stephen up as a potential successor; certainly, Stephen seems to have considered this possibility. Maybe even in the early 1120s, that might have been what Henry was actually planning. And if not Stephen, Stephen had brothers, perhaps one of them.

But that's not what Henry did in the end. Because in 1125, his daughter Matilda, the Empress of Germany, was widowed. Which meant she was available again. Father and daughter had always kept in touch; they'd even found opportunities to meet up several times when Henry was on the continent. And now Henry summoned Matilda home.

His plan clearly was that Matilda would marry again and produce the male heir that he, King Henry, had been unable to produce. He's hoping to be succeeded by a grandson rather than a son. So he marries Matilda off a second time to Geoffrey, the son of the count of Anjou, and he makes his barons swear to support Matilda as his heir. This was a very unpopular move among the barons, both in Normandy and in England. For one thing, kings are supposed to be men. It's virtually unprecedented for a female to rule in Western Europe.

Another problem is Matilda's husband. Anjou, the homeland of Matilda's new husband, is a very important territory. Anjou and Normandy had been rivals for years, and there is certainly bad feeling between the Angevin and Norman lords. These lords don't want to end up taking orders from the count of Anjou; of course, they're assuming that Matilda would be ruling as a figurehead and that the real power is going to be wielded by her husband, the count. They obviously don't know Matilda very well.

Matilda is not the sort of woman who is going to submit meekly to her husband. She and Geoffrey had a fairly stormy marriage. At one point early on, they're actually separated for a considerable time, and they have to be cajoled, not to say coerced, into reconciling. The pope even has to get involved. Matilda clearly considers that, for a former empress, marriage to a mere count of Anjou is beneath her. They don't get along. Still, they're both ambitious people, and I think they realized that it's vital to keep on King Henry's good side, so they do their duty and they produce three sons. After that, Matilda and Geoffrey seem to have seen each other very rarely. King Henry, however, is delighted by the birth of his grandsons and positively dotes on them.

But as I said, Matilda and her husband, Geoffrey, are ambitious people, and Matilda ended up acting like any other adult royal child who isn't being given enough power or responsibility to keep her busy. We saw this problem already with Robert of Curthose and William the Conqueror, and we'll see it again; you've got a prince (or princess) who wants more headroom than the king is willing to give. King Henry had promised certain fortresses on the Norman-Angevin border as part of Matilda's dowry, but he had been very slow to hand them over. Kings really hate letting go of any of their power, at least English kings did. This angered Matilda and Geoffrey (it's one of the few times where they actually were on the same page), so they were actually in rebellion against Henry I in the fall of 1135 when the king suddenly fell ill. They're in rebellion; they're not "on the spot" when he dies.

Now, Henry's death is another less-than-dignified royal death, although it's not nearly as repulsive as William the Conqueror's. He's in Normandy, in the northeastern part of the duchy, and he had been hunting. As I've said before, all English kings loved to hunt. So after a long day of hunting, he sits down to supper and he eats a dish of lampreys—which are a kind of eel—apparently a very large dish of lampreys. His doctors had warned him against this; apparently lampreys disagreed with him, but the king didn't listen, and three days later, he was dead, as the saying goes, "of a surfeit of eels."

So Henry I is dead. Matilda is supposed to succeed him. But that's not what happened because, once again, we have the importance of being the man or woman on the spot. At the time Henry died, Matilda was in Anjou; she

quickly crossed the border into Normandy and finally she did take charge of those border castles that had been causing all the trouble between her and her father. But she's not close to England. Almost out of the blue comes a wild card. King Henry's nephew Stephen, count of Mortain, who by now is known as Stephen of Blois, is just across the Channel from England, in the county of Boulogne. As soon as Stephen hears of the death of his uncle the king, he jumps on board a ship, sails to England as fast as he can, and seizes the treasury at Winchester, just exactly the way Henry I himself had done back in 1100 when his brother William Rufus was killed in the New Forest. On December 22, 1135, Stephen was crowned king of England by the archbishop of Canterbury. He had to promise all sorts of things to the church to get their approval for this; after all, people are violating an oath that they swore to support Matilda, and the church has to get them out of this. It's definitely a quid pro quo arrangement.

Meanwhile, in Normandy, the nobles there are trying to figure out what to do. They don't want Matilda or, even worse, her husband, ruling Normandy—he's an Angevin, which is bad; she's a woman, which is worse. So they're just on the verge of actually offering the duchy of Normandy to Stephen's older brother Theobald when word arrives that Stephen had been crowned king in England. At that point, the nobles in Normandy decide it's better to have one lord rather than two; they doubtless remember how much of a problem it was during the whole conflict between Robert Curthose and his brothers when Normandy and England were ruled by different people. So the Norman nobles go ahead [and] they accept Stephen as duke of Normandy, as well as king of England.

And that's where it stood for the next three years. Matilda has been cheated out of her inheritance, but she doesn't feel quite strong enough yet to act. Most nobles in England and Normandy had accepted the fait accompli of Stephen's coronation. Even Matilda's strongest supporter, her half-brother, Robert, earl of Gloucester, had sworn allegiance to King Stephen. But either the earl of Gloucester was just biding his time, or he got fed up with King Stephen's policies in Normandy. And so in 1138, Robert, earl of Gloucester, rebels in his sister's behalf; he renounces his fealty to King Stephen and proclaims that he is going to try to put Matilda in her rightful place on the English throne. In addition, at the same time, the king of Scotland, who

was Matilda's uncle, also invaded England. Remember, Matilda's mother is Matilda of Scotland; King David of Scotland is her younger brother, so he is Matilda's uncle. This first rebellion fizzles out fairly quickly; the Scots are beaten decisively at the Battle of the Standard in Yorkshire.

I want to pause to talk about this battle for a moment, because it's interesting from a number of perspectives. First, it's interesting how the battle got its name, the Battle of the Standard. Apparently, the English army had a large pole, or standard, and they carried it before them with a banner on it, and on the banner were the images of several saints, including St. Wilfrid. St. Wilfrid was the bishop who had argued at the Synod of Whitby in 664 in favor of going over to the Roman date of Easter. So at this battle in 1138, the English army is commemorating this very important turning point in the history of England.

In addition, we have an account of the battle in which the English army is treated to a very intriguing pep talk right before they go off to fight. They're told that they have a chance now to build on the triumphs of their ancestors, and the triumphs that they hear about, that they're supposed to imitate, are the Norman conquests, not just of England but of Sicily and of Jerusalem. (These are areas that Normans had also conquered.) There's a sense here in which already, at the Battle of the Standard in 1138, English and Norman are becoming one people. Our paths are merging.

The final point to make about the battle, though, is a very practical one. You get a sense of how serious the threat from Scotland is throughout the period covered by our course. Yorkshire may seem like a long way north from London, but it's actually fairly far south into English territory from Scotland. Northern England has to worry about Scotland a lot—not so much being conquered by Scotland; Scotland doesn't really have the resources for that—but raiding is a very serious problem, and if Scottish raiders come and steal your livestock and burn your farmhouse, it doesn't much matter whether they're there to stay or not.

But on this occasion, the English win, the Scots go home, and King Stephen breathes a temporary sigh of relief, but it's only temporary, because things are about to get really bad. In the spring of 1139, a faction fight splits the

king's court. This sort of thing had happened before in English history; it had really haunted the whole of King Æthelred's reign. We'll see it again. There were two factions at Stephen's court. One was led by Roger, bishop of Salisbury—he's essentially the head of the royal administration; he's a holdover from Henry I's reign. The other faction is led by a pair of twins known as the Beaumonts, Waleran, count of Meulan, and Robert, earl of Leicester. It was a vicious behind-the-scenes battle, and it ended with the Beaumonts managing to provoke some of the followers of Bishop Roger into drawing their weapons at court; this was a breach of the king's peace, a very serious offense. Bishop Roger is arrested, as are two of his nephews, who were also bishops. These bishops have important responsibilities in the administration; one of the nephews, Nigel of Ely, is the treasurer. When Stephen broke these bishops, he was crippling his own administration, and what was worse, he was opening an avenue for his enemies to attack.

Here's how: I mentioned earlier in this lecture that Stephen had brothers. One of them is Count Theobald, the brother who was shunted aside as duke of Normandy when the Norman nobles decide that they want to follow just one lord. But there's another brother, a very interesting man named Henry (and I'm sorry that it's another Henry). Henry is bishop of Winchester, and this is probably the second-most important job in the English church after archbishop of Canterbury. Technically, the archbishop of York outranks the bishop of Winchester, but the see of Winchester is much richer than York, and it's right in the heart of political events in the kingdom. Plus, Henry of Winchester is a papal legate, which means he had powers delegated to him by the pope to settle certain questions on the spot in England on the pope's behalf. And even though Henry is the king's brother, he definitely has his own agenda. He doesn't like the way his brother the king had treated his bishops. Henry's a bishop himself. And so the arrest of the bishops in 1139 opens the way for Henry of Winchester to change sides.

It's about to get interesting. On September 30, 1139, a group of ships arrives from Normandy. Onboard are the Empress Matilda and Robert, earl of Gloucester. (Somebody who's not there is Geoffrey, count of Anjou; he never comes to England. England is really his wife's thing—he concentrates on getting control of Normandy, and after many years of fighting, he actually does that.) Matilda and Robert land on the Sussex coast near the castle of

Arundel, which is held by Adeliza of Louvain, the Empress's stepmother, the widow of Henry I (apparently, Matilda and Adeliza had always gotten along). Shortly before, another group of the Empress's supporters had landed farther to the west; thus, they created a sort of a diversion. Robert of Gloucester took the opportunity to escape to the west to Bristol, in the heart of his own lands. This left the Empress in Arundel castle, and it put King Stephen in a very difficult position. Here, Matilda's gender may have worked in her favor for once. Stephen already looks bad after arresting three bishops the year before. Now, if he arrests a woman, his own cousin, how's that going to look? Even more important, Queen Adeliza is now married to one of his chief supporters. He doesn't want to cause offense either by arresting somebody who is under Queen Adeliza's protection or by arresting a woman. So the king grants Matilda a safe-conduct to Bristol, and his own brother, Henry, bishop of Winchester, acts as escort. Henry is going to switch back and forth between his brother and the Empress during the course of the next few years.

It's now time to fight a civil war. We have two claimants to the English throne on the loose: Stephen, the anointed king, the man on the spot, and Matilda, the designated heir, the one King Henry I had wanted to succeed him. Each of them had strengths and weaknesses. Stephen was hard to figure out. He was very personally brave, but he didn't always make the right strategic decisions; he often ended up in the wrong place at the wrong time, and he wasn't a very good politician. He seriously mishandled his very difficult brother Henry, for example. His contemporaries really didn't see him as all that kinglike. You can compare, for example, what *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* says about him to what it says about Henry I. Remember, Henry I provided justice and peace—you were scared of Henry. But about Stephen, *The Chronicle* says, "He was a mild man, and gentle and good, and did no justice." That's not very complimentary for a king.

On the other hand, Matilda had something of the opposite problem. She was haughty to the point of arrogance. We can start with the fact that she insisted on being called "Empress" all the time. This arrogance was going to get her into serious trouble, as we will see.

So how does the civil war play out in the field? I'm just going to give you the highlights, because a lot of the war is a grind. It drags on for years. There were minor skirmishes and sieges, mostly concentrated in a few disputed areas, especially eastern England, in the fen country, and also in the midlands, in the area around Oxford. Most of the rest of the country is relatively untouched by the fighting because it's securely held by one faction or the other: the Angevins—the supporters of Matilda—they have a very secure foothold in the west because Robert of Gloucester has huge estates there. The supporters of King Stephen are really unchallenged in the southeast. So most of the fighting is fairly localized.

That being said, some of the episodes of fighting are very dramatic, so I'll run through these in turn. The first one I want to mention is the Battle of Lincoln on February 2, 1141. This battle is important for a few reasons, but one is that it illustrates how readily some of the nobles in England changed sides. King Stephen had offended a pair of brothers, Ranulf, earl of Chester, and William, earl of Roumare, but they kept their displeasure under wraps. The two earls sent their wives to the castle at Lincoln, ostensibly on the pretext that they were visiting the wife of the castellan, the man in charge of the castle. Then, Ranulf, earl of Chester, showed up, unarmed, claiming he's just joining his wife, who's already inside. But once he's inside, the earl and his men attacked the garrison [and] they seize weapons; his brother, the earl of Roumare, breaks in, too, and together, they seize the castle. When King Stephen hears about this, he hurries north to besiege the castle. The earl of Chester escapes; joins forces with Robert, earl of Gloucester; and together, they besiege the besiegers, so now King Stephen is pinned between the castle and the army of the Angevins. Stephen decides to try to fight his way out, but in the battle, he is captured.

This is obviously a terrible blow. For the moment, the Angevins are triumphant. But they reckoned without Empress Matilda's chief personality flaw. Matilda figures that now that Stephen's in captivity, she's a shoo-in to be queen. She goes off to London in high state expecting to be crowned, but she makes several major mistakes. After very complicated, very protracted negotiations, she enters Westminster. But she makes the mistake of being arrogant and high-handed in her treatment of Henry, bishop of Winchester, who had come over to her side. Henry was her ticket to getting the church

to cooperate in her coronation, and that's crucial. While she's waiting to be crowned, she interferes in the election of the bishop of Durham. This offends Bishop Henry. He's the papal legate; this should have been his thing to decide. This is the beginning of Henry's decision to change sides and revert to supporting his brother. Worse still, Matilda offended the Londoners. They petitioned her politely for a reduction in the financial demands placed on them by the crown; certainly, they're thinking, here's our chance to get a better deal. But instead of just saying, "I'm afraid we can't really do that right now. You see, the circumstances aren't favorable; we are fighting a war of survival," or something tactful like that, Matilda demands even more money from the Londoners. They are enraged, and they drive her out of the city.

She has to flee to Oxford. One contemporary source describes the retreat as a rout. In the summer of 1141, she advances to Winchester to try to coerce Bishop Henry, who is now prevaricating about who he's going to support. While Matilda's forces are besieging the bishop, a force of Stephen's supporters comes up from London and attacks the empress. She only just escapes, but at a terrible cost. Robert, earl of Gloucester, is covering her retreat, and he is captured.

So now each of the two sides in the civil war is down one major figure, and after much hemming and hawing, the inevitable happens. King Stephen is exchanged for Robert, earl of Gloucester, and the fighting continues. Nothing much gained on either side. I just want to talk briefly about one final military exploit of the civil war, because it captures a little bit of how personally brave Matilda was. After the disaster at Winchester, Stephen was at liberty, and he besieges Matilda in Oxford. She's in desperate straits and she needs to escape. It's winter; the Thames River, which flows through Oxford, was frozen. Matilda and a small escort of three or four knights, slip out of the castle wearing white cloaks to disguise themselves against the snowy landscape. They walk seven or eight miles through the snow in the dead of night to Abingdon. Then, Matilda makes her way west to the castle of Devizes, where she tries for the next six years to make headway against King Stephen. She never becomes queen.

What are we to make of this period of civil war? Historians argue a lot about it. Some think it was a period of anarchy in England. They take their cue from some of the chronicles of the time, especially *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*; it comes to an end in this period with a very long, rambling description of the civil war—it has nothing good to say about it. In this entry, *The Chronicle* says that the reign of Stephen was a time when Christ and his saints slept. Other historians point out that a lot of functions of government seem to have carried on as normal: Shire courts are meeting; coins are minted (admittedly some by Stephen, some by Matilda); charters are granted (again, by both Stephen and Matilda). If you weren't in one of the areas most affected by the fighting, maybe it's not so bad.

As is often the case, I think the truth lies somewhere in between. Things in England were undoubtedly worse in some places than in others, but England had become used to peace and prosperity under the Norman kings. That's not really what they get under Stephen, and that's why he's one of only two kings in English history never to have a successor named after him; there's never been a Stephen II. And Matilda never gets to be queen at all. But she won in the end, because her son did get to be king. We'll find out how in the next lecture.

Henry II—Law and Order

Lecture 16

Now that you know some of the melancholy aspects of Henry's reign in advance, let me start by saying that his achievements were nothing short of astonishing. He managed not only to restore order to a kingdom recently ravaged by civil war; he also, in the process, presided over the birth of the English Common Law, which is the foundation of the legal system for not just Britain but also the many current and former members of the British Commonwealth and, of course, the United States.

Toward the end of Stephen's reign, Matilda gave up her claim to the throne in favor of her oldest son, Henry. By the 1150s, Henry I was being remembered quite fondly as someone who had at least kept order, and therefore many people were ready to welcome his grandson. Stephen was exhausted from the war and, in 1153, devastated by the sudden death of his oldest son, Eustace. Stephen agreed to make Henry his heir, and he took the throne peacefully as Henry II when Stephen died in 1154.

Henry II was larger than life, and his long and complicated reign really deserves two full lectures. In this first lecture, we'll deal largely with Henry the law-and-order man, whose passionate efforts to concentrate legal authority in royal hands led directly to the epic struggle with the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket.

It helps to understand a little bit about Henry's character. He was famously hot-tempered and given to almost ungovernable rages. He had phenomenal energy, a huge asset for a ruler in this period. Henry also had a very vigorous notion of the rights of kings, even with regard to the church. He came to the throne young, at the age of 21, newly married to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the greatest heiress in France and the ex-wife of the French king; through Eleanor, Henry added southwestern France to his kingdom.

It was now Henry's job to restore order after nearly two decades of conflict. Central authority in England had been severely compromised; local barons

and lords had taken over royal castles and built many new ones that were in their own personal control. These "adulterine castles" were a danger to royal control because it was relatively easy for a baron or earl to defy the king from within a fortified base; medieval warfare favored defense. So one of Henry's first moves as king was to visit all the questionable castles and demand their surrender into royal hands. Dozens of castles reverted to royal control; those he didn't want to maintain were simply razed. Henry also set about ruthlessly recovering £3,000 worth of royal lands that had slipped out of royal control. In essence, Henry was trying to undo the civil war and restore the throne to its status under the rule of his grandfather, Henry I.

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Henry II (r. 1154–1189) created the legal institutions that are the foundation of modern jurisprudence.

But Henry did more than just restore wealth and control to the crown; he fundamentally changed the way in which English people viewed the administration of justice. In fact, we can credit him, very distantly, with fostering acceptance of the rule of law, rather than rule of might. During the civil war, a kind of self-help justice system had developed, leading to a lot of disorder in the countryside. Henry decided to make it more attractive for people to settle their disputes in the royal courts than with their own fists and swords by devising a series of standardized writs that gave people clear and guaranteed access to recognized procedures in the royal courts. This standardization lowered the cost of the writs and streamlined the whole process of dealing with disputes. The most important of these writs was the writ of **novel disseisin**—or "newly dispossessed." If someone had recently "disseised" you of your property, you could go to the king's court, get a writ

of novel disseisin, and have the sheriff eject the people who had taken your property. The sheriff would thus be restoring the status quo, and then the case could be decided on its merits, not on who held the land at the moment. Also popular was the writ of **mort d'ancestor**, which literally means "death of your ancestor," which you could get if your lord had blocked you from your rightful inheritance. The writ asked the sheriff to convene a jury of 12 lawful men, who would decide who was the nearest heir, and then the sheriff would put that person in possession. These two writs were popular not only because they were cheaper and safer than fighting but because their existence made people with property feel more secure, and the people began to trust that the ultimate source of that security was the king's law.

Henry II was also determined to reform English criminal law. To that end, he set about reforming the royal approach to crime. He sent out roving commissions of judges called **eyres** specifically tasked with sweeping up criminals and trying their cases. He increased the royal supervision of the courts run by barons on their own lands. And he went after a group of people whom he considered to be threats to public order because they tended to escape royal jurisdiction altogether: the clergy. Before the Norman Conquest, this would not have been a controversial issue. A **criminous clerk** would have been tried like anyone else. But William the Conqueror had allowed the church jurisdiction over certain cases, particularly those related to marriage, and certain kinds of people, namely anyone in the clerical orders. In practice, clerks accused of really serious crimes would first be stripped of their clerical status in the church courts and then handed over to the royal courts, but this was merely custom, not law. Henry wanted this practice set in law, which brought him into opposition with the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket.

Becket (who called himself Thomas of London; the "à" in "Thomas à Becket" was a 16th-century flourish added by others) was the son of a Norman merchant. He was neither rich nor well connected, and he was not exceptionally brilliant. But he was handsome, strong willed, and charming; one of those who succumbed to his charm was Henry II. They met early in Henry's reign and became best friends. Henry also appointed Becket his chancellor, then promoted Thomas to archbishop of Canterbury in 1162 over his more obvious rivals, such as the bishop of London.

Not all of Becket's contemporaries were as enamored of Becket as Henry was. In fact, he was extremely controversial within his own lifetime. Even members of his inner circle thought he brought his problems on himself, and there were many people who were outright hostile to him; one Norman monk wrote that he was the chief villain of Henry's reign. And shortly after Becket became archbishop, his friendship with the king soured. It seems that Henry thought he was finally going to have an archbishop who was "his" man; Thomas seemed to think he now had his own power base and no longer had to dance to the king's tune. Thomas immediately drew a firm line in the sand: Whenever the rights and privileges of the church of Canterbury were threatened by the king in any way, he would fight back.

When Becket resisted Henry's attempt to prosecute the criminous clerks, the king produced the **Constitutions of Clarendon** formalizing the previously informal process of handing them over to the secular courts—and in fact obliging the church to do so. Becket accepted the document under threat of violence, then later renounced it. This enraged both his fellow bishops, whom he had made accept the document against their consciences, and of course angered the king.

From this point on, Thomas and Henry could not stop provoking each other. Little disputes got magnified out of all proportion. Finally, the king decided to bring Becket down for good and accused him of embezzlement during his days as chancellor. We cannot be certain, but it is likely this was a bogus charge. However, the charge was serious enough that Becket fled to the Continent. It would be six years before he returned to England. ■

Important Terms

Constitutions of Clarendon: Imposed on Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, by Henry II in 1164, the constitutions spelled out the rights of the English royal courts with respect to the church courts in England, especially the right to try criminous clerks. Becket's humiliating acceptance of the constitutions and subsequent renunciation of his oath to abide by them cost him support among his bishops.

criminous clerk: A man in one of the seven grades of the clerical order who has been accused of a secular crime. Ordinarily, criminous clerks were supposed to be turned over to the church courts for trial, but Henry II demanded that the worst offenders be tried by the royal courts. Treatment of criminous clerks was one of the salient issues in the dispute between the king and Thomas Becket.

eyre: Circuit of courts under the jurisdiction of an itinerant commission of judges. The circuit of the justices in eyre was established on a regular basis by Henry II in 1176, though itinerant judges had occasionally been used earlier.

mort d'ancestor: Writ devised in 1176 under Henry II whereby tenants could be swiftly put in possession of inherited lands.

novel disseisin: Writ devised in 1166 under Henry II whereby those disseised (deprived) of land could purchase a writ ordering the sheriff of the shire in which the estate lay to restore them to possession until the case could be adjudicated.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Henry II—Law and Order
Lecture 16—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we talked about the so-called anarchy of Stephen's reign. We saw that for much of the reign, the rule of England was contested between two parties: the Angevin party, led by the Empress Matilda, daughter of Henry I, and the royal party, led by King Stephen. Toward the end of the reign, though, both sides became essentially exhausted, and Matilda gave up her claim to the throne in favor of her oldest son, Henry. I think she bowed to the inevitable facts of gender politics in the 12th century. It was just going to be a whole lot easier for people to accept a man as ruler, even if he was a young man barely out of his teens.

Young Prince Henry did in fact make several forays to England from Normandy in the 1140s and early 1150s (sort of ways of testing the water), but his most important effort began in 1153. He came with the intention of defeating King Stephen in battle, but this proved impossible. Nevertheless, Henry was slowly gaining supporters. He was, after all, the grandson of Henry I, and by this point, Henry I was being remembered quite fondly; he's somebody who at least kept order. So a lot of people were ready to welcome this new prince. Stephen, for his part, is getting tired of the struggle, and then disaster strikes: His oldest son, Eustace, his favored heir, dies suddenly. The fight seems to go out of Stephen. Stephen and Henry made an agreement that Henry would succeed to the throne when Stephen died. This is really quite amazing. The two men, King Stephen and Prince Henry, went around England on a sort of tour to show the flag and drum up support for this agreement about the succession. Nevertheless, it was precarious, and it was on the verge of collapsing again the following year, 1154, when all of a sudden, Stephen died. Thus, Henry succeeded to the throne of England, probably sooner than he expected. He becomes Henry II, and there's barely a whisper of opposition. He rules for the next 35 years, from 1154 to 1189, exactly as long as his grandfather, Henry I. So what's he like?

When I imagine Henry II of England, I always picture Peter O'Toole, who played the king in two famous movies. The first one was called *Becket*, where he played opposite Richard Burton (Richard Burton is playing the martyred archbishop of Canterbury); the second of these movies was *The*

Lion in Winter, where he's playing opposite Katharine Hepburn, possibly one of the only women in history who is just as formidable as the queen she is portraying, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Now, just like Peter O'Toole, Henry II is larger than life, and he has a very long and complicated reign; for that reason, we're going to spend two full lectures on it, just as it merited two films. In the first lecture, I'm going to deal largely with Henry the law and order man, the Henry of the film *Becket*. This is a king who engages in passionate efforts to concentrate legal authority in royal hands, and this leads directly to the epic struggle with Thomas Becket. In the second lecture, I'm going to look at Henry as the head of a dynasty, the Henry of *The Lion in Winter*. He rules a sprawling collection of territories in England and France, but he has a very unruly family, and this family includes four notoriously disloyal sons and one very aggrieved wife. It turns out to be Henry's tragedy that his bitterest enemies are, first of all, his former best friend and chancellor, Thomas Becket, and then, his own wife and sons.

But now that you know some of the melancholy aspects of Henry's reign in advance, I want to start by saying that he nevertheless achieved astonishing things as king. He manages not only to restore order to this kingdom that's recently ravaged by civil war; he also, in the process of doing that, essentially gives birth to the English common law. The English common law is the foundation of the legal system not just for Britain but also the many current and former members of the British Commonwealth all around the world and, of course, for the United States. So let's look at how he manages to do this while, at the same time, he has to fight off all these serious challenges to his rule from within his innermost circle.

In order to understand this, it helps to understand a little bit about his character. Like many members of the Angevin family, Henry was rather hot-tempered. Everyone knew about the famous Angevin temper. Henry could be given to ungovernable rages; he had a tendency to throw himself on the ground and gnaw on the rushes. (The way things worked in the Middle Ages is you didn't really have carpets—that would have been too expensive, to put a beautiful piece of work on the ground. You would strew rushes on the ground, these plants that you would put on the ground, and they were meant to absorb all the little bits of food and other less pleasant things that would fall on the ground. And when they were all dirty, you would sweep them

away and bring in new ones.) So Henry would fall on the ground and gnaw on the rushes to express his displeasure with whatever had angered him.

The king also has phenomenal energy, and this is a huge asset for a ruler in this period, because as we've seen, the king really has to go around and show himself in person as much as possible; otherwise, people are just not going to obey him. People were very impressed by this ability of Henry's to do this. King Louis VII of France famously says of Henry, in astonishment, "The king of England is now in Ireland, now in England, now in Normandy; he seems rather to fly than to go by horse or ship." Henry also has a very vigorous notion of the rights of kings, even with regard to the church, and this is something we're going to see play out in this lecture on a very grand scale. If we want to sum up Henry, he's a man to be reckoned with—as long as he's your friend, he's a very good friend, but he's a very dangerous enemy.

Now, when Henry came to the throne of England in 1154, he's a very young man; he's only 21 years old. He's already duke of Normandy and he's also count of Anjou in France. He's newly married to Eleanor of Aquitaine, the greatest heiress in France and the former wife of King Louis VII of France, which is a very interesting story that I'm going to tell you in the next lecture. Through Eleanor, Henry also controls almost all of southwestern France. It's a good thing that Henry is notoriously vigorous, even restless, because he has a huge task before him that is going to take him to almost every corner of England, not to mention all these vast lands in France, because it's Henry's job to restore order after nearly two decades of conflict in England.

Now, the task before the new king is a very daunting one. As I said, for nearly two decades, central authority in England has been severely undermined; you have parties of Stephen and Matilda battling across the countryside. Of course, some regions are much more severely affected than others, but everywhere, you have local barons and lords taking advantage of the fact that the king's attention is elsewhere. So these barons have taken over royal castles; they've built many new castles that are in their own personal control. These "unauthorized" castles are known as "adulterine" castles, because they're illegitimate in the eyes of the king; they're not authorized. This is a very dangerous situation for the crown. The kings of England had always tried to keep the number of castles in England, the ones not in royal hands, to

an absolute minimum. This is because it's relatively easy if you have a castle to defy the king; you have got a strong base.

In this period, warfare definitely favors the defense, because it's very hard to keep a besieging army in the field for long enough to starve out the garrison of a castle. If the English kings want to see what this looks like, they just have to look at France. The French kings were constantly having to deal with barons rebelling; they would hole up in their castles and just defy royal orders. So when Henry takes the throne in 1154, one of the first things he wants to do is to deal with those adulterine castles; he wants to make sure he is not going to have to face the same problems as the French kings.

To do this, Henry has to go around systematically to all of the questionable castles and demand their surrender into royal hands. For example, he marches north and he breaks the power of the count of Aumale; the count had been ruling virtually unchecked in Yorkshire. Henry recovers the northern castles of Newcastle-upon-Tyne, Bamburgh, Carlisle; all of these actually were being held at this point by the king of Scotland, so it's very important to get them back into English hands. The result is that dozens of castles revert to royal control, particularly ones like Carlisle; these are of strategic importance in defending the borders of England. The castles that he doesn't think he needs for strategic purposes, he just razes to the ground so that they aren't a problem for him internally in the future.

Henry also set about recovering not just castles but other things that had slipped out of control during the civil war, particularly royal lands. Stephen had made many grants of royal lands, and this was simply to have something to bribe people with to keep his supporters on board. In addition, many royal estates that were supposed to be merely leased out to tenants are now being treated de facto as private property. People sort of forget that they're renting them; they sort of act as if they own them. Henry sets out to change all that. He declares that all charters granted by Stephen were invalid, and he sets about recovering royal lands, and they actually add up to £3,000 worth of lands. This is a significant addition to the royal revenues.

I think the theme here is clear. Henry is trying to undo the civil war; he wants to restore the throne to the status it had under the rule of his grandfather,

Henry I. Henry mentions his grandfather all the time in his charters. He's trying almost to pretend that the reign of Stephen, the whole civil war, that it never happened at all.

But if Henry had only fixed what came undone during the civil war, he wouldn't be remembered as one of the greatest kings in English history, which he is. For Henry went beyond getting rid of illegitimate castles; he went beyond getting royal lands back under royal control. He changed the whole way in which the royal administration worked. He changed the way people viewed justice in England. He began the development of the system that came to see justice as radiating from the royal courts, not from the point of a sword, as it often had during the anarchy, but from the royal courts. And thus, we can give him a certain amount of credit for fostering acceptance of the rule of law, and that's obviously an indispensable building block for the kind of prosperous and free and orderly society that the civilizations that descended from medieval England enjoy today. How does this come about?

One of the big problems during the civil war had been that people who had problems with each other over land or some other issue had simply taken matters into their own hands and fought it out, since the king was often too busy to help. This is a self-help style of justice; we've talked about this in the past, and it sort of made a comeback during the anarchy, and that could obviously lead to a lot of disorder in the countryside. It created longstanding feuds, and these could trickle down the social hierarchy from top to bottom. Many people agreed that this was not an inefficient way to solve disputes. King Henry decided to do something about this. He decided to make it more attractive for people to settle their disputes in the royal courts. He did this by devising a series of standardized writs, and these writs gave people clear and guaranteed access to recognized procedures in the royal courts, and at least in theory, these writs would be tailored to addressing whatever concern they had. Let me talk a little but about these writs. We've encountered writs before, but they so far have been very ad hoc affairs. You could get a writ from the king if you happened to catch his attention, but the king is a moving target, as we've seen, and you have to find him and you have to lay out the specifics of your case to him. And then you have to hope he's going to grant you one of these writs, which he has to customize for your particular situation, and you're going to have to pay for that privilege, absolutely.

But what if the whole system could be streamlined? What if, instead of having to deal with each case individually, there were a standard formula for the most common kinds of disputes, a sort of form 1a and form 1b that you could fill in whenever a petitioner showed up, whether the king was there in person or not? That's exactly what Henry II's legal advisers came up with. They devised a series of standardized writs that addressed some of the most frequent kinds of legal disputes. This lowered the cost of the writs—there's a kind of a volume discount that can be applied—and it streamlines the whole process of getting the dispute dealt with. I'll talk about two of the most famous kinds of writs, but there were also others.

The most important writ that Henry II devised was the writ of *novel disseisin*. And what does that mean, *novel disseisin*? First of all, it's not a Latin term; it's French, because that's the language still being spoken by the elite classes, and these are the ones likely to be suing each other. The word *novel* means, not surprisingly, "new" or "recent." The word *disseisin* takes a little more explaining, because if you want to understand what *disseisin* is, you have to understand what *seisin* is. *Disseisin* means depriving someone of *seisin*. *Seisin* basically means "possession." If you're in *seisin* of a particular piece of property, it means you're holding it; you are actually in possession of it. It doesn't say anything about whether you have a right to hold the land; it merely means that you have it currently. Now, what was happening all over England was that people were perpetually having arguments about who had the right to a piece of property. This was very frequent in medieval England. We talked about this in an earlier lecture; we described ways people tried to remember the details of property transactions. You know, there's the boundary stone; there's the stream. But boundary stones could "move," sometimes accidentally, sometimes on purpose. Streams could change their courses. Many times, one person would simply show up at the disputed property with a gang of toughs and they'd kick out the other person from his holding. If you've ever heard the expression "possession is nine-tenths of the law," you get the idea. You're in a much stronger position if you actually had *seisin* of the disputed property than if you don't.

What the new writ of *novel disseisin* is designed to do is to stop people from taking this kind of advantage of their opponents in a land dispute. If someone has done this to you—that is, if someone has disseised you of your

property—you can now go to the king's court, get a writ of *novel disseisin*, for which you would pay 2d (a bargain!), then you'd take it to the sheriff of the county where the land is. He was instructed in the writ to disseise the disseiser, so to speak. The sheriff would thus be restoring the status quo, and then the case could be decided on the merits. There would often still have to be lengthy legal proceedings; they might or might not be terminated by a trial by battle, and that would determine who actually had the right to the land, but in the meantime, order would have been restored.

These writs proved enormously popular. They practically flew off the shelves, and I think that gives you a sense of how much disseising is going on in England. It's clearly a lot cheaper to buy one of these writs than to go out and hire your own gang of toughs to get rid of your opponent. Why not let the sheriff take care of that part?

The next-most popular writ after *novel disseisin* is the writ of *mort d'ancestor*, which literally means "death of your ancestor," or "predecessor." This is a writ you could get if your lord had blocked you from your rightful inheritance. The writ asked the sheriff to convene a jury of 12 lawful men, and they would decide who was the nearest heir, and then the sheriff would put that person in possession. This was a way of stopping lords from denying the right of their tenants to pass down their holdings to their heirs. In practice, it's pretty easy for a local jury to determine who the heir is—you know the families around you—but the point of the writ is to guarantee that the normal channels of inheritance would function.

The reason these writs are so popular is not just that they're cheap and [that] it's obviously safer to use them than the self-help methods. It's that they make people with property feel secure. They begin to trust that if they hold their land today, they're going to hold it tomorrow, and it reinforces the sense that the ultimate source of that security is the law, specifically, the king's law. This gives the propertied classes a stake in the established order, and that ultimately proves crucial to the development of English government. We'll have a lot more to say about that in the lectures to follow.

But I promised to talk about English common law in this lecture. So far I've only dealt with what we would think of as civil law, the law of property and

dispute settlement. Henry II is also determined to reform the criminal law. He wants to crack down not just on barons and lords who are disseising each other but also on garden-variety criminals. In an earlier lecture, we heard that Henry I's reign was a period when someone can travel around England with silver and gold and not be molested. Remember how much Henry II wants to be thought of as the heir of his grandfather. He wants that sort of thing said about his reign, too.

To that end, he sets about reforming the royal approach to crime. He sends out roving commissions of judges called "eyres." These eyres are specifically tasked with sweeping up criminals and trying their cases. We're not going to wait for the cases to come to us; we're going to go out and find the criminals. He increased the royal supervision of private jurisdiction; that is, courts run by barons on their own lands. He wants to make sure they're doing things properly. And he went after a group of people whom he considered to be threats to public order, and the reason they were is because they tended to escape from royal jurisdiction altogether. It might surprise you to learn that this class of troublemakers are clergymen, or clerks, to use the term they used in the 12th century. But that doesn't necessarily mean they're priests. There are many grades in the clerical hierarchy in those days; men could work their way slowly up these grades, and they would live still very much like laymen, and in the lower grades, they might even be married. So there are lots of these men floating around; they're technically churchmen, but they're not really living very church-oriented lives, and some of them are scraping by on very low salaries or sometimes no salary at all. A few are clearly supplementing their earnings with crime.

Once upon a time, before the Norman Conquest, this would not have been a controversial issue at all. A criminous clerk—that's what you'd call these clerical criminals—would just be tried for his crimes like anybody else. But William the Conqueror had brought into England a parallel court system that was run by the church. These church courts had jurisdiction over certain kinds of cases, particularly those related to marriage; that was something that the church should take care of. But they also had jurisdiction over certain kinds of people, namely, anybody in clerical orders, even these very low orders, like acolyte. In practice, the secular courts and the church courts had worked out a way of getting along over the years, by which clerks accused

of really serious crimes first would be stripped of their clerical status in the church courts—now you're not a cleric anymore—then they would be handed over to the royal courts for further punishment. The reason for this is the church courts are not allowed to be involved in the shedding of blood. That's something that polluted the church, so you couldn't do executions, you couldn't do mutilations; if you wanted those, you have to go to royal court. But this whole system of working things out between the two courts was just run on custom. There aren't any hard-and-fast written rules about when exactly the church courts are obliged to cough up particular criminous clerks to the royal courts.

Henry II is determined to regularize this aspect of the law—he's doing this everywhere in his administration; he wants to do this here, as well. There were several big clerical scandals at this period that sort of pushed him in this direction. I'll just tell you about one of them. In 1163, a canon of Bedford named Philip de Broi was accused of murdering a knight. He was brought before the archbishop's court and he purged himself of the crime; that is, he swore on oath that he had not committed the crime, and the oath was accepted. That's all it took in the church court; he got off scot-free. Later, a royal judge tried to reopen the case; apparently, there were many grounds for thinking that this oath was not exactly sincere. Philip then insulted the royal judge before witnesses. This was, if anything, a more serious crime than the murder; you're actually disrespecting the king by doing that. He's hauled up before the archbishop's court again; this time, he's convicted of insulting the judge, but again he's acquitted of the murder. He gets off with a very light sentence for insulting the judge (the secular penalty for that would have been death), and the king was outraged. Henry is utterly fed up with clerks being able to get away with murder, literally.

Now, the target of the king's anger is the man who presided over that court, namely, the archbishop of Canterbury, Thomas Becket. There are lots of controversies about Becket; I'll do my best to deal with them. The first thing I want to clear up is the controversy about his name. Many people have heard him referred to as Thomas à Becket. This is something that nobody said until the 16th century. It was not used in Becket's lifetime. And even the name Becket is not used much, at least by Thomas himself. You see, Thomas is the son of a London merchant named Gilbert Beket. He was a Norman

immigrant; he was of relatively humble social status. Beket is not a noble name, and everybody knows that, and once Thomas has made his way up the social ladder a few rungs, he doesn't want to be reminded of his non-noble origins, so he usually calls himself simply "Thomas of London." That's what it says on his seal. If people want to needle him, they call him Thomas Becket on purpose. But I don't mean any disrespect; I'm just going to use the name because we're used to it. So if Thomas doesn't owe his high position in the church to noble birth, which a lot of people did in this period—a lot of people are archbishops or bishops because of their families—how does he get to the top of the clerical hierarchy?

He's not rich; he's not well-connected, at least to start with; he's not even exceptionally brilliant. Many people around him are clearly smarter than he is. Instead, he owes his phenomenal rise to charm, good looks, and ambition. If you imagine Thomas Becket as Richard Burton, like in the film *Becket*, you're probably not far off, because he's certainly dark-haired and handsome. He has a magnetic fascination for those around him, and one of those people is the young king, Henry II. Henry notices Becket early in his reign. At that time, Becket is a clerk in the household of Theobald, the archbishop of Canterbury. The king makes Becket his chancellor, the keeper of his records. It's a very powerful position, but even more than that, Henry makes Becket his friend. Becket is about a decade older than the king, but they seem to have a lot in common. They love hunting, they love hawking, they love all sorts of outdoor pursuits, and they love a good party. We have accounts of them spending lots of their time together outside of business hours. In short, they're best friends, so much so that when Archbishop Theobald dies in 1161, Henry passes over the obvious choice to replace him; there's a very capable guy waiting in the wings, the bishop of London, Gilbert Foliot. Instead, Henry names his friend Thomas Becket to the post. And that's where things went wrong. Why?

I want to tread lightly here, because Thomas Becket is a saint, after all, but in the context of a course on medieval England, I think the thing we need to remember is that Becket was extremely controversial in his own lifetime. People's opinions about him varied a lot. The members of his inner circle are devoted to him, but if you read between the lines of some of the things they wrote, you can tell that a lot of them thought he brought his problems on

himself. And there were lots of people who were outright hostile to Becket. One chronicler, a monk in Normandy who wrote just before Becket was murdered, called Becket the chief villain of Henry's reign. One of Becket's very powerful detractors is the bishop of London; the very learned, very savvy Gilbert Foliot says of Becket in frustration after he'd done something particularly provocative to annoy the king, "He's a fool, and he'll always be a fool!" Of course, Gilbert is the one who had been all set to become archbishop of Canterbury and Becket got the job instead, but that doesn't necessarily mean that the bishop of London is wrong here. Let's find out if there's anything to justify Gilbert Foliot's judgment.

Shortly after Becket becomes archbishop in 1162, the relationship between the king and the archbishop sours. One reason seems to be they have very different expectations of what their roles are going to be under these changed circumstances. Henry thought now he's going to have a tame archbishop; he'd be his man. After all, Thomas owes him everything. Thomas, on the other hand, seems to feel like now, at last, he's got an independent power base, and he's not going to have to dance to the king's tune anymore. The church of Canterbury is very powerful, and Becket's going to do everything he can to protect that power base. He's going to draw a firm line in the sand whenever the rights and privileges of Canterbury are threatened in any way, even by his former best friend, the king.

So when Henry goes after criminous clerks, the archbishop pushes back. This leads the king to try to spell out in detail exactly when and how the church was obliged to hand these clerks over to the secular courts. There had been this informal working arrangement, but now it's going to be a written obligation, and so the king produces this document in 1164, the Constitutions of Clarendon. These obliged the church to hand criminous clerks over to be tried by the royal courts. Becket was summoned before the royal presence and forced, probably literally under the threat of violence, to accept this renunciation of the church's rights of jurisdiction. But after he does this, after he accepts the Constitutions, he makes all the other bishops accept them, and then he changes his mind, and he decides to defy the king; he decides to take a stand. He renounces the Constitutions of Clarendon. This enrages his fellow bishops. He has made them go against their consciences in accepting

the constitutions; now he's going back on his word—he's trying to have it both ways. He loses a lot of support among the bishops right there.

There's an uneasy truce with the king at this point, but Thomas and Henry just can't stop provoking each other. Little disputes over church property get magnified out of all proportion. Finally, the king decides he's going to bring Becket down for good. He accuses him of financial improprieties during his term as chancellor and he summons him to appear before him at Northampton. Apparently, a very large sum of money that the king had given to Thomas, £30,000, can't be accounted for. Nobody knows what happened to this money. Was it a gift, or did Thomas spend it in the royal service? We'll never know, and it's very likely that the whole affair is really a put-up job; it's meant to get rid of Becket.

The charge is serious enough that the archbishop feels he has no option but to flee. He doesn't want to be treated publicly like a criminous clerk. So he escapes from Northampton with a few followers; there's a harrowing cross-country journey—it takes him three weeks to finally make it to the coast. He goes to the port of Sandwich, which is under the archbishop of Canterbury's control in the south, and he leaves for exile on the continent. And it's going to be six years before he comes back to England, six years of fruitless negotiations; they involve not just the king and the archbishop but also the king of France, the pope—almost every important secular and religious leader in Western Europe. All of them are involved in trying to solve this dispute between Becket and the king. In the next lecture, we'll find out what happened when Becket finally went home.

Henry II—The Expansion of Empire
Lecture 17

The result of all of this inheritance, and marriage, and conquest … is an astonishing conglomeration of territories, especially when you think about trying to control all of this land under the conditions of the 12th century. Henry had Ireland, England, and half of France under his control, at least in theory. In reality, the degree of royal control in each of these areas varied considerably.

Before we examine the fate of Thomas Becket, we need to look at some other aspects of Henry II's early reign and the creation of the so-called Angevin Empire. Henry inherited Normandy and England from his mother, Empress Matilda. Henry inherited the county of Anjou from his father, along with the counties of Maine and the Touraine. Together, these lands constituted an enormous, contiguous lordship that dominated northwestern France. Through marrying Eleanor of Aquitaine, he acquired Aquitaine and Poitou. Finally, Henry married his third son, Geoffrey, to the heiress to Brittany. Through these maneuvers, Henry ruled half of France, as well as England.

Henry also acquired land by conquest—namely, the "Norman" conquest of Ireland. In the 1160s, Ireland was divided among many warring kings, none of whom could control the whole island. The exiled King Diarmait of Leinster tracked down King Henry II, who was in Aquitaine at the time, to ask for help in recovering his throne. Henry put him off but gave Diarmait permission to see if any of Henry's lords might be willing to help out on a private basis. Diarmait finally found some tough Welsh marcher (or border) lords interested in the adventure. Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, lord of Strigoil (later known as Strongbow), agreed to help Diarmait in exchange for the hand of Diarmait's daughter Aoife and being made heir to the kingdom of Leinster. By 1171, Diarmait and Strongbow had made Diarmait more powerful in Ireland than ever before.

Henry hadn't expected Diarmait's plan to work so well, and he wasn't sure he would be able to control the Welsh marcher lords once they had a

secure power base in far-off Ireland. So Henry went to Ireland in person in 1171 establish his own authority there, essentially rebranding Diarmait's rescue into an English royal venture. Thus the English lordship of Ireland was created, and the very long, very contentious history of England's rule of Ireland was begun.

So by 1171, Henry had England, Ireland, and half of France under his control, although the degree of control varied considerably. Although historians call this the Angevin Empire, there was no integrated administration or institutions as in the Roman Empire, for example. Ireland was never completely conquered, although Henry had established a secure foothold there, particularly in the south and east. And Henry's French lands were almost as different from one another as France was from England. Predictably, the various areas of the empire were fiercely independent. Poitou and Aquitaine, in particular, were a real headache for Henry.

So what was his plan to govern this huge mess? Basically, his goal was to control the whole while he was alive, then on his death a manageable chunk of the empire to each of his four sons—Henry, Richard, Geoffrey and John. Henry would get England, Normandy, and Anjou. Richard would inherit his mother's lands, Poitou and Aquitaine. Geoffrey would rule Brittany through his marriage. The youngest, John, was at first called John Lackland because this inheritance scheme was drawn up before he was born, and nothing was left for him. When Henry gained control of Ireland, however, he made John its lord—problem solved.

This plan might have worked if it weren't for the fact that the Angevin royal family was one of the most dysfunctional families in all of English royal history, starting with the very volatile relationship between Henry II and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine. Eleanor had married Louis VII of France at an early age, and they were clearly unsuited to each other. Eleanor loved music and poetry and parties; Louis was perhaps more suited to the cloister than the battlefield. Because of their incompatibility (and, more importantly, because the marriage produced no sons), Louis divorced Eleanor on the pretext of **consanguinity**, giving up his claim to Aquitaine and Poitou in the process. Louis might never have divorced Eleanor if he'd realized Eleanor was about to deliver those lands to Henry, his bitter rival.

At the time of their marriage, Eleanor was over a decade older than Henry; she was an experienced woman who had been queen of France for 15 years. But they were both ambitious people, and for some time the marriage seems to have worked well. Henry even trusted Eleanor to serve as regent while he campaigned. After the birth of John in 1167, however, Henry took a series of mistresses, and Eleanor took revenge by fostering her sons' rebellions against their father.

"Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Henry later claimed this question was rhetorical.

So how do these dynastic politics and family squabbles relate to the controversy between Henry and Thomas Becket? Henry and Becket had straightened out most of their differences by 1170. But then Henry wanted his oldest son (also called Henry) to be crowned king while he himself was still alive, mainly to ensure a smooth succession. Normally, the archbishop of Canterbury consecrated a new king, but on June 14, 1170, Prince Henry was crowned in Westminster Abbey with the archbishop of York presiding. Another quarrel ensued. Becket, with the pope's backing, intended to punish the bishops involved in the crowning of Prince Henry (now called Henry the Young King). Henry snapped and uttered his famous question, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?"

Henry later claimed this question was rhetorical, but even so, four of Henry's knights cut Becket down in his own cathedral at Canterbury. Overnight, Becket went from first-class troublemaker to saint, and Henry was now on the pope's bad side. But as it happened, this is when the Irish expedition cropped up. Henry thought he could redeem himself by bringing the Irish church into line with Rome while reining in his marcher lords and solving the problem of an inheritance for John all in one blow. But after Henry returned from Ireland, he still had to do public penance at Becket's tomb.

From the time of Becket's murder in 1170 pretty much until the end of his reign, Henry had very little peace. Blow after blow was delivered by his own family. The chief cause of the trouble was, once again, the frustrations

of adult sons with all of the training to rule and none of the power. To make matters worse, they had the backing of an angry, powerful mother and a French king with a grudge against Henry. Henry the Young King led his brothers into rebellion in 1173. When Henry II finally suppressed the revolt, he reconciled with his rebellious sons but not with Eleanor. He put her in prison, where she stayed in prison for the rest of his reign—another fifteen years.

To make matters worse, the brothers didn't always get along with each other. Richard, the second son, was his mother's favorite. She gave him a measure of autonomy in Aquitaine, so he had much more scope for independent action than Henry the Young King, who was basically waiting around for his father to die. They quarreled until the Young King died in 1183. Geoffrey, the third brother, died in 1186, so only Richard and John remained. In 1189, Richard rebelled again with the help of France. To Henry's shock, John (his favorite) joined his brother Richard in revolt that summer, and this seems to have broken King Henry's heart. He was defeated, and shortly thereafter he took ill and died.

So, all of Henry II's careful dynastic planning was for naught. All of the tensions and difficulties involved in ruling the diverse, far-flung territories under English dominion were perpetuated into the next royal generation. ■

Important Term

consanguinity: A relationship that was considered too close for marriage. Consanguinity was often used as a pretext for dissolving royal and noble marriages in the 11th and 12th centuries until the church tightened up the rules in 1215.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Henry II—The Expansion of Empire
Lecture 17—Transcript

Welcome back. I left you in suspense in our last lecture, because Thomas Becket and Henry II had just patched up their quarrel, and Becket was headed home to England at last after six years of exile. What happened next? We're going to find out in this lecture, I promise, and we'll see that Becket's fate is tied to the subject that we're going to spend the rest of the lecture on, the expansion of English rule under Henry II and the complicated intertwining of the personal and the political throughout his reign, but especially in the second half of the reign, when Henry's sons grew up. So we are going to get to Becket later in the lecture, but first, I'm going to back up to a point even before [Henry] became king so we can understand how Henry ended up ruling so much territory, so much land that some historians call it the "Angevin Empire."

Henry acquired his lands in three main ways: by inheritance, by marriage, and by conquest. From his mother, Empress Matilda, he had inherited his claim to Normandy and, of course, to England. Normandy was solidly controlled by the Angevins by the time Henry was a young teenager, thanks to the work of his father, Geoffrey of Anjou; Geoffrey, you'll remember, had preferred to concentrate on Normandy. He never bothered to get interested in England. England, of course, young Henry had had to fight for, though he ultimately got it due to this compromise we talked about last time with King Stephen. So that's Henry's maternal inheritance; this is the original territory controlled by William the Conqueror, Henry's great-grandfather, and then by Henry's grandfather, Henry I. But Henry also has a paternal inheritance from his father, Geoffrey of Anjou. Geoffrey died suddenly in 1151 at the age of 39. From Geoffrey, Henry inherits the county of Anjou, along with the counties of Maine and the Touraine. Taken together, the lands Henry inherits from his mother and father in France constitute an enormous, contiguous lordship that dominates northwestern France.

But that's not all. In 1152, Henry accomplishes a masterstroke that makes him ruler of almost all of the western seaboard of France. He marries Eleanor of Aquitaine, the newly divorced ex-queen of France. I promise I will give you the juicy details later in the lecture, but for right now, I just want to point

out that by this marriage, Henry acquires rights over Aquitaine and Poitou, and that's essentially all of southwestern France. And finally, to complete the western seaboard, later on, Henry marries his third son, Geoffrey, to the heiress of the county of Brittany. So by inheritance and by marriage, Henry rules basically half of France, as well as the kingdom of England.

Henry also acquires land by conquest, and here I'm talking about the famous "Norman" conquest of Ireland, though the term doesn't really make sense anymore; you don't want to call these people Normans—they rule over so many different territories. The story of the conquest of Ireland is very complicated, but one essential point to grasp, I think, is that it's never all that important to Henry, certainly not in comparison to any of his other lands. Here, in a nutshell, is what happened.

Ireland in the 1160s is divided among many, many warring kings; none of them really controls the whole island. One of these kings, Diarmait of Leinster, is driven into exile. He loses out in a faction fight—there are two more powerful rulers; he's backing the loser. He's already in contact with lords in England and Wales when this happens, and he decides he's going to try to get English help to put himself back on the throne. Diarmait tracks down King Henry II—at this point, Henry is in Aquitaine—and Diarmait comes to ask for support, but Henry puts him off; he has his hands full. But the king does give Diarmait permission to go see if any of Henry's other lords might be willing to help out on a private basis.

Diarmait tries a lot of lords in vain; there's not a whole lot of interest in this venture, but finally, he has success in Wales. Wales is full of restless, enterprising noblemen referred to as "marcher" lords. Since the days of William the Conqueror, Anglo-Norman lords had been pushing into Wales, establishing lordships at the expense of the native Welsh. The areas that they control are on the border between English and Welsh territory. A border is referred to in this period as a "march," so marcher lords are border lords. There were also Scottish marches on the borders between England and Scotland. The marcher lords are a fairly tough lot, and they have to be, because their position in Wales is always rather precarious. The Welsh fought back, of course, and sometimes these marcher lords would lose out to the Welsh; they would actually lose their new lordships. So for them, it

might be a good idea to have other outlets for their energies. Maybe Ireland might be a promising avenue to explore.

One lord in particular, a guy named Richard FitzGilbert de Clare, is happy to take up Diarmait's offer, and we'll call him "Strongbow," because that's the nickname that he got later on. The terms were very attractive. Diarmait promises Strongbow that in return for helping Diarmait get back on the throne, Strongbow will have the right to marry Diarmait's daughter Aoife, and he will inherit the kingdom of Leinster when Diarmait dies. And so you see a series of invasions of Ireland starting in 1167, and gradually, these invasions restore Diarmait's position there, until in 1171, he and Strongbow have managed to make Diarmait more powerful in Ireland than he had ever been before.

At that point, Henry II gets involved at last. He hadn't necessarily expected that Diarmait's plea for help would be answered so successfully, and he wasn't at all sure that he's going to be able to keep a lid on the Welsh marcher lords once they've established a secure power base in Ireland. It's a little bit far off the beaten track—maybe they will be a little bit more independent than the king of England is comfortable with. These marcher lords could be rather fickle in their loyalties, and they're used to a lot of freedom of maneuver, much more freedom than lords in the other parts of Henry's dominions. The English kings had had to give them a certain amount of headroom so that they could survive in the very difficult conditions on the Welsh border. So Henry doesn't trust these lords; he doesn't trust Strongbow. And so, he comes to Ireland in person in 1171 to make sure that from now on, everybody knows that the king is ultimately in charge there. He's coming in at the last minute, sure—he hasn't really done any of the work—but he's rebranding the invasion of Ireland, turning it from a private venture into a royal venture. And thus, the lordship of Ireland is created, and we see the beginning of the very long, very contentious history of England's connection to Ireland.

The result of all of this inheriting and marrying and conquering is that Henry is in charge of an astonishing conglomeration of territories. Think about trying to control all of this land under the conditions of the 12th century. Henry has Ireland; he has England; he has half of France under his control,

at least in theory. In reality, the degree of royal control in each of these areas varies a lot. Many historians like to talk about an Angevin Empire, but there isn't a real sense in which this is an empire like the Roman Empire. There isn't an integrated administration at all. These are territories with their own traditions, their own institutions of government (or not, in the case of Ireland—there's hardly any government in Ireland); they have their own peoples; they have their own languages; they have their own customs. Really, the only thing that unites them is the accident that they're ruled by this one man, Henry II. Let's talk a little bit about these divisions. We'll start with Ireland; we'll move across England and then into France.

Ireland is never completely conquered in the Middle Ages. The English certainly establish a secure foothold there, but their authority never extends over the whole country. There are areas in the south and the east that are quite Anglicized. These are places where you have a lot of settlers come in; they establish new towns, and it all looks rather English. But there are also parts of the north and the west where hardly any English settlers go; the Irish kings and chieftains are still ruling pretty much the way they'd always done. In between these areas, there are marches, just as there are in Wales, and these are places where the Irish and the English have to work out ways of getting along with each other, though there's frequent conflict. So Ireland is not an area that is securely held by Henry II or by any other medieval English king. Ireland is always a problem.

In this context, we don't really need to talk much about England; we know from our last lecture what Henry's administration in England is like in this period. He's getting an increasingly firm grip on law and order in England. It's a relatively well-governed territory, certainly.

But what about France? Here, I think, the most important point to make is that Henry's French lands are almost as different from one another as France is from England and, in one respect, probably more so. France is broadly divided into two main cultural and linguistic zones; the zone in the north is called the *Langue d'Oil*, and the zone in the south is called the *Langue d'Oc*. These two names come from the two different words for "yes" in the two regions. In the south, for "yes," you said "*oc*," and in the north, you said "*oil*," which over time became the modern French *oui*. The northern

term ends up winning out because of the way politics develop in France; the north ends up dominating the south. Both *oc* and *oil*, they both come from a similar Latin derivation; it's just that the two different regions of France chose a different part of the Latin word that they took it from. And these words for "yes" are by no means the only points of difference between the two languages. They really are separate languages; they're actually not all that mutually intelligible, so you actually are speaking a different language in the south than you are in the north.

In addition, northerners and southerners tend to have different legal systems; for example, take inheritance. The northern lands are more likely to practice primogeniture; that is, they reserve the main inheritance for the oldest son. Certainly, there's more of an emphasis in the north on passing down larger parcels of land. In the south, people tend to divide up their holdings more among different brothers. The result is that in the north you see larger, more compact lordships; in the south, there are lots of little lordships, and things are, as a result, just a lot more chaotic overall.

On the legal front, there's also a big difference. Normandy and England use customary law; as we've seen, the common law is being developed in England, and there's an emphasis slowly emerging on precedent and case law, and this is true in Normandy also. In southern France, they're actually still using the old Roman law, and this had never completely died out after the fall of the Roman Empire. So the legal systems of the two main regions of France that were ruled by Henry II are incompatible.

Overall, then, not a lot of basis for unity. You don't have culture going for you; you don't have language; you don't have law. And, predictably, these areas are fiercely independent. We've seen in the past that the Normans hate the Angevins; this is why the barons in England and Normandy don't want Matilda to marry Geoffrey of Anjou in the first place. Things actually get worse after Geoffrey of Anjou uses rather brutal methods to conquer Normandy; the Normans really hate the Angevins after that. Both Normans and Angevins hated the people of Poitou, the Poitevins. One constant theme in English history from now on down through the 14th century is that everybody hated the Poitevins. They were just seen as treacherous schemers who were always getting in the way. And then there's Aquitaine. Aquitaine

was a real headache to govern. Every little lordship in Aquitaine was fiercely independent; it was resistant to the authority even of their own dukes.

So what on earth is Henry II's plan for trying to govern this huge mess? Well, as we've seen, he's a man with a lot of self-confidence, and his plan is basically that he personally is going to keep a lid on all of these territories as long as he's alive, and then he's going to divide them up among his sons when he dies. His sons will get manageable chunks of territory that are going to be more logical units to govern. He has a large family to provide for—he and his wife, Eleanor, have four sons and three daughters who lived to adulthood. But Henry seems to have a lot of land in order to take care of this. So what exactly is his master plan?

First, the daughters. They're not going to get any land. They're going to be married off to important royal figures—one goes to Germany; one goes to Spain; one goes to Sicily. It's the sons who are going to inherit. So you have these four young men, Henry, Richard, Geoffrey, and John, and they dominate Henry II's planning, and they end up making him absolutely miserable. But before we get to the misery, let's look at how Henry II thought it was going to turn out.

His first son, Henry, is the oldest. By this point, it's customary for the oldest son to get the lands that belonged to his father by inheritance. In the case of Henry II, that would be England, Normandy, and Anjou. Henry II's second son, Richard, is going to get his mother's lands in Poitou and Aquitaine. Now we have to take care of the third son, Geoffrey, and Henry II is going to take care of him by marrying him off to the heiress of Brittany; he's going to rule in Brittany, and that'll be a pretty decent holding for a third son. Now, when Henry II first devises this scheme for providing for all his sons, the youngest son, John, hadn't been born yet, so when he came along, there was nothing left over, and people mockingly referred to him as John "Lackland," because he didn't have any land set aside for him, at least at first. Incidentally, John Lackland is at least a better nickname than one he got later on, "John Softsword." But King Henry found a solution to the problem when Ireland came under English control. King Henry made John lord of Ireland—problem solved.

This seems like a pretty reasonable plan. And it might have worked, if it weren't for the fact that the Angevin royal family was one of the most dysfunctional families in all of English royal history, and they have competition on this point, but still I think they absolutely take the cake. And it really all starts with the very volatile relationship between Henry II and his wife, Eleanor of Aquitaine.

So far, I've put off describing Eleanor, but now it's time finally to fulfill my promise of explaining why Eleanor is such a formidable figure that only Katharine Hepburn could possibly do her justice on the screen. Eleanor had quite a history before she became queen of England. In the 1130s, she was the most eligible heiress in France, the granddaughter of the famous Duke William IX of Aquitaine, who was a troubadour poet in his own right and a renowned bon vivant. Eleanor had been married at an early age to Louis VII of France, just before Louis inherited the throne from his father, Louis the Fat. Louis VII was his father's opposite in many ways. He was not fat; instead, he was quite ascetic, and some people thought that Louis was more suited to the cloister than the battlefield. Eleanor and Louis were clearly unsuited to each other. Eleanor loved music, poetry, parties; Louis didn't. There were other things Eleanor apparently liked more than Louis did, and it's largely to keep an eye on her that Louis brings Eleanor with him on the Second Crusade. Her behavior on crusade caused something of a scandal; there were rather public displays of affection between Eleanor and her uncle, Raymond of Antioch, and people gossiped quite a bit about that. Louis hustled Eleanor back home, and a few years later, they were divorced.

The ostensible grounds for the divorce were consanguinity, and that means the spouses were too closely related for the marriage to be legal in the eyes of the church. This was a relatively common pretext for divorce in the 12th century. Officially, you were not allowed to marry someone related to you within seven degrees of kinship, and that means you're not allowed to marry your sixth cousin. But almost all of the noble and royal families of Europe at this point were closely related to each other; it could be hard to find somebody who you wanted to marry because they were rich enough and important enough but who wasn't related to you too closely at the same time. In practice, many marriages went ahead even if they were technically

incestuous. This could leave a convenient "escape clause" for later, and that's what happened with Louis and Eleanor.

The real practical reason for the divorce was the fact that Eleanor had produced two daughters but no sons. King Louis wanted an heir. Now, we know from what I've said already earlier in the lecture that Eleanor has no trouble producing sons later with her second husband, Henry II, but I think that it's pretty clear to all concerned at the royal court of France that there aren't going to be any more offspring from Louis and Eleanor, because the spouses just can't stand each other, and they could not bear to do their dynastic duty. In this situation, divorce is the best option. This is the case even though it means that Louis is going to lose control of Eleanor's vast inheritance; it shows you how bad things were.

But Louis does not see Eleanor's next move coming, clearly, or he would never have risked the divorce before having some suitable second husband for Eleanor lined up; that's probably what he was planning to do eventually—marry her off to somebody else. Because Eleanor turned around immediately after the divorce and married Henry of Anjou, the future Henry II. And really, there's no better way of getting back at Louis than that, because the Angevins and the king of France are, of course, bitter rivals. The French kings don't like the fact that the English kings have these huge landholdings in France. Also, technically, the English kings owe homage to the French kings for their French lands, and they don't like that. In practice, they don't have to listen to the French kings very much, but it definitely rankles with them that technically, they are their overlords. So now, here comes Henry of Anjou; [he] swoops in; he gets Aquitaine and Poitou; two years later, he's king of England as well. This is a very bitter pill for Louis of France to swallow.

But let's turn our attentions away from poor King Louis to the royal couple themselves. These are two fascinating, ambitious individuals. At the time of the marriage, Eleanor is over a decade older than Henry; she's an experienced woman—she's been queen of France for 15 years. I think the two of them were united in their ambition for power. For about the first 15 years of their marriage, things seem to have worked fairly well. They produced eight children, seven of whom survived, which is a very good rate for the 12th

century, and it's especially impressive when we consider that Eleanor is about 30 when they get married and still she has eight more children. In these early years, Henry clearly relied on Eleanor; on several occasions, she served as regent in one area of his dominions while he campaigned in another.

But things seem to have gone wrong shortly after the birth of their last child, John, in 1167. After that point, Eleanor is permanently replaced in the king's affections by a series of mistresses. This is not a period when there's any realistic expectation that kings are going to be absolutely faithful in marriage, but I think what Eleanor minds is that she's being ignored. She isn't used to it, and she seems to have taken her revenge by fostering plots among her sons so as to get back at their father. But I want to leave Eleanor on one side for a moment, beginning her schemes, to return to the subject that we started the lecture with: namely, how does all of this dynastic politics relate to the controversy between Henry II and Thomas Becket?

Most of the very thorny issues between Henry and Becket (all of this constitutional jurisdictional stuff) had been straightened out by early in 1170. But then another controversy arose, and this time, it had to do directly with Henry's dynastic plans. Henry wanted his oldest son, called Henry, to be crowned king of England even while he himself is still alive. This would be kind of an insurance policy that he will succeed peacefully when the time came, because he'll already be king, of course. Remember, the successions of all of the other English kings since the Norman Conquest have been rather dicey; think about Henry I having to sprint to Winchester to get the royal treasury or Stephen having to hurry across the channel to do the same thing. Henry II wants his son to have an easier path to the throne. And in order to get his son crowned, he needs the archbishop of Canterbury. Remember all the back and forth about who's going to consecrate various kings? You really want the archbishop of Canterbury to do it if you can possibly pull that off, because that's going to look the best. But if you can't settle your disputes with the archbishop of Canterbury in time, there's another archbishop in England, the archbishop of York. You can get him to do it. So on June 14, 1170, Prince Henry is crowned in Westminster Abbey by the archbishop of York. After that, he's usually referred to as Henry the Young King, because he's already king.

When Becket finds out about the coronation, he's devastated. This is a blow at one of Canterbury's most cherished prerogatives, the right to consecrate the king. But he swallows hard, and he makes up the quarrel between himself and the king. I don't think they quite understood what each other was saying when they settled the quarrel. Becket thought the king is giving him permission to punish the bishops who were involved in the coronation; Henry did not think he was doing that. At any rate, it seemed like peace. In the meantime, letters arrived from the pope imposing sentence on the bishops who had been involved in the consecration. Becket forwarded the letters to England and crossed the Channel himself, and clearly, his intent was to follow up personally. He was going to go after those bishops. And this was the final straw.

When Henry learned that Becket was going to go after the men who had consecrated his son king of England, he snapped. He was in Normandy when he got the news, and he is reported to have burst out in anger with a very famous leading question; he asked, "Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?" Four knights in his entourage heard this and said to themselves, in effect, "Well, we will!" And off they went across Normandy, over the Channel to Canterbury, to create a martyr. They probably didn't go with the intention of murdering Becket, but when he resisted their attempts to coerce him, they cut him down right in his cathedral. Overnight, Becket went from first-class troublemaker to saint. King Henry tried in vain to argue that he hadn't ordered the knights to kill Becket: "Well, they misunderstood me." Everyone basically accepted that he was ultimate responsibility for the deed.

In a strange way, Becket's murder is tied up in the king's dynastic plans, not just because it was partly caused by this controversy over the Young Henry's coronation, but for another reason, as well. Henry II is all of a sudden in the very bad graces of the pope. He wants to get out of town, and he wants to seem as if he's doing something that the pope would approve of in the process. It's just at this moment that the Irish expedition crops up. Popes had been calling for an invasion of Ireland for a while; their hope was that the English would be able to impose some sort of discipline on the Irish church, which was famously very undisciplined. Here's a chance for Henry to win brownie points with the pope and rein in those troublesome marcher lords, as we talked about. So the invasion of Ireland in 1171 was directly tied to

Becket's murder. But after Henry II returned from Ireland, he still had to do public penance at Becket's tomb.

From the time of Becket's murder in 1170 pretty much until the end of his reign, Henry had very little peace, and it's important to keep this in mind when we remember all the great administrative and legal accomplishments that we talked about in the last lecture. Those are all going on while Henry deals with blow after blow delivered by his own family, and at the back of them is his bitter wife, Eleanor.

The chief cause of all of these troubles is the dynamic that we've seen before, where you have adult royal children (usually sons—Empress Matilda is the one exception here), and they want more authority than the king wishes to concede during his lifetime. That happens in spades with the family of Henry II. He has four sons. They know what's coming to them, but they want it now, not later. To make matters worse, the French kings very cheerfully used these family squabbles in the English royal family to their own advantage. The French kings would ally with whichever Angevin son or sons happen to be rebelling against their father at any one time; this would be a way of scoring points against Henry II. The marriage of Henry II and Eleanor had been the worst nightmare for the French monarchy, but the sons that the marriage produced might provide the means of undoing some of the damage.

The Angevins are led into rebellion, of course, by the oldest of the sons, Henry the Young King. He is married to Princess Margaret of France, who's actually the daughter of King Louis by his second wife, the one he married after the divorce from Eleanor. So Henry the Young King is the son-in-law of King Louis of France. Louis helped Henry and his brothers, Richard and Geoffrey, rebel against Henry II in 1173. Ironically, of course, Louis's ex-wife, Eleanor, is also helping out behind the scenes. This is a serious revolt; it lasts into the following year. With some difficulty, Henry II did finally suppress the revolt. He forgives his sons but not his wife. He puts Eleanor into prison, and she stays in prison for the rest of his reign, another 15 years. I think it's a measure of how formidable Eleanor is that Henry insists on keeping her locked up.

The relationship between Henry and his sons is never easy, and to make matters worse, the brothers don't get along with each other either. Richard, the second son, is his mother's favorite; he'd been given a certain measure of autonomy in her lands in Aquitaine. He has much more scope for independent action than his older brother Henry; Henry is more or less waiting around until Henry II will finally die. Henry and Richard quarrel repeatedly until the Young King himself dies early in 1183. Geoffrey also dies in 1186, leaving a young son named Arthur. More about him in a future lecture. But for now, that leaves only two sons alive, Richard and John.

In 1189, Richard rebels against his father, again with the help of the French king; by this point, the king is Philip II, son of Louis VII by his third wife. Now, this may not have wounded Henry II too much; Richard was Eleanor's favorite son, not Henry's. But young John, the last-born, was Henry's favorite. In the summer of 1189, John joins his brother Richard in revolt, and this breaks King Henry's heart. He's defeated by his sons and their ally, the French king, and shortly after this defeat, he is taken ill and dies. On his deathbed, he is supposed to have whispered, "Shame, shame on a conquered king."

So what's the result of all that dynastic planning? It proves moot; Henry ends up with only two sons to survive him, and as we'll see, Richard has no heirs, so it all goes to John in the end. But all of the tensions, all of the difficulties involved in ruling all these very different, very far-flung territories, are thus perpetuated into the next generation. Henry had managed to keep all these lands together. We'll see that Richard did, too. But what about John? We're going to certainly answer that question, but before we do, we're going to take a pause in the sequence of our narrative to look in some detail at what the Angevins were doing when they weren't scheming against each other. What sort of culture is associated with the Angevin royal family? That's what we'll cover in our next lecture.

Courtly Love

Lecture 18

If you ran across a text in a book, how would you know, aha, that's courtly love? Well, you might look for some of the standard characteristics of courtly love. … The first is that courtly love is supposed to be secret. … The secrecy is necessary because the love is almost always adulterous. … In contemporary terms, love in the sense of passionate, romantic love, that kind of love and marriage just didn't go together.

The Angevin period produced two of the most important developments in all of literary history: the concept of courtly love and the legends of King Arthur. These two parallel (and related) phenomena which emerged in 12th-century English literature are still a significant part of our storytelling world.

Love stories, whether as main plots or subplots, are such an integral part of our culture that it seems odd that we have to explain where they come from. But between the classical times and the 12th century, romantic love had disappeared from the literary scene. Most of Latin literature was written by churchmen, of course, and so spiritual or brotherly love were far more common themes. In vernacular literature, like *Beowulf* and *The Song of Roland*, the emphasis was on warrior values like loyalty and bravery. These are both male-oriented kinds of literature, certainly; the plots were all about things that men did, and there were hardly any female characters.

Around the year 1100, there was a major shift in literary sensibilities. The south of France was heavily influenced by Spanish culture, which in turn was influenced by Muslim culture via Islamic conquest of Spain in the 8th century. Specifically, there was close contact between Aquitaine and Spain through trade and important marriages. A new literary fashion was born out of this contact, and the new kinds of poetry it inspired were romantic and even erotic.

Duke William of Aquitaine, Eleanor's grandfather, was himself a troubadour poet, but he was also a patron to other poets. The court of Aquitaine attracted

some of the best poets in southern France, all writing in this new style. This is the atmosphere in which Eleanor of Aquitaine grew up. She grew up listening to love songs, and she brought them with her when she married King Louis of France, sparking a new literary fashion. She also passed her love of this poetry on to her children, especially Marie, countess of Champagne, and Richard, who would one day be king of England, both of whom were strong patrons of literature themselves.

So what is courtly love? The trope has three main characteristics. First, it is usually a secret love, a fact that usually provides the story with suspense. Second, it is usually secret because it is adulterous—generally speaking, the woman is married and the man is not. Noble marriage in this period was more like a business arrangement or a religious duty than a passionate union; courtly love was not only passionate but freely given. Finally, stories of courtly love tend to subvert the normal gender hierarchy, which in 12th-century meant the woman is the one calling the shots. What did tend to vary was whether or not the love was physically consummated.

After spending an entire book describing secret, adulterous relationships and how to conduct them well … [Andreas] takes it all back.

Poems of courtly love were often set to music. Although the music was rarely written down, enough survives that we can hear the influence of Arab music which, like the poems' themes, arrived via Spain and possibly via the Crusades. These poems were performance pieces, meant to be read aloud in a social setting. Certain plots and characters were so well known that the poems could allude to them in passing and expect that the audience would get the reference, which also helped to knit together the cultural elite.

One of the most famous works of this period was written at the court of Marie de Champagne: Andreas the Chaplain's *The Art of Courtly Love.* Andreas was a court cleric, one of a class of men who had a university education and was in minor orders of some kind—probably not a priest, but with some sort of religious profession. Andreas had a very worldly orientation; he knew the

court intimately and wrote about it from within. The work is modeled on Ovid's *Art of Love*. Andreas lays out how men and women of different social classes should approach each other to try to win each other's love. Class and power are as important as gender to Andreas, and he suggests the easiest relationships to sustain are between social equals. Then, after spending an entire book describing secret, adulterous relationships and how to conduct them well, at the end of the book, he takes it all back. We don't know whether it was meant seriously or in jest, but it brings us to a larger question about courtly love in general: Did people really engage in these kinds of relationships? Or was the whole point of the genre the vicarious thrill?

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Under the influence of Angevin court poets, the Romano-British stories of King Arthur took on a distinctly Anglo-Norman flavor.

Although this literary trend had its origin in France, and before that in Spain, the most popular stories used in these 12th century poems came from England. The most successful group of tales from this period, without question, was the legends of King Arthur and his knights. The fusion of interesting characters with the ethos of courtly love was a winning combination. Although, as we already discussed, we don't know whether Arthur was a real historical figure or not, stories about him have circulated since at least the early 7th century, especially in the Celtic regions of Britain and France. Doubtless the stories got more elaborate in the telling over the centuries.

Then, in the 1130s, a Welsh cleric named Geoffrey of Monmouth wrote *The History of the Kings of Britain*, claiming it was a translation into Latin of an ancient Welsh text. It tells the history of Britain from the time of the Trojan War down to the 7th century, including a section about King Arthur. Around 1155, a Norman poet named Wace translated Geoffrey into French verse, and Arthur's legends took off. The text spread wherever French was spoken, including the court of Marie de Champagne, where Arthur finally found his muse in the person of Chrétien de Troyes.

Using Wace and other stories about Arthur that may have been circulating orally, he shaped Arthur into a 12th-century courtly king living in a courtly city called Camelot and surrounded by knights who had lives a lot like those of the men who were the stories' audience. This new Arthur is still a brave warrior, but he enjoys the company of elegant ladies as well—maybe evidence of the attempt to appeal to a female audience as well.

One of Chrétien's most significant contributions to the corpus of Arthurian literature was the creation of Lancelot. We find it hard to imagine the legend without him, but before Chrétien, Guinevere's lover was Arthur's despicable nephew, Mordred. Lancelot is a courtly lover—adulterous, yes, but brave and skilled and noble and generous and (mostly) loyal to his king. Chrétien also started but didn't finish the story of Perceval and the Holy Grail. We're not sure where the seed of the story came from, but obviously this story became a huge part of Arthur's legend. Chrétien's work was translated into all the major European languages, and Arthur's popularity grew and grew. And thus an obscure Welsh folk hero was adopted by French courtly poets and became one of the most famous characters in literary history. ■

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Courtly Love

Lecture 18—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we followed the story of Henry II and his very colorful family to its tragic end, as Henry lay dying, betrayed by his two surviving sons. It's a story worthy of fiction, and it has, indeed, inspired some wonderful fiction. But of course, Henry and his family were part of a courtly culture that consumed fiction with great enjoyment, and so today, we're going to talk about the literature of the Angevin period.

What kinds of stories and poems did these people like to read and listen to? The reason we're going to spend an entire lecture on this subject is that this period, the 12th century, produces two of the most important developments in all of literary history, and our people, the ones we've been talking about over the last couple of lectures, they are right in the middle of it.

The first of these developments is the more revolutionary of the two, because it actually changed the whole nature of what was discussed in works of literature, what they were actually about. I'm talking here about the development of courtly love; I'll be defining the term as we go along (right away, you can hear that it's courtly; it has to do with courts), but for right now, I just want to say that discussing love of a romantic sort is actually new in the 12th century, or at least, it hadn't been done for many centuries. So our period sees the arrival of love as a major theme in fiction. Try to imagine most fiction today without love as the main element of the plot, and I think you'll see how important this innovation of the 12th century really is.

The second of the two developments I want to talk about today is not as revolutionary but still extremely important. The 12th century is the period when King Arthur hits the bestseller lists. We're going to be talking about how his legend develops, how he becomes a household name throughout Europe. But the popularity of King Arthur is very much tied to the phenomenon of courtly love in general, because the stories about Arthur draw very heavily on the new themes that courtly love is making popular in the 12th century. So first, we'll talk about courtly love in general, and then we're going to talk about King Arthur.

The first thing to say about courtly love, and it might seem odd, is that we have to explain where it comes from. In between classical times and the 12th century, love had really disappeared off of the literary radar screen. There were lots of other themes that were more popular. In Latin literature—it's mostly written by churchmen, of course—the love you find is mostly the love of the soul for God or the spiritual love between clerics united by a common purpose. It's pretty ethereal stuff. On the other hand, in vernacular literature, you have texts like *Beowulf*, and the emphasis is very much on warrior values, loyalty, bravery, and the troubles that sometimes arise when these values came into conflict.

A text that a lot of people in the English elite would have known in the early 12th century was the "Song of Roland." It was an epic poem—it was written in French—about the hero Roland, nephew of Charlemagne, who was assigned to the rear guard of Charlemagne's army. The rear guard comes under attack, and Roland has to choose between his duty to protect his brothers in arms and his desire to seem brave; he wants to beat off the enemies without help. Finally, he blows his horn to summon Charlemagne's army back to help him, and by that point, it's too late. That's the kind of text people would have listened to in the royal and noble halls throughout the area where French was spoken, and that would certainly include the whole area ruled by the English kings. It's a very male-oriented kind of literature; the plots are all about things that men do, and there are hardly any female characters.

But about 1100, there was a major shift in literary sensibilities; it began in the south and it spread north. You'll remember from our last lecture that I talked about France really being divided into two main cultural zones, and even the language in the two zones was different. The south of France looked very much across the Pyrenees into Spain, and they were quite heavily influenced by Spanish culture, which had a very strong imprint from the Muslim states that went back to the Islamic conquest of Spain in the 8th century. In the 11th century, the unified Spanish caliphate had fallen apart into many smaller Muslim states, and there were also several small Christian kingdoms in the north of Spain. The political situation was very confusing, but the artistic life of Spain was flourishing, because there were so many courts competing to patronize the best artists, poets, and musicians.

Now, there were many close contacts between Aquitaine and Spain, through trade, certainly, and even through important marriages. I mentioned in the last lecture the famous grandfather of Eleanor of Aquitaine, Duke William IX, who was one of the first troubadour poets. He seems to have picked up the elements of the poetry trade partly from one of his wives, who was a Spanish princess. She probably brought Spanish musicians and poets with her when she crossed the Pyrenees into Aquitaine. And you see the birth of a new literary fashion, and it comes out of this contact with a very vibrant, very multicultural Spain. And the new poetry that's being written is very different from works like the "Song of Roland." It's frankly romantic and it's even frankly erotic. It's not about valor and duty; it's about love.

Now, Duke William of Aquitaine didn't just write poetry. He patronized lots of other poets; he paid them just to write poetry at his court. So the court at Aquitaine became a kind of literary magnet; it attracted the best poets in southern France, all of them writing in this new style. This is the atmosphere in which Eleanor of Aquitaine grew up. She grew up listening to love songs. And she brought them north with her when she married King Louis of France at the age of 15. As we've seen, Eleanor had a very powerful personality; it takes grit to defy two kings, which is what she did. Eleanor was perfectly capable of making sure that this new literary fashion got a hearing in the north of France, though doubtless King Louis did not care for it personally. Eleanor also made sure to transmit her love of love songs to her two daughters by King Louis. We haven't talked about these daughters very much.

When Eleanor and Louis were divorced in 1152, Eleanor was forced to leave them behind; husbands got custody in the Middle Ages (it's generally the case). But Eleanor's influence had stuck, particularly in the case of one of the daughters, Marie. She became the countess of Champagne, and she lived until 1198. As countess, Marie ran the most glittering literary salon of 12th-century Europe. All of the main trends we're talking about today went through Champagne. I think it's a testimony to how important noble patronage is in this period. Creative artists can't make a living without it; there aren't royalties from big sales of books or anything like that to sustain them. So without people like Marie of Champagne, there wouldn't have been anything like the literary explosion that we see in this period.

But back for one second to Marie's mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine: At various points during her time as queen of England, Eleanor was actually in Poitou, basically running the place on behalf of her husband, King Henry, because she was local; she knew the job. And so she was in a position to keep the troubadour tradition going in the south, as well. And she passed her taste on to her son Richard; Richard was her designated successor in Aquitaine. He also became a very important literary patron, so much so that there were later legends about him involving him composing poetry himself; we'll get to that in the next lecture. But for now, I think the important point is that this emphasis on love in literature spreads all over the larger French-speaking world (and beyond) largely due to the patronage networks that are set up by people like Eleanor of Aquitaine and her children.

I've talked about how this new kind of literature spread, but I haven't really talked about what it is yet. If you ran across a text in a book, how would you know—aha, that's courtly love? Well, one thing would be to look for the standard characteristics of courtly love, and I'll just talk about three of them. The first is that courtly love is supposed to be secret. This is one of the driving engines in the plot of a courtly love story or a courtly song. It's what provides the suspense. And the secrecy brings me to the second main characteristic of courtly love: Why is it a secret? And this one is a bit more surprising. The secrecy is necessary because the love is almost always adulterous. Usually, the woman is married and her lover is not. The reason the love has to be adulterous is that in contemporary terms, if you want mad, passionate, romantic love, well, that kind of love doesn't go with marriage; they just don't go together. Love between spouses is supposed to be more of a dutiful thing, a religious thing. Marriages for the nobility are really rather businesslike affairs; they're contracted between families rather than individuals. There isn't any romantic pursuit involved; it's more a question of property and political alliances, and then you're supposed to make the best of it. If you wanted something really exciting, you had to look elsewhere.

So you've got love that's secret and illicit, and that's what makes it exciting. And the third main element in courtly love is that you get a kind of subversion of the normal gender hierarchy. What do I mean by that? I mean that instead of the man calling the shots, which is probably how it mostly goes in real life, in these stories and songs, you get the woman put on a pedestal, so to

speak. She's got the power to say yes or no; of course, that's not the case in a real marriage. She can relieve the torment of her lover or not. She is in charge of her own fate. I imagine that this element may have been very attractive to a female audience in the 12th century.

Those are the three main aspects of courtly love poetry and stories. One thing that varies across these stories and songs is whether the love is ultimately consummated in a physical sense. Sometimes it is; sometimes it isn't. Sometimes there's a focus on the desperate, unfulfilled longing of the lover; other times, you get the couple trying desperately to avoid being caught in the act. In each case, though, it's clear that the love is freely given, which is quite different from marriage, where you have to love your spouse, so it's not much of a compliment if you do. That's how they perceived it in the 12th century.

Now, I want to say a couple of things about how this literature was experienced. A very important point to make about this literature is that it's often set to music. The music for these poems is almost never written down—musical notation is still evolving in this period—but enough survives for us to get a sense of what it sounds like. When you listen to this music you can hear very clearly the Arab roots of the music. You know that it came from over the Pyrenees and also probably partly from the Crusades. European music owes a very considerable debt to Arab music.

That brings me to my other point: This is literature that is usually performed for an audience. The musicians and poets might be professionals, [or] they might be noble amateurs. The audience might be large, perhaps a gathering in the hall of a castle or lodge, or it might be small, perhaps only a few people in a small chamber. But it was experienced usually in a social setting, in a multisensory manner. It's part of the sociability of the court. We know from literary allusions in the poems that there were certain plots, certain characters that are so well known that people could just refer to them in passing and they would expect that their audience would get the reference. So this literature creates a kind of common stock of references that people all knew. It helped to knit together the cultural elite.

Now that I've talked about what courtly love is in general and about how it was performed, I want to say something about one of the most famous works of this period, but first I need to justify doing so, because the work I'm going to talk about was not written in England, not even in a part of France ruled by England. It was written at the court of Marie of Champagne, the daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine, who I talked about earlier. How can I justify talking about this work from Champagne in a course about medieval England? I think I can. The important point here is that in the 12th century, culture does not really respect national boundaries in our modern sense. The English elite is a cross-Channel elite. Many members of this group go back and forth quite easily between England and France. They speak French. They consider French to be the language of polite society. They wouldn't have cared what part of the French-speaking world a song was written in. It was their culture. So if we want to understand the 12th-century English, we need to understand their literature, whether or not it was written in France.

A few words, then, about one of the most important works written at the court of Marie of Champagne, but I'm going to go back a bit on what I just said in one sense. The work I want to talk about briefly was not actually written in French. It was written in Latin. I'm talking about a work by a guy named Andreas the Chaplain, and it was called *The Art of Courtly Love*. Andreas was a literary protégé of Marie of Champagne. He refers to her explicitly in his work. And *The Art of Courtly Love* is a kind of treatise about courtly love and how it's supposed to work. It's sort of a guidebook for the uninitiated, so you know what the rules are and how to follow them.

Who is this guy, Andreas the Chaplain? He's a court cleric; that means he belongs to a class of men who are becoming very numerous in this period, people who had had a university education—universities are just getting going in the 12th century. He's in minor orders of some kind, so probably not a priest, something a little bit less than a priest. He has a very worldly orientation, though. He knows the court intimately, and he's very much writing about it from within.

His work is modeled on the *Art of Love* by the Roman poet Ovid. Ovid was very, very popular in this period, and that's a sign of how important love is. People were going back to find things that had been written about love a

long time ago; they have to go all the way back to the classical period. But Andreas is updating Ovid to fit a 12th-century context. In his work, Andreas lays out how men and women of different social classes should approach each other to try to win each other's love. And what he does is to give men and women of different social levels talking points, in effect, good lines to break the ice. It's a fascinating work, because you can see very clearly how both gender and social class are supposed to determine people's behavior. You might have a woman of high social status who can be more powerful than a man of low social status, at least to a degree. Andreas also makes it very clear that he thinks the easiest relationships to sustain are ones between social equals; he is certainly not a social revolutionary at all.

Now, of course, Andreas is describing the secret, adulterous relationships we've talked about. But at the end of the book, he takes it all back. He issues a retraction. He says, "These relationships are sinful." Uh-oh. What are we to make of this? Scholars aren't sure, and I think this ambiguity runs through the whole phenomenon of courtly love. If Andreas is really sorry he wrote all that stuff about adultery, then why not just suppress the work? Why let it circulate, albeit with this retraction? Is he joking about the retraction? Does he really have a change of heart? I don't think we know. And I think that brings us to a larger question about courtly love in general.

I don't think we know how seriously people took it all; probably it varied quite a lot from person to person. Is there life imitating art? Is there art imitating life? Do people really engage in these kinds of relationships? Do they get a thrill out of the danger of getting caught? It's actually a serious risk; we know of cases where people were caught in adultery and they were very severely dealt with. The men were usually executed in horrible ways and the women were banished. Jealous husbands were not going to overlook this sort of thing because it was very publicly shameful to a man for his wife to commit adultery. Maybe the whole phenomenon is kind of a vicarious thrill. People liked reading about these dangers, and then maybe that was enough to make them content with their domestic lot. It's a puzzle, and I don't think we're ever going to solve it.

But one thing we can say unequivocally. Even though the literary trends we've been talking about have their origin in France and, before that, in

Spain, the most popular stories of the 12th-century have to do with material that comes out of England. The most successful group of tales from this period, the one with a long future ahead of it that stretches down to the present day, was the group of stories about King Arthur. I think they were successful because they ended up being a fusion of interesting characters and stories, and then also the values and ethos of courtly love. It all ends up being a very winning combination. And all of Europe has England to thank for this or, rather, Britain, because the stories come from a period before there was an England. Arthur supposedly lived right after the fall of Roman Britain, when the first English settlers are arriving on British soil. And because everyone in Europe knew that the stories came from Britain, this cycle of Arthurian stories was known as the *Matière de Bretagne,* the "Matter of Britain." Let's figure out how Arthur becomes the most popular literary character of the 12th century.

We last talked about Arthur many lectures back, when we talked about the question of whether he was a real person or not, and we concluded that we were never going to know for sure. But we do think there were stories about Arthur that circulated from at least the early 7th century, and by the 9th century, they were clearly associated with a war leader who supposedly beat the Anglo-Saxons in 12 big battles around the year 500. Between the 9th century and the 12th century, these stories are continuing to circulate, and doubtless, they're getting more elaborate over time, but they're circulating in the Celtic regions, in Wales and Cornwall, and possibly Brittany in France.

Then, in the 1130s, a literary thunderclap. A Welsh writer named Geoffrey of Monmouth, a cleric from south Wales, wrote a book, in Latin, that claimed to be a translation of an ancient book of British history in the Welsh language. This work was called *The History of the Kings of Britain*, and it told the history of Britain from the time of the Trojan War down to the 7th century. And one of the most important parts of the story was the section about King Arthur. There's all sorts of other interesting stuff in Geoffrey's history. That's where we get Old King Cole from the nursery rhyme, for instance. It's also the ultimate source of the plots for several plays by Shakespeare—*King Lear* and *Cymbeline*; that comes out of Geoffrey of Monmouth. But without a doubt, the part that had a future was the part about Arthur.

Geoffrey's work was extremely popular; many, many manuscripts of it survive. But, of course, it's in Latin, and that gives it tons of credibility, but it limits its circulation. The stories about Arthur really take off in about 1155 when a Norman poet named Wace translates Geoffrey into French verse. And that was it. Arthur took off. As we've seen, wherever French is spoken, the same texts are going to circulate, so Wace spreads throughout the Angevin lands over into the French-ruled parts of France, including the court of Marie of Champagne. And that's where Arthur finally found his muse.

Marie of Champagne, as we've seen, is a great literary patron. She's the patron of Andreas the Chaplain. But she's also the patron of a poet called Chrétien de Troyes, and Chrétien is the one who puts courtly love into the Arthur stories. He used Wace, and he used other stories about Arthur that were probably circulating orally. But the Arthur that Chrétien writes about is essentially a 12th-century courtly king. He lives in a courtly city called Camelot surrounded by knights, and these knights seem a lot like the knights who would have probably been listening to the stories. The knights hold tournaments very like the ones that the 12th-century audience would have been familiar with. This Arthur is very different from the 6th-century British war leader that we met up with originally. He's certainly a brave warrior, but he enjoys the company of elegant ladies, as well. Here, I think, we see again the evidence of the appeal to a female audience for this literature.

So King Arthur has changed with the times. But Chrétien made another huge contribution to the development of Arthurian literature. Chrétien created Sir Lancelot. Now, I'm sure you're wondering: How do you have stories about King Arthur without Lancelot? Well, if you look at the story of King Arthur in Geoffrey of Monmouth and then in the translation by Wace, you do get Arthur and Guinevere, and Guinevere does betray Arthur, but the man she betrays him with is his nephew, Mordred, and he's not an admirable character at all. You don't like him; you have no sympathy for him—you have really no sympathy for Guinevere. Chrétien really changes things around. He takes the whole idea of the courtly lover, the passionate suitor, and creates Sir Lancelot, and somehow we do like Lancelot—we do admire him—even though he's trying as hard as he can to sleep with the queen.

This love triangle proved wildly popular. Chrétien wrote a whole series of Arthurian works, but the most famous is "The Knight of the Cart," about the relationship between Guinevere and Lancelot. Lancelot, of course, is one of Arthur's knights, and he's in love with Queen Guinevere. Guinevere is abducted by the evil Meleagant, and Lancelot has to rescue her. Lancelot has to do a lot of difficult things along the way, but one of the most interesting, I think, is the feat that gives the story its name, "The Knight of the Cart." In order to find out where Guinevere is being kept, Lancelot has to accept an offer by a dwarf to ride with the dwarf in a cart to the place where he will be told Guinevere's whereabouts, and we're told in the story that riding in a cart is a deeply shameful thing—it's associated with criminals being led to their execution. Lancelot hesitates; he knows that if word gets out about the cart, he will be shamed, but love wins out, and he gets in. This shows the lengths he'll go to for the sake of his love; this is the central conflict: reputation versus love.

Lancelot also has to withstand temptations. During his travels, Lancelot needs to find shelter, and he encounters a woman who promises him a bed for the night, but only if he will share it with her. He doesn't want to because he's in love with Guinevere, but he reluctantly consents; then, when the time comes, he lies down next to this very enticing woman and he doesn't even touch her. Once again, I think this episode is designed to appeal to a female audience. This is a very impressive demonstration of fidelity. Of course, Lancelot does eventually meet up with Guinevere, and in the course of their adventures, they become lovers, though they have to go to extraordinary lengths to keep this secret. At the end of the story, Lancelot finally defeats Meleagant, the whole court rejoices, including King Arthur, but Chrétien makes it very clear that Lancelot and Guinevere are just biding their time until they can find a way to be alone again. It almost looks as if room is being left for a sequel.

But in fact, Chrétien didn't write about Lancelot and Guinevere again, and he didn't even actually write the last bit of "The Knight of the Cart." He had another writer finish it off. No one is sure why. There's speculation that he actually became disgusted by the adulterous nature of the relationship between Lancelot and Guinevere; maybe he's writing about it only because his patron wanted him to, and then he got sick of the subject. Here, we're

back to the essential ambiguity about courtly love. Is it really okay to be advocating adultery? Maybe Chrétien wasn't sure.

Chrétien also wrote other stories about Arthur and his knights, and one very important story that he started but didn't finish was about Perceval and the Holy Grail, the chalice from the Last Supper that people had to go and search for. This is going to be very important in Arthurian literature from now on, this quest by Arthur's knights to find the Holy Grail. We're not sure where Chrétien got this from, but it's another of the very huge contributions that he made to the body of Arthurian stories.

Chrétien's work was translated into all of the major European languages. People in Germany, Spain, and Italy named their sons Arthur. And that was true closer to home, as well. In the last lecture, we mentioned that the grandson of Henry II, the son of Prince Geoffrey and his wife, Constance of Brittany, was named Arthur. We'll have more to say about this Arthur in a future lecture. But for now, I think the important point to make for our purposes is that you see the Angevin Empire, or the Angevin realms or dominions—whatever you want to call them—this Angevin Empire is at the heart of some of the most important literary developments of the 12th century, and that's the case even though the most famous works of this period come out of French territory. Courtly love poetry makes its way to the rest of Europe via Aquitaine; King Arthur comes from Wales.

Both of these territories are under Angevin rule in the 12th century. And you can even make the case that the reach of the Angevin court extends to Champagne via the influence of Eleanor of Aquitaine on her daughter, Countess Marie. You can't draw hard-and-fast national boundaries in this period, and certainly, the literature doesn't respect these boundaries. It's popular everywhere. People love to hear about love. In our next lecture, we're going to return to our narrative to learn about the truth and the fiction behind a man who was also a great literary patron, but a protagonist, too, in many romantic stories: Richard the Lionheart.

Richard the Lionheart and the Third Crusade

Lecture 19

Richard was a born soldier, and it was certainly still the case that kings were supposed to be successful soldiers. They really had to be if they were going to keep control of their lands; the loyalty of their nobles was simply too precarious for them to be able to relax for very long. Well, this was the part of the job of king that Richard liked the most.

If any English king resembles one of the heroes of medieval romantic literature, it's Richard the Lionheart. Richard was very much his parents' son: He had his father's phenomenal energy and sharp temper and his mother's love of music and poetry, as well as her love of Aquitaine—his favorite part of his realm, and the place he spent most of his time. Richard ruled for 10 years, of which he spent less than six months in England. Some historians condemn Richard for neglecting his duties as king of England. Others have pointed out that England came through this "neglect" pretty well. The modern jury is still out on Richard, but for the most part, his contemporaries adored him.

Two myths about Richard we should dismiss at the outset. The first is that Richard was gay; there is simply no evidence for this claim, which was only put forth in the 20th century. In fact, we know very little about Richard's private life. He made a political marriage to Berengaria of Navarre, a Spanish princess, but they spent little time together and produced no children. He had one acknowledged illegitimate son. That's about all we know.

The second and perhaps more pervasive myth is the association of Richard's reign with the activities of Robin Hood. Many books and movies give us a Robin who is protecting the English from the evil Prince John while Richard is away on Crusade, and most of them end happily with Richard's return. But this was the invention of the 16th-century Scottish author John Major, who simply wanted to write a single story about these two great characters. But the truth is we don't need Robin Hood to make Richard's reign exciting.

The first half of Richard's reign was dominated by the Third Crusade. The First Crusade, called in the late 11th century, had been spectacularly successful. The European armies captured Jerusalem and set up four small Christian states. The Second Crusade was fought because one of these states, Edessa, had been recaptured by Muslim armies. It was unsuccessful, however, and for the next several decades, the other three states hung on in the face of ever-lengthening odds. Then, in 1187, the Egyptian leader Saladin recaptured Jerusalem. Christian Europe was dismayed, and many leaders across Europe immediately "took the cross." Richard wanted very much to be one of them, but he was still involved in the struggle with his father.

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King Richard I (r. 1189–1199) is more renowned as a warrior than as a king. He spent less than six months of his 10-year reign in England.

Richard's coronation in 1189 did not go smoothly. After the ceremony, the king held the traditional banquet for his most important subjects; this was a royal tradition. A delegation of the leading members of London's Jewish community appeared at the banquet with gifts for the king, but the guards barred their entry. Things got out of hand, and a riot broke out across the city. Jewish businesses and homes were attacked, and a number of lives were lost. Over the next several months, anti-Jewish outbreaks spread to other towns and were especially bad in Lincoln and York. Unfortunately, these kinds of outbreaks often went along with periods of crusading fervor.

Even though these outbreaks of violence against Jews continued, King Richard left England just two months after his coronation. He spent the next year and a half in his French lands, preparing to go on Crusade. This included collecting money for this expensive venture, a lot of it from England, the richest of his dominions. In addition, King Philip of France was planning to go on the Third Crusade as well, which complicated Richard's plans. Both men were very talented and very aggressive, and they had a history: Philip had supported Richard in his rebellions against Henry II, but when Richard became king, Philip became Richard's enemy. Officially, Richard and Philip were two Christian kings trying to liberate Jerusalem. Unofficially, they wanted to keep an eye on each other.

When these two kings arrived in the Holy Land in 1191, they faced a volatile situation. The town of Acre, in present-day northern Israel, was in Muslim hands but was under siege by the king of Jerusalem, Guy of Lusignan. (Guy was still called king, even though Jerusalem had fallen to the Muslims.) Guy was being besieged in turn by a Muslim relief force and needed to be rescued. And here's where the different strengths of the two European kings came into play. Philip arrived in April but was mired in indecision. Richard arrived in July with more resources and the will to use them. He bought superior siege weapons, and the city soon surrendered. The capture of Acre

Richard, King of Jerusalem?

When Richard embarked on the Third Crusade, ostensibly it was to secure the Holy Land for Christendom and to secure himself a little glory in the process. But what if he secretly sought more than a little glory? Richard was the great-grandson of King Fulk of Jerusalem (r. 1131–1143). In the early 1180s, when ruling male line of Jerusalem died out, the city's church leaders actually offered Richard's father, Henry II, the throne. Henry declined; he had enough to worry about with England, Ireland, and half of France on his plate. The crown was given to Guy of Lusignan instead, but Guy lost Jerusalem to the Muslims, triggering the Third Crusade. Perhaps Richard's real intent in trying to capture the holy city was to capture himself another crown.

would turn out to be the greatest success of the Third Crusade. But in the aftermath of victory, Richard managed to insult Duke Leopold of Austria, who left the Holy Land in a rage. This would come back to haunt Richard later. Philip also left shortly after the capture of Acre, leaving Richard to confront Saladin alone.

Richard and Saladin had made a treaty after the fall of Acre according to which Saladin would pay ransom for some prisoners, but he had trouble raising the money. Richard, convinced the delay was a ploy, had 3,000 Muslim prisoners massacred in cold blood. (This is one of the big stains on Richard's character, and it is still remembered with anger in the Holy Land.) Richard then marched on Jerusalem, with Saladin's forces harassing him along the way. The two leaders confronted each other in person at Arsuf, and Richard beat Saladin decisively by using a heavy cavalry charge. But Saladin's army was light and maneuverable, able to regroup and continue to harass Richard's. Richard got as far as the walls of Jerusalem, but then he had to fall back. The following fall, Richard got word that Philip was threatening Normandy and was forced to leave the Holy Land. He and Saladin made a three-year truce that gave Christian pilgrims the right to enter Jerusalem and kept Acre in Christian hands. It wasn't all he had hoped for, but on the whole, Richard had a glorious record to boast of.

Richard had to devise a quick route home that avoided the twin dangers of Philip and the Holy Roman Emperor, Henry VI, each of whom had grudges against Richard. He traveled in disguise with a small retinue, but he was finally captured in a small village outside Vienna and taken to Duke Leopold, whom he had insulted all those months earlier. Leopold sold Richard to the emperor, who imprisoned him in the castle of Dürnstein and demanded an enormous ransom, 150,000 marks. To the horror of Richard's men, Philip started bargaining with the emperor for a lower price. So they swallowed hard, raised some taxes, and raised the money. Richard also had to agree to surrender England to the emperor and receive it back as an imperial fief, although this was nearly impossible for the emperor to enforce and was quickly hushed up.

What is really significant here is that England was able to ransom its king because England was a wealthy, well-run kingdom, even in his absence.

While he may have been an absentee ruler, like his father, he knew how to plan and he knew how to hire the right people. We also have evidence that Richard kept an eye on England even from afar. He issued numerous charters that show a close interest in local administration in England. He made the most important financial innovation of this period, the imposition of royal customs duties.

Richard spent the last five years of his reign, after his release from captivity, primarily engaged in fighting Philip in Normandy and securing his position in Aquitaine. He died in Aquitaine in the spring of 1199 while besieging the castle of Chalus-Chabrol, hit by a chance arrow. He left behind a brilliant reputation but—unfortunately—no direct heir. ■

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Richard the Lionheart and the Third Crusade
Lecture 19—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we took one of our chronological detours to look at the rise of courtly love and stories about King Arthur, and we talked about how important the Angevin family was, especially the women of the Angevin family, in patronizing this literature and making it popular all over Europe. Today, we're going to get back to our narrative and we're going to look at the career of the English king who I think most resembles one of the heroes of this courtly literature, and I'm talking about Richard the Lionheart. We've discussed a lot of royal nicknames in this course already, and most of them have not been exactly flattering. We had Æthelred Bad Counsel; we had Robert Short Pants; even William the Bastard. But Richard the Lionheart, that's a pretty good one. Let's see if Richard deserves his epithet.

The first thing I want to say about Richard is that he was very much the son of his parents, his two very quarrelsome parents. He got two main traits from his father, Henry II: his phenomenal energy and his sharp temper. Richard's anger was legendary, just as his father's was. (Remember Henry II chewing on the rushes?) Richard also seemed to have the ability to be in two places at once; he moved that fast. From his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, Richard got his love of music and poetry and his love for Aquitaine. It was always his favorite part of the Angevin dominions, and he spent much more time there than he did in England, certainly in part because Aquitaine was far more troublesome than England, but also in part because he simply preferred it.

This fact is very important about Richard , and it's something that has been very controversial among historians of England over the years: Richard ruled for 10 years, from 1189 to 1199. Of those 10 years, he spent less than six months in England. In the past, a lot of English historians have basically been insulted by this. They have condemned Richard for neglecting his duties as king of England. They blame him for essentially treating England as a cash cow that he exploited to finance other projects that seemed more important to him, like the crusade—which we'll get to—or, perhaps, shoring up his grip on his French lands.

Other historians have pointed out that England seems to have come through this supposed "neglect" pretty well. The very need to extract a lot of revenues from England led to Richard putting in some very able administrators who did a lot to regularize the functions of government while he was out of the country. And, they argue, it isn't even strictly true that he wasn't interested in England, since he issued a lot of charters about England even from overseas. He clearly kept very up-to-date on English affairs.

Recently, the historical tide has turned against Richard a little bit again. Now, some scholars are saying that Richard simply took too much money out of England. He set up a financial crisis that was going to break during the reign of his successor, his brother John. The economic arguments involved here are very complicated, and I don't think the verdict is clear on that, so in this lecture, I'm going to look much less on what modern historians think about Richard than about what his contemporaries thought about him. Mostly, they adored him.

The biggest reason for this was that Richard was a born soldier, and it was certainly still the case in the period that kings are supposed to be successful soldiers. They really have to be if they were going to keep control of their lands; the loyalty of their nobles is simply too precarious for them to be able to relax for very long when they have very powerful rivals. This was the part of the job of king that Richard liked the most. He attracted the best soldiers because men thought he was a great fighter. He liked hanging out with his fellow soldiers, and they loved him; they're the ones who called him Lionheart.

And Richard wasn't a good soldier simply because he was brave or good at strategy. He was also good at logistics, and this was a winning combination. It took a tremendous amount of planning to move an army around even a very small area, and Richard took one to the Holy Land, as we will see. He was good at making sure the supplies arrived on time, and that's going to make soldiers happy also.

There are two myths about Richard that I want to get rid of right at the start. The first is the notion that he was a homosexual. Nobody thought this in the Middle Ages; it was a modern historian writing in the 20th century

who first came up with this notion, but it's based on misinterpretations of contemporary sources. There's just no basis for it. Richard did get married for purely strategic reasons; this was common in this period. He married Berengaria of Navarre, a Spanish princess, but they spent very little time together and they produced no children. He had one acknowledged illegitimate son, and that's most of what we know about Richard's private life. And, I have to say, after the Angerin dysfunctions of the past couple of lectures, I am happy to leave it there.

The second myth to dispose of is that Richard's reign is the setting for the activities of Robin Hood, the famous outlaw. We're going to get to Robin Hood later in the course—the "real" Robin Hood, if there is such a thing—but the version of Robin Hood that most people are familiar with now from movies and books puts him in Richard's time. Robin Hood is supposedly trying to help protect England from evil Prince John while Richard is away on crusade, and most of the Robin Hood stories end with Richard's return from crusade, punishing King John, and rewarding Robin Hood, and order is restored.

This is not true at all. Nobody ever thought of Robin Hood living in the 12th century until many centuries later, when a Scottish author named John Major pushed the Robin Hood stories back in time. Really, they come from about the 15th century. He pushed them back to Richard's period simply because Richard himself was such a great character to have in a story. So no Robin Hood for Richard, but I don't think we need Robin Hood. Richard's reign is exciting enough without him.

The reason, of course, is that Richard's reign was dominated, at least for the first half, by the Third Crusade, and that was the occasion for adventures that you could hardly make up if you tried. We talked about crusading a little bit when we talked about Robert Curthose going off on crusade and leaving Normandy in mortgage to his brother, William Rufus. That was the First Crusade in the 1090s. We mentioned crusading again when we talked about Eleanor of Aquitaine making a spectacle of herself when she went on crusade with her first husband, King Louis of France. That was the Second Crusade in the 1140s. We're coming up now to the Third Crusade, and I just want to explain why we keep having more and more of these crusades.

The First Crusade had been spectacularly successful. The crusading armies had captured Jerusalem, and they had set up four small territories in the Holy Land that were ruled by Christians. So far, so good, but of course, it was hard to defend these territories being so far away from supplies and reinforcements. The Second Crusade—the one that Eleanor of Aquitaine went on—was fought because one of these little territories, the county of Edessa, had been recaptured by Muslim armies. This Second Crusade was unsuccessful, and for the next several decades, the remaining crusader states hung on in the face of odds that were getting ever longer. Then, in 1187, disaster struck. The Egyptian leader Saladin recaptured Jerusalem, the Holy City, the main prize of the crusaders.

Christian Europe was dismayed, and many leaders across Europe immediately took the cross; that is, they declared their intention to go on crusade. The expression "to take the cross" comes from the large red crosses that the first crusaders had sewn onto their tunics to show that they were going on crusade. The word "crusade" comes from the word for "cross." At the time of the fall of Jerusalem in 1187, Richard wanted very much to go on crusade; this was the ultimate test for a soldier. But he was still very much involved in the struggle with his father, King Henry, so even the crusade had to wait. But as soon as Henry died and Richard became king, the crusade was the first thing he wanted to do.

There was actually a rather interesting family connection between Richard and the Holy Land. When the Christian kingdom of Jerusalem was set up at the time of the First Crusade, it was ruled briefly by a Flemish dynasty, but the male line failed rather quickly, and so the heiress of the kingdom, a princess named Melisende, married—and I know this is complicated, so just bear with me for a second—she married the *father* of Count Geoffrey of Anjou, who was the husband of Empress Matilda and the father of Henry II. So Henry II's grandfather, Richard's great-grandfather, was actually king of Jerusalem. In the early 1180s, when the direct line of the Jerusalem dynasty failed again, the leaders of the church in Jerusalem needed a new king, and they actually sent a delegation to Henry II in England offering him the throne of Jerusalem, the same throne his grandfather had held—he actually held a hereditary right to it. Henry turned it down. I think he rather wisely thought

that with England and Ireland and half of France on his plate, he had enough to worry about.

But Richard was a different story. We don't know what was in Richard's mind when he went off on crusade to try to recapture Jerusalem. Did he perhaps think he might end up as king? If he got the city back, wouldn't he be a logical choice, with his impeccable Angevin pedigree? Now there was another king by then; when King Henry turned them down, the leaders of the kingdom of Jerusalem had picked a man named Guy of Lusignan. But who knows what could happen? I bet Richard wasn't ruling anything out.

But before Richard could leave on crusade, he had to get crowned king of England. And the coronation was perhaps not the best way to start off his reign. There were some problems. We've seen that coronations sometimes went wrong; there was the misunderstanding at William the Conqueror's coronation that caused his soldiers to burn down some houses. Then, the fault line was between the king's French followers and his new English subjects. They couldn't understand each other. The problem at Richard's coronation exposed a different fault line in English society, the one lay between the king's Christian subjects and his Jewish subjects.

The coronation took place on September 3, 1189. After the coronation ceremony in Westminster Abbey, the king held a banquet with his most important subjects; this was a royal tradition. At the banquet, a delegation appeared. It was composed of the leading members of the London Jewish community. They had brought gifts to congratulate the king on his coronation; clearly, they were trying to curry favor with the new monarch, which was certainly not a bad idea. But the guards at the banquet barred them from entry. Things apparently then got out of hand, and a riot broke out. It spread to other sectors of the city. Jewish businesses and homes were attacked, and a number of lives were lost.

These anti-Jewish outbreaks spread over the next several months to other English towns that had substantial Jewish communities. The riots were especially bad in Lincoln and in York. At York, in March of 1190, around 150 Jews fled from a mob and took refuge in the royal castle. When it looked as if there was no hope of rescue, most of the men inside first killed their

wives and children and then committed suicide. A few often relied on the promises of the mob outside that if they accepted Christian baptism they would be spared. So these few Jews came out of the castle, but they were immediately massacred. Unfortunately, these kinds of outbreaks often did go along with periods of crusading fervor. The idea is, okay, we're going to go kill enemies of Christ, but first we've got them right here; let's kill the enemies in front of us. The same sorts of pogroms had happened during the First and Second Crusades.

We have to go back and think about the history of the Jewish community in England. The first known Jews to live in England came over during William the Conqueror's reign. Over the course of the 12th century, the number of Jews in England had grown substantially, though we're still talking about relatively small numbers, a few thousand at most. They were highly visible, however, because many of them specialized in money lending, and quite a few substantial citizens owed these Jews a lot of money. Some Jews did grow extremely wealthy, though this was never the case for all of them, but there are some who were very, very wealthy. For example, Aaron of Lincoln, who died in 1186, left behind such a large fortune and such a complicated network of debts owed to his estate that the English Exchequer had to set up a separate department called the Exchequer of Aaron of Lincoln, and it met separately for the next 15 years to deal with the ramifications of his estate. The downside of this success was that it bred resentment. The terrible attack at York in 1190 was partly directed at the surviving business associates of Aaron of Lincoln.

This is a rather ugly aspect of English life on the eve of the Third Crusade, and in fact, King Richard tried to stop the riots. I don't think it's so much that he personally cared deeply about the fate of the Jews, but English kings were able to tax the Jews at high rates, and Richard was very unhappy at the thought of this financial resource of his being damaged. His efforts, however, were ineffectual. The outbreaks simply continued until they died down of their own accord. It was a fact of life for Jews in medieval Europe that they might live many decades entirely unmolested, but then something would happen, and it would touch off a mob reaction. It was a very uncertain existence.

But even as these outbreaks against Jews continued, King Richard left England only two months after his coronation. He spent the next year and a half in his French lands, preparing to go on crusade. I mentioned earlier that Richard was very good at logistics; he was a good planner. And you certainly have to be to go on crusade. First, he had to raise an enormous sum of money, a lot of it from England, which was certainly the richest of Richard's dominions. No one liked paying taxes in the Middle Ages. (People still don't like paying taxes, but they *really* didn't like it in the 12th century.) Thus, I think it's a real tribute to the popularity of the crusading ideal that people actually paid up rather readily. I also think they felt as if Richard was likely to make a success of it, and it was going to be a good investment.

After a lot of planning, Richard was ready to go. But he wasn't going alone. King Philip of France was planning to go, too, and Richard's experience of the crusade was largely shaped by the very tense relationship between these two men. In the film *A Lion in Winter*, Richard and Philip are depicted as embittered ex-lovers. I don't think we need this kind of personal complication to explain why these men were rivals. All you have to do is look at the map of France. Richard has a lot of France; Philip wants more of it for himself. Both men are very talented and very aggressive. If Richard is remembered as one of England's greatest kings, so is Philip remembered as one of France's greatest kings. In fact, he later got the nickname "Philip Augustus," so you can set that beside Richard the Lionheart. There is no mystery why these men would not get along.

They do have a complicated history, though. When King Henry was still alive, Philip of France had been quite happy to help Richard make life difficult for his father. But it was all business; nothing personal. As soon as Henry died and Richard became king of England, Philip automatically became Richard's enemy. Officially, they were going off on crusade as two Christian kings trying to liberate Jerusalem. Unofficially, they wanted to keep an eye on each other.

The two kings took different routes to the Holy Land, partly by land, partly by sea, and they did bump into each other at various points along the way. Whenever they did, they found something to get irritated with each other about. But they finally arrived in the east in 1191. They faced a volatile

situation. The town of Acre, which is in the north of present-day Israel, was then in Muslim hands. The king of Jerusalem (he was still called that, even though Jerusalem had fallen to the Muslims) was a man named Guy of Lusignan. As I said earlier, he had taken the throne when Henry II of England had said, thanks, but no thanks. Guy of Lusignan was besieging the town of Acre, but Guy was being besieged in turn by a Muslim relieving force and he needed to be rescued. And here's where the different strengths of the two European kings come into play.

King Philip of France arrives at Acre in April of 1191. Richard arrives in July, and he comes with more money than Philip had, and that money pays for better siege engines than Philip could provide, and on July 12, the city surrendered. The capture of Acre would turn out to be the greatest success of the Third Crusade, and it was largely due to Richard's generalship and his logistical abilities.

But an incident took place right after the victory, and it proved to have very dire consequences for Richard. The banners of the victorious crusaders were put on display outside the city walls. Richard noticed that the banner of Duke Leopold of Austria was flying next to his own. Apparently, Richard thought Duke Leopold wasn't sufficiently important for his banner to fly next to the king of England's banner, so he ordered it removed, and it was found later in a ditch. The duke demanded that Richard apologize for the insult, but Richard refused. The duke left the crusade in a rage and returned to Europe. This was going to come back to haunt Richard later on.

Duke Leopold wasn't the only one who was leaving. At the end of July, King Philip also left to return to France. He had gotten word that an important French nobleman had died; Philip had a claim to the inheritance, and he wanted on to be the spot to be sure to make good on it. I think he also could see that the crusade had probably accomplished as much as it was going to, and he probably also didn't much care for standing in Richard's shadow. This left Richard to confront Saladin alone.

Richard and Saladin had made a treaty after the fall of Acre according to which Saladin would pay a ransom for some of the prisoners Richard had taken in the city. Saladin had trouble raising the money, and Richard became

convinced that the delay was a deliberate ploy to keep Richard pinned down at Acre. This probably isn't true. Still, Richard believed it, and in retaliation, he had the 3,000 Muslim prisoners massacred in cold blood. It took a very long time for them all to die. Remember, in this period, you have to kill people one at a time. This is one of the big stains on Richard's character, most people agree, and it is still remembered in that part of the world.

But the massacre did at least free Richard up to move toward Jerusalem. He headed first for the coast and then he marched south, with Saladin's forces harassing him all along the way. Finally, the two leaders confronted each other in person at Arsuf, and Richard beat Saladin decisively with the famous Norman heavy cavalry charge. But it was simply too hard to make permanent headway against Saladin and his light, maneuverable army, perfectly suited to conditions in the Middle East. Richard got as far as the walls of Jerusalem, but then he had to fall back to a more secure position.

By the following fall, Richard was forced to leave the Holy Land. He got word that King Philip was threatening the borders of Normandy. Richard and Saladin made a three-year truce that gave Christian pilgrims the right to enter Jerusalem peacefully. So that's something. Acre was also kept in Christian hands. That was a lasting accomplishment for Richard. And Acre was, in fact, the last of the crusader lands that are recaptured by Muslim forces, exactly 100 years after Richard's victory there.

It wasn't all he had hoped for, but on the whole, Richard had a pretty glorious record to boast of. But now he had to get home. He sent most of his army back to Europe by sea, but he had a quicker path in mind. He was very eager to get back to confront Philip, so he tried to devise a route home that would allow him to avoid Philip's lands and also those of the German ruler, Emperor Henry VI. The German emperor was the sworn enemy of Richard's brother-in-law, the duke of Saxony, so Richard did not want to fall into his hands either.

This need for speed and secrecy led to an incredible series of events. As I said earlier, it almost seems like fiction. Richard was traveling incognito with a small retinue. One day he was in a small village outside Vienna in Austria, and he was down to one traveling companion, a young boy, acting

as his servant. He sent the boy out to get some food in the local marketplace, but the boy was recognized, and under the threat of torture, he revealed the dwelling of the king. Richard was arrested and taken to the duke of Austria.

This was, of course, the same Duke Leopold whom Richard had insulted all those months earlier after the fall of Acre. Duke Leopold was the vassal of Emperor Henry VI of Germany, who was Richard's enemy. And so Duke Leopold rather gleefully sold Richard to his royal master, the emperor, who imprisoned him in the castle of Dürnstein. The emperor demanded an enormous ransom, 150,000 marks. Now, the bidding begins, because King Philip of France begins negotiating with the emperor about buying Richard. He had a vested interest in getting hold of Richard, but he was trying to get a better price than 150,000 marks. (He's actually trying to get a bargain.) Richard's men in England and his other dominions were horrified at the thought of the king in the hands of King Philip.

So they swallowed hard and raised the money. The taxes required for this were enormous, but the people paid. And there was a further humiliation. In order to obtain his release, Richard had to surrender England to the emperor and receive it back as an imperial fief. Technically, this made Richard the vassal of the emperor. In reality, this doesn't mean very much; there wasn't any real way for the emperor to impose his authority on England. But it didn't look great, certainly, and it seems as if this part of the agreement may have been hushed up. It never really got about in England that this fief arrangement had taken place. And so, after just over a year in captivity, Richard was free.

Now there are a couple of points I want to make about Richard's captivity. The first is another little bit of myth-busting. There was a wonderful story told about Richard's imprisonment, and it plays on Richard's very well-deserved reputation as a literary patron and lover of music. Supposedly, nobody knew where Richard was being held, and so his faithful minstrel, Blondel, traveled all through Germany, and outside every castle, he would sing the first lines of a song that he and Richard had written together, hoping for a reply. Finally, when Blondel got to the Castle of Dürnstein, he sang a few lines and heard the refrain, and he knew that Richard was inside. It's a lovely story, but there is no evidence to back it up. In fact, everyone knew

where Richard was being held. He was the most famous prisoner in Europe. The story is romantic but untrue.

But what *is* true about Richard's captivity is what it tells us about England. England was able to ransom Richard—and it was largely English money that did it, not so much money from the French lands. England was able to do this because England was wealthy and well run. I said at the beginning of the lecture that Richard spends hardly any time in England. But he was a good logistics man. He knew how to hire the right people. He put in place a series of very capable administrators. His first chancellor was the bishop of Ely, a man named William Longchamp. He was very talented but very unpopular, and interestingly, one reason seems to have been the fact that he was born in Normandy. By the late 12th century, English and Norman had merged in England to the point that everyone could be hostile to a Norman and see him as a foreigner. In fact, when Longchamp was forced into exile, he had to travel in disguise—according to one account, he was disguised as a prostitute—and the thing that gave him away was the fact that he knew no English, which tells us that people even of Norman descent were expected to know English by the late 12th century, even if they spoke French when they wanted to seem important. Anyway, Longchamp later did Richard excellent service in helping to negotiate his ransom.

Richard's other important administrator was a less controversial man, Hubert Walter, who was archbishop of Canterbury, as well as chancellor. He was not a very impressive scholar; we have some very funny stories about how bad his Latin was, for example. But he was very good at running England when Richard wasn't there.

Still, Richard was king, and these servants of his were successful because they had his confidence, and we have lots of evidence that he did keep an eye on things in England even from afar. He has to have been the person behind the most important financial innovation of this period, which was the imposition of royal customs duties. Before this, you hadn't had to pay import duties on foreign goods, but now you do. Merchants hated this new tax, but they had to pay it, and the customs became a hugely important part of royal revenues from this point on. So Richard was a great soldier, but he was no slouch as an administrator either.

So far, I have accounted for the events of Richard's reign through the crusade and down to his release from captivity in 1194. What happened in the last five years of his reign? He mostly spent them in Normandy, where he was fighting a more or less constant border war with King Philip, or campaigning in Aquitaine, trying to shore up his position there. He was in Aquitaine in the spring of 1199 confronting the viscount of Limoges, who had defied him. While he was besieging the castle of Chalus-Chabrol, he was hit by a chance arrow from one of the soldiers in the castle. The wound festered, and shortly thereafter, King Richard died. Richard left behind a brilliant reputation, but unfortunately, no direct heir. England was faced with another disputed succession. We'll find out what happened then in our next lecture.

King John and the Magna Carta
Lecture 20

One thing that did get a whole lot better under John's reign was record keeping. … On the other hand, because we have such good records, it's easy to see exactly where John behaved tyrannically.

Richard's brother John, like Stephen, is one of only two kings in English history to have no successor named after him. Why? For one thing, John came to the throne under circumstances that were less than ideal. There was some doubt as to his right to succeed Richard, given that the brother between them in age, Geoffrey, had left behind a son, Arthur. John had three advantages over Arthur, however: Richard had designated John as his heir; John had the backing of their mother, Eleanor; and John was an adult, while Arthur was only 12 years old.

Normandy and England supported John, but Anjou supported Arthur. John acted quickly, seizing the Angevin treasury at Chinon. Arthur took refuge with Philip of France, who of course backed Arthur on principle. He still wanted control of England's lands in France. For the next few of years, there were some very complicated military and diplomatic maneuvers until finally, in 1202, Arthur fell into John's hands for good and then simply disappeared. He was doubtless murdered, some suspected by John himself. This didn't help John's reputation. The rest of John's reign was dominated by three major (and overlapping) conflicts with three major opponents: Pope Innocent III, King Philip of France, and his own barons.

Throughout most of John's reign, the pope was Innocent III, one of the most formidable popes in the history of the Catholic Church. He was a forceful ruler who didn't hesitate to take on kings and emperors. In 1205, he intervened between John and the monks at Canterbury over which had the right to appoint the new archbishop. The monastic chapter at Canterbury theoretically had the right to the free election of the archbishop, but under the terms of the agreement worked out a century before under King Henry I, it was understood that the king was supposed to have a say in the election. Usually, the monks and the king came up with a workable solution. This

time, the monks acted without royal permission, and John pushed back. The dispute ended up before Innocent III, who rejected both candidates and installed his own: an expatriate English scholar named Stephen Langton who had spent most of his career teaching at the University of Paris. The pope clearly wanted to put his own stamp on the English church.

John was outraged, and he refused to allow Stephen Langton to enter England. Delegations traveled frantically between England and Rome, trying to avert an open breach between the king and the pope, but in 1208, Innocent finally placed England under **interdict**. The king's crime was so serious, his whole kingdom was punished. There would be no public church services, no baptisms, no weddings, no funerals—even church bells could not be rung.

This went on for six years. John refused to give in, and the interdict turned out to be a financial windfall: While the church was on strike, he felt perfectly entitled to seize its land revenues. But when the pope began

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John's problems with the church, like his father's, revolved around Canterbury.

encouraging Philip of France to invade England, John had to back down. He allowed Langton to enter England, but then he went one better: He surrendered England to the pope as a papal fief. Although this didn't mean much in practical terms, it was a huge symbolic gesture that would matter a lot when John confronted his barons at the end of his reign.

This of course leads us to John's conflicts with Philip, who had now lost the pope's unequivocal support. The conflict between John and Philip was just the latest round in the rivalry between the French and English kings. These two kings were in a structurally awkward position: Officially, the English kings were the vassals of the French kings with respect to their lands in France. Again, this mostly had symbolic significance, but symbols could have huge political impact.

In 1200, before the papal interdict, the two kings had made a truce. And then, a few months later, John got married, and all hell broke loose, because his bride was Isabelle of Angoulême, heiress to the county of Angoulême in Aquitaine, who was already betrothed to Hugh of Lusignan. The other extraordinary thing about the marriage was that the bride was only 12 years old. Child marriages were not uncommon among the elite in this period, but generally the couple lived apart—that is, they didn't consummate the marriage—until both parties were a bit older. John markedly did not observe this tradition—another stain on his already blemished reputation.

Philip saw John's outrageous behavior as the chance of a lifetime. In 1202, he summoned John to Paris to account for his behavior. There was no way that John could answer this summons without losing face; one king can't just do another king's bidding, so John refused. Philip declared John a contumacious vassal and thus had the legal grounds to confiscate John's French fiefs. John's supporters began to desert him, and John failed to move decisively to block Philip. By 1204, Philip had seized Normandy, Maine, Anjou, and Poitou; only Aquitaine remained—the most remote, most troublesome, least remunerative of all the English lands in France. The Angevin empire, if we can call it that, was no more.

John spent most of the rest of his reign trying to get those lands back. To pay for these efforts, he needed to raise enormous sums of money, which meant

taxing the people of England, taxing the clergy; he even imposed heavy fines on his nobles for the smallest offenses. John could also be extremely capricious and cruel to his nobles, and he quite enjoyed sleeping with their wives and daughters. In this poisonous atmosphere, John tried one last time, in 1214, to get back his French lands. In alliance with his nephew, Otto of Germany, who was looking to become the German emperor, John planned to trap Philip's forces between two armies. The plan didn't work; Otto faced Philip alone on July 27, 1214, and lost. John was out of money, out of allies, and out of time.

This brings us to the third of the three major conflicts of John's reign, the one with his own barons. They neither liked nor trusted John; furthermore, thanks to his military failures, they had no reason to respect him. So a group of barons decided to get together to try to make him be a better king. In the spring of 1215, with the help of Archbishop Stephen Langton, these barons created a list of demands with regard to taxation and good governance generally, and they took up arms to enforce those demands. And in June, at the field of Runnymede on the banks of the Thames, John agreed to this great charter, Magna Carta.

Among the Magna Carta's many provisions, three are especially important to the history of England—and in fact, the entire free world. Clause 39 guarantees trial by a jury of peers to every free man in England. Of course, "free men" would have excluded a lot of people in 1215, such as serfs; but over time, this clause became the basis of the principle that everyone is equal under the law. Clause 12 states that extraordinary or unaccustomed taxes cannot be levied without the consent of the people. Clause 61, which is known as the security clause, was their means to do it. It created a council of 25 barons whose duty was to ensure the king followed the charter, although it was vague on the how. Together, clauses 12 and 61 would be the kernel that grew into Parliament and, eventually, true representative government. But all that lay in the future. The barons in 1215 were not trying to institute a democracy; they just wanted rein in their capricious king.

After swearing to the Magna Carta, John turned right around and appealed to Pope Innocent III to be absolved from his oath. Of course, an oath sworn under duress is invalid under canon law, so the pope agreed. With papal

backing, John went on the offensive again, and England degenerated into civil war. Some barons offered the throne to Prince Louis of France. Others would not go so far. And then, quite suddenly, John died, leaving England at civil war, with foreign troops on English soil, and an heir to the throne who was nine years old. Most historians have found it hard to judge John's reign as anything but a failure. ■

Important Term

interdict: Penalty imposed by the church on an entire ecclesiastical jurisdiction whereby public sacraments may not be performed; usually, interdicts are intended to force compliance with a specific church policy. Pope Innocent III placed England under interdict for seven years to pressure John to accept Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

King John and the Magna Carta
Lecture 20—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the career of one of the most famous kings in English history, Richard the Lionheart. In this lecture, we're going to look at one of the most *infamous* kings in English history, Richard's brother John. John, just like poor King Stephen, who we talked about a few lectures back, is one of only two kings in English history never to have a successor named after him. There has never been a John II. It's our job in this lecture to try to figure out why that is.

For one thing, John came to the throne under circumstances that were far from ideal. There was significant uncertainty about who should really succeed when Richard died. We have to back up here for a minute and remind ourselves of the details of the Angevin family tree. You'll remember that Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine had had four sons. The oldest one, Henry the Young King, had died without issue. The next was Richard, who also died without any children. But next after Richard was Geoffrey. Geoffrey had died before Richard, but Geoffrey had *not* died without issue. He had left a daughter, but more importantly, he had left a son who was born posthumously. This son was named Arthur. This was not an accident. Arthur's mother, Constance of Brittany, was well aware of the popularity of the Arthur stories that we talked about a couple of lectures ago. She was very deliberately giving her son a name that marked him out for a royal future. She wanted him to end up king of England. So you have Arthur, and then there is John, the fourth son of Henry II. Richard had designated John as his heir on his deathbed, but as we have seen before, that wasn't necessarily enough to seal the deal. John does have the backing of his mother, Eleanor of Aquitaine, though, and that counts for a lot.

So the choice was between Arthur, the son of an older brother (Geoffrey's older than John, and that would seem to make sense if you are thinking strictly along genealogical lines), and on the other hand, you had John, a younger brother, but with the very great advantage of not being 12 years old, which is how old Arthur was at this point, and that's not a good selling point in a potential king. So what happens is that the Angevin dominions split on this question. Normandy and England support John, and Anjou goes

for Arthur. But John acts fast. He seizes the Angevin treasury at Chinon, just as his great-grandfather Henry I did in 1100 when he rushes to Winchester to get the treasury of England, and I kind of think they know these stories in the family from being passed down. Arthur takes refuge with Philip, the king of France. Of course, once John is securely on the throne, Philip of France is automatically John's enemy, and Philip then backs Arthur because Philip thought—and I believe he is very right about his—that if Arthur is king of England—little 12-year-old Arthur—it would be a lot easier for Philip to control Arthur than to control John.

For the next couple of years, there are some very complicated maneuvers, both military and diplomatic, between the two camps, pro-John and pro-Arthur. At one point, Arthur's forces actually capture Eleanor of Aquitaine; he captures his own grandmother and holds her captive, but John came to her rescue. But in 1202, Arthur falls into John's hands for good, and then Arthur disappears. He was doubtless murdered. One account claims that John did the deed himself in a drunken rage; then he supposedly tied a stone to the body and threw it into a nearby river. We'll come back to this story later in the lecture. At the very least, John probably ordered the murder; it's his responsibility. This casts John in a very discreditable light. He's eliminated a rival, but this cost him a lot in good will.

The rest of the reign is dominated by three major conflicts. John has three major opponents: Pope Innocent III, King Philip of France, and his own barons. These conflicts overlap with each other in very striking ways. I'll talk about them one by one, but along the way, we'll see how closely linked together all John's problems really were.

First, we'll talk about the pope. The pope throughout John's reign down until the last few months was Innocent III, who was one of the most formidable popes in the whole history of the Catholic Church. He came to the papal throne in 1198 at the age of 38, and at the time, a poet who backed the pope's enemies wrote a poem in which he said, "Alas, alas, the pope is too young!" Clearly, there is a fear that this pope is going to be around a long time to plague his enemies. Innocent was a forceful ruler who doesn't hesitate to take on kings or even emperors when he thinks they have violated church norms in some way. He got into repeated clashes at various points with King

Philip of France, and he was deeply embroiled in a nasty succession dispute in the German Empire. But let's look at what happens when he comes up against King John.

You'll remember that in our last lecture I talked about the very talented administrators that Richard the Lionheart put in place to run England for him. One of these was Hubert Walter, the archbishop of Canterbury. He stayed in office under John; he was one of those indispensable men whom any king would want to keep in office, and he's continuity from the previous administration. But in 1205, Hubert Walter died, and John than got caught up in a very nasty fight over who should replace him as archbishop of Canterbury. Canterbury is one of the famous monastic cathedrals of England. It is staffed by a community of monks. The monastic chapter at Canterbury theoretically had the right to the free election of the archbishop, but under the terms of the agreement worked out 100 years earlier under King Henry I, it was understood that the king was supposed to have a say in the election. Usually, the monks and the king came up with a workable solution—a candidate they could agree on—so that neither side had to lose face about their rights in this situation. This time, through a whole series of complicated circumstances, the monks ended up going ahead and electing a candidate without royal permission. And the king was very angry. He decided to push back and he forced the chapter then to elect his own candidate, and the whole thing ends up in Rome for the pope to solve.

So you've got two candidates. And the pope could have chosen one or the other of the candidates, the monks' man or the king's man. But he rejected both of them and chose a *third* man, a scholar named Stephen Langton. Stephen Langton was an Englishman, but he had spent most of his career in France at the University of Paris, where he was teaching theology. And he taught a kind of theology that the pope was very much in sympathy with. It focused on pastoral theology, on preaching to the faithful. And I think what's going on is Pope Innocent figures, this is the perfect time for me to put my own stamp on the church in England, so I'm going to take advantage of it and put in my own man.

But King John is outraged. He feels as if these longstanding precedents are violated, and he refuses to let Stephen Langton enter the country to become

archbishop. And so you have delegations going back and forth frantically between England and Rome, trying desperately to avert an open breach between the king and the pope. But in 1208, Pope Innocent is fed up and he finally places England under interdict. Now, an interdict is a very serious thing. What it means is essentially that the church goes on strike. The crime of the king is so serious that the whole kingdom is going to have to suffer. There would be no public church services, no sacraments would be administered, no baptisms, no weddings, no funerals. This obviously causes tremendous spiritual suffering. Think about it. Your wife dies [or] your child dies; you can't bury them in consecrated ground. Now, some religious communities tried to get around these provisions (secret masses, that sort of thing); we know because they got in trouble for it. But on the whole, it was a very grim time. Church bells could not be rung. The whole country must have been rather eerily silent.

And it went on like that for about six years, because John was adamant. He does not want to give in to the pope. Furthermore, the interdict was a financial windfall for him. While the church is on strike, while it wasn't doing its job, the king feels perfectly entitled to take all the revenues of the church from all its landed estates. So the interdict does actually help King John balance the books in those years.

But finally, John has to give in, because Pope Innocent begins to encourage King Philip of France to invade England and depose him. And it's not a good thing in public relations if the pope is calling for you to be deposed. That is a recruitment tool for your enemies. So John decides to give in and finally allow Stephen Langton to come to England to take office as archbishop of Canterbury. But he goes one better than that and actually turned the conflict with the pope into a victory of sorts, because John decides to surrender England to the pope as a papal fief. Now, you might remember that Richard had been forced to surrender England to the German emperor as an imperial fief so that he could be released from captivity. Nobody really cared about that any more by this point, so John feels free to give England to the pope. This doesn't mean very much in practical terms, but it meant a lot symbolically, because now Pope Innocent has a special stake in what is going on in England. We'll see later in the lecture that the pope's attitude to

English politics will matter a whole lot when King John confronts his barons at the end of his reign.

So that's the first of the conflicts of John's reign that I wanted to talk about, and in many ways, it was the least damaging and most easily solved. But there are hints in the story I just told of the two other conflicts we need to talk about, the one with King Philip and the one with his barons. Let's talk about Philip first. The conflict between John and Philip is just the latest round in the rivalry between the French and English kings that went all the way back to the reign of William the Conqueror. Because these two kings are in a position that's rather structurally awkward. They were both kings, of course, but officially, the English kings are the vassals of the French kings with respect to their lands in France. As duke of Normandy and as count of Anjou, the king of England is subordinate to the king of France. Now, this didn't mean that the French kings could issue orders to English kings, but it does have symbolic significance, and we'll see in a moment that that can have a huge political impact.

As soon as John becomes king, he and Philip picked up pretty much where Richard and Philip had left off, haggling over castles on the borders between their territories, that sort of thing. But in 1200, the two kings make a truce. And then, a few months later, John got married, and all hell broke loose. Let me explain. John had been married once before, to an English heiress named Isabelle of Gloucester, but the marriage had proved childless, and John was in the process of having it dissolved when he became king. (This is one of those cases of consanguinity. The spouses are related too closely, since in this case, they were both great-grandchildren of Henry I, John on the legitimate side and Isabelle on the illegitimate side.) So that's all in process. He's getting rid of his first wife. Then John encounters a second Isabelle, and in a sense, she proves his undoing. This second Isabelle was Isabelle of Angoulême, heiress to the county of Angoulême in Aquitaine. She was already betrothed to Hugh of Lusignan, a member of a very powerful local family with lands that connect up to Angoulême. This was a troubled region, and the loyalty of the Lusignan family was not as secure as the king would like to see it. He was afraid that if the lands of Hugh and Isabelle were united, there would be a powerful, potentially hostile bloc of territory right in the heart of Aquitaine, and that would make the duchy ungovernable. In order

to prevent this worrisome marriage from taking place, King John marries Isabelle himself.

The extraordinary thing about the marriage is that the bride is 12 years old at the time. Child marriages are not unknown among the elite in this period. We saw that young princess Matilda was sent off the Germany to become empress when she was about 10. But there was usually a bit of delicacy about the age at which the royal couple would officially cohabit. There doesn't seem to have been any such delay in this case, and public opinion was a little scandalized by that. To give John a tiny bit of credit, he does seem to have been genuinely infatuated—she was beautiful—though it's not clear how he felt about Isabelle later on, and she seems to have been completely indifferent to John, at least later in her life. After his death, she simply never mentioned him again. It was an odd relationship, to say the least.

And it had tremendous political repercussions. Of course, the Lusignan family feels terribly insulted by the marriage. The bride had been stolen out from under them. John might have been able to come to some sort of face-saving arrangement by paying them compensation, but he doesn't pull this off, and the Lusignans complained to their overlord, King Philip of France, who was, of course, also King John's overlord.

This was the chance of a lifetime for Philip. In 1202, Philip summons John to his court in Paris to account for his behavior. Technically speaking, as John's feudal superior, he had a right to do this. But here's where the structural absurdity of the two kings' relationship to each other enters in. There is no way that King John could give in and answer this summons without losing face to a terrible degree. One king can't just do another king's bidding. So John stood on his dignity and refused. Philip thus declared John a contumacious vassal, which is a fancy way of saying he was defying royal orders. King Philip thus has the technical legal grounds to confiscate John's fiefs.

Of course, it was one thing to declare John's fiefs forfeit; it is quite another thing to actually confiscate them in practice. For that, Philip is going to have to fight, and at first, it was a tough fight. But here the whole conflict between John and his nephew Arthur comes into the picture. I already mentioned at

the beginning of the lecture that Arthur ended up dead, and one big reason is that Philip is trying to use Arthur. He is trying to install Arthur in John's lands in John's place, so Philip is using the conflict between uncle and nephew to his advantage, and that's dangerous. That's why Arthur had to die.

As I said, John captured Arthur, and Arthur disappeared. This among other things helped turn public opinion against John. In addition, John had treated some of his nobles very shabbily. A number of prisoners had been taken, John wasn't going to let them have the ransom, and this also made them angry. John's supporters began to desert him. John also seems to have lacked the martial spirit for the conflict. Maybe if he'd acted a little more decisively, he could have stopped Philip from advancing into his lands. Contemporary writers seem rather puzzled about why John didn't do more to counter the threat from Philip. At any rate, by 1204, King Philip has seized most of John's lands in France. Normandy is gone. Maine and Anjou are gone. Poitou is gone. Only the rest of Aquitaine remained: the most remote, most troublesome, least remunerative of all the English lands in France. That's all that's left, and this is a catastrophe. The Angevin Empire, if we can call it that, is no more, and John spent most of the rest of his reign trying to get it back.

One reason why John wants to get the land back is because the loss of Normandy has put many of John's barons in a terrible position. Over the years since the Norman Conquest, plenty of families ended up dividing into two branches, one English and one Norman, just because it was easier to administer the lands that way. You might have one son take the English lands [and] one son take the Norman lands, but there were still quite a few that had lands on both sides of the Channel. Now they owe allegiance to two different kings who hate each other. For example, one of the most important barons, William Marshal, has to get special permission from John to do homage to King Philip for his lands in France, and this causes serious tension between William Marshal and King John.

So for many years after the loss of Normandy, John is plotting and scheming to raise the necessary funds and recruit the necessary allies to pull off this feat. To pay for these efforts, he needs to raise enormous sums of money, and remember, he's not getting any money from Normandy anymore or from

Anjou. England has to bear essentially the whole financial burden. So John taxes the people of England; he taxes the clergy. He also imposes extremely heavy fines on his nobles, even when they commit very minor offenses. Certainly, there is a lot of grumbling. There is a body of opinion among the barons that, first, the king is incompetent enough to lose his lands, and now, he's making us pay for his failure.

And he doesn't exactly win friends along the way. For one thing, John was cheap. This is not a trait that is admired in the Middle Ages. He is still supporting his ex-wife, Isabelle of Gloucester, essentially paying her alimony; and it looks as if he actually made his queen, Isabelle of Angoulême, live under the same roof as the other Isabelle just so he could save money on upkeep. That's charming. John could also be extremely capricious and cruel to his nobles. For one thing, he was notorious in his personal appetites, not in the rather sweet way we saw with Henry I. Henry I seems genuinely to have cared for all of his many, many mistresses and illegitimate children. For John, the whole thing is about power.

He seems to have liked to humiliate his barons by deliberately insisting on sleeping with their wives and daughters. (Some of these stories are awful; I don't even want to tell them.) So this is the atmosphere between the king and his barons when John is trying one last time, in 1214, to get back his French lands. He assembles an army and he forges an alliance with his nephew, Otto of Germany, who was locked in a struggle at the time to become German emperor. King Philip of France is backing the other side, and John is planning a complicated pincer movement whereby he and Otto would converge on Philip and destroy him. John is supposed to come up from the south, from the lands in France that he still controls, while Otto would come from the east, and they'd meet up in the Low Countries and attack Philip together. This proves to be too complicated to pull off, and the two armies never met up. Philip ended up going up against Otto alone on July 27, 1214, and beat him decisively at Bouvines. There's a wonderful illustration of the Battle of Bouvines in a chronicle written in the middle of the 13th century by an English monk named Matthew Paris. It depicts King Philip in the battle, just after he's been knocked off his horse. In fact, he was unhorsed several times in the course of the fighting, but unfortunately for the hopes of the English, Philip always got back on his horse again, and he won the battle. And this

defeat at Bouvines means the end of any realistic hope that John will regain the lost lands in France. He was out of money, he was out of allies, and he was out of time.

Because now we come at last to the third of the major conflicts of John's reign, the one with his own barons, and I've been hinting at this throughout the lecture. They don't like John. They don't trust him. They might have been able to put up with all his many faults if he had at least been successful, but he wasn't, and so a group of barons decided to get together to try to make him be a better king. And the defeat at Bouvines led more or less directly to the Magna Carta.

In the spring of 1215, a group of barons coalesces that includes, interestingly, a disproportionate number of northerners (always the most independent-minded of the English). The barons were advised by Archbishop Stephen Langton, now safely in office, but he's still not a big fan of King John—you can see here how all the conflicts of the reign feed into each other. These barons formulated certain demands of the king with regard to taxation and good governance generally, and they took up arms to enforce these demands. And in June, at the field of Runnymede, just east of Windsor on the banks of the Thames, John agrees to the Great Charter, Magna Carta.

The charter was a compromise document. Stephen Langton edited it, and there are a lot more goodies in Magna Carta for the church than there were in the earlier draft. The first clause, in fact, guarantees the liberties of the English church. There are also quite a few very specific, almost mind-numbingly detailed provisions having to do with economic grievances. For example, the charter encourages trade by demanding the removal of fish weirs, that is, permanent fishnets. These fish weirs on certain rivers were obstructing shipping, and so you wanted to get rid of those so ships could go up and down, and that would foster trade.

But there are two clauses I want to pay a bit closer attention to because they speak to two of the most important issues of John's reign, and they also have quite a future ahead of them, and I'm going to talk about them in reverse of the order in which they appear in the document. The first clause is clause 39, which guarantees trial by your peers to every free man in England. This

clause was directed at the arbitrary imprisonments that John was notorious for. From now on, Magna Carta, said, you have to convince other people that someone deserves punishment. Now, this provision does say explicitly that it applies to free men. That would have excluded a lot of people in 1215; there were a lot of serfs who would not have been covered. But over time, this clause proves to be the basis for the principle that everyone is equal under the law.

The second clause I want to talk about is clause 12. It states that extraordinary or unaccustomed taxes cannot be levied without the consent of the people. This clause, too, was a reaction to the events of John's reign. John had had to impose a lot of extraordinary taxes in order to raise the funds for his various attempts to get his French lands back. But it may also have been a slap at King Richard (remember, King Richard had that great idea to impose import duties). At any rate, here again, the barons are demanding more of a say in how they are going to be governed. Clearly, the implications of this are very, very important. We're going to see them play out in future lectures. This is going to be the kernel of what will grow into parliament: the idea that you've got to ask people when you want taxes.

But all that lies ahead of us. Certainly, the barons in 1215 don't imagine that they're founding representative democracy. They just want to stop the king from acting arbitrarily. And this is their big dilemma: Now [that] they've forced the king to promise something, how are they going to get him to keep his promise? They aim to do this by means of clause 61 of the document, which is known as the security clause. The security clause creates a council of 25 barons, and they are given the job of making sure that the king is going to follow the charter. Exactly how they were going to do this was left a little vague. And the security clause is, without a doubt, the part of the document King John hates the most. It was a huge insult to his dignity, and even though we don't see how it was actually supposed to work, he doesn't like it.

After Magna Carta was agreed to, John did something extraordinary, and here is another connection to his earlier conflict with the pope. John appealed to Pope Innocent to be absolved from the oath he had sworn to comply with Magna Carta, and the grounds were that this oath had been extracted from him under duress. Of course, an oath sworn under duress,

according to canon law, isn't valid. So the pope absolved John from the oath. John is now Pope Innocent's favored son, his vassal, and the pope is looking out for John. In fact, the pope was furious with Stephen Langton, his hand-picked candidate for archbishop of Canterbury, for getting mixed up in this whole conflict. With papal backing, John goes on the offensive again, and England degenerates into civil war. Some of the barons conclude that there's no way they were going to get John to cooperate with them, so they took the extraordinary step of inviting King Philip's son, Prince Louis, to come over to England and become king of England instead of John. Prince Louis was at least a plausible candidate because his wife, Blanche of Castile, is the granddaughter of Henry II and Eleanor of Aquitaine. Things have gotten so bad in England that the barons are actually welcoming a French invading army. But not all of them. Some barons feel that this is going too far and back the king. One of John's staunchest allies throughout is William Marshal, the baron I mentioned earlier who had been put in the awkward position due to the loss of Normandy. William Marshal's son John, though, backed the rebels.

And that's where things stood when John dies, rather suddenly, in October of 1216. There is an ongoing civil war with foreign troops on English soil; the heir to the throne, Prince Henry, is nine years old. Can we conclude that John deserves all the bad things that have been said about him? Or is there any case to be made for John?

Some historians have tried to make such a case, especially ones who love to work with royal records, because one thing that did get a whole lot better under John's reign is recordkeeping. This is when you see the beginnings of a series of records, like the close rolls and the patent rolls; these are records of property transactions that were kept in a central location so you can go and look them up if you have dispute about land. On the other hand, because we have such good records, we can see exactly when John is behaving tyrannically. On the up side again, we have yet another reorganization of the royal household, and we have very good accounts from the household from now on. We know, for example, that King John paid his bath attendant 2 pence for his monthly bath. John is the first king for whom we have that level of detail.

But that’s not a lot to set next to a record of military defeat and totally dysfunctional relations with your barons. At the time and since, John’s reign has mostly been judged a failure. Your job as king is to protect your lands from invasion. John failed at that. By losing Normandy, John oversees the rupture of the link between England and Normandy that went back to William the Conqueror. John leaves his young son Henry the challenging task of restoring confidence in the crown, and we’ll see that this was a task for which little Henry was not ideally suited. Henry was going to rule for 56 years, not very well. But before we look at the politics of Henry’s reign, we’re going to pause and look at what daily life was like in England in the 13th century. How had it changed since the Norman Conquest? We’ll find out next time.

Daily Life in the 13th Century

Lecture 21

One central fact about life in this period is that it could be dangerous and even violent. This is surely not different from earlier periods. … But for the 13th century, we've got much more detailed evidence. We don't have to just look at evidence of a skull fracture and try to figure out how it happened; we can read about how it happened.

We're going to pause for a moment our narrative of political events to take a look at how everyday life has evolved over the centuries since the Norman Conquest. England is still overwhelmingly rural, but the population has more than doubled, from around 2 million in the 1080s to around 5 million in 1300. With this growth in population came a rise in living standards as well.

The majority of English men and women lived in small villages and rarely left them. Recall that villages might be attached to a manor, or you might have a large manor with more than one village in it, or you might even have a village that was divided among multiple manors. The manor was a legal entity; the village was a social reality. Both manor and village were economic entities, in that a manor was organized for the economic benefit of the lord and the village for the economic convenience of the villagers.

Manor court rolls from the 13th century onward tell us a lot about life on these manors. The courts were held at regular intervals, usually every three weeks or so, to handle local disputes. They were presided over by the lord's officials. One of the most important things we can see in the records is that there was an active market in land on these manors going back to the 12th century or so. In a lot of cases, these land transfers were between the older and younger generations of the same family. One of the strings attached to these transfers was an agreement that the adult children had to support their parents. Historians call these transactions **maintenance agreements**. The really intriguing thing is, why were these agreements necessary? Clearly a lot of parents felt they had reason to worry about being left out in the cold. Other transfers are evidence of some economic mobility among the residents

of a manor—not always upward. Families sold off part or all of their land; others accumulated larger and larger holdings. Over time, villages became economically stratified.

At the top of the village social strata were prosperous families holding farms of 100 acres or more. Some of them may have accumulated wealth by serving their lords as reeves. Rich villages also hired poorer neighbors to work their land. In the vast middle layer of society were families holding 40 acres or so—enough to feed themselves and employ one or two servants. Beneath them were the cottagers, who held small plots of land too small for subsistence. These are the villagers who hired themselves out as labor on their neighbors' farms. Finally, there were landless laborers who often moved from village to village in search of work.

The proliferation of parish churches in this period is actually a sign of economic growth—one sign of many.

Interestingly, this social hierarchy didn't necessarily correspond to the villagers' legal status. A person could be very rich but be a serf, whereas even someone who was very poor might still be free. Being a serf was not the same as being a slave; slavery was gone from England by the 13th century. Being a serf meant being tied to a manor, period. There were no complicated degrees of freedom, thanks in large part to the legal reforms of Henry II. Since only free persons had the right to use the courts, it was important to clarify who was free and who was not. Therefore, a lot of litigation in the manor court rolls concerns people establishing their status.

Another strange fact to the modern mind is that land could be free or unfree, just like people. Free land didn't owe obligations to a lord, whereas servile land did. Free land was obviously more attractive to a potential buyer. Having people of different status and land of different status combined with a very active market in land led to some interesting complications. A free peasant might buy servile land, so he wouldn't personally owe any labor, but his land might, so he'd have to make sure they were fulfilled. Conversely, a rich serf might buy free land, and he owned it free and clear with no obligations. This

confusion of statuses is one reason why the whole system broke down over the next few centuries.

Life in the 13th century could still be dangerous and violent. In 1194, the office of coroner was created to investigate suspicious deaths, and their records—called coroners' rolls—pass down the details about how English men, women, and children met untimely ends. They show a strikingly high incidence of manslaughter. There are also many accidents recorded in these rolls, especially concerning young children—unsurprising in an agricultural society where both parents are working from morning to night.

The parish church—a new feature in 13th-century England—was the center of village life. Parish priests often lived very much like their parishioners: They were often married, either officially or unofficially, and they usually farmed some land attached to the church. On Sundays and feast days, the church was the social hub of the village. The church was also the site of baptisms, weddings, funerals, and all sorts of other rituals central to the life of the village. The proliferation of parish churches in this period is actually a sign of economic growth—one sign of many.

Life is generally improving in this period, although it's not getting better for everybody, and it's not improving at the same rate for everybody. The economy, although still primarily agricultural, is becoming more specialized and commercialized. The climate in the 12th century and 13th centuries was warm and mild, improving crop yields. Crops still failed from time to time, but we have no records of large-scale famine. Farmers moved beyond subsistence and started growing crops for the market more regularly. This makes sense, because between the Norman Conquest and the 1220s, 125 market towns were founded in England, and there were many smaller markets springing up throughout the country. Between 1199 and 1272, the kings licensed some 770 markets; in that same period, 920 new annual fairs were established.

One way to trace increasing commercialization is through the increasing circulation of money. Between 1086 and 1300, the increase in the money supply was about 24-fold. By the 13th century, most coins were minted at London or Canterbury. The year 1279 saw the first minting of small change,

which means small-scale transactions were shifting from the barter economy to the money economy.

Aside from agriculture, England's hardiest industry was wool. The pastoral lowland regions began to raise sheep and produce wool on a large scale; ultimately, this product would transform the English economy. The industry was pioneered by the Cistercian monasteries of northern England, whose breeding and raising techniques were adopted by laymen. Wool was by far the most important export from England throughout this period.

Much of England's economic life was centered on England's two dozen or so cathedral towns. The bishops were engines of job creation in themselves, although many cathedrals were built in already thriving towns. Bishops could literally make or break the economic fortunes of a town. The arrival of Gothic architecture in the early 13th century led to a building boom that in itself is evidence of the increasing prosperity in England. ■

Important Term

maintenance agreement: Formal agreement, registered in a manor court, whereby adult children assumed management of the family holding in return for guaranteeing their elderly parents a specified domicile and allowance of food and clothing.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Daily Life in the 13th Century

Lecture 21—Transcript

Welcome back. We left off in the last lecture somewhat in suspense about what was going to happen in England at the end of King John's reign. There was a civil war raging; there's a French army on English soil. I know you'll want to find out what happens next, but we're going to have to wait, because I want to pause during this lecture and take one of our breaks from the narrative of political events.

The last time we took such a break we looked at Arthurian literature and courtly love, and certainly at that point, in the 12th century, that was very much a preoccupation of the elite, the nobles and courtiers who lived in the kind of world where people would have time to sit around listening to this kind of literature being performed. Today, I want to take a different sort of topical detour. I want to look again at daily life, ordinary, everyday life in all its messy complexity, and we'll try to see how it's changed in the years since the Norman Conquest. So today, daily life in the 13th century.

Now, England is still overwhelmingly rural in this period. But one central fact to note is that there are a lot more people than before. English population grew substantially in the period between Domesday Book and the 13th century. At the time of Domesday Book, it was probably around 2 million in England. By 1300, it was probably up around 4 or 5 million. And living standards are rising at the same time population is, so that's a lot of growth. I'm going to talk about growth later in the lecture, but we're going to start on the local economic level and work up, so we'll start with life in the most basic building block of English society, the village.

For the vast majority of people in England, you're spending most of your time in your village. I explained in our lecture about Domesday Book that villages might not be the same as a manor. In other words, you might have one lord in charge of a whole village, or the village might be divided between two or more lords, or you might have a very large manor that had more than one village in it. The manor is a legal entity, and the village is a social entity; it was a social reality on the ground. Both manor and village are economic entities, of course, in that a manor was organized for the economic benefit

of the lord, and the village is organized for the economic convenience of the villagers—that's all that negotiating about plowing different strips of land that I talked about before. But a lot of times, the village and the manor are the same, and it's always a bit easier for the historian when that's the case.

Now, historians love manors, because manors had courts. And especially from the 13th century on, we have records from these courts that can tell us a lot about life on these manors. These records are called court rolls, because they were sewn end to end and stored in rolls, just like the pipe rolls of the Exchequer that we talked about before. The records were kept in a highly abbreviated Latin, and it takes a lot of training to learn how to read these records today, but once you do, you can find out about a lot of great stuff. The courts would be held at regular intervals, usually every three weeks or so, and at these courts, you would handle any disputes that arose on the manor. They would be presided over by the lord's officials on the manor.

One of the most important things we can see in the records is the fact that there was an active market in land on these manors. We see this as far back as our records go, so this might have started earlier, maybe in the 12th century. These land transactions would be formally recorded in the manor court rolls. There were many types of land transactions, and I want to talk about two of these. The first is very interesting from a social point of view. You see a lot of cases where the older generation in a family is transferring ownership of their property to the younger generation. These are older people handing over responsibility for the farm to their adult children. Now, the really fascinating part of these transactions is that there are strings attached. The parents are retiring, effectively, but they want support in their retirement, so these agreements spell out in great detail exactly what obligations the adult children have toward their parents. For that reason, historians call these transactions "maintenance agreements." The agreements will often specify exactly where the older people will live; there might be provision for a small cottage to be built for them while children take over the main house. Often, you'll get details about how they will be fed and clothed. The really intriguing thing is: Why are these agreements necessary? Clearly, a lot of parents felt they had reason to worry that if they handed everything over to their kids without any legal guarantees, they'd be left out in the cold. Maybe they've seen that happen to a neighbor, and they aren't taking any chances.

The second kind of transaction you see in the court rolls is much more mundane, but it's very important for getting a sense of what life was like on these manors. You can see some families trading up and some families trading down. You see families forced to sell all or part of their land, and you see other families buying up land and accumulating larger and larger holdings. The result over time is that these village societies end up being economically stratified. We don't know for sure if there ever was a time when everyone in the village had equal holdings of land. But certainly by the 13th century, when we can look at this in detail, there are winners and losers. Let me run through village hierarchy briefly from top to bottom.

At the top, you have the most prosperous villagers. They might hold farms of maybe 100 acres or more. One way they may have gotten together the money to buy all this extra land may have served the lord of the manor, maybe as a reeve; this is the local officials we talked about before. There were many ways to make a little extra money if you were a reeve, not all of these make you popular, but you could end up with enough money to buy more land. And then you'd hire your poorer neighbors to help you work that land, so these rich villagers would be the employers of other villagers.

Below this top layer, there was the vast middle. These families might hold maybe 40 acres or so, enough to feed themselves and to employ maybe one or two servants. Underneath this layer were the cottagers. They would have a tiny plot of land they could live on, but it would not generate enough food or income to support them, so they would be the ones to hire themselves out to the richer villagers. And finally, at the absolute bottom, there are the landless laborers who had to find a home with their employers. They could be quite rootless. They might travel far and wide in search of employment.

That's the social hierarchy in the typical village, and I must say that this is a generalization. It holds true for many of the villages devoted to arable farming, that is, to the growing of crops. But the social organization in the pastoral areas of England, where dwellings were scattered much more widely, that was quite a bit looser.

Now, the interesting thing about this social hierarchy that I've laid out is that it's not the same as the *legal* status of the people concerned. This is

really an odd fact; it's hard, I think, for modern people to grasp this. But the legal status of a peasant in 13th-century England and the economic status of that peasant are not necessarily the same; that is, you could have an unfree peasant who was very rich. Conversely, you could have a free peasant who was very poor. Let me try to explain how this worked.

By this point in England, all people are either free or unfree. Now, being unfree didn't mean you are a slave. Slavery is pretty much gone by the 13th century. By this point, you are either a serf or you are free. You are either tied to the manor or you're not. This was certainly much simpler than the situation we saw at the time of Domesday Book, when there were lots of different degrees of freedom and unfreedom. One big reason that things were clearer by the 13th century has to do with the legal reforms of Henry II. Once people are flocking to the royal courts, which is something he wanted to encourage, it becomes important to know exactly who was entitled to use the courts, and only free men were allowed to, so there was a big incentive to clarify if people are free or not. And in these years, there is a lot of litigation concerned with whether people were free or not. It matters to people to establish that they were free. It had a symbolic importance, as well as a legal importance, and—in practical terms—it could get you out of a lot of nasty obligations if you could prove you are free. Unfree peasants are often obliged to do the worst work on the manor; they had to work more and work more days, and they had to do the degrading jobs, like spreading manure. So it was better to be free, for sure.

In one sense, things are less complicated than at the time of Domesday. But wait! Things in medieval England are never simple; they're just complicated in different ways. Because land could have a status, just like people. Land could be either free or unfree. Free land doesn't owe obligations to a lord, whereas servile land does. So when you bought a piece of land, this was one of the things you definitely wanted in the disclosure statement. Is this land free or servile, and what obligations might we owe if we take this land on? The fact that you have people of different status and land of different status and the fact that you have a very active market in land could lead to some interesting complications. You might have a free peasant who had bought some servile land, so he doesn't *personally* owe any labor services, but his *land* might, so he'd have to make sure they were fulfilled by somebody, either

himself or someone he hired. Conversely, you might have a rich serf who had bought some free land, and he owns it free and clear, with no obligations. Now, this is all probably perfectly clear to most of the people involved, but it's rather confusing to us, and I do think that this confusion of statuses is perhaps one reason why we're going to see the whole system break down over the next few centuries, and serfdom would pretty much disappear by the end of the period we are covering in this course. It's probably not the only or most important reason why this happens, but one reason. More on that to come.

For right now, I want to talk a little bit about life in these villages. Now that we've established that they're very complex. We're not dealing with an undifferentiated mass of peasants all toiling at the same rate. One central fact about life in this period is that it can be dangerous and even quite violent. This is surely not different from earlier periods; we talked about this when we looked at Anglo-Saxon evidence from cemeteries, for instance. But for the 13th century, we've got much more detailed evidence. We don't have to rely only on archaeology or just look at evidence of a skull fracture and try to figure out how it happened; we can read about how it happened. That's because we have a new kind of record in the 13th century. In 1194, the office of coroner was created to investigate suspicious deaths. The coroners kept records, and as you might suspect, they are called coroners' rolls. In these rolls, you get lots of details about how English men, women, and children met their untimely ends.

One of the striking things in these coroners' rolls is the very high incidence of manslaughter. The rates of manslaughter were really very high. Often, these incidents are unpremeditated acts, but sometimes, there seem to have been very longstanding feuds that lay behind them. This is a culture that had not entirely abandoned self-help methods of resolving disputes. For example, we have records from the royal courts of a case in Somerset in 1258 in which somebody was killed while attacking another party in a dispute over lands that stretched back many years. It had started with one side impounding the other side's cattle, and over years, it escalated and resulted in manslaughter.

But there are also a striking number of accidents recorded in the coroners' rolls, and many of these involve young children. It's important to keep in

mind that this is an agricultural society in which both parents are busy from morning to night; the tasks are endless. Often, small children seem to have been allowed to fend for themselves without much supervision. The coroners' rolls are full of children who fell in ditches that were full of rainwater and drowned, or they were trampled by beasts when they accidentally wandered into a paddock, and there are lots of these really horrible cases; they might be burned by the fire in the family hearth. There weren't any fancy hearth screens in those days, and children could and did literally fall into the fire and burn to death.

Now, what sort of consolation might be available to the parents if such a disaster befell them? They would probably turn to their parish church, because that's the center of village life. Parish churches were actually fairly new in most parts of England. In the Anglo-Saxon period, you'll remember, you mostly had large minster churches that served a wide area around them. But starting in the very late Anglo-Saxon period, you start to get smaller churches being built to serve smaller areas, and this picked up a lot after the Norman Conquest. Often, the initiative came from the local lord, because there could be valuable economic rights associated with churches; people had to pay tithes to churches, for example, a tenth part of their produce to support the work of the priest in the church. In reality, some of that went to the lord of the church.

But these new parish churches were extremely popular. They were staffed by priests, and these priests often lived very much like their parishioners. As we've seen before, they were often married, either officially or unofficially, and they usually farmed the land attached to the church, so for much of the week, the priest might be doing a lot of the same tasks as his neighbors. But on Sundays, the church is the social hub of the village. After worship, there would be social gatherings of all kinds at the church, and we know that these could get a little rowdy on occasion (a certain amount of ale tended to be consumed). And this would not just happen on Sundays, because there were many feast days when there was supposed to be a rest from labor, celebrating various saints. Officially, there were about 100 of these, but they were not all observed in every parish. But the church would have been the site of baptisms, and weddings, and funerals, and all sorts of other rituals that were central to the life of the village.

Now, the proliferation of parish churches is actually a sign of economic growth, and it's one sign of many. Life is generally improving in this period. It's not getting better for everybody, and it's not improving at the same rate for everybody (we saw that with the winners and losers on the manors), but the trend is definitely upward on a material level. This has to do first and foremost with the economy. It's growing, and it's becoming more specialized and more commercialized. Of course, the economy is still overwhelmingly based on agriculture, so if the agricultural sector is doing well, so is everything else. One factor that helps a lot is the weather in the 13th century is generally pretty favorable. It may have been even better in the 12th century. It looks as though the temperatures then were at their warmest, and this was actually a good thing in terms of crop yields, but the 13th century is still a good period with regard to weather. It's not too wet or too dry, and that's crucial when you are trying to grow cereal crops, which are very sensitive to amounts of rainfall. This is not to say that everything always went well. Every few years, there would still be crop failures, and there could be a lot of suffering during those years, but in the 13th century, you don't see a lot of large-scale dearth where lots of people die of hunger. It's a pretty good time.

And agriculture was shifting its focus in England. Previously, a lot of agriculture had basically been oriented toward subsistence, though there was always the need to come up with some cash crops for taxes and other expenses. But starting in the 12th century and into the 13th, you begin to see farmers reorient their efforts toward producing crops more for the market. You begin to see some regional specialization. One very interesting way that you can trace this shift is the fact that on a lot of English farms, there was a changeover from oxen to horses as draft animals. Remember in Domesday Book how teams of oxen are a very big deal? You wanted to know how many teams of oxen were on an estate. They are the measure of wealth for an estate, how many teams of oxen you had. Well, oxen are very strong, stronger than horses, but they're not very fast. If you want an animal that can multitask, that is, an animal that can plow your fields one day and then turn around and pull a cart with some produce in it to market the next day, you want a horse. Now, these would be big, strong horses, not a delicate ladies' riding horse but something a little like a Clydesdale probably. A horse can get you to a market that was 10 miles or so away and get you back on the same day; an ox can't do that. So we can tell that when English farmers are

getting rid of oxen and taking up horses, they're producing with an eye to the market. They're willing to give up a little drawing power in exchange for the flexibility that horses had to offer.

And this makes sense because we know that there were more and more markets to draw your produce to with your brand-new horses. Between the Norman Conquest and the 1220s, 125 towns were founded in England; that means places that were deliberately planned in advance as towns that would be centers of trade. These would have been the largest areas where goods changed hands, but there were many smaller markets throughout the country, and these increased in number tremendously, as well. We know something about their numbers because they had to be licensed; you'll remember that licensing markets was one of the few roles the kings played in the English economy. Well, between 1199 and 1272, the kings licensed some 770 markets, and that's half of the total number of markets that existed in the whole Middle Ages. This was a huge upsurge. There was also a huge increase in the number of fairs. In that same period, 1199 to 1272, 920 new fairs were established.

What's the difference between a market and a fair? A market is something that happens every week at a certain place on a certain day. (There was actually a lot of controversy in this period over whether you could have a market on a Sunday.) A fair, on the other hand, happens once a year, usually over a number of days, often associated with the feast day of a certain saint. Churches were often the sponsors of these fairs, so the fair would be named after their patron saint, and of course, the church got to keep a portion of the proceeds of the fair. One of these fairs is particularly interesting because it gave us a word we probably use without ever thinking that it comes out of medieval England. The monks of Ely held a fair every year in June for their saint, St. Audrey. At this fair, necklaces of silk and lace were sold, and these were often pretty shabby things; they got a reputation for being pretty low class. And so from St. Audrey, we get our word "tawdry," which applies to anything kind of cheap and tired. But I think the fact that you could even get a phenomenon like this and that it became so widely known that it entered the language is a sign of how important these fairs are. The English economy is clearly becoming much more commercialized than it had been a few centuries before.

One way you can trace this growth in commercialization is with the increasing circulation of money. Between 1086 and 1300, the increase in the money supply in England is about 24-fold. Many, many more people were coming into contact with money on a regular basis. There is also a shift in the way money is being minted. We're long past the days of individual moneyers set up as lone entrepreneurs striking one coin at a time. (Perhaps the fate of the moneyers under Henry I had something to do with that!) Now, by the 13th century, most coins are being minted in two big central mints at London and Canterbury, largely because of the need to change money coming in from foreign merchants, which is another sign of economic growth, actually needing currency exchange. Another change in the coinage system took place in 1279, when you get the minting of the first small change. Up until now, the only coins in circulation are silver pennies, and that was a pretty valuable coin; you couldn't just pay for a drink in a tavern with a silver coin. Small-scale transactions still had to be done by barter. But in 1279, the government begins minting halfpennies and farthings (half-pennies and quarter-pennies). This makes it much easier to conduct everyday transactions by means of coins—probably still not a drink in a tavern, but certainly, you could do a lot more things with a coin than you could before.

Most transactions using coins are wholesale not retail, if you will. And the most important industry that would have needed to engage in those transactions was the wool industry. So far, I've talked in this lecture almost exclusively about life in arable regions of England. Of course, we must keep in mind, there wasn't a hard and fast distinction; there wasn't a border between the two zones. There were many areas of mixed agriculture, where there was some sheep raising and some growing of crops. But in this period, you really see the pastoral areas begin to come into their own. You start to see the raising of wool on a large scale, and that is ultimately going to transform the English economy. One of the biggest engines of this transformation was an order of monks known as the Cistercians. They had a lot of monasteries in the north of England, which was good sheep-raising country. They organized their grazing lands very efficiently, and they pioneered good breeding techniques. Other landowners followed suit, and soon, England is producing huge quantities of raw wool for export to the Low Countries, where it would be woven into finished cloth. Wool is by far the most important export from England throughout this period.

Now, life in the wool-growing regions was different from life in the arable areas in certain ways. Settlements were smaller and more scattered; parish churches might be scarcer and understaffed; contact with the royal administration is a lot more sporadic. These areas could be quite a bit rougher than the more settled villages. But as the wool trade expands, they do partake of the general rise in prosperity in 13th-century England.

One important thing that goes along with these economic changes—the increase in markets and fairs, the increase in coinage and trade—is that people's horizons are expanding. Most villages were within a day's walk of at least one weekly market. You might have to walk a little farther to get to a yearly fair, but again, most English people would have been able, if they chose, to attend at least one yearly fair where they could buy themselves some small luxuries, like pins or maybe some tawdry lace. It would even be possible for many Englishmen, at least a few times in their lives, to travel to one of the larger towns, maybe one of the cathedral cities.

Let me say just a few words, then, about cathedrals. It's a vast subject, one I can't possibly do justice to in a course of this kind, but I want to talk about the social and economic context for cathedrals. By the 13th century, there are some two dozen cathedrals in England. Most of them were in thriving towns. This was not entirely an accident, of course. Bishops brought with them a lot of apparatus that needed support, so bishops were engines of job creation in themselves. But a lot of the cathedral cities of England by the 13th century have actually been chosen *because* they were flourishing towns. Back in the Anglo-Saxon period, there had been a trend to make cathedrals more monastic. At that time, bishops were looking for cathedrals to be places almost of retirement from the world. A lot of the new Norman bishops who came in after the Conquest were far less interested in that. They wanted to be where the action was. And so you see the transfer of some episcopal sees from small towns to larger towns. In the late 11th century, for example, the bishopric of Elmham in East Anglia was moved to Norwich. Norwich was by far the most important town in that part of England.

But in some cases, bishops could literally make or break the economic fortunes of a town. The bishop of Salisbury in the early 13th century got fed up with the cramped site on which his cathedral stood; it was right next to

a royal castle on top of a hill and there was no room to expand. He moved the cathedral a few miles away to the banks of the Avon River, a new town grew up around the new cathedral, and the settlement around the abandoned cathedral withered and died away. You can still visit the ruined site today.

The 13th century was a great age for English cathedrals. There had already been a huge boom in cathedral-building after the Conquest. That's when you saw a lot of Romanesque-style architecture; it's usually called "Norman" in an English context because it's so closely associated with the change of regime. That style is characterized by massive columns and very solid forms; it's almost fortress-like. Then, in the 12th century, the Gothic style arrives from Paris. At first, English Gothic is based on French forms, but then distinctive forms of English Gothic architecture developed. The style of the 13th century is called Early English, and it's very graceful, very delicate, very restrained. Later in the 13th century and into the early 14th century, you get a style known as Decorated Gothic, and the name does really say it all. There is a lot more figurative carving, very naturalistic in style, and you see very elaborate vault ribbing on the ceilings. Finally, in the 1330s, you get the last major architectural style, Perpendicular Gothic. Again, the name explains it all. There is a strong emphasis on uninterrupted upward lines. On the ceilings, you get beautiful, highly intricate fan vaulting; literally, the ceiling looks like a fan that has been unfolded and extended. All of this had to be paid for, of course, and it's a measure of the increasing prosperity in England that it can be paid for relatively easily. I say relatively, because we do know that some bishops overreached themselves. They got into debt, and the number-one culprit was overly ambitious building projects. Still, I think we can all be grateful today that some of those bishops went overboard with the fan vaulting.

We've painted a rather positive picture of life in the 13th century, at least from an economic and social point of view. That's a good thing, because when we return to our political narrative in the next lecture, we'll see that much of the 13th century was dominated by a sweet but very silly king. Next time, Henry III.

The Disastrous Reign of Henry III
Lecture 22

While [Henry III] was a minor, things had gone pretty well. The barons were more or less contented; the royal finances were in reasonable shape. But almost as soon as Henry came of age in the early 1220s, Henry's barons began to complain about him.

King John died in October of 1216 with England in the midst of a civil war and a foreign invasion. It looked bad for England, certainly, but John's death changed everything. Instead of having the choice of a devil they knew (John) and a devil they didn't (Prince Louis of France) as king, they had a nine-year-old boy, a virtual blank slate, to put on the throne. The barons deserted Prince Louis in droves.

One big selling point for young Henry III was his advisers. The most important of these was William Marshal, earl of Pembroke. Marshal was born the younger son of a second marriage. He was so unimportant, in fact, that when he was about six years old, his father gave him as a hostage to King Stephen as proof of good faith, then deliberately and publically betrayed the king, saying "I have hammer and anvil enough to make another [son]." Luckily for William, Stephen was a gentle man and treated William as a welcome guest. We can speculate that his time with Stephen—and his father's ruthlessness—taught William a thing or two about politics. And when John died, William Marshal was on the spot to resolve England's crises his own way.

One of the most important things Marshal did was to arrange for the reissue of Magna Carta in 1217, essentially drawing the teeth from the opposition. He did make a few changes to the original charter, however. The security clause that mandated a council of barons was dropped; it seemed less necessary without John around. He also dropped clause 12 which forbade taxation without consent, but the amazing thing was that from this point on, the English government behaved as if the clause were still there anyway. Finally, the provisions in the Magna Carta that restricted the king's right to

declare new forest lands were hived off into a separate charter, known as the Forest Charter.

The problems began when Henry grew up and took matters into his own hands. Henry had many fine qualities: He was a pious man, a generous patron of the arts, and a devoted husband and father. But he was not much of a ruler. The two biggest issues between Henry and his barons were the two that would figure in many subsequent kings' reigns: patronage and foreign policy.

Kings were the ultimate source of almost all patronage in England; nobody objected to this in principle. But Henry III had an unusually large number of relatives to provide for, particularly his grasping and greedy half-brothers from Poitou (his mother, remarkably, married the son of her original fiancé, Huge de Lusignan, as soon as John was in the ground). His wife, Eleanor of Provence, had another large set of relatives looking for handouts from Henry. This flood of foreign half-brothers and in-laws did not endear King Henry to his subjects at all.

But the most serious disagreements Henry had with his barons had to do with foreign policy—namely, being asked to show up, carry it out, and pay for it. It wasn't so much that they didn't want to serve in the army as that they thought his foreign policy was, in a word, silly. The barons wanted Henry to focus on recapturing Normandy, then Anjou. Poitou came in a very distant third. Of course, that's exactly the territory that Henry III spent all his energies trying to win back—repeatedly, unsuccessfully, and very expensively.

Henry was once again way out of step with his barons on the subject of Crusading. In the 13th century, every competent ruler was expected to go on Crusade. In 1248, Henry not only refused to take part in the Crusades personally, he actively tried to block the English barons from taking part. He was unsuccessful, but the public relations damage had been done, and they later blamed him for the Crusade's failure. A few years later, Henry angered his barons once again by pouring money into a hopeless attempt to win his second son, Edmund, the disputed throne of Sicily and into his

brother Richard's equally hopeless bid to be named German emperor. The barons watched these schemes unfold in consternation and wonder.

Most of these disputes came about because the king and barons had a fundamental disagreement about their roles in government. The king, of course, saw himself as God's anointed ruler. The barons regarded themselves as the king's counselors—in this case, underutilized ones. Smart English kings had always consulted his most powerful subjects; remember the Anglo-Saxon witan. Now the only leverage the barons had over Henry was money. So in 1258, when the Sicilian affair was spiraling out of control, they decided to act, led by Simon de Montfort, earl of Leicester (who had married Henry's sister Eleanor without Henry's approval). The king asked for money, and the barons insisted on some severe conditions which were drawn up in the **Provisions of Oxford**. Among them were, first, requiring the king to hold three formal meetings of the great council every year; second, that the council include 12 men chosen by the barons whose word would be binding; and third, that the day-to-day business of the realm would be run by a Council of Fifteen, who would have the right to appoint the chancellor,

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Henry III's great cultural achievements, such as the renovation of Westminster Abbey, were overshadowed by his political failures.

the treasurer, and the justiciar and would supervise the Exchequer and other local officials. The barons not only wanted to be heard, they were willing to do the hard work of governance.

But kings, even wishy-washy kings like Henry, don't like being told what to do. By 1262, he saw enough cracks in the baronial opposition that he felt bold enough to renounce the provisions. He was quickly up to his old tricks, reminding people why they had wanted the provisions in the first place. Opposition sprang up again, and the king and the barons decided to submit their dispute to King Louis of France for arbitration. This was risky for the barons: On the one hand, Louis was a renowned peacemaker, but on the other, he was Henry's brother-in-law and a king who believed in divine right. Predictably, Louis ruled in favor of Henry. The resulting Mise of Amiens annulled the Provisions of Oxford and all subsequent reforms. The barons were not about to take this lying down. Now there was open warfare in England.

At the Battle of Lewes May 1264, King Henry was captured by the rebel barons. Montfort took advantage of this victory to enforce two demands: First, a **parliament** (from French *parler*, to talk), where the king and barons discussed important matters of state, would be held no fewer than three times a year. Second, the parliament would consist of two knights from every shire and two members from a select list of boroughs (big towns that had official royal charters); these members would be elected locally, not appointed by the king.

This ideal parliament only met once, because unfortunately for the barons, Henry's son Edward was everything that Henry was not: a good soldier and a clever politician. Having escaped Lewes with his freedom, in August 1265, he defeated Montfort's barons and killed Montfort at the Battle of Evesham. Edward learned from the rebels, however; it's wise to adopt the good ideas of your opponents. While the parliaments that followed Montfort's defeat would be made up of the locally chosen representatives the rebels had demanded (a feature that would evolve into the House of Commons), Edward also gave himself the right to choose which barons attended the parliament. Over time, these chosen barons and their heirs would become the hereditary

peerage—the House of Lords. Although these assemblies were not what we would call a capital-P Parliament until the 1320s, the barons' rebellion had unwittingly planted the seeds of modern English government. ■

Important Terms

Parliament: Assembly of representatives of the realm that began meeting sporadically during the reign of Henry III to discuss and approve grants of taxation. Membership became fixed in the 14th century into the House of Commons, consisting of two knights from every shire and representatives from the important boroughs or towns, and the House of Lords, consisting of the members of the peerage, a specified group of important barons.

peerage: Group of barons who were summoned by name to meetings of Parliament. The list was fixed in the 14th century, and the right to a summons to Parliament became hereditary.

Provisions of Oxford: Measures imposed on Henry III in 1258 by a committee of 24 men, half chosen by the king and half by the barons. Three formal meetings of the great council were to be held each year, and a Council of Fifteen would handle daily business, including the supervision of the Exchequer and sheriffs. The restriction of royal authority proved difficult to impose in practice, and the king renounced the provisions in 1262.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

The Disastrous Reign of Henry III

Lecture 22—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we talked about daily life in England in the 13th century, and the picture was pretty positive. The population was growing; the economy was growing; there's a lot of building going on. But we're going to return today to our chronological narrative, and the picture is a little bit less rosy here.

We ended two lectures ago with something of a cliffhanger. King John had died in October of 1216, and England was in the midst of a civil war. There was a French army on the loose in England, headed by Prince Louis of France, who was trying to become king of England in place of King John. It looked bad for England, certainly. But John's death changed everything. All of a sudden, the choices were different. Before, the barons had had to pick between the devil they knew, John, and the devil they didn't, Louis, and they hated the devil they knew so much that a lot of them were willing to back Louis. Now, they were choosing between Prince Louis and a nine-year-old child, little Henry. He had never personally taxed them arbitrarily, or insulted them, or done any of the terrible things that John had done. Furthermore, the young Prince Henry had some very good advisers looking out for him. A lot of barons felt as if things would be a lot different from now on, and they start to desert Prince Louis.

One big selling point for young Henry III is his advisers. The most important of these was a man I mentioned in the lecture about King John, a man named William Marshal, earl of Pembroke. William Marshal is a fascinating character, and we know a lot about him, because shortly after he died, his son commissioned a biographical poem about him, so we actually have a fairly detailed account of his life. Certainly, it's got some family myths mixed in, but you get a good flavor for what life was like in this period for a nobleman who sets out to make a career at court.

William Marshal didn't have it easy. He wasn't an oldest son; in fact, he was a younger son of a second marriage. There's a very famous story about his childhood. It's set during the anarchy of Stephen's reign. William's father, John Marshal, was backing the Angevins, and he wanted to trick King

Stephen into letting him reprovision a castle that the king was besieging. So John Marshal promised he wouldn't reprovision the castle. He wanted to send in supplies. As proof of his good faith, he surrendered a hostage to King Stephen, his little son William, who was about six at the time. Immediately, John Marshal violated the terms of the agreement he made with the king and reprovisioned the castle anyway. The king was furious, of course, and he sent word to remind John Marshal that he was holding his son hostage. John Marshal replied defiantly, "I have hammer and anvil enough to make another." In other words, I can beget more sons. Now, John Marshal was obviously banking on Stephen's reputation for gentleness; this isn't a gambit you would want to try with King John, since King John would kill and mutilate hostages. But Stephen does spare little William; in fact, they spent a happy time playing together with toy soldiers, and William never forgot it.

It's a sweet story, but I think it taught William something. He became not just a master soldier but a master politician. And when King John died in October of 1216, William Marshal was finally free to make war and make policy in a way that is going to resolve the crisis in England and get everything back on a sound footing. One of the most important things he does is to arrange for the reissue of Magna Carta in 1217. You'll remember that King John had repudiated Magna Carta; he had gotten Pope Innocent to absolve him from the oath he had sworn to uphold it. Now, here's the reason for little Prince Henry reissuing Magna Carta. I think William Marshal figured that there were a lot of good points in the Magna Carta, and reissuing it would essentially draw the teeth from the opposition. It was a brilliant move.

There were a few changes, though. One of these was designed to get rid of the most objectionable part of the charter, at least from a royal perspective. The so-called "security clause" was dropped. This was the clause that set up a council of 25 barons who would ride herd on the king. That probably seemed a lot whole lot less necessary now that King John was dead; the country was being ruled by a regency council anyway, so there wasn't much of a fuss about that. Another clause that was dropped, though, was the famous clause 12 about no taxation without consent. The royal government didn't much like that clause either. But the amazing thing is that from this point on, the English government basically behaves as if the clause is still there. The principle is established. It doesn't die, even though it was not in

the actual charter that had the force of law. Our modern principle of "no taxation without representation" is based on a clause of Magna Carta that was dropped but is still observed anyway.

A final change is that the provisions in Magna Carta has many clauses to do with the royal forests, and they are separated into a separate charter, known as the Forest Charter. This charter restricted the rights of the king to declare new forest lands. The forest law had been an irritant ever since the days of William the Conqueror, and here, the king is giving up a little bit of his arbitrary power over the forests. This was a very popular concession. William Marshal's political maneuver paid off. Prince Louis lost support completely, and he was rather swiftly driven back to France. The realm was once again at peace.

The problem is, Henry III grew up. Now, Henry had many fine qualities. He was a very pious man, and he was a generous patron of the arts. He was responsible for a major rebuilding effort at Westminster Abbey; remember, this was the church that Edward the Confessor had built, but Henry really refashioned it in splendid Gothic style. Henry was particularly interested in Westminster Abbey because he was very devoted to the cult of Edward the Confessor, and he even named his oldest son Edward. (Edward the Confessor had been named a saint.) Henry was also a devoted husband and father, one of the only kings in English history to have been conspicuously faithful to his wife. Now, while Henry was a minor, things had gone pretty well. The barons were more or less contented; the royal finances were in reasonable shape. But almost as soon as Henry came of age in the early 1220s, Henry's barons began to complain about him. The two biggest issues that caused tensions between the king and his barons were two issues that would figure in many subsequent disputes in many subsequent reigns. The two issues were patronage and foreign policy.

Let's take patronage first. Kings, of course, are the ultimate source of almost all patronage in England. This was understood; nobody objects to this in principle. But Henry III has an unusually large number of relatives to provide for, and they seem on the whole to have been unusually greedy and obnoxious, or at least, that's what a lot of people thought at the time. A lot of these relatives were members of his mother's family. His mother,

of course, is the notorious Isabelle of Angoulême, the one whose marriage to King John led to the loss of Normandy and the other English lands in France. Well, after King John dies in 1216, she barely waits to bury him before she was on a ship back for France, for Poitou, in fact. And there, she does something slightly amazing. She marries the son of Hugh de Lusignan, the man she had been originally betrothed to, the man from whom King John had stolen her. Isabelle marries his son. Isabelle and her new husband have numerous children, and a lot of them end up at the English court, expecting favors from their famous half-brother. Nobody likes these people. You'll remember from our discussion of the Angevin Empire that there was a lot of hostility to Poitevins, people from Poitou? Well, these half-brothers of the king are Poitevins through and through.

And besides the Poitevin half-brothers, Henry III has to also provide for his Provencal in-laws. He marries a woman named Eleanor of Provence, a rather elegant lady from a pretty exalted family. Eleanor's sister marries King Louis IX of France, so that makes the French and English kings brothers-in-law. But Eleanor of Provence, too, has a lot of relatives, and a lot of them show up at the English court looking for handouts. Now, the English aren't very fond of foreigners. We already saw during Richard's reign that that was one reason they didn't like his chancellor, William Longchamp. This flood of foreign half-brothers and foreign in-laws did not endear King Henry to his subjects at all.

But the most serious disagreements Henry has with his barons has to do with foreign policy, and the reason they care about foreign policy is that they were being asked to show up and carry it out (that is, to serve in the king's army) and also to pay for it. As such, they wanted a say in what it was going to be, and for much of Henry's reign, the barons think his foreign policy is, well, silly. Let me explain why I say this.

The big disaster of John's reign had been the loss of the English lands in France. They had lost Normandy, they had lost Anjou, they had lost Poitou. But the English barons don't care equally about these different territories that had been lost. They are not equally important in English eyes. Normandy matters the most. That was the legacy of William the Conqueror. If English barons have lands in France, they are most likely to be in Normandy. Anjou

came second; Anjou had been part of the picture for England ever since the marriage of the Empress Matilda to Geoffrey of Anjou back in the 1120s. Far fewer barons had ties to Anjou. But Poitou comes a really distant third. Poitou had come in with Eleanor of Aquitaine's marriage to Henry II in 1152, and there had been virtually no integration between Poitou and the other English lands. Almost no one in England has anything to gain in a material sense from reconquering Poitou. But of course, that's exactly the territory that Henry III spends all his energies trying to win back. It was his mother's land, the land of his half-siblings. He wants it back under English rule. And he tries repeatedly, unsuccessfully and very expensively to get it back. It's probably not the best way to win friends and influence barons to ignore the land they actually want back, which is Normandy, in favor of the land they would just as soon cut loose, which is Poitou. To be fair, Normandy would have been a whole lot harder to reconquer, but still, the whole thing did not help relations between the king and the barons at all.

Then there is Henry's attitude to crusading. Here, Henry is once again way out of step with his barons. In the 13th century, it was just expected of any competent ruler that he go on crusade. There was the example of Richard the Lionheart, of course, and right across the Channel in France, there was Henry's brother-in-law, King Louis. Louis was a famous crusader. In 1248, Louis is organizing his second big crusading expedition, probably the best-run effort of all the many crusades. Many of the barons of England were eager to go along. Not only did King Henry refuse to take part personally, [but] he actively tried to block the English barons from taking part. He was unsuccessful; a lot of them go anyway, but the public relations damage had been done. Then, in 1250, Henry suddenly changes his mind and decides to organize a crusading expedition of his own. At just that point, word arrives back in Europe that King Louis has been captured by the Muslims, and so the whole effort goes nowhere. Louis has to be ransomed, and recriminations flew. If Henry had only gone along from the start, maybe the crusade would have been successful, etc., etc. At the very least, Henry has terrible timing with regard to the crusades, and he is just never on the same foreign policy page as his barons.

But that wasn't even the worst foreign policy disagreement the king had with his barons. In the 1250s, Henry III tries to put his second son, Edmund,

on the throne of Sicily. Here is what happened: The legitimate royal line in Sicily, the Hohenstaufen line, dies out in 1250, and an illegitimate claimant takes over. The papacy was trying to get rid of that illegitimate Hohenstaufen claimant. Here, it almost seems as if the pope takes one look at Henry III and sees a patsy. So he offers the throne to Henry III if he would come up with the cash needed to get rid of the Hohenstaufen army. Henry was supposed to fork over £90,000 to cover the costs the pope has already incurred fighting the Hohenstaufen, and then he was going to have to put an army in the field. So he is going to have to spend a lot more even after the £90,000. This was completely unrealistic. Some money was raised, but no army ever took the field, and needless to say, there never ended up being an English-Sicilian dynasty. At the same time, Henry is also backing the efforts of his brother Richard to become German emperor, another completely unrealistic idea.

The English barons have watched these schemes unfold in consternation and wonder. It is apparent to everyone but the king that it's all crazy, and it's very possible that the pope was using the king the whole time as a cash cow. The Sicilian affair was the breaking point between King Henry and his barons. They have had enough.

Now, the Sicilian crisis and the various foreign policy crises that came before it all came about because there was a fundamental disagreement between the king and the barons about their respective roles in the government of England. The king sees himself as God's anointed, running *his* kingdom as he saw fit. On the other hand, the barons see themselves as the natural counselors of the king. They want to be consulted more regularly about the right way to do things. Smart kings had always done this. It's a tradition that goes way back to the Anglo-Saxon witan, the council of wise men, but it's by no means unique to England. It just makes sense to get some opinions about whether you were on the right track. Instead, the barons saw the king listening to people besides them, people like those obnoxious Poitevin relatives, for example. Of course, the people were likely to tell the king what he wanted to hear; those Poitevins would be all in favor of the king's unrealistic schemes in Poitou and even Sicily.

The one point of leverage the barons have over King Henry is money. According to the interpretation of the Magna Carta that had become

common, the barons couldn't be forced to grant money without consent, and the barons quickly make a habit of using every occasion when the king asked for money to extract some sort of concession from him. It becomes a pretty transparent quid pro quo. And if the king didn't have a good offer, the barons sometimes said no. For example, in 1225 the barons approved a tax of 1/15th of the value of all moveable goods in exchange for a reissue of Magna Carta. They want it reissued because the king is about to come of age. That was worth money to them. But in 1242, when the king wants to campaign in Poitou again, the barons said no, and in 1254, when the king wanted money for Sicily, the barons said no again.

And in 1258, when the king looked as if the Sicilian affair was going to take over completely and spiral out of control, the barons finally snap. They are led by a very interesting man. He was called Simon de Montfort, and he is interesting because he is himself a foreigner, a Frenchman who had come to England to try to make good on a rather tenuous claim to the earldom of Leicester. He succeeded because he was charming and strong-willed—so charming and strong-willed that he manages to win the hand of King Henry's sister Eleanor, though they had to marry behind the king's back. It took a while for the king to be reconciled to the match, but he came around eventually.

Simon is an uncompromising sort, and when he sees the kingdom being run into the ground by his feckless brother-in-law, he and some of his fellow barons decide to act. They agree to help the king out of his financial embarrassments, but only on the condition that he accept some very severe conditions. These conditions were known as the Provisions of Oxford, because the assembly that called for them to be drawn up met at Oxford. The conditions were drafted by a body of 24 men; half chosen by the king and half by the barons. The most important of the provisions were the following: First, there would be three formal meetings of the great council held every year. Second, the council must include 12 men chosen by the barons, and their word would be binding. Finally, the day- to-day business of the realm would be run by a Council of Fifteen, who would have the right to appoint the chancellor, the treasurer, and the justiciar—the most important legal and financial officers in the kingdom. The Council of Fifteen could also supervise the Exchequer and the other local officials.

There are a few important points to make about these provisions. One is that they definitely show how important the barons think it is for them to be heard. Please listen to us, they seem to be saying. We have the best advice to offer, not those other people you're listening to. The second point is closely related to the first. The barons are absolutely willing to get their hands dirty and help run the kingdom. They see it as their natural place in the world. They have a stake in good government. This is going to be a very good thing in the long run for England. You aren't going to get royal absolutism in England; there won't be an all-powerful king, because the barons are always there demanding a voice. But there will be some bumps along the way, as we will see. Because, of course, kings don't like being told what to do. Henry III doesn't have the strongest personality of any English monarch, but even he doesn't like being bossed around by his barons. And even some of the barons, the more conservative ones, are a little unsettled by the boldness of the Provisions of Oxford.

By 1262, King Henry sees enough cracks in the baronial opposition that he felt bold enough to renounce the provisions. Of course, if you gave Henry an inch, he'll take a silly mile, and he's pretty quickly up to his old tricks, reminding people why they had wanted curbs on his freedom of action in the first place. Opposition sprang up again, and the king and the barons decided to submit their dispute to King Louis of France for arbitration.

This was a somewhat risky move for the barons, certainly. On the one hand, Louis was a renowned peacemaker. This is St. Louis, the crusading king of France who was famous for his just judgments, which he sometimes delivered in the open air under an oak tree outside of Paris. But King Louis is also King Henry's brother-in-law, and I think even more important than that, he is a king with a very exalted notion of the rights of kings. In France, they don't have these sorts of problems with their barons; the barons didn't go around demanding a say in government policy. So Louis ruled entirely in favor of the king. The resulting protocol was known as the Mise of Amiens, and it was a total diplomatic triumph for King Henry.

But the barons are not about to take this lying down. They rebel again, and now there is open warfare in England. The rebels won a great victory at the Battle of Lewes in Sussex in May of 1264. In this battle, King Henry

is captured by the rebels. The battle is the subject of an extraordinary poem called the "Song of Lewes" that seems to have been written just after the battle, probably by a cleric from a nearby religious community. It's in Latin verse, but it's essentially a partisan political broadside. It lists all of the grievances of the barons' party, all their complaints about the king, and it glorifies the leadership of Simon de Montfort. Political songs of this kind are going to get more and more popular into the 14th century, as you see more and more political disputes took on a national character. There is increasingly a sense that there is a public opinion out there that is being appealed to.

Now, it's a rarefied public. I'll give you a sample of the "Song of Lewes" so you can get a sense of that. Here goes: "The king ought to honor with escheats and wardships his own men!" Now, what's that mean? Escheats are estates where the owner dies and there's no heir, and thus, they revert to the crown, which can grant them out again. Wardships refers to custody of minors who have inherited estates; if you got named to be the ward of a minor heir, you got essentially to live off the ward's estate until he came of age, and the king got to pick who did this. So escheats and wardships are privileges that the king can give out, and the barons thought they were going to the wrong people, the Poitevins and people like that. The song is thus addressed probably to the relatively small number of people who could realistically hope to be in the running for these sorts of privileges. But still, it's a big advance that you essentially have two sides of an argument, and they're taking it to the public. Now, they're also fighting, but we are heading in the right direction if we want to end up with a modern political system.

And this baronial revolt does lead to a huge step forward in this respect, because we see a big advance in the development of what was going to become the English Parliament. Up until this point, we have the principle that the king has to consult with the barons about taxation, but there hasn't really been any formal mechanism for doing this. The term "parliament" at this period simply meant an occasion when people got together to talk about something important; the term comes from the French verb *parler*, "to talk." This had happened periodically during Henry III's reign, and there is even a precedent for it all the way back to John's reign. But these were strictly ad hoc arrangements. The king would decide that it was time to get some people together and ask them for money, and he would send out invitations

to the specific people he wanted to talk to. He didn't necessarily ask the same people each time; it would depend on who he thought might come up with the money, who had standing in the realm, that sort of thing. But the habit was created that the king is going to call people together for this sort of occasion.

Once the rebels won the Battle of Lewes, however, Simon de Montfort decided to put these occasions on a more regular footing. He made two important innovations. First, Simon ordered that a parliament was to be held three times a year. This was much more often than had ever been the case before. Earlier in Henry's reign, you might have years go by without a parliament. So they're going to meet regularly. The other big innovation Simon brought in had to do with the membership of the parliaments. It wouldn't just be random people summoned by the king. There would be two knights summoned from every shire or county and two members from a select list of boroughs (the big towns that had official royal borough charters). Now, it wasn't absolutely new for representatives of these groups to be present at a parliament. During the 1250s, there had been parliaments that included members from the shires, the towns, and even the lower clergy. What was really new was that the coverage is now systematic—it covers the whole country—and also that these members would be elected locally. Now, this doesn't mean that they are elected on a universal secret ballot or anything like that. But it does mean that the principle is established that the localities get to choose who represented them in the parliament. It's not all the king's choice. He doesn't get to choose who he has to talk to.

Now, this was significant because it set a precedent, but this ideal parliament of Simon de Montfort's only met once. The forces of royal reaction were gathering strength. Henry III was a pretty silly king, I think most people agree in that, but he had succeeded pretty spectacularly in producing a plausible heir. His oldest son, Edward—not the one he wanted to put on the throne of Sicily—was already a capable soldier, unlike his father, and he was still at large after the royal defeat at Lewes. In August of 1265, he took on Simon de Montfort at the Battle of Evesham in Worcestershire and beat him. Simon was killed, and the rebel barons were defeated. That was the end of the baronial revolt.

But Edward was not just a good soldier. He was a clever politician, as well. He learned from the rebels, just like William Marshal's regency government learned from the rebel barons back at the time of Magna Carta. It was smart to take on the good ideas of your opponents. What happened was that the form of parliaments in England was forever changed by that one parliament that Simon de Montfort had called. The principle was established that parliaments ought to be broadly representative of the realm; there would be national coverage. From this point on, parliaments included representatives from the counties and from the boroughs. These elected representatives became the nucleus of what later turned into the House of Commons.

The House of Lords, by contrast, grows out of the barons who are summoned by name by the king. Over time, these summonses get restricted to particular families, and only the heads of those families get summoned to parliament. It becomes the distinguishing mark of membership in the baronage that you are one of the people who could count on an automatic summons to parliament. The summons is hereditary; it comes with the title, and those who have it are considered members of the peerage. The major ecclesiastical leaders are also summoned, all the bishops and some of the more important abbots, and eventually, then, barons and bishops are meeting together. So these are really the princes of church and state meeting together.

The division between the Lords and the Commons takes a while to develop its final form. You don't really see that happen until the 14th century. It's a long, slow process that turns parliament from an occasion, "a parliament," into an institution, "Parliament" with a capital P. But it's striking that parliament takes such a huge step forward as the result of a baronial revolt that comes about because the king needs money to pay for a foreign war. Over and over, we see that pattern repeated in English history. When the king needs money, the barons and, increasingly, the broader political classes, the knights and burgesses, extract concessions. We will see that pattern repeated in our next lecture, when we look at the career of Henry III's very talented, very warlike son, Edward I.

The Conquests of Edward I
Lecture 23

Edward has a couple of other nicknames besides Longshanks, and they speak to those twin preoccupations of his. He's called the Hammer of the Scots because of his campaigns in Scotland. … He's also called the English Justinian because of his efforts to reform the law in England.

England's prospects under Edward looked much better than they did under Henry. Unlike his father, Edward actually had a lot of experience governing the country, mostly during and after Henry's captivity. He was a skilled soldier, having not only fought of Montfort but having gone on Crusade in the 1270s. He also looked the part. He was called Edward Longshanks because of his long arms and legs, and portraits sometimes depicted him with a long neck to emphasize his height. This was an asset then just as it can be now; it made him seem more formidable. Edward was also handsome, and he seems to have had a kind of personal magnetism that attracted talent the way his most successful predecessors did. So when Henry III died in 1272, Edward was well-positioned to become King Edward I, and he was accepted by the people and the barons even though he remained in the Holy Land for two years after Henry's death. When Edward returned to England, he plunged right in to his two big preoccupations: justice and war.

Edward was determined to centralize legal authority in royal hands. To this end, he pioneered the use of the statute—that is, a brand new law written to address an immediate need. This is a dramatic departure from the earliest Anglo-Saxon traditions; Edward abandoned the illusion that the king simply "found" ancient laws.

The Statute of Merton, one of Henry's concessions to the barons, is technically the first law in the English statute book. But Edward's statutes were very different. Many concerned criminal law. For example, in 1275, the Statute of Westminster I made culpable homicide a crime subject to execution. This statute also regulated elections to Parliament and proclaimed that it was being written "for the common good and the relief of those who are oppressed"—Edward claimed that his interests and those of the

community were the same. Unsurprisingly, many of Edward's statutes also addressed property law. The 1290 **Statute of Quia emptores**, for example, simplified the transfer of feudal lands. It had the side effect of weakening the importance of feudalism; landholding became merely an economic transaction, not a personal relationship. He also enacted the 1279 Statute of Mortmain, regulating gifts of land to the church, which protected the revenue stream from property sale and estate taxes.

Edward also centralized justice even further than Henry had. From the Norman Conquest down to Edward's time, lords often held private courts for disputes on their own lands. Edward wanted to be sure all the existing private courts had been authorized by royal grants, so in 1274, he initiated Quo warranto (meaning "by what warrant?") proceedings. This caused some consternation among the barons because in many cases, they didn't have a charter for their 200-plus-year-old tradition. In 1290, Edward enacted the **Statute of Quo warranto**, which allowed a baron without a charter to obtain one (for a fee, of course).

Edward formalized the division of the three most important royal courts, the common law courts. Each had specific areas they covered and had a permanent staff of professional judges. The Court of King's Bench handled cases related directly to the king and his affairs, the Exchequer Court handled cases involving royal revenues, and the Court of Common Pleas handled all remaining cases. Along similar lines, Edward divided up the royal administration into four independent bodies, each keeping its own records. The Exchequer still supervised the collection of revenues by the sheriffs and other local officials. The Chancery was in charge of issuing and preserving royal documents and held the Great Seal. The Council was the inner circle of the king's advisers, a kind of executive department or cabinet. Finally, The Household handled day-to-day expenses and other matters for the king and his entourage. The Exchequer and Chancery were now permanently stationed in Westminster; the council and the household, of course, traveled with the king. Because of this, the Household held the Privy Seal, a traveling substitute for the Great Seal. The upshot of all of this is that England is heading toward bureaucracy.

While overall a more successful politician than his father, Edward could be brutal. In 1290, he helped his barons erase their debts by simply banning the Jews from England. (While this may seem arbitrary, it was part of a pattern of rising anti-Semitism across Europe in the late Middle Ages.) There wouldn't be a Jewish community in England again until the 17th century.

Edward ruled 35 years, mostly at peace with his barons. His success as a war leader gave him a credibility that helped him push through his reforms. The conquest of Wales is probably Edward's most famous military feat, and certainly it lasted the longest. Under the early Norman kings, English settlers had made inroads in Wales but had never really conquered the whole place. Wales was made up of many small kingdoms, and they fought with each other as much as they did with the English. Then in the middle of the 13th century came a king who seemed capable of leading the Welsh against the English, the leader of Gwynedd, Llywellyn. Llywellyn refused to do homage to Edward, which brought the two to battle in 1277 and 1282. After killing Llywellyn in battle, Edward set about the systematic conquest of Wales. He built a series of massive castles: Flint, Conwy, Aberystwyth, Rhuddlan, and Caernarfon. His son Edward was born at Caernarfon in 1284 and thus became the first English heir to be named prince of Wales. Edward's castles did the trick; today, Wales retains a separate cultural identity, but its political integration with England has been quite complete.

Edward's efforts in Scotland were not nearly as lasting, but at the time seemed promising. In the late 1280s, Scotland had a succession crisis; the only legitimate claimant was Princess Margaret, the Maid of Norway. Edward arranged her marriage to his son Edward, but Margaret died en route from Norway to Scotland. Edward then claimed that as her would-be father-in-law, he had a say in who should inherit the throne. In 1291, he took an expedition to Scotland just to demonstrate his authority, and in 1292 he convened a court, as feudal overlord, to choose between the two most promising candidates for the throne, Robert Bruce and John Balliol. This episode is known in Scottish history as the Great Cause. The court chose Balliol.

The Scots were divided about this turn of events. Some of Bruce's supporters appealed to King Edward to change his mind. Balliol then defied Edward's

attempt to treat him as a vassal. In 1296, Edward ravaged southern Scotland and forced Balliol to abdicate. Then he did something of symbolic importance that opened up a rift between England and Scotland for centuries: Edward took the Scottish coronation stone, the Stone of Scone, to Westminster Abbey. The idea certainly was to assert that Edward was the overlord of the Scottish king. The stone was used there for English and British coronation ceremonies for the next 700 years, until Parliament returned it in 1996 as a gesture to Scottish nationalists.

So, Edward had taken the throne of Scotland in all but name. But in 1297, a new player appeared, William Wallace (best known to us as the hero of the film *Braveheart*). There are many historical inaccuracies in the movie, but one thing is true: Wallace made life difficult for English rule in Scotland for nearly a decade. Finally, he was captured in 1305 and executed. But Wallace's death did not bring stability to Scotland, and when King Edward died in 1307, he left a lot of unfinished business for his son. ■

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The ruins of Caernarfon, one of Edward I's great Welsh castles and the birthplace of Edward II.

Important Terms

Quia emptores, Statute of: Measure enacted in 1290 to prevent further subinfeudation—that is, the lengthening of the chain of feudal obligation. The statute mandated that when the estate of a tenant changed hands, any feudal dues owed from that estate would be paid directly to the lord of the original tenant, not to the tenant himself. The statute accelerated the process by which feudal ties were slowly breaking down.

Quo warranto, Statute of: Measure enacted in 1290 that regulated private franchises or courts. Any courts that could not produce a royal charter of foundation had to be confirmed by a royal grant. The statute grew out of the *quo warranto* proceedings initiated in 1274 to investigate the origins of all private franchises as part of the efforts of Edward I to regularize the English court system.

Suggested Reading

Carpenter, *The Struggle for Mastery*.

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

The Conquests of Edward I

Lecture 23—Transcript

Welcome back. Last time, we talked about a very turbulent reign. Henry III was not well-respected by his barons, and they spent much of the reign trying to get him essentially to rule sensibly. But Henry won out in the end, and the big reason why is that Henry had a very sensible, very formidable son. Everybody in England knew that eventually this son was going to succeed his father and that things were likely to change once he did so if they just hung on. This was the Lord Edward, as he was called, Henry's oldest son, the one named after Edward the Confessor. And one reason the barons were split during the baronial revolt into two factions is that some barons are already positioning themselves with the Lord Edward, with his succession in mind, looking towards when he is going to be king. The prospects under Edward look a whole lot better. He seemed a lot more "kinglike," and that makes a big difference in the Middle Ages.

For one thing, he actually has a lot of experience governing the country. During the time Henry III was captive under the rebel leader Simon de Montfort, Edward had been the standard bearer for the royal cause, and he had successfully led the royal attack at the Battle of Evesham in 1265 that defeated the rebels once and for all. After that, for the last seven years of his father's reign, Edward played an important part in the day to day affairs of the kingdom; his father was getting older, and he was increasingly happy to leave matters to Edward. For another thing, Edward looked the part of king. He was called "Longshanks" because of his long arms and legs, but this was another way of saying he was tall; his portraits sometimes depict him with a long neck as a way of trying to emphasize his height. This was an asset then just as it can be now; it made Edward seem more formidable.

Edward was also handsome—people thought at the time—and he seems to have had a kind of personal magnetism that simply drew people to him. Henry III was not magnetic in the way that Edward was. Edward attracted talent the way other successful leaders we've looked at did. So when his father, Henry III, died in 1272, Edward was well-positioned to take over the throne, which he did, as Edward I. (Even though there had been Edwards before the Conquest, they started the numbering all over again.) But here's

the incredible thing about Edward's accession to the English throne: When Henry III died, Edward was not even in England. He was on crusade in the Holy Land with his wife, Eleanor, whom he adored. They went everywhere together, and when she died in 1290, the king had 12 elaborate stone crosses built to mark the route of her funeral procession from Lincoln all the way to London. But back to the crusade in 1272.

Here was another difference between Edward and his father: Henry had been reluctant to go on crusade, as we saw, but Edward was an actual crusader. The only other crusading king in English history was Richard the Lionheart, not bad company to be in. And Edward's reputation was so formidable that he didn't even actually have to come back to England right away once he heard the news of his father's death. He stays in the Holy Land another two years. Now everyone knew he was coming back eventually, and they want to be sure he isn't displeased by what they had been up to while he was away. So the English barons behave themselves, and things are pretty quiet until Edward got back from crusade.

When he did arrive back in England, he plunged himself into his two big preoccupations: justice and war. Edward has a couple of other nicknames besides "Longshanks," and they speak to those twin preoccupations. He's called the "hammer of the Scots," because of his campaigns in Scotland, though he was actually more successful in Wales than in Scotland, as we'll see. He's also called the "English Justinian," because of his efforts to reform the law in England; this is a reference to the great Byzantine emperor who reorganized the legal system of the Roman Empire in the 6th century. Now, Edward didn't do anything quite as major as Emperor Justinian did, but in his own way, he made quite an impact on the English legal system, so I'm going to start by talking about Edward the legal reformer, and then we'll talk about Edward the war leader. First, the courts and statutes, then the wars.

Like his great ancestor Henry II, Edward is determined to reform the law. And it's even clearer with Edward I than it is with Henry II that the king's goal is to centralize legal authority in royal hands. One way he did this was by pioneering the use of the statute, that is, of brand-new laws that are written just because there seems to be a need for them at the time. Now, this

may not seem like such a revolutionary concept, but in the 13th century, it is pretty new.

Think back for a moment to what we've said about law so far. We started by talking about the legal system that the early Germanic settlers brought with them from the continent when they came to England. That law was supposed to be the law of the people, and the king's job was merely to "find" it, that is, to say what everybody thought they already knew about what the law was. That starts to change under Alfred as the king begins to pick and choose what the laws should be from the choices he has, some of which conflict. The king is starting to shape the law, but there's a large element of custom that is still driving the whole thing. But Alfred started a trend, and various kings both before and after the Conquest came up with law codes, always with the claim that these were ancient laws they are promulgating. They have the authority of long tradition behind them.

King Edward does something fairly new. He makes brand-new laws—he isn't pretending that they are old laws—and he uses Parliament to do this. This is really the effective start of Parliament as a legislative body. Now, the first actual statute really can be traced back to Edward's father's reign, to 1236. This is the Statute of Merton, but it is not a royal initiative; it was a concession that King Henry has to make to the barons. They are asking for the right to enclose common lands on their estates, and he grants that, of course, in exchange for taxation. The Statute of Merton is technically the first law in the English statute book. But King Edward's statutes are different from his father's. Edward makes laws that *he* wants to make, and a lot of them have to do with criminal law. For example, in 1275, we have the Statute of Westminster I, the first statute of Westminster. Among other things, this statute makes culpable homicide a crime subject to execution. This hadn't been the case before, and it was clearly meant as a deterrent. The statute also permitted prosecutions for rape charges that are brought by non-virgins; such cases had had no standing before this. Later, rape was made a capital offense. The statute also regulated elections, something that was a new concern now that Parliament was up and running; the law calls for elections to be free and fair. This statute was written not in Latin but in French, the day-to-day language of the law courts, and the statute proclaimed that it was being written "for the common good and the relief of those who are oppressed."

Here, the king is essentially claiming that his interests are the same as those of the community at large: We all want law and order.

But it won't be a big surprise, I'm sure, that a lot of the statutes Edward was responsible for had to do with property. There is a very important statute passed in 1290 called *Quia emptores*. It's named for the first words of the statute in Latin. This statute banned subinfeudation. That's a long word, but it's fairly easy to explain. Suppose I hold some land of the king. I'm a tenant-in-chief, like we talked about under William the Conqueror; there's no other lord between me and the king. But then I grant part of my estate to someone else. That person holds their land of me, and I hold it of the king. Instead of two people in the picture, now there are three. What if the person I granted land to grants it to another person? Now that person holds it of my tenant, who holds it of me, and I hold it of the king. This process is called subinfeudation, and you can see that this could get ridiculously complicated over time. There were times when people wanted to just be rid of a piece of land, and this new statute makes that possible. It creates the mechanism for someone to sell their spot in that feudal chain outright and then just be done with the whole transaction. It's a much simpler way of buying and selling land, and it makes it a lot simpler for the land market to function. It slowly weakened the importance of feudalism. Landholding became merely an economic transaction, not a personal relationship anymore.

I want to mention just one more statute, because this is one that Edward wants to put in place very clearly for his own benefit. This is the Statute of Mortmain from 1279. The word *mortmain* means "death hand" in French. This statute barred the sale or gift of land to the church without the permission of the lord of the estate. The statute gets its name because of the expression "the hand of the church is dead." What that means is, the church never dies, so once land goes to the church, it never changes hands again; there is no turnover. This is very bad from a revenue-producing standpoint, because certain fees were due whenever an estate changed hands. When a lord inherits property, he has to pay a fee called a relief to the king, a kind of inheritance tax. So the kings didn't like the thought of land going out of the cycle of being inherited periodically. This statute is meant to protect a royal revenue stream. Taken as a whole, Edward's statutes are there to help the

king, help the people, and foster the idea that the king and people are helping each other.

But Edward didn't just make statutes. He also centralizes justice even more than Henry II had done. He wants even more business to be handled in his courts rather than in private courts. Let me say a word here about private courts. We've already talked a bit about manorial courts that lords would run on their manors. Well, they could also hold courts that dealt with a whole group of estates. Such a group of estates was called an honor, and it might stretch over a fairly wide territory, in the very disconnected way that we talked about at the time of the Norman Conquest. Well, all these lands together would have a court called the honorial court, and in these courts, lords would settle disputes between tenants—anything to do with affairs of the honor were handled in these honorial courts—and lords often had a lot of latitude to handle disputes between their own tenants.

They had a private court just for their own lands. Many such courts had been meeting in England since the time of the Conquest; supposedly, the right to hold them had been granted along with the estates. But Edward I wanted to be sure that all these private courts really were authorized by royal grants; he doesn't want any fly-by-night private courts. So in 1274, he began investigating the origins of the courts using a kind of proceeding called *quo warranto?* That means, "by what warrant?" In other words, by what right do you hold your court? Where's your charter saying you are allowed to do this? This caused some consternation among the barons because in many cases, they don't have a charter going back to William the Conqueror's time. In those days, grants were not always written down. How was a baron in the 13th century supposed to prove his right to hold a court that his ancestors have been holding for over two centuries?

There's a wonderful story about this dilemma. I hope that at least it's partly true. The story goes that the earl of Warenne, a very elderly baron, was summoned to defend his right to hold a private court. Where's your warrant, or charter? Supposedly, the earl took out a rusty old sword and waved it in the air before the king and said, "Here, my lords, here is my warrant. My forefathers came over with William the Bastard and conquered their lands with this sword. And I will defend them with the same sword against anyone

who tries to take them from me. The king did not conquer and subdue this land alone. Our ancestors were his comrades and confederates." Well, whether the king was taking into account the old earl of Warenne or not, he did back down a bit. The result was a statute in 1290 called the Statute of Quo Warranto, which said that if you couldn't prove you had a right to hold your court, you had to get the court confirmed by a royal charter (and, of course, there would be a fee for that). But the statute includes a kind of grandfather clause which takes into account the different standards of recordkeeping from an earlier age. Very old grants, like the earl of Warenne's, didn't need such airtight documentation. This is a good case of where King Edward gets most of what he wanted from his barons—they do have to regularize their courts—but the king makes a realistic concession, and everybody was more or less satisfied. Thus, another example of when Edward is a much better politician than his father was.

And Edward is also a good administrator, or he hires good administrators. He formalizes the division of the three most important royal courts. He really streamlines their functioning. These became known as the three "common law" courts because they administer the common law that has grown up since Henry II's reign. The three courts have specific areas they covered, so you know exactly what cases go to what court, and they now had a permanent staff of professional judges. The first of these courts is the Court of King's Bench, which handles cases that relate in some direct way to the king and his affairs. The Exchequer Court handles cases involving royal revenues, and the Court of Common Pleas handles everything else. That would have been the court that most people would be involved with.

Along similar lines, Edward divided up the royal administration into four independent bodies, each keeping their own records. The first, the Exchequer, we have met before; it supervised the collection of revenues by the sheriffs and other local officials. The Chancery is the second of these departments. It is in charge of issuing and preserving royal documents. The Chancery is the home of the Great Seal that was used to authenticate royal documents. It was kept at Westminster. So both the Exchequer and the Chancery now stay put; they don't travel with the king. It's now too cumbersome for them to do that, a sign of the growth of royal administration since you can't take it on the road anymore. The third royal body was the Council, which was just what

it sounds like: It was the inner circle of the king's advisers; it was a kind of executive department. Finally, the fourth royal body was the Household, which handles the day-to-day expenses and other matters for the king and his entourage. The Council and the Household, of course, do need to move around with the king, and thus, the Household has what was called the Privy Seal, a kind of substitute for the Great Seal. By means of the Privy Seal, the Household can tell the Chancery back in Westminster to issue certain documents, say, if the king has decided he wants to do something while traveling, like make a grant of land. The upshot of all of this is that there is more clarity, far more regularity in English royal administration, than ever before. We are starting to see *routines*. We are heading toward bureaucracy.

So far, this lecture has sounded very peaceful. I've given you the routine stuff first, but the rest of the lecture is all about conflict. Here come the battles I promised, but before I get to Edward's fights with the Welsh and the Scots, a few words about conflicts with his barons. We'll see that the two kinds of conflict are related to each other, because as we've seen, whenever kings in England want to fight foreign wars they needed money, and when they needed money, they often got into arguments with their barons. Most of the time, Edward was such a successful warrior and such a good politician that he gets his barons to go along with requests for money, but [on] a couple of occasions, there were problems.

The first of these occasions is the more interesting, I think, and the more disturbing. In 1290, Edward needed money for his wars, and he was temporarily out of good expedients, of good things to offer his barons in exchange. So he makes a very sinister bargain. In exchange for taxes, Edward agrees to expel the Jews from England. Now, at first, this may sound as if it's coming out of the blue, but the background is that anti-Semitism had been getting much worse in Europe in the 13th century. It was already bad at the time of Richard the Lionheart, when we saw the Jewish community get attacked right around the time of Richard's coronation. But the atmosphere was even worse by Edward's reign.

And the financial picture was very bad for the Jews. Henry III had repeatedly taxed the Jews; remember, he's not getting much money out of Parliament. So by 1290, the community has almost no assets left except the debts owed

to the Jews by a lot of the English barons. When King Edward banishes the Jews, he erases those debts. That's why the barons want the Jews expelled. It was a very brutal form of debt forgiveness for the elite. This is effectively the end of over two centuries of Jewish life in England in the Middle Ages. And there won't be a Jewish community in England again until the 17th century.

The second time the king and Parliament went head to head over money was in 1297. This time, the barons were resisting paying for a war the king was fighting to protect Gascony, the last of the English lands left in southwestern France, part of the old duchy of Aquitaine. King Edward persuades them to agree by reissuing and confirming Magna Carta and the Forest Charter. Now, it's a fair question: Why does the king need to reissue Magna Carta, and why would Parliament pay for that? The reason is that along with the reissue, the king is essentially admitting that maybe some of the taxes he'd been collecting lately fell into the category of what he wasn't supposed to collect, so reissuing the charters was a way of saying, "I'll be good from now on." And in terms of big confrontations between the king and the barons, that's about it.

Now, compared to Henry III's reign, that's not a lot of crises. Edward ruled 35 years, and most of the time, he and his barons are on the same page. One big reason for this is he's a very successful war leader. This gave him a credibility that helped him push through all the other reforms of his reign. He was active in three main military spheres: in Wales, in Scotland, and in France. I'll start with Wales, where he had the most success, and then move on to Scotland and then to France. The conquest of Wales is probably Edward's most famous military feat, and certainly, it lasts the longest. The history of relations between England and Wales is already long and complicated by this point.

It went back to the Germanic settlements and the building of Offa's Dyke in the 8th century, trying to separate England and France. Then, under the early Norman kings, English settlers had made inroads in Wales, especially in the south, but they had never really conquered the whole place. Whenever the political situation in England was difficult, the Welsh tended to take advantage. But they were a divided people; there were many small kingdoms, and they fought with each other as much as they did with the English. And

then in the middle of the 13th century, the Welsh finally produced a leader who seemed as if he would be able to unite the Welsh against the English once and for all. This was the leader of the northern Welsh kingdom of Gwynedd, a man named Llywellyn. Technically, Llywellyn should have done homage to Edward I for his Welsh lands; this was a concession English kings had forced on the Welsh in the past. But Llywellyn felt strong enough to refuse, so in 1277, Edward I attacked him and forced him to submit. In 1282, Llywellyn rebelled again, and this time, Edward responded more savagely.

He wanted to crush the Welsh once and for all. Llywellyn was killed in battle, and Edward set about the systematic conquest of Wales. To that end, he built a series of massive castles that used the latest building techniques. There are a whole series of these castles: Flint, Conwy, Aberystwyth, Rhuddlan, and perhaps most famously, Caernarfon, where his son Edward was born in 1284. This young prince became the first heir to the throne of England to be named prince of Wales, a tradition that continues in the English royal family to this day. There's a later story that after the conquest of Wales, Edward I promised the Welsh that he would give them a prince born in Wales who spoke no English. This was supposed to be a concession to the Welsh. It was a trick, because he really meant his infant son Edward, who at the time spoke no language of any kind. The story is probably apocryphal, but it does say something about relations between the Welsh and the English. It was a pretty thorough, brutal conquest. Of all England's attempts to subdue the lands of the Celtic fringe, the efforts against Wales had the most success. Those castles did the trick. To this day, Wales retains a separate cultural identity, but the political integration with England has been quite complete—more than it ever was with Scotland or Ireland.

Edward's efforts in Scotland were not nearly as lasting, but at the time, they seemed very promising. I think during his lifetime, Edward thought he'd be remembered for what he had achieved in Scotland. In Scotland, it was really a case of Edward taking advantage of an opportunity that presented itself. What happened was, there was a succession crisis in Scotland. I won't go into all the details, but through a series of deaths, the heir to the throne of Scotland by the late 1280s was a very young princess named Margaret who had been brought up in Norway, so she was called the "Maid of Norway."

She was the daughter of the Norwegian king and his Scottish wife, the daughter of King Alexander III of Scotland. So the Maid of Norway is the granddaughter of the king of Scotland. By 1286, she was the only legitimate claimant left in the Scottish royal family. King Edward saw a great chance here and agreed to a marriage between the Maid of Norway and his son Edward. The Maid of Norway is sent for, but she dies en route between Norway and Scotland. Then, King Edward claims that as the would-be father-in-law of little Margaret, he should have a say in deciding who would get the throne now.

He has a strong legal motive for doing this, because he sees this as a good chance to clarify the situation regarding the homage that the Scottish kings owe to the English kings. You'll remember that this had been the issue that triggered the Welsh conflict, whether Llywellyn was willing to do homage or not. Over the centuries, some Scottish kings had done homage to English kings [but] others hadn't, and Edward figures he has a good opportunity now to use some leverage and enforce the doing of homage. So in 1291, he takes an expedition up to Scotland just to demonstrate his authority, and in 1292, he convenes a court, as feudal overlord, to choose between the two most promising candidates for the throne: Robert Bruce and John Balliol. This episode, where the throne was up for grabs in Scotland, is known in Scottish history as the Great Cause. The court chose Balliol, but the Scots were divided about the choice, and some of Bruce's supporters decided to appeal over Balliol's head to King Edward as feudal overlord. Balliol then defied Edward's attempt to treat Balliol as a vassal. This does remind us, a little bit, I think, of the whole conflict between King John and King Philip of France, only now it's reversed: The English king is the overlord that the troublesome barons are appealing to. King John hadn't liked being treated as a vassal; John Balliol didn't either, so he went to war rather than submit to Edward.

This had pretty much the same disastrous consequences for Balliol in Scotland as defying Philip had for John in Normandy. In 1296, Edward comes north, ravages southern Scotland, and forces Balliol to abdicate. Then he does something of symbolic importance that opened up a rift between England and Scotland for centuries. Edward removes the Scottish coronation stone, the Stone of Scone, and takes it to Westminster Abbey. This was the symbol of the Scottish monarchy; their kings were crowned on this stone,

and now it was taken away. It really had to mean something to Edward to take the stone south—the thing weighs about 336 pounds. The idea certainly is to assert that Edward was the overlord of the Scottish king.

The stone stayed in Westminster Abbey for the next 700 years, and it is used in English coronation ceremonies, and then, of course, in British coronation ceremonies after England and Scotland are united under one crown under James I in 1603. In 1950, the stone was "kidnapped" by four Scottish nationalist students and taken to Scotland, I think in a VW Beetle, but it was later returned to Westminster. In 1996, the British government was trying to tamp down dissatisfaction with the constitutional position of Scotland within Great Britain, so they made the gesture of returning the stone to Edinburgh. The stone will stay there until the next time it is needed for the coronation of a British monarch.

But let's get back to King Edward. He has deposed the Scottish king, so he is effectively acting as Scottish king himself, but in 1297, a new player appears on the Scottish scene, a man named William Wallace. He's the main character in the movie *Braveheart*. There are many historical inaccuracies in the movie; the filmmakers really just want to tell a good story. But one thing is true: Wallace makes life very difficult for the English in Scotland for nearly a decade. Finally, though, he was captured in 1305 and executed. But Wallace's death does not bring stability to Scotland, and when King Edward died in 1307, he leaves a lot of unfinished business for his son. The effort to make Scotland a permanent part of the English realm does not succeed for another three centuries.

There is one last conflict of Edward's reign that I want to mention very briefly, and that is his conflict with France over the English lands in Gascony in France. The reason the English were clinging to these lands was trade. King Edward gets very valuable customs revenues from the Gascon trade. Now, the English kings still owed homage to the French kings for Gascony, but there were squabbles about what that meant in practice. King Philip the Fair is trying to assert his full feudal rights over Gascony, and this means that Edward would have to obey the summons of the French court. Edward doesn't want to do this any more than his grandfather John had wanted to, so he refuses.

Now we've talked about the fact that Edward wants to get Parliament to pay for this war, but finally, in 1297, Edward is able to take the field. The kings fight, inconclusively, for the next six years. The reason the war matters, though, is the way it ended. It is ended by a proposal of marriage between the young Prince Edward and the French Princess Isabella. This marriage is going to have very far-reaching consequences, because it is going to give England a claim to the French throne. Next time, we're going to talk about this young prince and princess and about their very complicated relationship.

Edward II—Defeat and Deposition
Lecture 24

But the issue between Edward and his barons wasn't really about sex at all; it was about power and access. I think the barons cared far less about whether the king was sleeping with Gaveston than about whether he was listening to him.

Edward I was a successful ruler. His son, Edward II, despite some recent attempts to rehabilitate his reputation, was a disastrously bad king. His reign was troubled from the start, and it ended in his deposition and (almost certainly) his violent death. The fact is that Edward II didn't seem to like being king. He was famously uninterested in the routine work of government, but the real problem was what he did with his time instead of attending to royal business. He was also unlucky enough to rule during one of the worst natural disasters to hit England during the Middle Ages, the Great Famine. He presided over England's worst military defeat since the Battle of Hastings, the humiliating rout at Bannockburn.

Edward II's reign naturally breaks down into four periods of crisis: first, the conflict with the barons over his favorite, Piers Gaveston; second, the disaster at Bannockburn and the economic crisis associated with the famine; third, the conflict with the king's cousin, Thomas, earl of Lancaster; and fourth, the war with the barons over the king's patronage of the Despensers. Of the four, the conflict over Gaveston was the most bitter. Gaveston was from a minor noble family in Gascony, an English-ruled province of southwestern France. He had been brought to the royal household by Edward I, who had thought Gaveston would be a good influence on the young prince. When it turned out quite the opposite, Edward I banished him. Virtually the first thing Edward II did as king was recall his favorite from exile and make him earl of Cornwall. Giving this earldom (normally reserved for a member of the royal family) to this seeming foreign upstart caused terrible friction among the English barons.

Two main issues caused the bulk of the resentment against Gaveston. The more high minded one was their fear that the king was taking counsel

from an unknown and untrusted outsider. Gaveston seemed to exercise a greater hold over the king than any royal favorite in English history. And Edward's policymaking was not on a good footing; he was in constant debt (and constantly raising taxes). The barons' more selfish motive was protecting their own self-interest. Gaveston had a stranglehold on royal patronage, the barons' financial lifeblood. The more offices, land, and treasure Gaveston received, the less there was for anyone else.

By 1321, Edward had basically ceded control of the English administration to Despenser.

Until recently, it was assumed quite matter-of-factly that Gaveston and the king were lovers. Shortly after the king's death, these claims circulated widely in England and beyond. Many scholars now argue, however, that the relationship between the king and Gaveston wasn't sexual or that we can't know for sure. In the early 14th century, a charge of sodomy was the default if you wanted to damage someone's reputation, not unlike calling someone a communist in America in the 1950s. Whether or not Edward and Gaveston were lovers, the real issue was with Gaveston's power.

Opposition to Gaveston coalesced around the king's first cousin, Thomas, earl of Lancaster. Under his leadership, the barons forced the king to exile Gaveston in 1308, but within a year, Gaveston was back in England. In 1310, the barons forced Edward to name a committee of bishops, earls, and barons who would take over the royal administration until rules could be drawn up for the future administration of the realm. These measures, called the **Ordinances**, were an attempt to make the king rule responsibly, within his means, and above all, with the advice of the barons. The Ordinances banished Gaveston again. They gave the barons the right to approve the king's appointed officers. Parliament was to meet twice a year. The king could no longer fund his household with tax revenues before they had been counted at the Exchequer.

Gaveston returned again in 1311, in defiance of the Ordinances. The king's opponents, led by the earls of Lancaster and Warwick, captured him, subjected

him to a show trial, and executed him. Naturally, the king was furious. He staged an elaborate, expensive funeral for Gaveston and commemorated the anniversary of Gaveston's death for the rest of his life. Edward's queen, Isabella of France, was less sorry to see her husband's favorite gone. She had married Edward in 1308 to seal a peace treaty between England and France. As the daughter of France's King Philip, she had a healthy regard for her own dignity and frequently wrote to her father complaining about her treatment at the English court and the attention lavished on Gaveston. Gaveston's death seemed to thaw the relationship between the king and queen, however; they produced four children over the next decade.

Gaveston's death was not the end of the king's troubles. The 1310s were a disastrous decade for the English economy, largely due to a series of terrible harvests and a cattle plague between 1315 and 1320. If it weren't for the Black Death a few decades later, this Great Famine would probably be the most famous natural disaster of the Middle Ages. Plus, this food scarcity led to terrible inflation; high taxes levied to pay for the Scottish war made the inflation even worse. Trade was disrupted throughout the country.

The most humiliating event for the king was the defeat at Bannockburn in 1314. The English cavalry had been slaughtered; the infantrymen and archers never even got into the fight. All the English baggage was left on the field and plundered by the Scots. Scottish independence didn't come into serious jeopardy for the rest of Edward's reign. Edward's reputation as a military leader was destroyed.

For the next eight years, English politics was dominated by the struggle between the king and his cousin Thomas, the powerful and wealthy earl of Lancaster. Thomas was able to dominate the post-Bannockburn parliaments, which once again forced Edward to accept the Ordinances. For about four years, Lancaster virtually ran the royal household. But by 1318, the king had a new group of powerful supporters, spearheaded by Hugh Despenser the Elder and Hugh Despenser the Younger. The younger Despenser came to fill Gaveston's shoes, but was of unimpeachable native English stock and was a much harder target for Edward's opposition. By 1321, Edward had basically ceded control of the English administration to Despenser. The problem was that Despenser had a taste for honors and bribes and lucrative deals.

Once again, the English magnates became frustrated with the high-handed behavior of the king's favorite. A coalition formed led by Lancaster and joined by the Mortimers, an important family of lords from the Welsh marches. Both baronial and royal forces armed themselves, and in 1322, the two armies met at the Battle of Boroughbridge in Yorkshire. Lancaster's army was defeated, and the earl himself was caught and executed without trial—perhaps as revenge for Gaveston's murder 11 years before.

For the moment, the anti-royal baronial faction had been smashed, but resentment of the Despensers didn't go away. Roger Mortimer, one of the rebel leaders, escaped his imprisonment in the Tower of London and fled to France. Meanwhile, Queen Isabella became convinced that the Despensers were undermining her influence at court. When Edward cut her allowance, she had finally had enough. She took their eldest son Edward and joined Mortimer in Paris, where they became lovers and plotted their return to England. In 1326, Mortimer and Isabella invaded with help from Flemish allies. They raised an army with baronial support, and by late in the year, they had captured King Edward. The Younger Despenser was executed. Mortimer, in an unprecedented move, persuaded parliament to depose the king, and Edward was forced to sign an acknowledgment of his deposition at the threat of losing the throne for his son.

What happened next is murky: Edward seems to have died shortly thereafter, in early 1327. It was rumored that he was disemboweled with a hot poker by one of Mortimer's henchmen, although accounts of the king's demise written shortly after his death make no mention of such horrible means.

The reign of Edward I ended in tragedy, but its long-term consequences transcend personal drama. From now on, English kings would have to listen to their barons if they wanted to stay safely on the throne. The growing power of parliament could now be used to give a veneer of legality to some of the barons' most extreme actions. Now it was possible for the barons to rebel against royal authority while claiming to represent the will of the community of the realm. But in the meantime, the kingdom was in the hands of a rogue nobleman, his royal mistress, and a puppet prince. ■

Important Terms

lords ordainers: Committee of 21 lords imposed on Edward II in 1311 to regulate the king's adherence to the Ordinances, which were designed to restore good government after a period of mismanagement.

Ordinances: Measures imposed on Edward II in 1311 by the lords ordainers to try to restore good government. Piers Gaveston and the king's Italian bankers were banished, and Parliament was required to be summoned once a year.

Suggested Reading

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Edward II—Defeat and Deposition
Lecture 24—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at a successful king, Edward I. His reign certainly wasn't devoid of problems, but most historians would agree that Edward I's was a successful reign. Today, we'll be looking at the reign of his son, Edward II. Despite some recent attempts to rehabilitate Edward, I think it's pretty clear that Edward II's reign was a disaster. It was troubled from the start, and it ended in the king's deposition and (almost certainly) his violent death.

One of Edward's greatest difficulties seems to have been that he posed such a strong contrast to his father, not in appearance—Edward was also tall and handsome—but in character. You'll remember that Edward I had such a commanding personality that when he inherited the throne while on crusade, he didn't even need to hurry home for two years. Edward II simply couldn't measure up to that kind of charisma. In fact, he doesn't seem to have been much interested in trying. The fact is, Edward II didn't seem to like being king. He was famously uninterested in the routine work of government. Now, this wasn't by itself a huge problem, since the king by this point did have more and more competent officials to do the routine work, but the real problem was what Edward II did with his time instead of attending to royal business.

It was one thing if a king neglected writs and charters to go hunting deer in the royal forest. That's a kingly way to waste time. Edward preferred instead to hang around with actors and musicians, and when he spent time outdoors, he liked to dig ditches and do other yard work. He took a lively interest in home improvements at his many royal dwellings. He personally supervised the redecoration of his childhood home at Woodstock, for example. These didn't seem like royal, or even manly, occupations for a nobleman in the 14th century, and they exposed Edward to considerable negative gossip.

Implicit in some of this gossip is an undercurrent of questioning about the king's sexuality. That's the most controversial aspect of Edward's reign, and we'll briefly discuss it later in the lecture, but for now, suffice it to say that Edward's involvement with several successive court favorites caused violent

conflicts with the king's barons. These relationships were deeply and widely resented by significant segments of the political classes in England.

And these controversial relationships were not the only problems Edward had to face. He was also unlucky enough to rule during one of the worst natural disasters to hit England during the Middle Ages, a devastating famine that hit all of northern Europe from about 1315 to 1320. On top of these disasters, Edward presided over the worst military defeat that England had suffered since the Battle of Hastings. I'm talking about the humiliating rout at Bannockburn in Scotland in 1314, a bitter pill for England to swallow after the triumphs of Edward I's reign. So during Edward's reign, there's not a lot of good news.

Let's take these disasters in turn, and at the end, we'll draw some lessons from these royal setbacks, because Edward's son, Edward III, was certainly going to do so, and if we understand Edward II's reign, we'll understand quite a lot about the much more successful 50-year reign of Edward III. Edward II's reign naturally breaks down into four periods of crisis: First, you have the conflict with the barons over his favorite, Piers Gaveston; second, the disaster at Bannockburn and the economic crisis associated with the famine; third, you have the conflict with the king's cousin, Thomas, earl of Lancaster; and fourth, the war with the barons over the king's patronage of the Despensers, father and son. So four crises. Let's start with the first of Edward II's crises.

Edward's most bitter conflict with his barons broke out right at the beginning of his reign. By the time he came to the throne, Edward was already deeply attached to a young man named Piers Gaveston. Gaveston came from a minor noble family in Gascony, the English-ruled province in southwestern France. Gaveston had been placed in the young Prince Edward's household by King Edward I when Edward was a teenager. At the time, the king had thought that Gaveston would be a good influence on the young prince, but he soon changed his mind when it became clear that Gaveston was leading young Edward astray. Edward I felt strongly enough about Gaveston that he had him banished. This was a relatively extreme step, and it suggests that the king had very strong reasons for wanting to get rid of Gaveston. Gaveston didn't have many defenders in the royal household, because his foreign

birth made him something of an outsider. Sources critical of Gaveston refer repeatedly to his Gascon origins, and this is obviously meant to be disparaging.

It says a lot about the strength of Edward's ties to Gaveston that virtually the first thing he did as king was call Gaveston back from exile. Not only did he bring Gaveston back to England, [but] he made him earl of Cornwall, as well, and gave him a favored role in his coronation, almost as though they were being crowned together. Now, the grant of the title of earl of Cornwall was a very provocative act in the 13th century. Recently this earldom had been reserved for very close relatives of the king, beginning with Richard, earl of Cornwall, the younger brother of King Henry III. Recently though, the earldom had died out, and the probable expectation was that Edward would grant it to one of his own younger half-brothers or at least to a well-known English nobleman. Instead, giving the earldom to this Gascon upstart, as he was perceived to be, caused terrible friction among the English barons.

And the ill opinion of Gaveston was widely shared. One chronicle claims: "The magnates hated him, because he alone found favor in Edward II's eyes and lorded it over them like a second king, to whom all were subject. Almost everyone in the land hated him, great and small, even the old, and foretold ill of him; his name was reviled far and wide." Certainly, part of this hatred came from Gaveston's unpleasant personal style. Apparently, he liked to give the earls and barons at court insulting nicknames. It would be nice to know what these were.

Were these barons just snobs? Were they just being oversensitive? Perhaps partly, but there was a serious point behind some of their resentment. There were two main issues that caused the bulk of the resentment against Gaveston, and they reveal a lot about how the English political system worked. The first of these issues is the more high-minded issue of the two. The barons considered themselves to be the king's natural counselors. We've seen this before during the revolts under John and Henry III. The barons could be very jealous of their right to give the king advice, and they were very worried about anyone influencing the king whom they didn't trust. The consequences for the realm could be disastrous.

During Henry III's reign, the English barons were upset about a whole group of favorites at court. These were the king's foreign relatives and his foreign in-laws. In the case of Gaveston, they were worried about just one man, but Gaveston seems to exercise more of a hold over Edward II than any previous royal favorite had done in English history. And royal policy during Edward's reign certainly did not seem to be on a good footing, as the king constantly got into debt and had to summon parliaments repeatedly to bail him out of his financial problems by voting more and more taxes.

The second bone of contention between the king and the barons has more to do with self-interest. The barons resented Gaveston's stranglehold on royal patronage. Patronage was the lifeblood of the English barons; they could not survive without it. Patronage was a zero-sum game. If Gaveston wants to build up his own faction at court, he has to take offices, or land, or treasure from someone else. It shows how dependent the magnates are on royal patronage that they were so outraged by this arbitrary exercise of patronage. But is there another, more personal grievance against Gaveston?

Here, I'm talking about the nature of the king's relationship with Gaveston. Until recently, it was assumed quite matter-of-factly that Gaveston and the king were lovers. Shortly after the king's death, there were stories claiming this, and they circulated widely in England and the continent. These stories influenced the perception of Edward's reign down to the present day. Recent scholarship, however, takes another look.

Many scholars now argue either that the relationship between the king and Gaveston wasn't sexual at all or that, at the very least, we can't know for sure. I have now become an agnostic on the question of Gaveston and Edward. I used to believe they were lovers; I no longer think we can know for sure. For one thing, the early 14th century was a period when hostility to homosexual behavior was increasing throughout Europe. By the 14th century, homosexuality had become the default vice you would accuse someone of if you want to damage his reputation, like being a communist in the 1950s, so it's very possible that the stories of homosexuality are just a slur. But I don't think the issue between Edward and his barons was really about sex at all; it was about power and access. I think the barons cared far less about whether the king is *sleeping* with Gaveston than about whether he is *listening* to him.

Opposition to Gaveston coalesces around the king's first cousin, Thomas, earl of Lancaster. Under his leadership, the barons once again force the king to send Gaveston into exile in 1308, but within a year, Gaveston was back in England. In 1310, however, the barons forced Edward to name a committee of bishops, earls, and barons who would essentially take over the royal administration until rules could be drawn up to govern the future administration of the realm. This is very similar to what had happened during the revolt of the barons under Henry III; the idea is, we need to rein in the king and force him to follow some good rules.

These measures came to be known as the Ordinances. These Ordinances basically form a critique of Edward's rule thus far; they were an attempt to make the king rule responsibly, within his means, and above all, to listen to the advice of the barons. The most important provision was simply that Gaveston had to be banished again, making it three times. But besides banishing Gaveston, the Ordinances also demanded that the king's officers had to be appointed with the approval of the barons in parliament, who were to meet twice a year. This is to eliminate Gaveston's stranglehold on royal appointments. The barons were taking the very first steps toward creating an expectation that royal servants were responsible not just to the king but to the kingdom. We're heading toward an abstract idea of the state.

In addition, there was a rule that the household, the king's personal entourage, could not be funded directly out of tax revenues *before* they had been accounted for at the Exchequer. Apparently, the king had been scooping up tax money at the point of collection before it went through the Exchequer at Westminster and just spending it on himself. This provision meant no more taking cash out of the till. It's not your personal kitty; the money belongs to the kingdom, not to the king. Again, the idea of an abstract state is developing.

But this attempt to constrain royal power is no more successful than the previous attempts we saw under John and Henry III. Although Gaveston did go into exile initially, by 1311, he had returned. When some of the king's opponents got wind of Gaveston's return, they took matters into their own hands. Led by the earls of Lancaster and Warwick, they captured Gaveston, subjected him to a sort of show trial, and executed him.

Naturally, the king is furious. He stages an elaborate funeral for Gaveston on which he spends a huge sum of money; he pays for masses to be said for his soul; and he commemorates the anniversary of Gaveston's death for the rest of his life. For the moment, the murder of Gaveston took the impetus away from the opposition, for some of the barons felt that this was going too far. It caused a split, and by 1313, there was an uneasy truce.

The king mourned Gaveston extravagantly, but there was probably another member of the royal family who doesn't, and that was the king's wife, Isabella of France, the oldest daughter of King Philip the Fair. Isabella and Edward had been married in January of 1308. Their marriage sealed a peace deal between England and France that dated back to the war over Gascony that happened late in the reign of Edward I. The marriage between Edward and Isabella was going to break down very spectacularly at the end of Edward's reign, with disastrous consequences, so it's worth pausing for a moment to talk about Isabella and about her relationship with the king.

Isabella was the daughter of a famously self-confident king, Philip the Fair of France. And Isabella had a healthy regard for her own dignity. In fact, she was conscious of any slight to her royal person. She frequently wrote letters home to her father complaining about any mistreatment she suffered at the English court. She didn't like all the attention the king lavished on Gaveston, and she didn't think the king had provided her with a rich enough dower to pay for her personal expenses. But Gaveston's death did seem to cause a sort of thaw in the relationship between the king and queen. They got along fairly well for about the next decade and produced four children in that time.

The end of the Gaveston crisis was not the end of the king's troubles, however. The most immediately pressing problem was the economic crisis. The 1310s were a disastrous decade for the English economy, largely due to forces beyond anyone's control. Europe was hit by a series of terrible harvests due to repeated heavy fall rains, particularly between 1315 and 1320. The effects of this terrible weather included not just very low crop yields—that was bad enough in a society that lived on the edge of subsistence—but there was also a plague, or murrain, of cattle with a lot of cattle dying.

In addition to losing their crops, people are losing their livestock, too, and this was very serious, because farm animals provided not just transportation and draft power but also the manure they need to replenish the fertility of the soil. So there is widespread suffering and death, and indeed, this period has been called the Great Famine. If it weren't for the Black Death that came along a few decades later, which we'll talk about in an upcoming lecture, this period of famine would probably be the most famous natural disaster of the Middle Ages. And, of course, the rest of the economy was badly dislocated by the famine. There was terrible inflation because the scarcity of food drove up prices. There were high taxes to pay for the Scottish war, which I'll talk about in a moment, and that only makes the inflation worse. Trade is disrupted throughout the country, and none of this made the king's life any happier.

The most humiliating event, bar none, was the defeat of the English army by the Scots at Bannockburn in 1314. The war with Scotland had dragged on for years; Robert Bruce was now claiming the Scottish throne, and he was besieging Stirling Castle. In the spring of 1314, Edward decided to make a concerted effort to relieve the siege at Stirling. He gathered his forces at Berwick, then moved north. Robert Bruce was determined to intercept the English army before it could get to Stirling. The two armies met near a stream, or burn, known as the Bannock, hence Bannockburn.

The English cavalry charged the Scottish pikemen, but their horses' hooves got trapped in the marshy ground near the stream, and they were slaughtered. The rest of the English army, the infantrymen and archers, never even got into the fight. The king's 23-year-old nephew, the earl of Gloucester, was killed leading the cavalry charge. At this point, Robert Bruce employed a brilliant stratagem. He ordered his noncombatants to line the hilltop looking down on the battlefield, making it look as if a second Scottish army was coming to join the fray. When Bruce then led a charge on the English line, the remaining English soldiers broke and ran. It was a humiliating rout.

One must say this for Edward II: He wasn't a coward. He wouldn't leave the battlefield until the earl of Pembroke grabbed his reins and forced him to withdraw. But it was a disaster for the English. Of course, Stirling Castle was forced to surrender to the Scots. All the English baggage was left on the

field, where the Scots happily plundered it. The elaborate siege engines that the English had brought north with them also had to be abandoned—a huge capital loss. And Scottish independence didn't come into serious jeopardy for the rest of Edward's reign.

Medieval kings are expected to win wars. Edward's first major military campaign has ended in defeat, and his reputation clearly suffered at the time. It was widely believed that the king was a failure. The barons were also disgusted; many of them had lost friends or relatives at Bannockburn, or they had had to pay ransoms to redeem them from Scottish captivity. In this atmosphere of humiliation, the reign enters a new phase.

For the next eight years, English politics is dominated by the struggle between the king and his cousin, the earl of Lancaster. Lancaster by this point was the most powerful magnate in England. He holds five earldoms, both by inheritance and marriage, an unprecedented concentration of power in the post-Norman Conquest. Thomas had skipped the Bannockburn campaign; he didn't go. He thought it was a bad idea. Events had certainly proved him right, and as a result his stock rose considerably after the battle. Thomas was able to dominate the parliaments that the king had forced to call in the years after Bannockburn, and once again, Edward is forced to accept the Ordinances.

The most humiliating aspect of Lancaster's ascendancy for Edward was Lancaster's ability to veto the appointment of important royal officers. This was at the heart of the basic struggle between the king and the barons; the king wanted the freedom to choose his own personnel, and the barons were desperate to prevent him from surrounding himself with the wrong sort of people.

For about four years, Lancaster reigned virtually supreme over the royal household, but by 1318, the king has built up a new group of powerful supporters within the household, spearheaded by the two Despensers, Hugh Despenser the Elder and Hugh Despenser the Younger. The younger Despenser became just as dominant in the royal administration as Gaveston had been, but Despenser was not as easy a target as Gaveston because

Despenser came of unimpeachable native English stock. His family had been in royal service for decades. He was no upstart; you can't tag him with that.

By 1321, Edward had basically ceded control of the English administration to Despenser. He's running things on a day-to-day basis. As we have seen, the king had never much liked the actual business of government, whereas Despenser had a taste for it. The problem was that he also had a taste for honors and bribes and lucrative deals wherever he could find them. He seems to have been rapacious on a truly extraordinary scale. He managed to get the king to let him marry one of the three Gloucester sisters, who were co-heirs of the earl of Gloucester, who died at Bannockburn. Then Despenser set out systematically to deprive the other two heirs of their share of the inheritance. Despenser was not a nice man.

Once again, the English magnates are frustrated by the high-handed behavior of the king's favorite. A coalition forms, led by Thomas of Lancaster, to oppose the Despensers, this time joined by a new element, the Mortimers, an important family of lords from the Welsh marches. The Mortimers didn't like the fact that Despenser was attempting to encroach on their territory in Wales. Both baronial forces and royal forces arm themselves, and in 1322, the two armies met at the Battle of Boroughbridge in Yorkshire. Lancaster's army is defeated, the earl himself is caught, and he's executed without trial. It is a sign of the new savage direction English politics is taking, that even Lancaster's royal blood didn't save him. This brutal elimination of a rival was going to set a trend for the coming two centuries of English history.

The act of killing Lancaster is seen as revenge for Gaveston's murder 11 years before, and I think this is correct. For the moment, the anti-royal baronial faction has been smashed, but resentment of the Despensers didn't go away, and it re-forms a few years later due to a surprising alliance. Roger Mortimer, one of the rebel leaders, had been imprisoned in the Tower of London after the Battle of Boroughbridge, but in 1324, he escapes and flees to France. While these events were unfolding, Queen Isabella was becoming irreconcilably estranged from the king. She became convinced that the Despensers were undermining her influence at court, and then, when Edward cut back on her allowance (and we know how well that was likely to go over), she had finally had enough.

In 1325, Isabella manages to get the king to send her to France, supposedly to negotiate a peace treaty with her brother, King Charles IV; there are still a few problems in Gascony. She convinces the king to send their eldest son Edward over with her. Isabella never sees her husband again. In Paris, Isabella meets Roger Mortimer, who had of course, escaped. The two fall in love; they became lovers, and together, they plot a triumphant return to England.

Now, here I want to say something about the marriage between Edward and Isabella. Though it ultimately failed, it was not always contentious. It had started off badly, with Isabella complaining to her father about being ignored in favor of Gaveston, but after Gaveston's death, the royal couple worked out a way to get along. They produced four children together, and they seem genuinely to have loved their children. Indeed, when their eldest son, Edward, became a sort of pawn in the power struggle between his parents, Edward wrote some moving letters to his son begging him to come back to England from France out of the love they bore each other. Edward was also protective of his wife's dignity. During the struggle with the barons leading up to Boroughbridge, Isabella had at one point been refused hospitality by the wife of one of the barons. This was a huge insult, and Edward had savagely punished the garrison of the castle to which Isabella was denied entry.

But the Despensers' rise to power was the last straw for Isabella. She became convinced that nothing was ever going to restore her to her rightful position at court, and she staked all on her new alliance with Mortimer; she does seem to have been genuinely besotted with him.

In 1326, Mortimer and Isabella get help from allies in Flanders and landed in England, bringing with them the young prince Edward. They raise an army with baronial support, and by late in the year, they had captured King Edward. The younger Despenser was executed, just as Piers Gaveston and the earl of Lancaster had been before him. But now Isabella and Mortimer have a problem. What do you do with a captive king? The baronial rebels in the 13th century had not solved this problem, but Mortimer came up with a new solution. He had parliament depose the king. By now, Edward is imprisoned in Berkeley Castle, and Mortimer sent one of his henchmen to

force Edward to sign an acknowledgment of his deposition. Edward didn't want to do this, but he was brought to the act by the thought that he was at least saving the throne for his son.

What happened next is murky. Edward seems to have died shortly thereafter, early in 1327, and that is all we can know for sure. Within a few years after his death, reports circulated that he had been murdered by one of Mortimer's henchmen named Maltravers (there's a great name for a murderer!). The king was supposedly disemboweled with a hot poker so as to leave no outer marks of violence on the body. It was even suggested, and this is a very unpleasant intimation indeed, that the manner of the king's death was devised as a kind of just retribution for his alleged lifestyle.

This version of Edward's death was very vividly depicted on stage in Christopher Marlowe's play about Edward II, and it was widely accepted as true by historians until very recently. But scholars have examined these reports more carefully now and have cast doubt on their veracity, since other accounts of the king's demise written closer to the actual time of his death make no mention of such a horrible end. It is even possible that Edward died of natural causes, perhaps simply from the effects of imprisonment. I think the likeliest story, though, is that he was, in fact, murdered on Mortimer's orders, but the grisly details are attached to the murder later on.

Thus ended the reign of Edward II. It was a tragic end, certainly, but it offers certain long-term lessons for English history that transcend the personal drama of Edward's story. First, during his reign, the English barons demonstrated their continued resolve to play a decisive role in royal administration. They refused to be shut out of power; they take up arms repeatedly to avoid being sidelined by royal favorites. English kings were going to have to take account of the political opinions of their barons if they wanted to stay safely on the throne. In addition, the barons now had a new and useful tool for putting pressure on the kings. The fairly new institution of parliament could be used to give a veneer of legality to some of the barons' most extreme actions, such as restricting the autonomy of the king within his own household or, the most extreme case of all, deposing him. Now it is possible for the barons to rebel against royal authority while claiming that they're representing the will of the community of the realm. But

there was still no means for the king and the barons to come to a peaceful accommodation with each other if they disagree fundamentally about how to run the kingdom. If it's not enough to withhold taxes—if that's not sufficient to coerce the king into behaving as the barons think he should—the only option they have left is deposition and, it seems, murder.

In the meantime, Edward leaves the kingdom in the hands of a rogue nobleman, Roger Mortimer, and his royal mistress, and they're ruling through a puppet prince. But it turns out that Edward had done one thing right. He managed to produce a first-class son and heir. And in the next lecture, we will see Edward III restore the dignity of the English monarchy and take it to new heights, including victory in France—the homeland of his mother, Isabella.

Edward III and the Hundred Years' War

Lecture 25

All of the trouble over Gascony always stemmed from the essential falseness of the relationship between the French and English kings. It just didn't make sense for one king to be the vassal of another. It was always something the French could hold over the English. But what if the Gordian knot were cut at last? What if the French and English kings were the same man?

Edward III was the perfect 14th-century king. He looked the part. He had the right wife. He produced a healthy brood of children, including five strapping sons. He liked tournaments, he liked pageantry, and he won wars. In short, he gave the public what they wanted. He had a rough start, of course; for three years, he was under the thumb of Roger Mortimer. Mortimer quickly made himself unpopular by seizing estates and offices for himself just as rapaciously as the Despensers had, and he was ruthless with his opponents. At the tender age of 18, Edward III gathered supporters and had Mortimer arrested, tried by Parliament, and executed. As for Isabella, she retired from active politics and lived out a comfortable retirement for the next 28 years. Now Edward was his own man.

Determined to reverse his father's humiliations, Edward campaigned in Scotland from 1333 to 1336, making no permanent gains but holding his own. In 1346, Edward at last captured the Scottish king, David Bruce, at the Battle of Neville's Cross, though this didn't lead to English rule over Scotland. The most important aspect of Edward's reign, though, was unquestionably the war with France, the first in the series of conflicts called the Hundred Years' War. The old conflicts of the Angevin period still lingered, and France was now openly supporting the enemies of England, including the Scottish. In addition, the French were backing an anti-English faction in Flanders, England's most important partner in the wool trade. So everywhere England turned, France was causing trouble. The last straw came in 1337 when the French king, Philip VI, confiscated Gascony, the last of England's French fiefs, outright. But Edward III had a powerful weapon against the French that his predecessors had not: a claim to the French throne through his mother.

England's armies set off for the Continent in 1338, intending to attack France via the Low Countries. Edward had forged these Low Country alliances with bribes, which he financed with loans from Italian bankers. Nothing much happened until 1340, when the English won a naval victory at Sluys off the Flemish coast. This victory gave the English control of the English Channel, which ensured their supply and communications lines. Between 1340 and 1346, Edward released bands of his soldiers into the French countryside to live off the land, which meant stealing from the peasants, but no major battles were fought. In 1346, Edward raised an army of 10,000 men by means of a new military assessment: Each landowner whose land was valued at 100 shillings was to provide an archer; each landowner worth £10 had to provide a *hobelar*, a lightly-armed mounted soldier; each landowner worth £25 had to provide a man-at-arms. The ranks were then filled out with criminals serving in exchange for pardons.

Edward landed in Normandy and captured Caen. He then moved toward Paris but met up with King Philip's army outside the town of Crécy. The French outnumbered the English, but the English were far better positioned, and Philip did not coordinate his various contingents well. More than 1,500 leading knights and nobles died on the French side. Capitalizing on this victory, Edward marched north to besiege Calais, a strategically important port.

The townspeople resisted stubbornly at first. After protracted negotiations, when it became clear that Philip could not rescue them, the citizens submitted. Edward, furious with the town's protracted resistance, ordered that six leading citizens of the town, six burghers of Calais, were to present themselves to him, naked except for their undershirts, with halters around their necks, so that he could do with them whatever he willed. The burghers were terrified, but they did as they were told. Edward ordered them hanged, but then Queen Philippa interceded for the burghers, publicly going down on her knees before the king begging for their lives. Edward relented. The burghers were released, but not to go back to Calais. The entire population of Calais was expelled, and new settlers were brought in from England. Calais would remain an English town for the next two centuries. The whole scene between Edward and Philippa may have been staged—a bit of good cop, bad

cop—but genuine or not, the story had enormous resonance around Europe. It demonstrated the terrible wrath and great mercy of Edward III.

The second huge victory of Edward III's reign was led by Edward's son, the Black Prince. In 1355, he was sent to Gascony to lead a big *chévauchée*—an armed plundering raid. This raid crossed France from Bordeaux in the west to the Mediterranean and back, then north toward the Loire River, intending to meet up with another English army in Normandy. The French caught up with his army at Poitiers and demanded surrender. The Black Prince preferred to fight. Again, the English were outnumbered but better situated. In addition, the earl of Warwick used the same trick William the Conqueror had used at Hastings, the feigned retreat, to great effect. It was another rout, with even worse consequences for the French: King John II, only 5 years on the throne, was captured.

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At the Battle of Poitiers, the Black Prince demolished the French army and captured their king, John II.

John was bundled off to England, where he spent the next four years as the toast of society; he doesn't seem to have chafed that much at his captivity. Negotiations over his ransom dragged on. Finally, in 1360, the **Treaty of Brétigny** set John's ransom at 3,000,000 crowns; Edward agreed to drop his claim to the French throne but got full sovereignty in Calais, Ponthieu, Poitou, and Aquitaine. John was released to raise the ransom money, leaving his son, Prince Louis, as a hostage in Calais. At first, quite dutifully, John sent some money back to England, but then something happened that has amazed commentators ever since: In 1363, Louis escaped from Calais, and John, deeply humiliated that his son had broken the terms of the treaty, surrendered himself back into English captivity. He was greeted in London with parades but died a few months later, still in captivity.

The peace of Brétigny lasted a total of nine years. Fighting broke out in 1369. Edward was aging, and the Black Prince was in ill health. The French slowly recaptured most of their lands. By the time of Edward's death in 1377, only Calais and a few other towns remained in English hands. So was it all pointless? It may seem so now, but at the time, victory always seemed just around the corner. More important from our perspective is what the war did to English society and government: It boosted English nationalism, and as a side effect, the French language lost its already-waning prestige status in England, even among the nobility. King Edward ordered all the priests in the kingdom to praise the English nation from their pulpits. English men were also ordered to practice archery on Sundays and holidays, for the good of England and against France. Perhaps the most important effect of the war, though, was the impact it had on Parliament. The need to finance the war gave Parliament even more leverage over the king. The two-house structure and the membership of Parliament became fixed, although how members of Commons were selected still varied from borough to borough. By the end of the 14th century, Commons' power to grant and deny the king's proposed taxes was firmly entrenched. So the Hundred Years' War may not have led to lasting gains of territory, but it did contribute to a growing sense of English nationhood, and that sense of nationhood was increasingly embodied in the institution of Parliament. ■

Important Term

Brétigny, Treaty of: Agreement between England and France made in 1360 that guaranteed English possession of Gascony and pledged a ransom of ₤500,000 for the captured French king, John the Good, in exchange for the promise of Edward III's renunciation of his right to the French throne (which he never fulfilled). The treaty brought nine years of peace before hostilities resumed.

Suggested Reading

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Edward III and the Hundred Years' War
Lecture 25—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the deposition and death of Edward II. Edward had abdicated to save the throne for his young son, now Edward III, but the new boy-king was the puppet of his mother's lover, Roger Mortimer. This didn't last for long, though; Edward seized the reins of government, staged a daring coup, and became one of the most successful military leaders in English royal history.

He was enormously popular with the English people for most of his 50-year reign. His popularity even survived the Black Death, which we'll get to in a future lecture. In this lecture, we're going to look at why Edward was so well liked, and I think the answer is pretty simple. Edward was the perfect 14th-century king. Let me explain. Edward was tall and handsome like his father and grandfather, so he looked the part of a king. He was also married to the right wife. Edward was devoted to his queen, Philippa of Hainault, a Flemish noblewoman, and she was just as popular as her husband. The two of them produced a huge brood of children, including five strapping sons, and they got along with each other. We don't see a repeat of all those dysfunctional dynamics that we saw under the Angevins, especially Henry II.

Edward III took his sons with him on his military campaigns, and he acted as a mentor, trying to help them find their footing as military commanders. Edward also liked to do kingly things; you'll remember that this had been a problem for his father, who didn't like hunting and that sort of stuff. But Edward liked everything to do with being king. He liked tournaments, he liked pageantry, all of it. He also won wars. In short, he gave the 14th-century public what they wanted.

He had a rough start, of course. It's not pleasant to come to the throne if your mother's lover has engineered the deposition of your father and then probably had him murdered. For three years, Edward was under the thumb of Roger Mortimer. Mortimer quickly made himself very unpopular by seizing estates and offices just as rapaciously as the Despensers had done under Edward II. There was considerable grumbling, but Mortimer was ruthless with his opponents. He even ordered the execution of Edward III's uncle,

the earl of Kent, who was the half-brother of the murdered king, despite the objections of the horrified young king. After three years of this sort of thing, Edward III decided to act. He was now all of 18, but he gathered supporters, and they surprised Mortimer while he was in the queen's bedchamber with his advisers plotting to strike back at the king's confederates. Mortimer was arrested, tried by Parliament, and executed. This is over, of course, the objections of the queen. Isabella retired from active politics and lived out a comfortable retirement for the next 28 years.

Now Edward was his own man, and he intended to make the most of his opportunities. He was determined to reverse the humiliation his father had suffered at the hands of the Scots at Bannockburn. From 1333 to 1336, he campaigned in Scotland; there weren't any permanent gains, but Edward had at least held his own. Later in his reign, though, in 1346, the English did win a major victory in Scotland at the Battle of Neville's Cross. The Scottish king, David Bruce, was captured in the battle and spent the next 11 years in captivity in England. So that pretty effectively took the sting out of Bannockburn. It didn't lead to British rule over Scotland, but it certainly helped.

The most important aspect of Edward's reign, though, was unquestionably the war with France. Much later, in the 19th century, this war came to be called the Hundred Years' War. This is not really an accurate name for the war for two reasons. The first is that it actually lasted about 115 years. The second is more important: It's not really one war. It is more a series of conflicts that were punctuated by long periods of peace. People only called it the Hundred Years' War after it was clear that it was all over. Nobody knew at the time how long this series of conflicts was going last. The war actually started, in fact, as a continuation of another longstanding conflict that went back all the way to Edward: the conflict between England and France over Gascony. These are the lands in southwestern France that are pretty much all that remained of the old Angevin Empire.

As we've said before, Gascony was a fief of the French crown, and the English kings owed homage to the French kings for Gascony, which always gave the French kings leverage over the English kings. Most of the real issues between the two kings were economic ones; it was all about trading

rights, and import duties, and who was benefiting from Gascon trade. This had been a problem since way back in the 13th century, and in fact, the marriage between Edward III's parents, Edward II and Queen Isabella, had been contracted to try to settle these disputes. It hadn't worked. The conflict flared up again in the 1320s, and that's when Queen Isabella took her fateful trip to Paris, where she met up with Roger Mortimer expressly so that she could try to help solve the Gascony problem between England and France.

Tensions between the two countries increased in the 1330s as France was openly supporting the enemies of England abroad. For one thing, France reinforced an alliance with Scotland that dated back to the 1290s. This was a very important alliance for both France and Scotland, and it became known in Scotland as the Auld Alliance. It would last almost down through to the end of the 16th century. The idea was obviously that Scotland was helped by infusions of money from France; Scotland was always starved for cash.

And it helped France if England was distracted, worrying about its northern border. The Battle of Neville's Cross that I mentioned a moment ago, the one where the Scottish king was captured, that was fought in support of the Auld Alliance. The Scots are trying to help out the French by distracting the English. England was not very happy about French support for the Scots. In addition, the French were backing an anti-English faction in Flanders. Flanders was always in political turmoil during this period. The major cities of the Low Countries were the biggest manufacturing cities in northern Europe. They produced great quantities of finished cloth, and the raw wool they used to do this came largely from English sheep, so the economic ties between England and the Flemish cities were very close. But the ruler of Flanders in this period was a count who was very much under French influence. So the count and his cities were at odds for much of the century, and the French, of course, backed the count, so the French were making life difficult for the Flemish cities, who were the most important trading partners of the English. Everywhere England turned, France was causing trouble: in Gascony, in Flanders, in Scotland.

The last straw came in 1337. The French king, Philip VI, got fed up with the ongoing wrangling over Gascony, and he confiscated the fief outright. This sort of thing had happened before, but Edward III had a different response

than his predecessors had had. He had a new weapon in his arsenal. He had a claim to the French throne. All of the trouble over Gascony always stemmed from the essential falseness of the relationship between the French and English kings. It just doesn't make sense for one king to be the vassal of another. It was always something the French could hold over the English. But what if the Gordian knot were cut at last? What if the French and English kings were the same man? There would be no problem then.

Here's how the claim worked: Edward III was the grandson of King Philip IV of France, who was called Philip the Fair. Philip's daughter Isabella was Edward's mother. Isabella also had three brothers, all of whom ruled in succession after their father, but none of the brothers had any male issue, so the only grandson of Philip the Fair was Isabella's son, Edward III. But when the last of Isabella's brothers died in 1328, the French nobles had no thought of bringing in the young Edward III as French king. Their pretext was that the claim to the French throne could not pass through the female line, as it would have to in Edward's case. Supposedly, the ancient law of France, known as the Salic Law, barred inheritance through the female line. There's a very famous scene at the beginning of Shakespeare's play *Henry V* that talks about the Salic Law and whether it does or does not bar a claim to the French throne via the female line. In reality, this is just a pretext: The French don't like the thought of being ruled by England. So instead of choosing Edward III, they picked Philip of Valois, the son of Philip IV's younger brother, Charles of Valois, and Philip takes the throne of France as Philip VI.

Now, this all happened in 1328. At the time, Edward III was not in any position to complain, even if he had wanted to. He was still under the thumb of Roger Mortimer and his mother. The claim to the French throne was really an abstraction at this point. It didn't surface as an issue until the trade disputes with France and the other international irritants I've talked about pushed Edward into making the claim. I think the claim was largely instrumental, at least at first. It was a good weapon to use in this long struggle with France. It's hard to even know how serious Edward was about making good on it. As we'll see, he was prepared to walk away from it at various points if he thought he'd gotten the best deal he could.

Let's talk about the war. As I've said, it wasn't one long, continuous period of fighting—far from it. In this very long period when England was officially at war, there were only a few big battles. I'll certainly talk about those, but before I do, I think it's important to say that most of the war was about harrying the enemy; that is, destroying the property of your enemy, making life difficult for your enemy. Often the armies of the French and the English wouldn't even see each other for months at a time. It's a different kind of warfare than we're used to. It was somewhat easier on the troops and quite a bit tougher on the civilians, because for the most part, the civilians were the ones being harried.

All right, here's how it all unfolded: The royal armies set off for the continent in 1338, intending to attack France via the Low Countries, where they had allies. Edward has had to spread quite a lot of money around in order to forge these alliances, but that's crucial when you need to invade your enemy from overseas. You need secure sources of supplies. Now, the economic consequences of these alliances were very dire, because the allies demanded even more bribes before they would cough up the aid they had promised. Edward was "in for a pound" at this point, so he had to borrow a lot of money from his Italian bankers, the Peruzzi family and the Bardi family, just to keep his army in the field. This was the era when international banking was really taking off, and the Italians had created a niche for themselves in this field. This did not exactly make them popular; in fact, Edward II's chief banker, a man named Amerigo Frescobaldi, had been banished from England under the terms of the Ordinances because it was thought [that] he was leading the king ever deeper into debt. But Edward III couldn't finance the war without his Italian banking partners. It all ended badly for the bankers, though, because later, Edward III was forced to default on his loans, and the Italians lost everything. No bailout for them.

Well, for the first two years of the war, from 1338 to 1340, nothing much happened. This seems rather incredible by modern standards—to have a war where nothing happens for two years—but it wasn't all that unusual in medieval warfare. For those two years, Edward's army accomplished very little. And the first victory of the war was actually won at sea, not on land. This was the Battle of Sluys, which took place in 1340, just off the Flemish coast. An English fleet defeated a heavily armed French fleet. Now, sea

battles in this period were very vicious affairs that mostly involved hand-to-hand fighting. You didn't have cannons shooting at each other the way you would later on. The ships would try to ram each other or come up beside one another, and then one ship would use iron grappling hooks to attach itself to the other, and then you'd have essentially a floating battle until one set of sailors or the other won control of both ships. It could be very nasty. On this occasion, the English won, and this victory at least gave the English control of the English Channel. This was very important for keeping open the lines of communication and supply back and forth from France to England.

After Sluys, there was a long period where not a lot happened, except that life for the French peasants who were anywhere near the English army was completely miserable. Edward was trying to keep costs down, so he simply released bands of his soldiers into the French countryside to live off the land, which is really a euphemism for stealing from the peasants. No one really batted an eye about this; it was standard operating procedure.

For much of this period, the king wasn't even actually with his army. He was back in England attending to other business. But in 1346, he decided to make a big effort in person. He came over to France with a huge army, 10,000 men; that was really big by the standards of the day. The army was raised by means of a new military assessment. Each landowner whose land was valued at 100 shillings had to provide an archer; each landowner worth £10 had to provide a "hobelar," which is a lightly armed mounted soldier; each landowner worth £25 had to provide a man-at-arms, which is a soldier with the whole kit, armor and everything. Some of the people who were assessed served in person; others sent substitutes, sometimes even their own sons. The ranks of the English army were filled out with men of dubious reputation who were serving in exchange for pardons for their various crimes. Not surprisingly, there were complaints about the level of discipline of these troops. Edward landed in Normandy and captured the city of Caen. He then intended to move toward Paris, but he met up with King Philip's army outside the town of Crécy in the county of Ponthieu, which actually belonged to Edward's mother, Queen Isabella.

Many people don't know that the famous battle at Crécy was actually fought on land [that] the English king owned anyway, as part of Isabella's own

inheritance. It was indeed a famous victory. The French outnumbered the English, maybe by as much as two to one, but the English were far better positioned. Edward's men-at-arms were tightly concentrated in the center, with contingents of archers on each wing, and the archers were arranged in a wedge shape pointing toward the French. This was seen at the time as a very advantageous position, since the French had to concentrate their attack in the center. Furthermore, the English were on a rise, with the archers flanking them on the wings, and the French were attacking uphill. It was also raining, which isn't great for a cavalry charge, and when the sun came out later in the battle, it was shining right in the eyes of the French. Pretty much everything went wrong for the French.

And the French did not fight a smart battle. King Philip did not coordinate his various contingents well. One contemporary account suggests that the French king let his hatred of the English get the better of him, and he ordered his Genoese crossbowmen to attack before the rest of the army was in position. This led most of his nobles to just blunder into the fray in no particular order. The result was disaster for the French. The English archers did tremendous damage. Both knights and their horses were picked off by the arrows, slipped in the mud, and could not rise. English foot soldiers then found it easy to slip among the fallen knights and deliver the coup de grace. More than 1,500 leading knights and nobles died on the French side. This included one of the French king's allies, King John of Bohemia, who insisted on charging the enemy despite the fact that he was totally blind. His companions tied the bridles of their horses together so that King John would at least not get separated from them in the battle, but he was determined to fight. All of them were found afterwards, dead, with their horses still tied together. It was an amazing act of bravery, or folly, depending on your point of view.

It was an unexpected victory for the English, and Edward wanted to capitalize on it. He marched north from Crécy, out of his own lands and toward the port city of Calais. This was a very strategically important town. It was directly opposite Dover at the narrowest point of the English Channel. It would be a great help to have this port available for supplies and communication. Edward besieged the town, but it was strongly fortified, and the townspeople were counting on King Philip of France to relieve them, so they resisted

stubbornly. Edward got more and more impatient as he consumed more and more supplies and lost more and more men. Finally, after protracted negotiations, when it became clear that the French king was not going to be able to rescue Calais, the citizens submitted. But King Edward imposed one condition: Six leading citizens of the town, six burghers of Calais, were to present themselves to King Edward, naked except for their undershirts, with halters around their neck, so that he could do with them whatever he willed. This was a sign of how angry Edward was.

The scene as it's described for us by a contemporary chronicler is quite amazing. The burghers were terrified, but they did as they were told to save their city. They presented themselves exactly as ordered, complete with the halters around their necks. The idea behind that was that they were all ready to be hanged, and in fact, the furious king did order that the burghers be hanged. At that point, Queen Philippa, who was heavily pregnant, interceded for the burghers. She got down on her knees before the king in front of everyone and begged for their lives. Faced with this display of humility from his own wife, Edward relented. The burghers were released, but not to go back to Calais. The residents of Calais were expelled, and new settlers were brought in from England. Calais was going to be an English town, and it remained an English town for the next two centuries. It was the last land in France that the English finally let go of, in 1558.

Now, I have often wondered if the whole scene was a put-up job between the king and queen, maybe a little bit of good cop, bad cop. Whether or not it was planned in advance, the story had enormous resonance around Europe. It demonstrated the terrible wrath of Edward III—you did not want to mess with him—but it also showed his mercy. I think both sides to him were good for propaganda purposes. The incident at Calais was later immortalized in the very famous sculpture by the French sculptor Auguste Rodin. In this sculpture you can see the terror and submission on the faces of the burghers; and you can also see the halters around their necks.

After the victory at Calais, there was another lull in the fighting, at least from the point of view of big set-piece battles, but then we come to the second of the huge victories of Edward's reign. This time, though, the victory was won not by Edward personally but by his oldest son, also called Edward. He

is usually referred to as the Black Prince, supposedly because of the dark plate armor he wore. We can't definitely trace the nickname to this period, but since there are so many other Edwards around, we're going to go ahead and call him the Black Prince. Anyway, the Black Prince had come of age, and he was ready to lead a big campaign on his own. In 1355, he was sent to Gascony to lead a big *chévauchée*. I need to explain what that is. Essentially, a *chévauchée* was a big armed plundering raid; the word comes from the word *cheval* for "horse," because you'd ride through the countryside stealing and burning. As I mentioned earlier, there were a lot of these activities during the Hundred Years' War, but the one that the Black Prince led across southern France was probably the most ambitious of them all. He went all the way from Bordeaux in the west across France to the Mediterranean and back. He then moved north towards the Loire River, intending to meet up with another English army in Normandy. The French royal army blocked his route, however, and he was forced to turn south again. The French followed him and caught up with the English at Poitiers and offered rather magnanimously to accept their surrender. The Black Prince preferred to fight.

And that proved to be the right decision, because Poitiers proved to be an even more lopsided victory than Crécy. The numbers were again uneven, with 10,000 on the French side and 7,000 on the English side, but once again, the English had the better tactical position. They were on a hill, protected by a marsh in front and a wood behind. Once again, they deployed their archers to great effect. In addition, one of their commanders, the earl of Warwick used the same trick William the Conqueror had used at Hastings, the feigned retreat, and he drew a large number of French knights into the marsh. It was another rout. But the consequences were much more dire for the French than at Crécy, because in the battle, the French king, John II, was captured.

You'll remember when we talked about Richard the Lionheart being captured, how England had to raise a ransom of 150,000 marks, which was a lot of money. Well, with the shoe on the other foot, the English were not going to miss a chance to collect big time. John was well treated (they threw a dinner party for him on the night of the battle), and he was bundled off to England, where he spent the next four years as the toast of English society. He doesn't seem to have chafed that much at his captivity. Negotiations over his fate dragged on. The English weren't able to capitalize on the victory

in the field; they didn't manage to turn it into decisive territorial gains. Eventually, a peace agreement was reached in 1360. By the terms of the Treaty of Brétigny, King John's ransom was set at 3,000,000 crowns. Even with the inflation since the time of Richard I, that was a lot of money. King Edward does agree to drop his claim to the French throne; in return, he gets full sovereignty in Calais, Ponthieu, Poitou, and Aquitaine. No more of this homage business that had been such a problem. This seemed like a pretty good deal, and King John was allowed to go back to France to raise the ransom money, and as security, he leaves his son, Prince Louis, as a prisoner in Calais. And off John went, and he did, quite dutifully, start sending money back to England.

But then something happened that has amazed commentators ever since, and I think it even amazed people at the time. We've already seen one very striking act of chivalry in this war: the blind king of Bohemia going into battle tied to his companions. Now, King John of France did something equally chivalrous. In 1363, his son Louis escaped from Calais. King John was deeply humiliated that his son had broken the terms of the treaty he had signed. He felt honor bound to surrender himself back into English captivity, and that's what he did. He was greeted in London with parades; he was the guest of honor at feasts; maybe there was just too much rejoicing, because a few months later, in April 1364, King John II of France died in English captivity. Again, whether you think he was chivalrous or foolish depends on your point of view.

The peace lasted a total of nine years, and in 1369, fighting broke out again. By this point, King Edward III was aging, and even his son, the Black Prince, was suffering from ill health. The French slowly captured back most of the lands that they had conceded in the Treaty of Brétigny. By the time of Edward's death in 1377, only Calais and a few other towns remained in English hands.

Was it all pointless? It may seem now as if the war with France was a colossal waste of time and resources. But that's not at all how it seemed at the time. Victory was always just around the corner. More important, from our perspective, is what the war did to English society and government. The war with France gave a big boost to English nationalism. This was already pretty

well advanced. We've seen that English identity had managed to absorb the Norman invaders within a couple of generations. But now, due to the war with France, you get an added linguistic aspect to English nationalism. Up until this point, French had been the prestige language in England. Even very solidly patriotic Englishmen had been sure to learn French because that was your ticket to polite society.

Over the course of the 14th century, fewer and fewer English men and women bothered to learn French. This was a trend that was doubtless underway already, but the war accelerated it. English men and women also became more self-consciously nationalistic, partly due to nationalist propaganda. King Edward ordered all the priests in the kingdom to praise the English nation weekly from their pulpits. At every opportunity, the English were being told that they were great and that the French were their enemies. English men were also ordered to practice archery on Sundays and holidays; every time they were out there shooting arrows, they knew they were doing it for England and against France.

Perhaps the most important effect of the war, though, was the impact it had on Parliament. We've said before that the need to pay for foreign wars gave the barons leverage against the kings. Now, that leverage was centered on the institution of Parliament. This is the period when the structure of Parliament became fixed with two houses, Lords and Commons. It's also the period when membership of the House of Commons became invariably fixed: the knights of the shire and the borough representatives meeting together, just as Simon de Montfort had planned back in 1264. Now, the means of selecting members of Parliament were still not uniform. There were supposed to be elections, but what an election means could vary from borough to borough. Certainly, the number of voters and the qualification for voting varied a lot. In many instances, it was a question of influence rather than election. But still, the Parliament was increasingly representative of the opinions of at least the men of substance in the country, the men who were likely to have enough money to pay taxes with. And it was the House of Commons that ended up with the responsibility for granting taxes; they represented the community of the entire realm. By the end of the 14th century, this power was firmly entrenched. It wasn't even really questioned any more.

So the Hundred Years' War may not have led to lasting gains of territory, but it did contribute to a growing sense of English nationhood, and that sense of nationhood was increasingly embodied in the institution of Parliament. I doubt that Edward III realized that's what he was doing when he was prosecuting this long war with France, but that was the result. Next time, we're going to pause in our narrative to talk about a subject very closely related to war, and to the Hundred Years' War in particular, namely, chivalry.

The Flowering of Chivalry

Lecture 26

Before the crusades, the church did not look on violence as a good thing, and of course, the job of the knight was to fight. ... With the preaching of the crusades in 1095 ... the church figured out a good reason to fight; it was a positive thing to go fight the enemies of Christendom. ... So the Church was giving knighthood respectability, and as kings got their acts together a bit more, knights came to be seen less as a plague and more as a way of defending the innocent.

What is chivalry, or what was it in the 14th century? What did it mean, and what was it for? How did the warrior code of the French elite become an all-encompassing European ethos? The word "chivalry," like so much else having to do with the elite in this period, comes from French, specifically the words for horse, *cheval*, and knight, *chevalier*. So chivalry is for the horsey set, those wealthy enough to ride horses for transportation, rather than hitch them to a plow.

Although having its origins in events of the 11th century, the earliest form of chivalry emerged in France and French-held lands in the 12th century and reached its height during the Hundred Years' War. As we know, England's medieval elite had strong ties to France and French culture, so the customs took hold in England rather easily, although it took on local peculiarities. One important thing to note is that, wherever it spread, chivalry presupposed that the main preoccupation of elite society is war.

The 11th century was a rough time in Europe; governments were rudimentary at best, and instability was rampant. Kings and nobles jockeyed each other for power, and one of the means they used was a new class of armed horsemen called knights. The first knights were just hired thugs, the muscle nobles used to carve out bigger and bigger lordships for themselves. Over the course of the next century or so, knights acquired social respectability and made a place for themselves among the elite. The way they did this was directly tied to the ideology of the Crusades. Before the 12th century,

the church (accurately) saw the conflicts between European nobles as selfish power struggles. But with the call to the First Crusade in 1095, the church took a definitive step to channel that lust for violence and glory for the good of Christendom. Churchmen like Saint Bernard of Clairvaux began to praise "the new knighthood" as much to encourage good knightly behavior as to describe its reality on the ground. As knights came to live up to this reputation, they were seen less as a plague and more as defenders of innocence.

Knighthood became not just respectable but fashionable, and it took on all sorts of elaborate trappings over time. These included ceremonies such as **dubbing**, the origins of which are obscure but which eventually took on all the elaborate religious and social features of a wedding. One of the ceremony's purposes was to equip the new knight, which was not cheap: He needed a full suit of armor, a whole suite of horses, and of course weapons. By the 12th century, armor had evolved from breastplates of boiled armor and a little mail to full suits of mail, which were custom made and required a specialist to make. By the 14th century, full plate armor was being worn by the best-equipped knights, including the Black Prince.

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The Crusades transformed knights from little more than hired thugs to warriors of God.

A knight needed multiple horses because each was bred and trained for a different purpose: a heavy war horse (called a destrier

or courser), a horse to ride as transport (such as a palfrey), and one or more to carry baggage (such as a rouncey). Horses were then, as they are now, expensive to buy and to maintain, plus a war horse even required its own armor!

Tournaments were an integral part of knighthood. They had a simple, practical origin but, like everything to do with knighthood, got fancier and fancier over time. They began in the late 11th century simply as practice for war, just giant mêlées. Their other appeal was the rule that if you captured another knight and made him yield, you could either keep his horse and armor or make him pay a ransom. In this way, a tournament was also a way to make a name for yourself and perhaps catch the eye of a wealthy employer. On the downside, tournaments could be very dangerous, of course. The knights weren't supposed to be trying to kill each other, but accidents did happen. By the 12th century, there was a regular tournament circuit in France, and some knights were essentially professional athletes. This circuit was where William Marshal, Henry III's regent, made his fortune and his reputation as a young man. Marshal fought on the French circuit because there wasn't an English one; the crown had banned tournaments as disruptive, disorderly affairs.

The 13th century saw the rise of single combat—the one-on-one jousts we usually see in the movies. While this gave a certain narrative clarity to the

The Eponymous Garter

According to tradition, the Order of the Garter got its inspiration from an incident that took place at the king's court in 1348. The king and his courtiers were dancing, including the countess of Salisbury. The king had his eye on the countess (Edward III adored his wife, but he wasn't scrupulously faithful to her). As they danced, the countess's garter slipped off and fell to the floor. Some of the people around her started to snigger, but the king very chivalrously picked it up, tied it to his own leg, and said, "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*," meaning "Shame to whoever thinks ill of it." That quip became the order's motto.

event, it made tournaments more artificial and less like actual fighting. By the 14th and 15th centuries, tournaments were diverging more and more from the reality of war as archers and infantry became more important on the battlefield. But the circuit had a life of its own; tournaments were great social occasions. Women attended in large numbers to cheer their favorites. Stands were built for spectators. Kings even took the field to show their prowess.

Tournaments ... had a simple, practical origin but, like everything to do with knighthood, got fancier and fancier over time.

Meanwhile, heraldry developed from mere decoration to a way to identify individual fighters. By the 1140s, certain important nobles wore specific emblems on their shields; one of the first to do so was Geoffrey of Anjou, the father of King Henry II. (The gold lions from his shield ultimately became part of the English royal coat of arms.) Over the 12th and 13th centuries, heraldic devices became hereditary and had worked their way down from kings all the way to the humblest of knights. An elaborate set of codes and rules had developed regarding heraldic symbols. A shield's description was called a blazon. Richard the Lionheart's blazon, for example, was "*gules* three lions *or*, *passant guardant*," meaning three gold lions, walking to the left with their front legs raised and their heads facing toward the viewer, all on a red background. Perfectly clear, right? Heraldry was literally its own dialect, and professional heralds arose as its grammarians and record keepers.

What characterized knightly culture besides war? For one thing, knights seem to have liked to listen to stories about other knights. War stories date back to the earliest known literature, but the literature of chivalry belonged to the subgenre of courtly love, such as troubadour poems and Arthurian romances. But then, in the 14th century, as the Hundred Years' War ensued, stories about English knights were increasingly composed in English instead of French. Although many of these were biographical, one of the most famous examples of these new English knightly romances is "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight." It's a wonderful story, and it's proof that by the 14th century, knighthood in England has really gone native, but moreover, English

knights are asserting a peculiarly English identity, distancing themselves from the French enemy.

If knights liked to hear about themselves, it was partly because they were very conscious of belonging to a distinct social group. The 14th century was the age of formalizing knightly associations. Edward III, the consummate knight, took the brilliant step of creating an order of knighthood, the **Order of the Garter**, in 1348. Its purpose was to bind his knights even more closely to him in a time of war. Edward was also consciously imitating King Arthur and his knights at the court of Camelot.

But beyond all the pageantry and glamour, there was an ugly side to chivalry. Knights very much looked down on people who weren't knights. English knights had no scruples about pillaging French peasant villages, nor about raping peasant women of any nationality. It might be good to think for a moment about what the rest of society thought about all those tournaments and colorful banners and shields. ■

Important Terms

dubbing: Ceremony that officially conferred knighthood. It began in the 11th century as an informal rite but developed into an elaborate ritual. Vassals were required to pay for the dubbing of the eldest son of their lord.

Order of the Garter: Order of chivalry founded in 1348 by Edward III to foster unity among his closest supporters and increase support for the war in France. Membership was highly selective.

Suggested Reading

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

The Flowering of Chivalry

Lecture 26—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the Hundred Years' War during the reign of Edward III. I mentioned a couple of very famous instances during that war when men acted chivalrous. We talked about the blind King John of Bohemia going into battle with his horse's bridle tied to the bridles of his companions; we talked about King John II of France surrendering himself into captivity in England to make good on a pledge he had made in the Treaty of Brétigny to guarantee the good behavior of his son, Prince Louis. We would refer to these actions as chivalrous gestures.

But what is chivalry, or what was it in the 14th century? What did it mean, and what was it for? I want to make a couple of preliminary points about chivalry. First, it's for the elite. Second, it's a French phenomenon that spreads to the rest of Europe. And finally, it's associated, first of all, with war, but it becomes an all-encompassing ethos or way of life.

The first thing to say about chivalry is that it's a cultural pattern of the elite. The word "chivalry," like so much else having to do with the elite in this period, comes from the word for "horse," because it was mostly the elite who had horses, at least horses that you would ride versus horses that might pull a plow. Only the rich rode horses as a means of transport. The word for "knight" in French, which is the language of chivalry, was *chevalier*, which means "horseman." So chivalry is for the horsey set.

Now, the language of chivalry is French because chivalry starts in France or, at least, in French-speaking lands. You can see it emerge there certainly by the 12th century, but then it spreads to the rest of Europe, including England. One of the central facts about England in the Middle Ages, and we've talked about this before, is that the elites in particular are very influenced by French culture. They have the strong tie to lands in France, of course, but that's simply where the cultural center of gravity is. So this is a French phenomenon that then spreads out and takes on its own local peculiarities wherever it goes.

The final thing I want to say by way of introduction is that chivalry presupposes that the main preoccupation of elite society is war. As I said in our last lecture, this is one reason Edward III was so popular; he fits this model of what a king is supposed to be, a successful war leader. A lot of the trappings of chivalry have their origins in war.

But chivalry has a long history. It develops over a long period of time, so in this lecture, we're going to be looking back a bit to the origins of chivalry, and then we'll watch as it becomes more and more elaborate. It becomes a cultural pattern, a worldview, an all-encompassing way of dealing with the world. And it reaches its height at the time of the Hundred Years' War, so this is a good time to pause and talk about it.

Let's go back and look at where chivalry came from. To do this, we have to go all the way back to the 11th century. This is a pretty rough-and-ready time in Europe. Governments are rudimentary at best; we've seen that England was one of the best-governed places, but still there's a lot of instability. Kings and nobles are jockeying for power, and one of the means they are using is a fairly new class of armed warriors, armed horsemen in particular, called knights. These knights don't start out as particularly exalted figures; in fact, they are really hired thugs. They are there to provide the muscle as these nobles are trying to carve our bigger and bigger lordships for themselves. The counts and viscounts of the 11th century would not think of sitting down at the table to dine with their knights.

But this changed. Over the next century or so, knights acquired social respectability. They climbed their way up into the elite. This is an interesting process. It has a lot to do with the ideology that came out of the crusades. Before the crusades, the church regards violence as an evil, and of course, the job of the knight was to fight. The church was always trying to get people to stop fighting because, really, in the 11th century, most of the fighting was for purely selfish reasons. Lords were just trying to become more powerful than other lords. But that changed with the preaching of the crusades in 1095, because finally, the church figured out a good reason to fight; it was a positive thing to go fight the enemies of Christendom. You start to see churchmen writing treatises about knighthood that cast it in a very positive

light. St. Bernard of Clairvaux, one of the most important theologians of the 12th century, wrote a work called *In Praise of the New Knighthood*.

So the church was giving knighthood respectability, and as kings got their acts together a bit more, knights came to be seen less as a plague and more as a way of defending the innocent. Kings and nobles started giving their knights land to settle on, which turned them into respectable homeowners. So you have a shift in the general profile of the knight. Knights in the 11th century were often the group of thugs who came and burned your fields; by the 12th century, they were a bit more likely to hold lands themselves and to be, essentially, upright citizens. By the end of the 12th century, knights have made it into the elite. If you are a knight at the end of the 12th century, you do belong sitting at the same table as the count. You won't be as rich or powerful by a long shot, but you can sit at the same table and no one will feel that this is socially awkward. In fact, knighthood became fashionable. Even the kings and the high nobility wanted to be "knighted."

And knighthood took on all sorts of trappings that got more and more elaborate over time. One of these was the ceremony of dubbing, or being named a knight. Its origins are fairly obscure. At first, back in the 11th century, someone was named a knight in a fairly impromptu way. The standard thing was for a close male relative to put the "belt of knighthood" on a young man. Usually you'd choose the highest-ranking relative to do this, so if you had an uncle who was a count, that would be the person you'd want to ask to present the belt of knighthood.

Over time, the ritual surrounding dubbing got extremely complex. By the late 12th century, dubbing had become a quasi-religious ceremony; the input of the church in making knighthood respectable was having an impact. The night before the ceremony, the prospective knights would fast and keep vigil in church, sort of a purification. Then there would be an elaborate ceremony, followed by a big party. It was the equivalent of a coming-of-age ceremony, and everyone knew it was going to be expensive, probably just as expensive as a big wedding. In fact, a lord's vassals were obliged to help the lord pay the cost of two big events: marrying his oldest daughter and knighting his oldest son. So everyone recognized that the two events, a dubbing and a wedding, were kind of equivalent to each other. You can just imagine medieval

parents stressing out about their sons' dubbing just the way a modern parent might over a bar mitzvah. Who do we invite? Where will they stay? That sort of thing.

Now, dubbing was so expensive partly because one of the main purposes of the ceremony was to equip the knight with everything he needed to be a warrior, and that got more and more elaborate over time also. You needed a full suit of armor and a whole suite of horses, not just one, but several. Let's take the armor first. In the 11th century, armor was pretty basic. Remember, this is the period when knights are just hired thugs. These knights often fought with nothing more than breastplates made of boiled leather with a little chain mail. By the 12th century, it was popular to wear entire suits of chain mail. These suits had to be made to order; you could not buy them off the rack. They were made of hundreds of tiny rings of forged metal, and only expert armorers could make these; the village blacksmith was not going to be able to make you a suit of chain mail. So they were incredibly expensive. By the 14th century, the era of the Hundred Years' War, a new kind of armor was coming in made of metal plate; this is the kind that the Black Prince supposedly wore. It, too, was extremely expensive, and it was less flexible than chain mail, but it was certainly very strong. Armor in this period was even subjected sometimes to special testing; you'd discharge crossbow bolts at the armor to make sure it was up to the job. There was some quality control, and that figured into the price. So armor gets better over time, but also more expensive.

The other huge item of expense for a knight was his horses. Every knight needed several of these. You needed a heavy warhorse, of course, the kind that was bred to bear the weight of a fully armored knight charging into battle. These were the most expensive horses. They cost a lot to feed. But you didn't ride such a horse just to get from point A to point B. Knights also had other horses they used for transport and for carrying baggage on campaign. All of these kinds of horses had their own names: A "destrier" or "courser" was a warhorse; a "palfrey" was a good-quality riding horse; and a "rouncey" was a more all-purpose horse that you could ride but also use as a packhorse. Medieval people could look at a horse and tell what kind of horse it was and about how much it was worth, pretty much on sight.

In the royal records for the 14th century, you can actually see a lot of these horse prices because the king would have to compensate his soldiers for horses they lost on campaign, so you can see listings for a horse of such-and-such a value. Now, besides the price of the horses, you needed to factor in the armor that a warhorse would wear. By late in this period, horses were wearing plate armor, as well as knights. As you can tell from the accounts of battles like Crécy, horses needed armor, because if your horse was shot out from under you, that might be the end of the battle as far as you were concerned.

All right, you've been dubbed, and now you have all your brand-new armor and your suite of horses. What do you do with them? You go off to a tournament. Tournaments were an integral part of knighthood. Like everything else having to do with chivalry, they had a very simple, practical origin, and then they got fancier and fancier over time. They start in the late 11th century simply as practice for war. They were just occasions when a bunch of knights would agree to meet in a certain field and go up against each other in a mock battle. They weren't really structured in any particular way. It was just a giant mêlée, and the idea was that individual knights would try to capture other knights and make them yield. If you got a knight to yield, you had the right to keep his horse and armor, which as we've seen, was going to be worth a lot of money. Or you could make him pay a ransom. This worked because everyone more or less fought by the rules; if you didn't, no one would want to fight with you. The purpose of all this was certainly to get practice in fighting, but it was also something people did to make a name for themselves. It was a way for young knights to show off and maybe get hired in the retinue of a famous lord. It could be very dangerous, though. The knights weren't supposed to be trying to kill each other, but accidents did happen.

By the 12th century, this whole process had gotten much more formal. There was a regular "tournament circuit" in France, and some knights were essentially professional athletes. William Marshal was one of these; you'll remember, he was the English nobleman who started life playing soldiers with King Stephen and ended up as regent for the young Henry III. William Marshal didn't start out with much money, but he basically made a living because he was so good at capturing other knights in these tournaments.

Now, he had to fight on the French circuit because there wasn't an English circuit. Kings in England banned tournaments because they thought they were disruptive, disorderly affairs. But in France, they were extremely popular, so lots of English warriors fought in them in France.

So far, tournaments had basically been big mock battles, but in the 13th century, we see the rise of single combat, where knights would charge each other with a couched lance, a lance held under the arm and pointed straight at their opponent. This gave a certain narrative clarity to the event that it had previously lacked, when all you could see was a big mass of knights fighting. Of course, this made tournaments increasingly more artificial and less like actual fighting. By the 14th and 15th centuries, tournaments were diverging more and more from the way battles were actually fought. Archers and infantry were getting more important in real warfare.

Still, the elite stuck to the tournament because it had taken on a life of its own. Tournaments were great social occasions. Women attended in large numbers, and we know from contemporary accounts that they cheered for their favorite knights and booed the ones they didn't like, often quite loudly. Special stands were built for spectators. It was a very big deal. Kings even fought in tournaments as late as the 16th century. In fact, the French king Henry II died in 1559 as the result of an injury received in a tournament. You can set that beside the hunting accident that killed William Rufus and say that the pastimes of the rich and famous could be deadly.

One very important part of chivalry that developed along with the tournament was heraldry. Heraldry is the use of visual devices to distinguish warriors from one another. This arose because of the need to tell participants in a tournament apart from one another. Now, if we go back to the 11th century, you don't see distinctive markings on shields. For example, if you look for examples in the Bayeux Tapestry, you see that the soldiers at the Battle of Hastings have shields decorated with various geometric patterns, but they don't seem to mean anything in particular. They certainly don't identify particular soldiers.

By the 1140s, certain important nobles were choosing specific emblems for their shields. One of the first to do this, in fact, was Geoffrey of Anjou,

the father of King Henry II. His shield had gold lions on it, and these lions ultimately became part of the English royal coat of arms. Over the course of the 12th century and into the 13th century, heraldic devices became hereditary within families. This practice started at the top of the social hierarchy and worked its way down, starting with the kings and then on down to the barons, and after 1200, you increasingly see even rather humble knights bearing arms, which was the term for having a heraldic device. The upshot was that bearing arms became the distinguishing feature of knighthood. There could be quite a bit of social climbing involved.

Now, these heraldic devices, like everything else to do with knighthood, got more and more complicated over time. Special rules developed for what you could and could not put on your shield. There was a specialized vocabulary. If you see a coat of arms described, it reads like another language, and it pretty much is. For example, the coat of arms for Richard the Lionheart was "gules three lions or passant guardant." This was the description of what was on the shield; the description was called the "blazon." Now what does that mean, "gules three lions or passant guardant"? Well, it means that the shield has a red background, and on it are three gold lions, walking to the left with their front legs raised, with their heads facing out toward the viewer. So was that perfectly clear?

Well, most members of the elite in our period would have understood immediately what the blazon meant. They would have been able to visualize the shield right away. But the people who really knew this stuff were the heralds. These were the professionals, the ones who knew all the rules about what arms could be quartered where, what color fields you could use, etc. By the 14th century, important nobles were employing their own heralds. They would act as messengers, of course, but one big reason was that they could look out at the field of players in a tournament or a battle and know where to go. They knew who to talk to. And they also kept records. We have fairly accurate lists, for example, of the major nobles killed at the battles of Crécy and Poitiers. This is because heralds who were present wrote down the names of the casualties. There is a scene in *Henry V* about a herald going out and making a list of the dead. Of course, heralds had a professional interest in making heraldry as obscure and difficult as possible so that only the initiated could understand it. It was a highly technical field. And I think it's really

the ultimate expression of how chivalry took on a life of its own. Heraldry started out as a very practical way of making sure you were capturing the right opponent in a tournament. It ended up as a means of asserting identity and status in a very public way.

Let's pause for a moment and see how knighthood has developed between the 11th century and the Hundred Years' War. At the beginning of the period, knights are just armed thugs. They don't really look different from anyone else except that they're better armed. By the 14th century, they have elaborate armor and carry colorful shields that proclaim their membership in an elite class. They participate in rituals, such as dubbing, and they attend public events, such as tournaments, and all of this is an assertion of elite status. Knights have arrived.

Now, so far, I've concentrated on the martial aspects of knighthood, and that's completely fair. Knights grow out of war, and they like to associate themselves with war; it's prestigious for them. But they don't spend all their time fighting in wars and tournaments. What characterizes knightly culture besides war? Well, knights seem to have liked to listen to stories about other knights. Of course, there was a literary tradition of stories about war that dates back as far as we can trace literature. But as we have seen, this kind of literature took on a specific pattern, a courtly pattern, in the 12th century. These are the troubadour poems and the Arthurian romances that we talked about in an earlier lecture. This literature stayed wildly popular through the 14th century and beyond. But something big changed in the 14th century, and it goes along with a point I made at the end of the last lecture about the rise of English identity during the Hundred Years' War.

Stories about knights were increasingly composed in English. This is fairly new in this period. Until this point, most courtly literature had been in French, but now you start to see these stories in English verse rather than in French verse. There's a transition period where you see the languages being used side by side, but then French gradually fades out and English takes over. One of the most famous examples of these new English knightly romances is the great 14th-century Arthurian poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. Sir Gawain is a hero at King Arthur's court, and one day, a mysterious knight appears at the court; he's completely green. He offers to

let a knight strike a blow at him with his axe if that knight will then allow him to strike a blow in return. Sir Gawain rises to the challenge and cuts off the head of the green knight, but then, to the amazement of all, the knight picks up his own head and tells Gawain he has to keep his promise exactly a year later to let the green knight strike him in return. Gawain is terrified, but he keeps his promise and he goes off to let the knight strike him. He has lots of adventures along the way, some of which involve a beautiful lady whom Gawain has to struggle to fend off, and he does meet the green knight again, proving himself to be a true and worthy knight. It's a wonderful story, and it's proof that by the 14th century, knighthood in England has really gone native.

One other interesting aspect of knightly literature is that knights liked to listen to "nonfiction" accounts of knightly deeds, as well. Early in the 13th century, for example, we get a biographical poem about the deeds of William Marshal, commissioned by his son; we've mentioned this poem before, but it's part of a trend. Increasingly, knights are interested in hearing about other knights. In the 14th century, you see an explosion of historical writing aimed at the laity, specifically at the knightly classes, and the Hundred Years' War was largely responsible. We have wonderful accounts of the war, particularly by the Flemish writer Froissart. He goes into tremendous detail about the war; he describes the pageantry, the heraldry, the personalities involved in the war. This is what knights wanted to hear about. They wanted to hear about themselves.

This brings me to the final aspect of knighthood I want to discuss. If knights liked to hear about themselves, that was partly because they were very conscious of belonging to a social group that consisted of other people like them. They liked to be with other knights, to associate with them, and the 14th century was the big age for formalizing such associations of knights. We've seen that Edward III was the consummate knight. Well, he took the brilliant step of creating an "order of knighthood," a kind of club for knights with exclusive membership. The purpose of this was to bind his knights even more closely to him in a time of war. He's not going to have the same problems with his followers that his father had; he wants to make them part of his inner circle. This order of knights that he founded was called the Order of the Garter.

Supposedly, the Order of the Garter was founded in 1348 in response to an incident that took place at Windsor. The king and his courtiers were dancing, including the countess of Salisbury.

The king had his eye on the countess. (I said earlier that Edward III adored his wife, Queen Philippa; I didn't say he was scrupulously faithful to her.) The countess was dancing quite close to the king, and her garter slipped off and fell to the floor. Some of the people around her started to snigger, but the king very chivalrously picked it up, tied it to his own leg, and said, "*Honi soit qui mal y pense*." That means, "Shame to whoever thinks ill of it." That became the motto of the Order of the Garter.

Well, it's a wonderful story, but there are other explanations for the founding of the order. Some think the garter has to do with the straps that were used to fasten armor; that's a more prosaic explanation—probably a more likely one. It's also possible that the motto, "Shame to whoever thinks ill of it," actually has to do with the claim to the French throne. The members of the order were being recruited to back the claim to the throne. After all, I don't think this will ever be settled definitely, but the important point about the Order of the Garter is that it formalized the tie between the king and some of his most important knights. It conferred membership in an elite group. It was something for people to aim for and aspire to. To this day, membership in the Order of the Garter is the highest knightly honor that the English monarch can confer. Membership is limited to the monarch, the prince of Wales, and 24 companion members (nowadays, these can be women).

Now, in creating this order, Edward was also consciously imitating King Arthur and his knights at the court of Camelot. He wanted to inspire the kind of chivalry that he and his knights had grown up hearing about in stories. It was, in a real sense, life imitating art, and it's a measure of how important a force Arthurian literature was in English elite society.

So what shall we say about chivalry? It's really an all-pervasive cultural phenomenon that affects every aspect of elite life. It affects consumption patterns: What do you need to buy; what do you need to wear? It affects social life: What kinds of rituals and ceremonies do you participate in; on what kinds of big occasions do you get together with other members of

your in-crowd? It affects the kind of literature you like to read or listen to. It affects identity in a fundamental way: Chivalry tells you who you are, down to the minute details of your blazon; you are your coat of arms. It affects politics, too, because membership in an organization like the Order of the Garter is a sign of royal favor, a sign that you are in the inner circle of the powerful, and you aren't going to want to lose that.

And as we saw in the last lecture, being chivalrous or being seen to be chivalrous was deeply important to many medieval people. To show you belonged to this group, it wasn't enough to wear the right armor and have a fancy shield. You needed to act a certain way; you needed to be a perfect knight, like Sir Gawain. In a real sense, that's what led the king of Bohemia to ride to his death at Crécy; that's what led King John of France to surrender himself to captivity. These men were participating in a cultural phenomenon that united people across international boundaries. They were all part of one chivalric ethos. This ethos of chivalry coexisted with the growing nationalism we have talked about. It was fine to root for your own team; it was simply good sportsmanship to play by the rules and respect your opponents.

So there's a very strong element of class identity associated with chivalry. Only people of a certain social status can be knights. Once the knights climbed up into the nobility, they never wanted to look back. There is thus an ugly side to chivalry that we can set next to all the pageantry and gallantry. Knights very much looked down on people who weren't knights. We have accounts from the Hundred Years' War of the very matter-of-fact way in which English knights pillaged the French peasants, like they were from another species and unworthy of caring about.

One of the attributes of knighthood was supposed to be a respect for women, the kind of respect embodied in the noble gesture of King Edward, who doesn't want the poor countess of Salisbury to suffer an awkward moment at the dance at Windsor. But you don't owe that kind of respect to women not of your own social class. You might remember Andreas the Chaplain, who wrote about the ways in which men and women of the various social classes should approach each other to talk of love. Andrew makes one exception to this need to talk about love. He tells young men, if you desire a peasant woman, you can just take her by force. There is no need to talk her into it.

That kind of attitude is part of chivalry, too. It might be good to think for a moment about what the rest of society thought about all those tournaments and colorful banners and shields.

Well, we're ending our discussion of chivalry on something of an ambivalent note, and that's appropriate, I think. But in our next lecture, we're going to talk about a subject about which it's hard to say very much at all that is positive. Next time, we'll talk about the great plague that struck Europe right in the middle of the Hundred Years' War, right as the Order of the Garter was being founded. We'll talk about the Black Death.

The Black Death

Lecture 27

A great mortality spread to England from the Continent, where it had already been raging for some time. In the course of the outbreak of disease that followed, perhaps a third of the English population died. ... It's hard for us even to imagine the scale of the catastrophe. Try to imagine your family, your friends, your coworkers. Now eliminate one in three of them. Imagine what that would do to your life on a daily basis. That's what happened.

In the same year in which the Order of the Garter was founded, the Black Death came to England. Named perhaps for the extensive black bruises the disease produced, or perhaps for the black fate of the infected, the disease may have been caused by the bacterium *Yersinia pestis* or a closely related one, or it may have been two or more diseases that struck at the same time. It seems to have appeared in Asia in the 1340s, from where it spread westward along trade routes, especially along the Black Sea. The ships that sailed these routes were infested with rats, which were infested with fleas, which carried the plague. The disease had spread to southeastern Europe and Italy by 1347 and reached England in 1348.

A contemporary chronicler recorded three forms the disease could take: The mildest caused buboes (enormous swellings of the lymph nodes of the armpits, groin, and so forth) and a fever and took five days to kill its victims, but if they survived the five days, victims had a chance at recovery. A more serious form also caused victims to vomit blood; the survival time was about three days, and the chance of recovery was low. The third and most terrifying form seems to have been airborne and astonishingly fast-moving; reports say there were families in which everyone went to bed feeling perfectly fine and were dead by the next morning.

Word of the plague reached England many, many months before it finally arrived. People took all the precautions they could under medieval conditions. They said prayers, held masses, and doubled up on almsgiving; they bought quack remedies; they put their affairs in order. But still the plague came.

And England wasn't in the best position to resist a major outbreak of disease. The Great Famine had weakened the health of an entire generation, and bad weather continued to take its toll on the populace into the 1340s. A concurrent rapid growth in the population meant people were living closer together, and disease could more easily spread.

The mortality rate for clergy was particularly high, partly because they were ministering to the sick and performing last rites for the dying.

The disease likely arrived in June 1348 in Dorset on a ship from Calais; by the autumn, it was all over the West Country, including the major port of Bristol. From there it spread inexorably from west to east by two main routes: a northerly route through Oxfordshire and down into London, and a southerly route along the south coast through Hampshire, into Surrey, and thus to London again. The plague didn't hit London with its full force until the beginning of the following year, but when it did, the cemeteries were unable to accommodate all the bodies; No one is sure how many people died in London, but one estimate says one-third to one-half of a population of 70,000. All over England, town authorities were overwhelmed by the task of burying the dead. Many towns resorted to mass burials in so-called plague pits. Not one but two elected archbishops of Canterbury died before they could take office. Some of the city's many livery companies, or guilds, lost all of their leadership. Twenty-seven members of the monastic community at Westminster Abbey died, and their abbot fled, taking the plague with him to Hampstead. London life was made all the harder by the unwillingness of the farmers and tradesmen from the countryside who kept it supplied to enter the city environs. From London, the plague spread to East Anglia in March of 1349, peaking at last in May, June, and July. The plague also spread north through the midlands. It seems to have hit particularly hard in Lincolnshire for some reason. The mortality rate for clergy was particularly high, partly because they were ministering to the sick and performing last rites for the dying.

People tried all sorts of remedies. It was widely believed that the plague came from "bad air," so people tried breathing through special cloths. Other

people wore charms and amulets. Perhaps the strangest remedy was based on the belief that one kind of bad air could drive out another. A physician named John Colle noted that people who took care of latrines or who worked in hospitals and other malodorous places had greater immunity to the plague. Worried citizens could sometimes be spotted crouched over a latrine for hours, trying to absorb the noxious smells as protection. It worked about as well as you might have expected. On the Continent, particularly Germany, people tried self-flagellation, believing that this penance for their sins might avert the punishment of the plague. One of the uglier responses to the Black Death was the persecution of Jews, who were accused of a conspiracy to spread the plague. The English did not participate in such persecution, but only because they had driven the Jews out of the country 50 years before.

By the end of 1349, the plague had reached almost every corner of England, then subsided. It would return periodically for the next 300 years. The first time, in 1361, it hit particularly hard among the children who had been born since the first outbreak of plague, who of course had no immunity to it. But in the meantime, England had lost a third of its labor force. Parliament, protecting its own members' interests, passed the **Statute of Laborers** in 1351 to set maximum wage rates and order people back into the labor force, which held back any dramatic rise in wages until the 1370s.

The Black Death's effects on agriculture were also profound, because a huge number of farms changed hands. In fact, it was sometimes hard to determine who really had a right to the holding, and in many cases, there was simply no one left to take over the farm. Landlords everywhere were desperate to find tenants, which often meant lowering rents and commuting servile dues, the labor that an unfree tenant owed the manor. Slowly but surely, serfdom withered away. Finally, the loss of population meant that demand for goods and services was depressed, which meant that prices fell. So despite the horrible emotional toll the plague took on the people of England, those who survived were far better off in its aftermath. ■

Important Term

Laborers, Statute of: Measure passed in 1351 intended to protect employers from the market forces set in motion by the great mortality caused by the Black Death. Wage rates were to be kept at pre-plague levels, and able-bodied men were required to accept work under those terms. The statute caused widespread resentment and contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

Suggested Reading

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

The Black Death
Lecture 27—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the rise of chivalry. This was the glorious side of medieval life, the colorful side, the side people wrote stories about. But there was another side to life, a tragic side, and we'll be talking about that today.

In the same year in which the Order of the Garter was founded, 1348, disaster struck England. A great mortality spread to England from the continent, where it had already been raging for some time. In the course of the outbreak of disease that followed, perhaps a third of the English population died, and that rate was true for Europe as a whole. It's hard for us even to imagine the scale of the catastrophe. Try to imagine your family, your friends, your coworkers. Now eliminate one in three of them. Imagine what that would do to your life on a daily basis. That's what happened in Europe in this period, and England was affected just as badly as anywhere else.

We call this outbreak of disease the Black Death, but that is a later name, a 16th-century name, and we're not even sure what it refers to. Some people think it's a reference to one of the symptoms of the disease. In many victims, buboes, or swellings, would form wherever they had lymph nodes, so the armpits, the groin area, the neck, those areas. After these buboes appeared, the victim would often develop purple or black spots or splotches on the skin; when that happened, death was usually not far behind. But that's probably not the explanation for the name. It seems to be a mistranslation of the Latin term *atra mors*; literally, this could mean "black death," but it is more likely to be used here in a symbolic way, as in, "It's a black day for this country when…" and then you can fill in the disaster of your choice. So we're not sure exactly what the origin of the term Black Death is, but by now it's firmly associated with the plague of the 1340s, so I don't see a lot of point in resisting it.

But what was it that caused this tremendous death toll? Can we actually identify the specific disease that caused the disaster? How would we do this? There are two main kinds of evidence we can use to answer the question, and each of them poses its own difficulties. The first kind of evidence we can

use comes from the period when the disease struck. These are contemporary accounts of what the disease was like: what were the symptoms, how long did they last, at what rate did people die of the disease. So we can look at that sort of thing. On the other hand, we have another kind of evidence. We have actual living organisms we can study in a lab, germs that are still around making people sick, and maybe we can associate them with the disease outbreak of the Middle Ages. So scholars of the plague will try to match up descriptions of what the plague was like with the known etiology of modern diseases, that is, their behavior, the way they run their course. The idea is to try to see if our accounts of the plague correspond to any diseases we can observe now.

Some scholars think we know exactly what the Black Death was. About 100 years ago, a scientist working in Hong Kong identified a bacillus that had caused a serious outbreak of disease in Asia. The bacillus was called *Yersinia pestis*. Many scholars have thought ever since that this bacillus was the cause of the medieval plague because they see a lot of similarities in the way the plague spread in the two outbreaks, for example, the buboes from which we get the term bubonic plague. Recently, this topic has caused tremendous disagreement among both historians and epidemiologists. There are plague affirmers and plague deniers, people who believe that *Yersinia pestis* was the medieval plague and people who think it can't possibly have been the same disease.

The plague deniers point out that certain features of modern plague, like the kind you saw in Asia in the 19th century, don't match up exactly with the symptoms of the medieval plague, things like the time of year when the plague was most active or the ease with which it spread. The problem is that the evidence is hard to work with. The medieval chroniclers who described the disease were not writing for a modern, medically trained audience. They were not nearly as precise in their formulations as modern researchers would like them to be. It can be hard to tell exactly what happened in the course of the disease.

On the other hand, it's hard to work with living organisms and project their behavior back into the past, because with a creature like a bacillus, evolution

is incredibly fast. So if the descriptions of the two plagues, medieval and modern, don't match up exactly, perhaps it's the disease itself that changed.

Scholars have even tried to settle this question conclusively by attempting to extract plague DNA from victims buried in plague cemeteries. They want to confirm whether it was *Yersinia pestis* or not. These efforts are ongoing, but so far they are inconclusive. We can't say definitively, and for our purposes, it's not all that important, but it's an interesting window into the kinds of questions that can really rile up the scholarly world.

But now let's get back to the Black Death in the 14th century. One reason it's been hard to figure out what the disease was is that it was probably two diseases or even three. A contemporary chronicler classified these different forms of the disease according to how long they took to kill you. The mildest, the one that many people actually did recover from, was said to take five days to kill you. This was the kind that gave you the buboes. There was a more serious disease, though, and that one caused continuous fever and the victims would spit up blood. This was very much a disease of the lungs. From this form of the disease, victims would die in three days, and the survival rate was very low. It was a very messy and unpleasant way to die. There may even have been a third form of the disease. This one seems to have been airborne and astonishingly fast-moving. An English chronicler named Geoffrey le Baker reports that there were families in which everyone went to bed feeling perfectly fine and by the next morning they were all dead.

Whatever the disease or diseases were, the first sign of trouble seems to have arisen in Asia in the early 1340s. The disease was slowly carried west by ships along the trade routes that had opened up in recent centuries between Europe and Asia, particularly along the Black Sea. These ships were infested by rats, and the rats were infested by fleas, and the fleas carried the plague. Ships bearing the plague reached southeastern Europe and Italy by 1347. There are dramatic accounts of ships being found with almost nobody left alive on board. Over the course of the year 1347, the plague moved north, and in 1348, it finally reached England.

One of the most chilling aspects of the Black Death, I think, is the fact that its victims had plenty of warning that it was coming. News certainly didn't travel fast in the 14th century, but it did travel faster than it had at any point since the height of the Roman Empire. Trade routes were far more extensive than in the past; more people were traveling for business and for other purposes than ever before, and word of the plague spread. They knew about it in England for many, many months before it finally arrived. Churches in England actually ordered special prayers to avert the plague. People took all the precautions they could under medieval conditions. They doubled up on almsgiving; they bought quack remedies; they put their affairs in order. But still the plague came.

And England was not in the best position to resist a major outbreak of disease. In an earlier lecture, we talked about the Great Famine during the reign of Edward II, in the 1310s. That disaster had weakened the immunity of an entire generation of English men and women. The bad weather that had caused the famine didn't get all that much better during the rest of the period before the Black Death. Europe seems to have entered a period when it was just colder and wetter than it had been before, and this is especially bad for northern Europe, where the problem tends to be too much rain at the wrong time. So the English agricultural economy was already in something of a crisis when the plague hit. There had been a lot of crop failures, and so people were not as prepared as they should have been to resist an outbreak of disease.

Other demographic factors were also working against England at this point. The population had been expanding quite rapidly. When we talked about daily life in the 13th century, we saw that population expansion as a source of growth for the English economy, and it was definitely a good thing. But at some point around 1300 or so, England probably reached a tipping point. Pretty much all the available agricultural land was already under cultivation, and some of that was pretty marginal; the yields on those marginal lands were low. There wasn't any slack. Any crop failure was bound to cause suffering. The increase in population also meant that people were living much more closely together, and they were, of course, living under medieval standards of personal hygiene. That clearly helped the spread of the disease.

Let's follow the course of the disease across England. It probably arrived in Dorset, in the southwest, in June of 1348, maybe on a ship coming from Calais; this is, of course, the town that Edward III had captured in the famous siege only the year before. Those trading contacts with the continent are turning into something of a drawback at this point. The disease then spread to other nearby towns, and by the fall, it was rife all over the West Country, including the major port of Bristol. From there, it spread inexorably across the country from west to east by two main routes, a northerly route through Oxfordshire and down into London, and a southerly route, along the south coast through Hampshire, into Surrey, and thus to London again. The first cases were reported in the capital in the fall of 1348, but the plague didn't hit with full force until the beginning of the following year. Things got so bad so fast in London that Edward III canceled an upcoming meeting of Parliament. One historian has said about this that the king may have been happy to spare himself the grumbling of Parliament; they had granted taxes the previous year, so he didn't have much more to gain from letting them get together to complain about things.

Such considerations were surely overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the deaths. The existing cemeteries in London were unable to accommodate all the bodies of the victims. A new graveyard at Smithfield was quickly opened up, and the bishop of London hurriedly consecrated it. No one is sure how many people died in London, but one estimate says that out of a total population of 60–70,000, maybe 20–30,000 died. Try translating that sort of death toll into modern terms, and you get a sense of the scale of the disaster. All over England, town authorities were overwhelmed by the task of burying the dead. The supply of coffins quickly ran out, and in many places, towns were forced to resort to mass burials in "plague pits." Modern scholars have excavated some of these plague pits; when you see these bodies so densely packed together, it gives you a powerful sense of what it must have been like to experience this kind of suffering.

Now, the plague hit the humble especially hard, as you might expect, but it did not spare the great either. At the time the plague hit London, a newly elected archbishop of Canterbury was preparing to take office. It was the chancellor, John Offord. He died before he could be enthroned. Pope Clement VI then appointed a famous scholar named Thomas Bradwardine to

replace Offord; Bradwardine died while staying in the palace of the bishop of Rochester in London. The city fathers of London were not spared either. London was the home of many guilds or associations of tradesmen, and they were led by wardens. These were pretty exalted figures in London society. By the end of 1349, of eight wardens of the Company of Cutters (these were people who cut out garments), all eight of them were dead, and so were all six wardens of the Company of Hatters.

Religious communities were sometimes hit especially hard, for example, at Westminster Abbey. The abbot at the time was a very difficult, very quarrelsome man named Simon de Bircheston. Twenty years before the plague hit, he had been prosecuted for attacking a royal stonemason, and he was not on the best of terms with his own community of monks. When the plague arrived, he tried to flee; they didn't understand the germ theory in the 14th century, but people did know that being close to plague victims made it more likely you would get sick yourself. So Simon de Bircheston tried to get out of town. As abbot of Westminster, he owned a fine manor in Hampstead; it was his country house, so to speak. But he brought the plague with him and died there. And it didn't go well for his monks, either. Twenty-seven members of the Westminster community also died.

Life in London was made worse by the fact that nobody wanted to go to London once they knew the plague had hit there. By this point, London was far from self-sufficient. The city depended on food supplies from the countryside, but no one wanted to bring a cartload of produce into London in the midst of the plague. Now demand was dropping precipitately at the same time, so there wasn't a famine, but it was still a very hard time to be in London. Some Londoners were so desperate for bread that they fanned out into the countryside looking for supplies. Of course, they just spread the plague with them.

And the plague spread even further. From London it spread to East Anglia in March of 1349; it peaked in May, June, and July. We can tell this because there are records of the deaths recorded in the manor court rolls for the areas that were affected. Since manor courts met every three weeks or so, it's relatively easy to trace the arc of the mortality. The plague also spread north through the midlands. It seems to have hit particularly hard in Lincolnshire

for some reason. One way to tell this is by looking at the records of when benefices became vacant. A benefice is a job in the church, such as being the priest of a particular parish. It was also referred to as a living, because the clergyman made his living by holding the benefice. Well, in the diocese of Lincolnshire, there were two archdeaconries; those were the large units that dioceses were divided into for administrative purposes. In the archdeaconry of Lincolnshire, 45 percent of the beneficed clergy died. In the other archdeaconry, the archdeaconry of Stow, 57 percent of the beneficed clergy died. So in the whole archdeaconry of Lincolnshire, about half of the clergy died of the plague.

The mortality rate for clergy was high partly because a lot of them were actually doing their job. They were out ministering to the sick, performing last rites for the dying, which is what they were supposed to do, but of course, this left them exposed to these diseases. We do have a few accounts of clerics fleeing, like poor Abbot Simon of Westminster, but many stood their ground. The highest mortality rates could often be found among the religious orders whose special task was taking care of the poor, especially the Franciscans and other friars. They tended to live right in the midst of the communities they served, and they suffered disproportionately.

One result of this terrible mortality rate among clergymen is that the Church was faced with a terrible staffing crisis after the plague subsided. It was a long process to train a priest properly; it was hard to replace half of them at one go. In many instances, the Church had to relax its standards and let people in who might have been rejected in former times. Canonical requirements, such as minimum age, were frequently waived. The quality of recruits was generally poor, and there were complaints about this particular cohort of priests, the plague generation, for a long time to come.

I've mentioned flight as one remedy for the plague. And that's really the only one that worked, though people often fled too late, like poor Abbot Simon of Westminster. But people tried all sorts of remedies. It was widely believed that plague came from "bad air," so people tried breathing through special cloths that were supposed to filter out the plague. Other people wore special charms and amulets. Perhaps the strangest remedy that people resorted to was based on the idea that the plague was caused by bad air. If was believed that

one bad odor could drive out another. A physician named John Colle noted that people who took care of latrines or who worked in hospitals and other malodorous places were nearly all considered to be immune to the plague. I don't think this was really true, but he thought so. Worried citizens could sometimes be spotted crouched over a latrine for hours, trying to absorb the noxious smells, so as to confer protection from the plague. It worked about as well as you might have expected.

One thing the English didn't try in large numbers was a remedy that was briefly popular on the continent, namely, self-flagellation. Groups of people, primarily in Germany, would travel around whipping each other as a penance for their sins. They would even wear special habits with holes cut in the back so that the scourges could have access to their bare flesh. Hundreds of these people tramped around Europe, and hundreds more participated in their ceremonies when they would pass through the major towns. But the English proved immune to the charms of the flagellants. A group of them arrived in London in September 1349 and performed their usual penitential rites. The response of the Londoners was polite but noncommittal. A few people expressed pity for their suffering, but the flagellants made no new recruits among the English.

So perhaps we can give the English some credit for being sensible in the face of disaster, but there was one ugly aspect of the European response to the Black Death that the English couldn't have participated in, even if they wanted to, namely, the persecution of Jews. In many parts of Europe, Jews were blamed for the plague. It was widely believed that Jews poisoned the wells and that caused the plague, and in fact, a Jewish man in Savoy was tortured into confessing his role in a supposed international conspiracy to spread the plague. Of course, it was hysterical nonsense, but the English were spared, not because they saw through the story, but because there were no Jews left in England to persecute. As you'll recall, they had all been expelled more than 50 years before.

Well, by the end of 1349, almost every corner of England had been visited by the plague. Then it subsided; it had run its course. But plague was going to return on a fairly regular basis in England for the next 300 years. The first of these major recurrences of the plague took place in 136162, and the cruel

thing about this outbreak was that it hit particularly hard among the children who had been born since the first outbreak of plague. These were children who had no immunity to the plague, so they were especially vulnerable. So the new generation that had been born to replace those who had died was also hit by the plague.

The psychological impact of the plague was enormous. No one was ever sure when it might come back. If you look at things like funerary architecture in the years after the plague, it gets much gloomier. Before the plague, you see tombs with statutes of the deceased looking rather peaceful, as they might have looked in life. After the plague, you see more of a grim representation of the effects of decay on the body. This was supposed to remind the living of the fate that awaited them after death, and presumably, this would concentrate their minds on heavenly things before it was too late.

These psychological effects of the Black Death were visible rather quickly, but some of the long-term social and economic effects took longer to make themselves felt. But there certainly were some profound effects. Essentially, England had lost a third of its labor force. There's no way that the English economy wasn't going to be affected by that. One obvious result you might expect from such a huge reduction in the labor force would be that wages would rise. There were now a lot fewer workers available, and that should improve their bargaining power. But that did not happen right away, for a couple of reasons. The first is that Parliament took steps to make sure it didn't happen.

In order to explain why, I need to repeat something about Parliament that I've touched on before. Parliament represents the men of substance in the realm, the men of property, the men with a stake in the established order. Men in Parliament were people who *paid* wages; they were not people who *earned* wages. By and large, they were employers. So it was definitely in their economic interest to keep wage rates low. Now, the members of Parliament could see the economic writing on the wall as well as we can, and they wanted to forestall it. Almost immediately after the plague hit, there were reports of laborers demanding higher rates of pay or refusing to undertake unappealing tasks. That had to be stopped. So in 1351, Parliament passed the Statute of Laborers. The statute set maximum wage rates. It also

ordered that all workers must work if called upon to do so. These measures weren't completely effective, but they did hold down the rise in wages somewhat, and they proved to be a major grievance among the laboring classes in England, as we'll see in the next lecture.

But there's another very intriguing reason why the wages of English laborers didn't go up right away, and this time it's not due to anyone trying to game the labor market. It comes out of conditions in the labor market itself. I talked at the beginning of the lecture about the fact that England had, in a sense, gotten overpopulated by the early 14th century. The economy simply wasn't developed enough to absorb all the available labor. So after the plague hit, even after that huge drop in population, it actually took a long time for all that slack in the labor market to be taken up.

The pressure on wages that Parliament was complaining about wasn't nearly as great as you might have expected based on the sheer numbers. This is a sign of how troubled the economy was just before the Black Death. But the numbers finally did begin to add up as the century wore on. By the 1370s, there was steady upward pressure on laborers' wages. Tensions over wages were one of the big triggers for the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381 that we're going to discuss in our next lecture.

The effects of the Black Death on agriculture were also profound. A huge number of farms changed hands. Of course, many farms were inherited by close kin of those who died, but in a lot of instances, so many members of a family had died that it was hard to determine who really had a right to the holding. Again, we can trace these kinds of problems in the manor court rolls. And in many cases, there was simply no one left to take over the farm; many plots of land were just left untended. We have a vivid account of this from a report submitted in 1354 by the former vice-sheriff of Cumberland in the north. He said that the plague had been so devastating around the royal castle at Carlisle that most of the manor lands attached to the castle were still uncultivated. That's more than four years after the epidemic had passed. Indeed, the report said, for the first 18 months after the plague hit, the whole estate had lain waste "for lack of labourers and diverse tenants." The pastures, the meadowlands, the mills, the fisheries—everything on the estate was just lying there.

And this was not just a problem on royal estates. Landlords everywhere could get very desperate to find tenants. They didn't want to try to farm the land themselves directly if they could avoid it, because now they'd be competing for labor in this new labor market that was not exactly favorable to employers. This led landlords to compete for the best tenants, and that meant lowering rents and, often, commuting labor services. What does that mean, commuting labor services? You'll remember, from our discussion about daily life in English villages that many tenants owed some sort of actual work to the lord of the manor, either help with the harvest or some other agricultural tasks, like carting produce to market or spreading manure. These labor services are referred to as "servile dues" because they marked tenants off as belonging to the class of serfs. If you had to work for the boss on certain days and at certain tasks, that made you a serf, and if your status was called into question in the manor court, for example, your fate would often be decided based on whether your neighbors had always seen you spreading manure for the lord. That would be case closed; you're a serf.

Now, landlords were having to compete for tenants, and they were having to offer attractive terms, so along with lowering rents, they often simply abolished these servile dues; they commuted them, the way you would commute a sentence today. The effect of this was profound. Slowly but surely, it became impossible for landlords anywhere to insist on these servile dues. They became hopelessly old-fashioned, and they simply withered away. By the 15th century, they were quickly disappearing. And the result is that English peasants looked freer and freer. If you weren't spreading manure any more, you weren't a serf; you were a free man or woman.

This is a good thing for the peasants, of course, and there was another happy effect of the Black Death, at least on the economic front. The loss of population in England meant that demand for all sorts of goods and services was depressed, which meant that prices fell. This was a good thing for anyone trying to survive on wages in the cash economy: Prices are falling and wages are going up.

So what are we to make of the Black Death overall? Obviously, the human toll was staggering. Families were devastated; institutions of all sorts were disrupted; the Church may have gone through a quality control crisis for

at least a generation. But on the social and economic fronts, the long-term consequences of the Black Death actually benefited the people at the bottom of the ladder, at least the people who survived. They had far more bargaining power than they had ever had before, and they used it. The 15th century has been called the golden age of the English yeoman, that is, the small independent farmer, and one big reason for that was that the yeoman had less competition than before.

But before we get to the golden age of the 15th century, we need to look at one last big conflict between the men of substance and the people at the bottom. We'll look at how the landlords tried to stave off the inevitable results of the famine and how common folk responded. Next time: the English Peasants' Revolt.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381

Lecture 28

The rebels were actually rather moderate in their demands; this is a characteristic of English revolts throughout history from this point on, really. ... We've seen real radical revolts, like the French and Russian revolutions, and we know that the revolt in 1381 doesn't look like that. But to the powers that be in 1381, it did seem like the end of the world.

There were long-term economic consequences to the Black Death in England, but the propertied classes were not going to bow to these market forces without a fight. The burgeoning class conflict of the late 14th century would play out in the largest, most threatening revolt of the entire Middle Ages, the so-called Peasant's Revolt of 1381.

So far, the rebellions we've looked at have been baronial rebellions, men of wealth and power trying to get a better deal out of the king. Then, starting with the Magna Carta, barons began to claim they were rebelling for the good of the realm—or at least, the propertied class. The revolt of 1381 is the first that we can honestly say was motivated by the concerns of the lower orders.

We call this revolt the Peasant's Revolt, but strictly speaking, most of the participants were a cut above ordinary peasants—small-scale tradesmen, low-ranking clergy, and so forth—and their demands were fairly sophisticated, addressing both economic and religious grievances. It was also an orderly revolt, as revolts go, with far less violence than you would expect from thousands of angry people on the march.

The king who had to confront these rebels was the young Richard II, son of the Black Prince and grandson of Edward III. Richard came to the throne in 1377 at the age of 10. It's interesting to note that, despite Richard's age (and the succession skipping a generation; the Black Prince died the year before Edward did), it was uncontroversial. The principle of dynastic legitimacy was well established, and the state had developed sufficiently so that the various organs of government could rule even if the king could not. Richard's

uncles, especially John of Gaunt, were also very loyal to their nephew; this was a close-knit family.

The last years of Edward III's reign were troublesome for England. The king had slipped into senility, and the war in France was going badly. Royal finances were in a terrible state, so between 1377 and 1381, Parliament passed a series of taxes of a new form called the **poll tax**. Previous taxes were on property, and thus the lowest orders were mostly unaffected. The poll tax, on the other hand, was per head; you had to pay it regardless of how much property you owned. Even at four pence, the lowest tax rate, it was a hardship for many. By 1381, the rate tripled, starting at a shilling a head. The rebels did not miss the irony that the same Parliament that was hiking their taxes had been passing laws since 1351 to keep their wages low.

Whatever we may think of Richard's later behavior, [meeting the rebels] was a brave thing for a 14-year-old boy to do.

Meanwhile, the public was angry with the church over the papal provisions, where the pope used his right of patronage to put his own men—often foreigners—into all the good jobs in the English church. In 1351 and 1353, Parliament passed the **Statute of Provisors**, which attempted to limit the papal provisions, and the **Statute of Praemunire**, which limited the number of cases relating to church property that were referred to Rome. It didn't help matters that the papacy was at the time in exile in Avignon, France—consorting with the enemy.

Meanwhile, England had produced its first home-grown heretic, an Oxford professor named John Wycliffe, who attacked some of the core tenets of the Catholic Church. He believed that it was possible for individual believers to find a mystical union with God apart from the sacraments and specifically denied the doctrine of transubstantiation. He said the institutional church did not have a monopoly on interpreting scripture. (He even sponsored an English translation of the Bible.) Then Wycliffe took the next logical step, saying that if lay people don't need the clergy for much, then the clergy don't

need all that property. Parliament cracked down Wycliffe's followers, the Lollards. In 1401 they passed the law known as **De haeretico comburendo,** "On the burning of heretics," the first time in English history that the execution of heretics was authorized by law. Wycliffe himself was never seriously punished; he had the patronage and protection of John of Gaunt.

Despite the suppression, Lollardy was very much in the air in the spring of 1381. In late May and early June, bands of rebels attacked poll tax commissioners in Kent and Essex. Led by Wat Tyler, a local tradesman, and John Ball, a Lollard-leaning priest, they then attacked religious houses, royal castles, and royal officials and began destroying legal records. By the second week of June, large groups of rebels began to converge on London—literally thousands of people on the roads headed toward the same place. Once there, they were joined by disaffected Londoners. They burned the Savoy Palace, the London residence of John of Gaunt; the rebels clearly saw him as the public face of the king's government. They attacked the Tower of London and seized the chancellor, Simon Sudbury, who was also archbishop of Canterbury, and the treasurer, Sir Robert Hales. Both Sudbury and Hales were beheaded. The rebels also targeted Flemish wool merchants—probably out of general hostility to foreigners—and destroyed more legal records.

This mob wasn't merely a mob, however; they had formulated specific demands, which they conveyed to Richard: They wanted the abolition of serfdom. They wanted to abolish the nobility other than the king. They wanted rents limited to four pence per acre. They wanted the property of the church confiscated and distributed among the people. Finally, they wanted the heads of the chancellor, the treasurer, and John of Gaunt; of course, they took care of the first two themselves. Wat Tyler demanded an appointment with Richard for June 15 at Smithfield, right outside the city, to discuss these demands. The amazing thing is, the king went. Whatever we may think of Richard's later behavior, this was a brave thing for a 14-year-old boy to do.

We have various accounts of the meeting, and they conflict in some important details, but this is the essence: Wat Tyler made either a disrespectful or a sudden gesture toward the king, and the lord mayor of London stabbed Tyler with a dagger. This could have been the start of a terrible riot, but the king called out to the rebels that he would gladly listen to all their demands if they

would only follow him into the fields further outside the city. They went, but they walked into a trap; Richard had bought enough time for his troops to arrive and arrest the remaining ringleaders. The rank and file dispersed quickly. The concessions made to the rebels at Smithfield were repudiated. The leaders, including John Ball, were executed, but there were no wholesale reprisals.

Despite the revolt's failure, the government got the point. Most of the rebels' demands went unmet, but the poll tax was scrapped. Perhaps the most important and interesting point to be made about the revolt is that both the rebels and the government acted with considerable restraint. ■

Important Terms

De haeretico comburendo: Act of Parliament passed in 1401 authorizing the burning at the stake of heretics. The measure was aimed at the Lollards, who had grown in popularity as the result of the writings of John Wycliffe.

poll tax: Tax on every individual in England imposed under Richard II in 1377, 1379, and 1381. It proved very unpopular and helped touch off the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

Praemunire, Statutes of: Measures enacted in 1353, 1365, and 1393 to prevent the appeal of ecclesiastical cases to foreign courts in which jurisdiction pertained to the royal courts. The first statute applied to foreign courts in general, whereas the later statutes were more narrowly directed at the papal court.

Provisors, Statutes of: Measures enacted in 1351 and 1390 against the practice of papal provision, by which the pope could nominate his own candidates for English ecclesiastical offices. Papal provisions were extremely unpopular because they deprived the king and the local church of a rich source of patronage, and the men "provided" to English offices often failed to perform their duties in person, instead hiring ill-paid and ill-qualified substitutes.

Suggested Reading

Hollister, Stacey, and Stacey, *The Making of England to 1399*.

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

The Peasants' Revolt of 1381
Lecture 28—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we talked about the Black Death, and I suggested that there were some long-term consequences that followed from the great mortality of the plague. You lose a third of the population: a third fewer people in the labor supply, a third fewer tenants for agricultural land. That's going to do something to the economy.

But I also hinted that the propertied classes in England are not going to bow to these market forces without a fight. They have actually gotten Parliament to pass restrictions on wages so that they wouldn't drift up too high. This is a sign of what we might call, in very loose terms, class conflict. And we'll see it play out today in the largest, most threatening revolt of the entire Middle Ages in England.

So far, we have looked at a lot of rebellions in this course, but they have been baronial rebellions. At first, these rebellions were simply about getting a better deal out of the king; they were completely self-interested in the 11th and 12th centuries. Then starting at the time of Magna Carta; you start to see barons claiming that they are rebelling for the good of the realm. There's still plenty of self-interest involved; a lot of the grievances the barons have are about privileges that benefit them personally. But they are now acting together at least partly in the interests of the realm as a whole, or at least in the interests of one segment of the population of the realm, the people with property. Remember the baronial revolt of Henry III's reign in the 13th century? Remember the "Song of Lewes" that called for a fair distribution of escheats and wardships? That's not really directed at the masses. But in 1381, you do get a rebellion that is aimed at the grievances of the lower orders in society. And it shakes the elite society of England to the core.

But I do have to start by qualifying even that statement, that the rebellion is one of the lower orders. It's actually one of the top tier of the lower orders. We call the revolt the Peasants' Revolt, but that isn't strictly accurate, not at least in terms of who actually took part. Most of the people who ended up participating in the revolt were a cut above ordinary peasants. They were small-scale tradespeople; some of them were even members of the lower

ranks of the clergy. This isn't a howling mob of yokels. And their demands are actually fairly sophisticated, as we'll see. Certainly, they're asking for things that will benefit the broad class of people at the bottom of society, but it's actually a fairly well thought out economic program; it's not just a call to kill all the landlords. There was an actual peasants' revolt in France in the 1350s where the rebels did do that, but not in England. Some people are killed in England in 1381, but far fewer than you might expect when you have thousands of angry people on the march. It's a fairly orderly revolt, and I think that comes from the fact that the people rebelling are actually fairly respectable types.

The other thing you see in the revolt is that there is a mixture of economic and religious grievances. That certainly comes from the fact that you have members of the lower clergy involved. In a sense, there are two hierarchies being attacked, the church and the state, and the rebels have their grievances against both. So it's an attack on entrenched powers of all kinds, but again, in the case of the church, it's not a blind attack on the institution as a whole. They don't want to abolish it, merely to reform it rather substantially. So I would argue that the rebels are actually rather moderate in their demands. This is a characteristic of English revolts throughout history from this point on, really; they're actually pretty conservative. But let me stress that that's how it looks to us as modern people. We've seen real radical revolts, like the French and Russian revolutions, and the revolt in 1381 doesn't look like that. But to the powers that be in 1381, it must have seemed like the end of the world.

So let's set the stage for the revolt. The first thing I want to talk about is: Who is the king who's going to confront the rebels? It's young Richard II, the son of Edward, the Black Prince, and the grandson of Edward III. Richard had come to the throne in 1377 because his father, the Black Prince, had died in 1376, a year before Edward III died, so Richard is 10 years old when he comes to the throne. It's interesting to note here that there wasn't really any controversy about the succession.

Unlike earlier in English history, say, at the time of King John, nobody is saying, you just can't have a child as king. Richard had plenty of very plausible grown-up uncles who could have succeeded, but by this point, the

principle of dynastic legitimacy is very well established, and also, I think, the state has developed sufficiently at this point that it can be ruled more easily by the various organs of government even if the king is not old enough to rule personally himself. The uncles are also loyal to their nephew—this is a close-knit family—especially John of Gaunt; he is really at the heart of royal government in this period. Still, Richard is the king, and he's arguably going to have his finest hour when he faces down the rebels personally at the age of 14. The reign went downhill after that, as we'll see in a future lecture.

All right, we've got little Richard on the throne. Things in England are difficult. The last years of Edward III's reign had not been good for England. King Edward III slipped into senility toward the end, and the war in France was not going well. It had started up again in 1369, and the English were losing territory very rapidly. Royal finances were in a terrible condition as a result, and so between 1377 and 1381, Parliament passed a series of taxes.

These taxes took a new form. Before this, taxes were mostly collected from people of some means. The most common form of tax was a kind of excise tax on the value of moveable goods. For example, you'd be taxed 1/15th part of the value of your goods. Most people at the bottom of the social ladder had almost no goods to speak of, so this doesn't really affect them. Now, Parliament is trying to spread the net more widely, so they pass a series of poll taxes. The term comes from an English word that meant "head," so a poll tax is a tax per head, or per person. You have to pay it regardless of how much property you own. Now, it was graduated based on economic status, so the richest people paid more, but for many poor people, the rate of 4 pence per head was a hardship. And the rate went up.

The poll tax that touched off the revolt had been increased to a shilling a head—that's three times the initial rate of 4 pence per person. The rebels were very angry about the poll tax because this is the same Parliament that had been keeping down their wages, and now they are raising taxes on them. So the poll tax was added to grievances about wage regulations—a very explosive political situation.

You also need to add to this economic controversy the fact that England is seeing its first-ever serious religious turmoil, and the two are not unrelated.

When people are already upset about the economy, they tend to resent the wealth and power of the church. This isn't new; there has always been grumbling about this. But in the 1370s, you see a movement appear that is trying in a concerted way to do something about it.

Let me explain. Where does hostility to the institutional church come from? We've talked before about various conflicts between church and state in England, and we looked at the showdown between King John and Pope Innocent III. Well, in the 14th century, English kings and the English public got increasingly fed up with papal interference in the English church. Innocent III had been a powerful pope, but his successors were even more powerful. They were able to name their own candidates to bishoprics in England more and more without the English kings being able to do anything about it, and they even started naming people to less important positions in the English church, like archdeacons. This was a process known as papal provisions, where the pope is essentially using his right of patronage to put his own men into the good jobs in the English church, and quite often they were foreigners, often Italians. Often, these men have no intention of moving to England and doing the job they were named to; they just want the paycheck. So it is not a very good thing for the spiritual situation in England at all, and perhaps just as important, it means that all that patronage isn't available to go to English churchmen.

So papal provisions aren't very popular in England, and in 1351, Parliament passed the Statute of Provisors, which tried to limit the practice of papal provisions. In practice, they continue; usually, the kings prefer to do deals with the pope to their mutual advantage and only cracked down when no satisfactory bargain could be reached. But it's a sign of how the English are beginning to resent foreign interference in their church, and the whole practice does not shed good light on the clergy, especially the higher clergy who might be "provided" by the pope. There wasn't much respect for those people. In addition, two years later, Parliament passed the Statute of Praemunire. This is a way of trying to limit the number of cases relating to church property that are referred to Rome. There is a mood that these things have to be settled in England. And finally, English kings also object very strongly to attempts by popes to tax the English clergy; this is something

they want to have full control of themselves. So there is definitely hostility to the hierarchy at work at the top.

Now, one big reason people aren't happy about papal interference in the English church is that the church in the 14th century has some big credibility problems. This is the period when the popes have to live in exile from Rome; they have been driven out of the city of Rome because of civil disorders there. In 1309, they take up residence in the city of Avignon, which is now part of France, but at the time, it was semi-autonomous. This period is usually called the Avignon papacy, but it also has a less flattering nickname: It's called the Babylonian captivity of the church. And of course, while the popes are in Avignon, they are very much under the influence of the French king, and so while the Hundred Years' War is going on, this isn't going to increase the respect of the English for the papacy at all.

To make matters worse, in 1378, there was a disputed papal election, and for more than three decades, there were two popes; at one point, there were even three popes. This is the period referred to as the Great Schism. One of the popes was back in Rome, and one was still in Avignon, and the countries of Europe picked sides. The French go with the Avignon pope, so the English go with the Roman pope. It is a very sorry spectacle.

Now, just at the moment when the institutional church is involved in all of these very unedifying proceedings, England produces its first home-grown heresy. It comes from an Oxford professor named John Wycliffe; of course, he's a cleric, because to teach at a university in this period you had to be a cleric. Wycliffe produces a coherent, theological critique of the institutional church. Wycliffe attacked some of the core tenets of the Catholic Church, and quite a bit of what he said was going to end up as part of the Protestant program at the time of the Reformation. Here is what Wycliffe argued, and you'll see why the institutional church was so unhappy about him: First, he believed that it was possible for individual believers to find a mystical union with God apart from the sacraments administered by the church. Right away, if that's true, you're taking away a lot of the reason for being of the whole infrastructure of the church. He also specifically denied the doctrine of transubstantiation. This was the belief that the bread and wine at communion is actually turned into the body and blood of Jesus Christ, not symbolically

but in some mystical physical sense. The doctrine of transubstantiation gave a very special status to the clergy, because only they could bring about transubstantiation. If you say it doesn't work that way—there isn't any mystical transformation—then you have a lot less need for the clergy with their special status. Furthermore, Wycliffe attacked the notion that the institutional church should have a monopoly on interpreting the Scriptures to the faithful. Until now, the church had been very concerned about making sure that only the clergy had the right to preach the Gospel, only the people they vetted; they were very nervous about unauthorized preaching, and so the Bible was available only in Latin, only to people with special training. Wycliffe argued that the Bible should be available in the vernacular so that all believers could read it for themselves and interpret it for themselves, and he made the first-ever full translation of the Bible into English.

These are pretty radical attacks on the special status of the clergy, but Wycliffe took the next logical step. He said that if you don't really need the clergy for very much, then the clergy doesn't need all that property they have. He thought it should all be confiscated. This was a very radical notion. The church was a huge landowner in medieval England. Many, many people would have rented their lands from various churches. The idea of taking the church completely out of the business of owning land was revolutionary.

So Wycliffe is pretty radical, and he gets denounced, predictably, by both ecclesiastical and civil authorities. His English Bible is outlawed. But, interestingly, he escapes serious punishment himself. The worst that happens to him is that he has to leave Oxford; he lives a simple life as parish priest of the village of Lutterworth in Leicestershire, defiant to the end. One reason he seems not to have been condemned is that he attracted the patronage of a very powerful man, John of Gaunt, the uncle of the king.

But the authorities did go after Wycliffe's followers. Quite a few of his old Oxford colleagues were initially drawn to his ideas, and they spread to the lower orders of society through local networks of traveling preachers. The wool towns of eastern England proved to be especially strong centers of this heresy. There were a lot of itinerant craftsmen and tradesmen involved in the various aspects of the wool trade, and they would take Wycliffe's ideas around with them from village to village and town to town.

The people who followed Wycliffe's ideas became known as Lollards. No one is really sure why. The term has several possible origins, but the most likely seems to be from a Middle Dutch word that means "to mumble." Maybe this was a reference to the way the Lollards prayed or how they would pass along their ideas to their fellow Lollards. Certainly, though, the term was meant to be insulting, and it carried with it the sense that these people were uneducated, that they were playing around with matters that were above their ability to understand.

Now, the civil authorities in England took the Lollard threat very seriously. England had always prided itself on not having a heresy problem; not like in France, where they did have a lot of heresy. So there was a major effort to crack down on the Lollards. Parliament passed laws against Lollardy that got more and more severe, until in 1401, they passed the law known as *De hæretico comburendo,* which means "On the burning of heretics." This was the first time in English history that a law was passed to authorize the execution of heretics. There hadn't been much need for this before, but now the Lollards were forcing the state to react.

So if we take all of these religious factors together—the hostile relations with the papacy, the Babylonian captivity, the Great Schism, the Lollards—it's a fairly tense religious atmosphere. From the king on down to the lowest rung of the social ladder, there are grievances out there against the institutional church. But the English government wants to make sure that attacks against the church do not get out of hand. The king and the Parliament want to tinker with relations between church and state, but they don't want to overturn the established order completely. Only the Lollards want to do that.

But Lollardy is very much in the air in the spring of 1381, and that's when you get an explosive mixture of religious and economic resentment, and it leads to the Peasants' Revolt. It starts in the southeastern counties of Kent and Essex due to frustration with the latest poll tax. Commissioners had been sent out from London to collect the poll tax. In late May and early June, bands of rebels attacked the commissioners, and then they started attacking other targets, and here's where you see all the various resentments of the lower orders coming to the fore. They attacked religious houses, not so much in their capacity as clergy, but because they were landlords; this is that

resentment about church property that Wycliffe was tapping into. The rebels also attacked royal castles; they attacked noblemen. They killed or severely wounded several royal officials. And here is one of the most interesting aspects of the revolt. They destroyed legal records wherever they could find them. There was great hostility to the law among the rebels. They definitely had a sense that the law was there to protect property, to keep the lower orders in their place, in debt, in servitude, and if you destroyed the records of all that, maybe everyone would just be free.

The rebels ended up coalescing in bands around particular leaders. The leader of the rebels in Kent was a man named Wat Tyler (Wat was short for Walter). He was a local tradesman; his name, Tyler, probably means that he was a roof tiler by profession. Another prominent figure in the revolt was a priest named John Ball. He was one of those clerics from the very bottom of the clerical hierarchy, and he'd been strongly influenced by Wycliffe. In fact, he'd been in and out of ecclesiastical prisons several times, and he'd been forbidden to preach. He was actually in the archbishop's prison in Maidstone in Kent when the revolt broke out. There are reports—we don't know how reliable they are—that John Ball had been involved in planning an uprising before the revolt broke out. Supposedly, the rebels even had a watchword set up. It was the phrase "John the miller grinds small, small, small," and the response was supposed to be "The king's son of heaven shall pay for all."

Well, whether there was anything premeditated or not, one of the first things the rebels did was to break John Ball out of jail, so he is probably a pretty important person among the discontented people in Kent. Once he was with the rebels, he preaches sermons to them that contained all the radical notions Wycliffe had been promoting, and he famously uses a rhyme that was current at the time; no one knows who first formulated it, but it was meant as a critique of social hierarchy. This is how it goes: "When Adam delved and Eve span, who was then the gentleman?" In other words, at the beginning of time, you don't have lords or serfs; there's no religious justification for some men being of higher status than others. That's a notion that would certainly make the powers that be sit up and take notice.

The revolt apparently broke out almost simultaneously in various parts of the southeast, particularly in Kent and Essex, and by the second week of June,

large groups of rebels began to converge on London—we're talking about literally thousands of people on the roads heading toward London. There, they joined forces with disaffected members of the lower orders in the city. The rebels were quite targeted in their attacks, which tells us, I think, that they had quite a bit of knowledge of who is who. They burned the Savoy Palace, which was the London residence of John of Gaunt; clearly, the rebels saw him as the public face of the king's government. Fortunately for John of Gaunt, he was away on the Scottish marches at the time, or he would very likely have ended up dead. The rebels also attacked the Tower of London, where they managed to seize the chancellor, Simon Sudbury, who was also archbishop of Canterbury, and the treasurer, Sir Robert Hales. Sudbury was particularly associated with the poll tax. Hales was, too, as treasurer, and since he was also the prior of the Order of Hospitallers, buildings owned by that order also were attacked. Both Sudbury and Hales were beheaded. In addition, the rebels attacked the buildings where legal records were kept and systematically destroyed them.

The rebels also targeted one other class of victims, and this takes a bit more explaining. They went after Flemish merchants. There was a large contingent of merchants from Flanders living in London due to the wool trade. This was part of an established pattern of English hostility to foreigners, and it may very well have been instigated by local Londoners, who knew who the Flemings were. There was certainly a lot of settling of scores in the general atmosphere of revolt.

But as we've seen, this was not merely a mob. They know what they want. And they apparently formulated specific demands, and these were conveyed to King Richard, who was in the city at the time. Here is what they want: They want the end of serfdom. They want there to be no lord but the king; this is an attack on social hierarchy. They want rents limited to 4 pence an acre. So this means the government should keep rents down, just the way the Parliament had been keeping wages down; the shoe's on the other foot now. They also want the property of the church to be confiscated and distributed among the people. Oh, and they also wanted the heads of the chancellor, the treasurer, and John of Gaunt. By the time the king gets their demands, the chancellor and the treasurer have been taken care of.

This is quite a list of demands, and Wat Tyler wants to discuss them in person with the king, so he demands an appointment with King Richard for June 15 at Smithfield, right outside the city. The amazing thing is, the king went. I think he and his advisers felt as if this would be the better part of valor—to seem to go along with the rebels. The king didn't have a lot of good options. Remember, there aren't a lot of troops in the city; there's no police force; and there are literally thousands of these rebels. They've already executed two top royal officials. So the king went to meet the rebels, and I have to say that whatever you think of Richard later in his reign, this was a pretty brave thing for a 14-year-old boy to do.

So now you have the king and the rebels, thousands of them, gathered in an open field outside London. The lord mayor of London, William Walworth, is also there. What's going to happen? It must have been very tense. We have various accounts of the meeting, and they conflict in some details, but essentially this is what happened: Somebody triggered off a reaction by the lord mayor. Either Wat Tyler made some sort of disrespectful gesture to the king—one account says he refused to take off his cap—or Tyler made a sudden threatening gesture, something happened to make the lord mayor react, and Walworth stabbed Wat Tyler with a dagger. Obviously, this could have been the start of a terrible riot, but the king called out to the rebels that he would gladly listen to all their demands if they would only follow him into the fields further outside the city. Amazingly, they did.

I think this is a sign of the essential conservatism of the rebels. They're not attacking the institution of monarchy. They want to follow the king. They want him to have the answers. But of course, it's a trap. Richard has bought enough time for the few troops he does have to come up and arrest the remaining ringleaders of the revolt. The rank-and-file members of the mob quickly disperse and return to their homes. The concessions made under pressure to the rebels are repudiated. The leaders are executed, including John Ball. But really, you don't see the sort of savage, wholesale reprisals that you might have expected; we're talking about dozens executed, not hundreds or thousands. The English government seems really to have breathed a sigh of relief that they got through the whole thing, and they just want everything to go back to normal as quickly as possible. Many rebels just faded back into the background.

What should we conclude about the revolt? I think there are several points worth stressing, and I'll just make four. First, I've already said that this is a conservative revolt. The rebels don't want to kill the king; they just want him on their side. Second, it's a revolt not of the desperate but of the ambitious. These are not the social dregs; these are the people who are hoping to benefit from the rising tide that followed the demographic catastrophe of the Black Death. Some historians have called the revolt a crisis of rising expectations. The rebels don't want to wait for landlords to be forced to raise their wages and lower their rents; they want this *now*. The third point I want to make is that the government did to a certain degree get the point. Most of the rebels' demands went unmet, of course. The church was not stripped of its property; lordship was not abolished. But, and this is important, the poll tax was scrapped. That had been the trigger that started off the whole thing, and the government concluded it wasn't worth it. So you do see a fairly hard-headed political calculation being made. The government is, in a real sense, responsive to public pressure.

The final point I want to make about the revolt may seem an odd one. I've talked about thousands of rebels on the move, palaces being burned down, Flemish merchants hunted down and killed. All of that is true, but yet both the rebels and the government acted, I think, with considerable restraint. The violence of the rebels was not indiscriminate; neither was the official response. England is not a savage country; it is not a cruel country. It had its share of class conflict, obviously, but there was quite a bit of social cohesion nonetheless, enough to restrain the excesses that you might have expected from a giant mob of aggrieved people on the move.

There's thus a sense in which the Peasants' Revolt of 1381 is really quite English—conservative and rather restrained. Of course, that's our perspective. I have no doubt it was a pretty terrifying experience to live through. In our next lecture, we're going to look at this question of Englishness in a particular way. We're going to look at the rise of the English language. It had been cast in the shadow by the Norman Conquest, but now we'll see it come into its own as the vehicle for one of the world's great literatures.

Chaucer and the Rise of English

Lecture 29

The idea of the strangers thrown together by chance who then decide to take turns telling tales is not Chaucer's own invention. This is exactly the same format as you see in *The Decameron* by Boccaccio. … But Chaucer does something new with his group of pilgrims. He uses them as a vehicle for social commentary on English men and women of all social classes and walks of life.

The 14th century is when the English language really comes into its own—as a written language, a literary language, and even a theological language. Up to this point, Latin was still the language of the church, the king's law, and the universities, but a working command of Latin was restricted to the clerical elite. The language of social prestige was French. Literature composed in England about English legends and heroes was written in French. French was also the language of the common law courts. English, on the other hand, had more or less died out as a written language after the Norman Conquest.

After the reign of King John and the waning of the Angevin Empire, England's elite continued to speak French, but with the passing decades it became more and more an affectation, less and less an everyday tongue. Chaucer, in *The Canterbury Tales*, mocks his Prioress character for speaking the French of "Stratford atte Bowe," a degraded form of the language. Likely the biggest reason why French lost its prestige is the Hundred Years' War and the anti-French sentiment at all levels of society that accompanied it.

By the 14th century, literature that was once written in French, like romances, was being written in English. More strikingly perhaps, religious texts were being composed in English as well for the first time since the late 11th century. The most famous of these texts is *The Vision of Piers Ploughman* by William Langland, composed sometime after 1360. It's an allegorical work; the characters have names like Reason and Truth. But the main character is a simple ploughman who really stands for every man. In the story, the author has a series of visions that amount to social commentary on the evils of the

day, including church corruption. But there is also a beautiful statement of the redemptive value of the toil performed in this life. Piers the Ploughman is a humble soul, but he's better than anyone else in the poem.

The other great area of English religious writing in the 14th century was mystical writing. These mystics were mostly solitary religious figures exploring the direct connection between God and the soul of the believer; this plays very much into the sort of arguments Wycliffe was making. The best-known of these mystics was Dame Julian of Norwich, an anchoress who attached to the church of St. Julian (from which she took her name) in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. When Dame Julian was about 30 years old, she fell ill and believed she was dying. She then had a series of direct revelations from God that she committed to writing that she called "showings." The overwhelming focus of her writing is the love of God for the individual believer. Richard Rolle, a mid-14th-century hermit from Yorkshire wrote "The Fire of Love," which described his soul's union with God as proceeding in three stages: first a physical sensation of warmth, then a wonderful sense of sweetness, and finally heavenly music accompanying him as he chanted the Psalms. Another anonymous mystic composed the *Cloud of Unknowing* in the late 14th century as an advice manual for potential clerics, but the text suggests they not seek God through reading learned works but to empty their minds and approach God directly through blind love. This was a fairly severe criticism of the kind of philosophical argumentation that was being taught in the schools at that point.

While these works definitely dovetail with Wycliffe's metaphysics, it is important to note that they don't openly deny the validity of the institutional church. Still, the fact that these texts are in English is part of the point; you are experiencing God in your own language, not in Latin, a language acquired through study and labor. The language is part of the theology.

One unique work in the corpus of medieval English religious literature is *The Book of Margery Kempe*. An "as told to" autobiography (several scribes, including possibly Margery's daughter-in-law, were involved in the writing), the text concerns the spiritual and material travails of a not-very-mystical, occasionally exasperating, but ultimately rather endearing woman who lived in King's Lynn in Norfolk in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Margery

had visions, but they tended to be of a very domestic nature, reflecting her bourgeois concerns as the wife of a prominent tradesman and as the mother of 14 children. Margery was famous for her pilgrimages, both in England and abroad. She often made her fellow pilgrims uncomfortable because she had "the gift of tears." Apparently, she couldn't turn it off, and the incessant weeping got on other people's nerves. It's easy to poke fun at Margery, but she was important in a number of respects: She was probably the first woman to write an autobiography. She was a laywoman, so her preoccupation with her own spiritual life gives us a sense of how important these questions were to ordinary people in this period. And Margery called enough attention to herself to be charged several times with unorthodox behavior by the church authorities. Each time she stood her ground and proved her innocence. She had grit.

[Chaucer] had a very busy public career, but he combined this with a very impressive literary output.

As far as secular, literary writing, the west and northwest were England's center of literary excellence in the 14th century, where the most important narrative poems of the period were produced. The poems are written in alliterative verse, the kind of verse used in *Beowulf*, yet the alliterative lines are also grouped into rhyming stanzas, just like in the French romances. English and French are blending into a new poetic form, perhaps best demonstrated by English-language Arthurian romances such as "Sir Gawain and the Green Knight" and "The Pearl." Unfortunately, the author or authors of these works is anonymous.

Not so anonymous is Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest writer of the English Middle Ages. He was born in London around 1342 and died in 1400. He was the son of a wine merchant, and he held various positions in English royal service, which means he left a paper trail; we have nearly 500 written references to Chaucer in official records. He served on foreign delegations during the Hundred Years' War and was eventually elected to Parliament. So he had a very busy public career, but he combined this with a very impressive literary output.

His masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, tells the story of a group of pilgrims on their way to Canterbury to the shrine of Saint Thomas Becket. These 29 pilgrims from all walks of life meet at a tavern on south bank of the Thames called the Tabard Inn. To pass the time (and smooth some social tensions), the innkeeper proposes a wager: the 30 of them will travel to Canterbury together, and each of them will tell two tales on the way there and two on the way back; whoever tells the best tale will win a free dinner at the expense of all the rest.

Alas, Chaucer never followed through on this scheme; we only have 24 stories, but we should be very grateful for the ones we do have. Chaucer uses the pilgrims' tales as a vehicle for social commentary. The characters of very high status, like the Knight, tell very elevated, very refined tales about courtly adventures and chivalry. The characters of very low social status, like the Miller and the Reeve, tell earthy stories with salty language. Even the story's prologue, where Chaucer sets the stage for the pilgrimage and the bet, is chock-full of social commentary; Chaucer describes each of the characters' appearance and manner with sharp detail and biting wit.

One thing we notice right away is that the anticlerical sentiment of the Peasant's Revolt is very much present in *The Canterbury Tales*; the Friar, for example, is described as dissipated, mercenary, and greedy. The Knight and the Yeoman, by contrast, receive quite favorable descriptions, and we see in the Ploughman some striking resemblances to Langland's Piers. One of the most memorable characters in the *Tales*—indeed, one of the most famous characters in all of English literature—is the Wife of Bath. She is charmingly confident and self-absorbed; in her tale's prologue, which is probably better known than her tale, she gives her autobiography. We learn about her five husbands, how they treated her, how she treated them, and what she thinks of marriage in general. Chaucer is having a lot of fun with the Wife of Bath; she comes vividly to life on the page, just as the English language was coming to life in the 14th century. ■

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

Chaucer and the Rise of English

Lecture 29—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the English Peasants' Revolt, and we saw that the broad masses of English people were making their voices heard, really for the first time, on the English political stage. They didn't get everything they wanted, but they did get rid of the poll tax they hated.

Today, we're going to be talking about the language in which they made their voices heard, the English language, because this period, the 14th century, is when the English language really comes into its own, as a written language, a literary and even theological language, a language that can finally compete with Latin and French on a far more equal footing than ever before.

Let's remind ourselves of where things have stood with regard to language up until now. Of course, Latin is at the top of the hierarchy of languages. It's the language of the church, of course, but it's also the language of many kinds of official records. If you want to claim to be educated in this period, you have to know Latin. The language of the universities, Oxford and Cambridge, is Latin. And Latin then is a spoken language, as well as a written language. All oral exams at the universities were conducted in Latin, and sermons that were preached mostly for a clerical audience were preached in Latin.

But that kind of command of Latin is certainly restricted to the clerical elite. The prestige language of the lay elite is French, and this was true right through the 13th century and beyond. Literature composed in England about English topics is written in French. The autobiographical poem about William Marshal that I talked about a couple of lectures ago was in French. So were lots of other stories about famous English knights. And French was the language of the common law courts, to the extent that we have a special term for the jargon that developed in these courts. It's called "law French."

English, on the other hand, had basically died out as a written language after the Norman Conquest. There are a few exceptions to this. *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* lingered on in a single version into the mid-12th century. There's also an important English poem by a priest called Layamon that

is essentially an expanded translation of Wace's *Brut*, which was itself a translation of Geoffrey of Monmouth's *History of the Kings of Britain*. The sections Layamon added were mostly about King Arthur, so this is the very first Arthurian literature in the 12th century in the English language. But that's pretty much it; there are a few ballads, a few religious works, but not a lot is being written in English.

However, political reality is on the side of English in the long run. As long as the Angevin Empire is intact, there is more or less constant contact between England and France, and that really helped to foster the idea that the elite of England is part of one large, French-speaking cultural zone. But the link is broken during John's reign. Although the habit of using French lingered for a long time, it got to be more and more of an affectation and less and less of a thing that people would acquire naturally. French starts to be something that is hard to learn. We have French sources from the period that make commentary about the inferior French spoken by Englishmen. By the time we get to Chaucer in the late 14th century, Chaucer himself is making fun of this English-acquired French. He refers to the Prioress in *The Canterbury Tales* speaking the French of "Stratford atte Bowe," because the French of Paris was by her "unknowe." Chaucer is obviously mocking the social pretensions of the Prioress, but I don't think he would have done so 100 years before. At that time the tide is really starting to turn against French.

One of the big reasons for this is one we have already discussed when we talked about the Hundred Years' War. It's ironic that when you have a war that is supposedly being fought to establish the English right to rule France, you get a lot of anti-French sentiment, and this has an effect on people wanting to learn French. But this is just the last straw in a development that had been going on for centuries—the decline of French. French had never been the language of the majority. The Normans had never had the ability or the will to impose French on the English, and there were just a lot more Englishmen than Normans. And it also made a big difference that the Normans adopted an English identity so readily. By the late 12th century, certainly, they're comfortably bilingual, and they're headed rather inevitably on the path to monolingualism, where the English today emphatically still are.

So there's a trend away from French. By the 14th century, things that used to be written in French, like romances about knights and their deeds, are being written in English. I'm going to talk about that sort of work later in the lecture. But you see another striking shift. Religious texts also start to be written in English. They don't replace religious writing in Latin—far from it. But you get large numbers of religious texts written in English for the first time since the great Anglo-Saxon sermons of the early 11th century that we talked about many lectures ago. These kinds of texts in English had virtually disappeared after the Norman Conquest, though we certainly know that churchmen are preaching in English. For example, in the late 12th century, we have an account of the abbot of the monastery of Bury St. Edmunds in Suffolk, Abbot Samson, and he was said to be able to preach in three languages, Latin, French, and English, though the English he spoke was the Norfolk English he had grown up with. Apparently, the difference even between Norfolk English and Suffolk English was quite apparent to Samson's audience. But we don't have a written version of any of Samson's homilies in English—it wasn't considered to be worth writing them down.

In the 14th century, though, you see full-scale religious works written in English that are designed to be read by an educated audience. The most famous of these is *The Vision of Piers Ploughman* by William Langland. We don't know a lot about the author. Langland was apparently a priest from the west midlands, and somehow he had acquired the education needed to write this very complicated work. It's an allegorical work; the characters in the story have names like Reason and Truth. But the main character is a simple ploughman, who really stands for Everyman. In the story, the author has a series of visions, and they all amount to a kind of social commentary on the evils of the day. You get criticism of corruption within the church, for example, of the kind we were talking about in the last lecture when we talked about Wycliffe and the Lollards. This text is a powerful indicator of how prevalent that sort of criticism was. But you also get a beautiful statement of the redemptive value of the work performed in this life. Piers the Ploughman is a humble soul, but he's better than anybody else in the poem.

Now, the poem itself is not advocating revolution. But some of the sentiments in the poem were certainly picked up on by the rebels in 1381. John Ball, the rebel priest of 1381, refers to *Piers* quite explicitly. I doubt Langland would

have approved, but I think it's a sign of how English is coming into its own that you have this text circulating widely enough that people can be reading it, and referring to it, and interpreting it to suit their own political agenda.

The other great area of religious writing in which English was used in the 14th century was in mystical writings. This was a great age for mystics in the European church generally, and England is no exception. These mystics are mostly solitary figures. They're preoccupied with exploring the direct connection between God and the soul of the believer via a sort of mystical union, and again, this is a little bit like the sort of work Wycliffe was doing, focusing less on the institutional church and more on the individual believer and his or her relationship with God.

The best known of these mystics is Dame Julian of Norwich. (Incidentally, many mystics were women—I think the idea of this direct connection to God was probably very appealing to women, since officially, they were shut out of the institutional hierarchy.) Dame Julian was an anchoress (the male equivalent would be an anchorite), which is similar to a hermit; like hermits, anchorites and anchoresses lived in solitude, but unlike hermits, usually they lived in a setting where they were otherwise surrounded by other people. They would literally be walled into a cell in a parish church, and they would promise never to leave, but people could talk to them through a sort of opening in the wall. So they were both part of the community and not part of the community; they had a kind of luminal, or borderline, status, and this could make them seem like good points of contact with the divine.

Dame Julian is one of these people. She lived in the late 14th and early 15th centuries in the town of Norwich in Norfolk, and she was attached to the church of St. Julian, which is where we get her name from; we don't really know her actual name. When Dame Julian was about 30 years old, she fell ill and believed she was dying. At that time, she had a series of direct revelations from God, and she wrote them down, and many believe this to be the first work written in English by a woman. She called these revelations "Showings." The focus of the Showings is the love of God for the individual believer. There's a very famous tag line in the Showings. Dame Julian says she has been assured that "All shall be well, all manner of thing shall be well." It's a rather optimistic theology.

Dame Julian had company in believing in the mystical union of the soul with God. There were other mystics, like Richard Rolle, a mid-14th-century hermit from Yorkshire; he wrote a work called the *Fire of Love*, which described how his soul was united with God, a process in three stages: First, he got a physical warmth in the body; then, a wonderful sense of sweetness, and finally, he heard a heavenly music that would accompany him as he chanted the Psalms in his hermitage. I'll just mention one other mystical work, this one by an anonymous author; it's called *The Cloud of Unknowing*. It was written in the late 14th century as a kind of advice manual for students; by definition, then, it would be for potential clerics. But the text warns students not to focus so much on seeking God through learned works but rather to forget all that, empty the mind, and approach God directly, through blind love. That's where the title comes from, *The Cloud of Unknowing*. Knowledge is not the key to union with God. This would be a fairly severe criticism of the kind of philosophical argumentation that was being taught in the schools at that point.

So if you look at the mystical works together, they do seem to dovetail with Wycliffe's criticisms of the church, but with one big difference. These mystics do not deny the *validity* of the institutional church; they merely offer an alternative path. Still, the fact that you have these texts available in English is itself part of the point, that you have a direct connection to God. You are experiencing God in your own language, not in Latin, a language that had to acquired with much study and labor. Here, I think the language is part of the theology, but it's very much building on the new self-confidence. These English authors believe that they can and should be expressing themselves in English.

Now, I just want to touch on one more religious work in English before we move on to more secular texts, and it's definitely in a class by itself. These mystical works we've been talking about have a lot in common with each other. But this one is unique. It is called *The Book of Margery Kempe*. Unlike the mystics we've talked about, the author of this book was herself illiterate. This is a work "as told to" some other person or persons; there seem to have been several scribes involved.

The text concerns the spiritual and material travails of Margery Kempe. She is not very mystical, occasionally exasperating, but ultimately rather endearing. She lived in King's Lynn in Norfolk in the late 14th and early 15th centuries. Margery had visions, certainly, but they tended to be of a very domestic nature, not the kinds of very ethereal visions that the mystics had; they reflected her rather bourgeois concerns as the wife of a prominent tradesman in King's Lynn who had borne 14 children. Margery actually visited Dame Julian in Norwich at one point to discuss the visions, and Dame Julian gave them a qualified seal of approval—with a few reservations.

The thing Margery was really known for was going on pilgrimage. She went all over the place, within England and overseas. She went to Rome, she went to Norway, she went to the Holy Roman Empire. On these trips, she often made her fellow pilgrims uncomfortable because she had the gift of tears. Apparently, she couldn't really turn it off, and the incessant weeping got on other people's nerves.

It can be easy to poke a little fun at Margery, but she's quite important in a number of respects. She was probably the first English woman to write her own autobiography. She was a laywoman, a married woman with children (although she did live a chaste life with her husband after the 14 children). Her preoccupation with her own spiritual life gives us a sense of how important these questions are to ordinary laypeople in this period. And Margery called enough attention to herself to be charged several times with unorthodoxy by the church authorities. Each time she stood her ground and proved her innocence. She had grit.

Now, if I try to think of anybody even remotely comparable to Margery, I end up thinking of a fictional character from about the same time, Geoffrey Chaucer's Wife of Bath. They're alike in being women you could not ignore; otherwise, there are important differences: Margery struggled against sexual desire; the Wife of Bath happily gave in to it. I'm going to switch gears and talk about fiction in the 14th century, and I'll get to Chaucer. But I want to talk first in general terms about English poetry in the 14th century. And then we'll get to Chaucer.

First, some general points: In the 14th century, the west and northwest of England seem to have produced a kind of center of literary excellence. This is the area that produces the most important narrative poems of the period; we can tell this by features of the dialect that mark the poems as coming from this region of England. The poems are written in alliterative verse, which is the kind of verse we saw used in *Beowulf*—that is, the lines have repeated initial sounds that kind of knit the line together. Each line would be divided into two half-lines with a pause, or *caesura*, in the middle. Now, this is a legacy that comes very clearly from the native English poetic tradition. But here comes an interesting wrinkle. These alliterative lines are now being grouped into rhyming stanzas, just like in the French romances. So you've got alliteration *and* rhyme, both at once. This is a pretty good indication that what we've got here is a blending of the English and the French into a new art form.

You can see this blending very clearly in the appearance of Arthurian romances written in English. You'll remember that back in the 12th century, these start out being written in France, though English audiences also loved them. Now, they're being written in English. And we get a masterpiece like *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which I talked about before. But there were also other very sophisticated narrative poems that used this elaborate mixture of alliteration and rhyme. One such poem is called *The Pearl*, and it's possible that the author of *The Pearl* is also the author of *Sir Gawain.* At any rate, the texts appear together in the manuscript, and scholars see a lot of stylistic similarities between them.

What is *The Pearl* about? That's a very good question, and nobody is completely sure. It seems to be sort of allegorical, sort of visionary; we don't know exactly what it means. In the poem, which is quite complicated with regard to form—there are 101 stanzas of 12 lines each with a complex rhyme scheme—we meet a narrator who is distraught at having lost a pearl (and we're not sure if this is an actual pearl or some sort of symbol). He falls asleep and wakes up beside a stream. On the other side of the stream, he sees a maid whom he identifies as the Pearl. (Now, it's possibly significant that "Pearl" is the English translation of the name "Margaret," which is very common in this period.) The maid replies that she is not the pearl herself, but she is entitled to wear the pearl because she has been washed in the blood

of the lamb—that is, she has sought salvation in the redemptive sacrifice of Christ. She tells the narrator to do the same, to sell everything and buy the pearl of great price mentioned in the Gospels. Then, the narrator asks to go to the heavenly city of Jerusalem, but the maid tells him that is forbidden, but he may see a vision of the city. The vision appears across the river, but when the narrator plunges into the water to try to reach the city, he wakes up. Presumably, he has been spiritually edified. Certainly, the audience of the poem has been treated to a poetic masterpiece.

Now, whether or not the poet of *The Pearl* and the poet of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* were the same person, the fact is that both works are anonymous. That's emphatically not the case with the author we'll spend the remaining part of the lecture on, Geoffrey Chaucer, the greatest writer of the English Middle Ages and the first one about whom we actually know quite a bit. He was born about 1342 and died in 1400. He was the son of a vintner in London, a wine merchant, and he held various positions in English royal service, which means he left something of a paper trail. We've talked about how administrative records were getting more extensive over time, and here's an instance where that's really helpful; we actually have nearly 500 written references to Chaucer. We know he went on several foreign delegations during the Hundred Years' War. He traveled to France, Spain, Flanders, and Italy. Eventually, he held several important government posts, including Comptroller of the Port of London, and in 1386, he was even elected to Parliament.

He had a very busy public career, but along with this public career, he produced a very impressive literary output. In addition to his masterpiece, *The Canterbury Tales*, which we're going to talk about, he also translated Boethius's *Consolation of Philosophy* into English (this was the same work King [Alfred] had translated in the late 9th century—clearly, it was time for an updated version). Chaucer also wrote a long poem about the Trojan War called *Troilus and Criseyde*, as well as many other shorter works.

But he's really known for *The Canterbury Tales*. The literary conceit in this work, the framing device, is that you have a group of pilgrims who all want to go to Canterbury to visit the shrine of St. Thomas Becket. As we saw in an earlier lecture, Becket had become an overnight sensation when he was

martyred in 1170, and his tomb was the most popular domestic pilgrimage destination in England even two centuries later, when Chaucer was writing. So you have 29 pilgrims from all walks of life, and they all happen to gather at an inn in Southwark, across the river from London on the south bank of the Thames, called the Tabard Inn. There's some grumbling among these ill-assorted guests until the innkeeper proposes a wager. They'll all go on pilgrimage together, including the innkeeper, so that makes 30 pilgrims, and along the way, each pilgrim will tell two tales on the outward journey and two tales on the way back, and the one who everybody agrees tells the best tale will win a free dinner at the expense of all the rest. Alas, Chaucer never followed through completely on this scheme. We should have 120 stories, but we only have 24, not even one for each pilgrim, let alone four. But we should be very grateful for the ones we have.

Now, the idea of the strangers thrown together by chance who then decide to take turns telling tales is not Chaucer's own invention. This is exactly the same format you see in *The Decameron* by Boccaccio, where people taking refuge from the plague in Florence also tell stories to each other to pass the time. It's even possible that Chaucer met Boccaccio when he was in Italy. But Chaucer does something new with his group of pilgrims. He uses them as a vehicle for social commentary on English men and women of all social classes and walks of life. The social status of the pilgrims is reflected very well in the tales they choose to tell. The characters of very high status, like the Knight, tell very elevated, very refined tales about courtly adventures and chivalry. The characters of very low social status, like the Miller and the Reeve, tell rather earthy stories with salty language that you might not want to use in mixed company. Some of these tales borrow very freely from foreign genres, like the French *fabliau*, as in the earthy stories I just mentioned. But Chaucer is such a master of the English language that it all comes out seeming uniquely English.

Now, I've mentioned the way in which Chaucer uses language to depict social status. That's a subtle way of commenting on social mores. But he also does this very directly, right at the beginning of the work; and this is the part of the work that historians have the most fun with, I think, because everything is very out in the open. The poet is pretty much telling you what he thinks.

I'm talking about the very famous Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*. A great portion of the prologue is taken up with setting the stage for the poem by introducing the characters, and the poet does this by giving us a series of capsule biographies. We get his description of the pilgrims' physical features, of course, but also their manners and behavior. Some of the pilgrims are clearly more admirable than others, and here, you get a clue to what English people are thinking about different classes of people in society in the 14th century or, at least, what Chaucer thought about them.

One very striking theme is the anti-clericalism that we noted at the time of the Peasants' Revolt of 1381. That has by no means gone away; it seems to be ingrained in English stereotypes. You see this very strongly in the portraits of the Friar and the Summoner. (A summoner was somebody who summoned people to the ecclesiastical courts, so you didn't want him to knock on your door.) I'll just talk about the Friar here. The Friar is portrayed as a very dissipated sort, certainly not following his vows very strictly, and is very greedy. I'll just give you a taste of this in modern translation: "Sweetly he heard his penitents at shrift/With pleasant absolution, for a gift." He's mercenary; he's selling absolution from sins. He's also overly fond of parties: "He knew the taverns well in every town." One of the most damning things about the Friar is that he actually has contempt for the poor he is supposed to be serving. He doesn't want to deal with beggars: "It was not fitting with the dignity/Of his position, dealing with a scum/Of wretched lepers; nothing good can come/Of commerce with such slum-and-gutter dwellers,/But only with the rich and victual-sellers." It's a damning indictment.

We have a very strong contrast, though, between these very negative characters and the depiction of characters like the Knight and the Yeoman, who get a very favorable description, and even the Plowman, and here, we see some striking resemblances to *Piers Ploughman,* where we get the idea of the simple labor of the peasants held up as a kind of ideal. So Chaucer's Plowman sounds like this: "He was an honest worker, good and true,/Living in peace and perfect charity,/And, as the gospel bade him, so did he."

Now, I've left my favorite character till last, though I've mentioned her once before in this lecture. That's the Wife of Bath. She's probably one of the most famous female characters in all of literature, and one of the charming things

about her is that she is so in love with herself or, at least, very interested in her own story, kind of like Margery Kempe. The funny thing about the Wife of Bath—and here, Chaucer is very much playing on stereotypes of women as being very talkative—is that she has a very famous prologue, essentially an autobiography. We find out all about her five husbands, and how they treated her and how she treated them, and what she likes in a husband, and what she thinks of marriage in general. And this goes on and on and on. And when we finally get her tale, it's much shorter than the prologue was. Chaucer is having a lot of fun with the Wife of Bath; she is definitely the character in the text who comes most vividly to life.

And that's a good way to end our survey of the rise of English in the 14th century, because it really is the story of a language coming into its own and claiming the attention of the educated public for the first time in centuries. England was still a multilingual country, and it would continue to be for a long time. Latin was going to be the indispensible language of the church and of learned discourse generally for hundreds of years more. In the 17th century, Sir Isaac Newton wrote his great work that included the famous three laws of motion in Latin. French is still very useful for the upwardly mobile; it is still one of those polite accomplishments that it was quite helpful to have, and it was essential for lawyers. Law French is going to be used in the royal courts down into the 17th century, though by that point, it had mostly degenerated into jargon. So there is still Latin and French around, but English is on the ascendant.

A sign of this is the position of the English kings with regard to French. The kings were at the top of the social hierarchy, and French lasted longest at the royal court. Richard II was the first English king who had to learn French as a second language; apparently, his French was very good, but it wasn't native. And though English kings officially claimed the throne of France down until 1801, they never went back to speaking French.

In our next lecture, we'll look at the later years of that monarch who spoke very good French for an Englishman, but we'll see that his linguistic skills didn't compensate for his lack of political skills. We'll look at the deposition and death of Richard II.

The Deposition of Richard II
Lecture 30

By Richard II's reign, there are a lot of these people around, these rich and powerful nobles with significant private military resources behind them. This obviously would tend to tip the power balance between the king and the nobles a bit more in favor of the nobles. And the explosive dynamic of Richard's reign is that Richard wants to push back.

Richard II's reign began with the Peasants' Revolt, but that was by no means the last of his troubles. On the one hand, Richard's conflicts with his barons were much like his predecessors: arguments over patronage and influence. On the other, the government of England had changed significantly over the previous two centuries; Parliament not only had a much tighter hold of the purse strings, but they had grown powerful enough to impeach royal officers if they so desired. The balance of power had shifted. Parliament had also become an instrument whereby political enemies attacked one another. Gone were the days of dying in battle for your cause; by Richard's reign, troublesome barons could be executed by order of Parliament. Politics had become deadly.

Parliament had become so powerful in part because some individual barons had. In particular, the five sons of Edward III all founded baronial families with significant resources and significant social clout. In other families, stricter inheritance customs, such as entailment, were keeping estates consolidated in fewer hands. The wealthiest began to keep large retinues of private soldiers, a phenomenon often referred to by historians as bastard feudalism. Lords used to grant lands to their followers in exchange for military service; now they paid salaries.

Richard didn't care for this situation at all. He saw that the king had lost power both to Parliament and to his own nobles, and he wanted to reverse this course. Unfortunately for him, he was the wrong kind of man at the wrong time. We've seen that Richard was a brave young man, personally facing the leaders of the Peasant's Revolt. But unlike his much-revered grandfather Edward III, Richard wasn't much of a warrior; in fact, there was a lull in the

Hundred Years' War for most of his 22-year reign—no glorious victories to gild his reputation. Richard liked art and literature; he was particularly fond of the glitz and ceremony of kingship. The more he set himself up as a quasi-priestly anointed ruler, the more he distanced himself from his people and their good will.

Richard began early on to steer an independent course and build an inner circle of advisors, shunning the advice of other barons. This dynamic led to problems for Henry III and Edward II, and it would do the same for Richard. In 1384, two of Richard's favorites were accused of financial irregularities. The furious king, instead of investigating the complaints, punished the accusers. In 1385, Parliament asked for an annual review of the accounts of the royal household. Richard refused. When Parliament assembled in the fall of 1386, they demanded the dismissal of the treasurer and of the chancellor, Michael de la Pole, whom they blamed for some of the recent losses in the French war. The king replied that he would not dismiss a scullion from his

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Richard II, like his great-grandfather, lost his crown by an act of Parliament.

kitchen at their request. Parliament then reminded Richard of his great-grandfather Edward II's fate at their hands.

Richard finally gave in. Parliament appointed the commission council to oversee the royal finances; in response, Richard called a great council of (rather biased) royal judges to declare the council illegal and Parliament's actions treasonous. The obliging judges also declared that the king could dissolve Parliament at will. In response, the earls of Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick—called the **lords appellants**—slapped five of the king's favorites, including Michael de la Pole, with an "appeal," or charge, of treason. Each side was now sinking to the other's level.

Richard promised that the five would answer the charges in Parliament, but meanwhile one of the accused, Robert de Vere, was leading a royal army from Cheshire toward London to "rescue" the king. In February 1388, the appellants—now joined by Henry Bolingbroke, the son of John of Gaunt, and Thomas Mowbray, earl of Nottingham—met de Vere's army at Radcot Bridge in Oxfordshire and dispersed it. So in 1388, Parliament met to decide the fate of the five favorites. This Parliament became known as the **Merciless Parliament**. All five men were condemned and lost their property; two were ultimately executed, along with a number of minor royal officials. It was the House of Commons that pressed for the executions; the political classes as a whole were opposed to the king's administration, and the Lords did not feel it would be safe to hold out against the Commons.

The bitterness caused by these executions overshadowed the rest of Richard's reign. For a few years, both Parliament and king trod a bit more carefully. But eventually, the king began gathering a new group of royal favorites far more formidable than the old ones, including men with Parliamentary experience whose expertise he could use. Meanwhile, Richard made two shrewd moves to improve both his popular image and his personal finances. First, he led an army to Ireland to protect the English settlements there from Art MacMorrough, the king of Leinster, and made MacMorrough submit to his authority. Second, he agreed to a 28-year truce with France; as part of this truce, Richard married Princess Isabella of France and obtained her 800,000 franc dowry.

At this moment, when the king was stronger than he had ever been, the House of Commons presented a petition to rein in the king's expenditures once again, but now Richard was prepared. His allies in the House of Lords convicted the petitioner of treason—threatening to do the same to any member of the Commons who came after the king. Richard then had a carefully chosen group of lords accuse Warwick, Arundel, and Gloucester of treason for their actions at the Merciless Parliament a decade earlier. Warwick was exiled. Arundel was sentenced to death. Gloucester died in prison, probably murdered on Richard's orders.

The balance of power had shifted. … Politics had become deadly.

Note that only three of the appellants were condemned. Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray actually helped the king convict the others and were duly rewarded: Bolingbroke was made duke of Hereford, and Mowbray was made duke of Norfolk. Flushed with success, Richard expanded his attacks, browbeating Parliament into granting new taxes and enacting the king's prerogative into law; he demanded payments and guarantees of good behavior from his former enemies, too. Richard was looking like the victor, but then Henry Bolingbroke made a surprising move: He accused Mowbray of treason. Mowbray denied the charge, and the matter was scheduled to be decided by duel. But before they could fight, the king banished both men—Mowbray for life and Bolingbroke for 10 years. A few months after Bolingbroke left England, his father, John of Gaunt, died. This should have made Bolingbroke duke of Lancaster, but Richard devised a dubious legal provision that allowed the throne to seize the title and the inheritance. Feeling secure at last, Richard returned to Ireland, where MacMurrough was making trouble again. This move is one of the most famous political blunders in history. His treatment of Bolingbroke had spooked nearly everyone of any means in England; no one's titles or property was safe.

Bolingbroke acted quickly. He returned to England, landing in Yorkshire. The earl of Northumberland and his son, Henry Hotspur, joined Bolingbroke and marched south. By the time Richard heard the news and returned to England, the royal army was dissolving in panic. Bollingbroke sent a

message to the king: He only wanted his inheritance, not the throne. Richard agreed to meet Bolingbroke, but his "escort" turned into his guards, and he was never free again.

Whether Bolingbroke wanted the throne all along or just seized the moment, we'll never know. But Parliament deposed Richard as they had deposed Edward II, with a similar result. Richard was imprisoned in the castle of Pontefract, where he likely died of starvation in 1400. Henry Bolingbroke took the throne as Henry IV, the first of the Lancastrian kings. Parliament was freed of their power-hungry problem king, but his deposition was to have drastic long-term consequences for England. ■

Important Terms

lords appellants: English magnates who opposed Richard II by appealing (accusing) his chief household officers, who were tried by the Merciless Parliament in 1388. The lords appellants were the Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Arundel, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Nottingham, and the Earl of Derby (Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV).

Merciless Parliament: Parliament of 1388 at which the lords appellants accused five of the household officers of Richard II of treason, leading to the execution of two of them and the flight of the other three. The king's steps in 1397–1398 to avenge the actions of the Merciless Parliament led to his deposition in 1399 by one of the lords appellants, Henry Bolingbroke.

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

The Deposition of Richard II

Lecture 30—Transcript

Welcome back. We ended our last lecture talking about how Richard II was the first English king who had to learn French as a second language. We're going to spend this lecture looking at the reign of Richard II, and it's a very troubled reign.

We've seen already that it starts off with the Peasants' Revolt, but that was by no means the last of Richard's troubles. The rest of the reign was dominated by power struggles. These power struggles were similar to those that occurred during the reign of Edward II in a few ways; access to patronage and the ability to influence royal policy were certainly major issues, as they had been in earlier struggles between the king and his barons. But things were different in Richard's reign in a very important respect. Parliament is now far more powerful than it had been earlier in the 14th century; the wars in France and the need to get Parliament to vote taxes to pay for them had led to a huge rise in the influence of Parliament. Things had gone so far by the end of Edward III's reign that in 1376, Parliament gained the right to impeach royal officers—that is, they could get rid of officers they disagreed with. This is something that opponents of various kings have been trying to accomplish for a long time. So the balance of power has shifted a bit from the king to Parliament. And during Richard's reign, Parliament becomes an instrument whereby political enemies went after one another in a very vicious way. In earlier baronial struggles, barons had been killed in battle with one another or with the king. During Richard's reign, you start to see barons executed by order of Parliament. Politics has become deadly.

One reason for this alarming development is that some of the barons themselves have grown far more powerful. This period, the mid- to late 14th century, is a time when magnates were expanding and consolidating their power. Partly, this is an outgrowth of developments in Edward III's reign. On a very practical level, it is the result of the fact that Edward III had so many sons. They all founded important families with baronial titles, and so there are quite a few leading magnates out there who are closely related to the royal family, and this means they have significant resources and significant social clout.

In addition, among the rest of the baronage, stricter inheritance customs had been devised to try to keep estates together. Some estates are now being entailed "in tail male," which means that if there are no sons in the family, the estate would go to the nearest male relative instead of to the daughters. It was the custom that if daughters inherited, the inheritance would be divided equally between them, so that would tend to dissipate the holdings of the estate. But if it goes to a male, it can stay intact. Incidentally, this is the legal device that features in the plot of Jane Austen's novel *Pride and Prejudice*; the Bennet sisters don't stand to inherit their father's estate because the estate is entailed.

So these new legal devices meant that large noble estates are not being continually broken up; in fact, they are getting larger because of marriage alliances. The result was that you had a few very rich, very powerful magnates who were able to dominate politics in England simply because of their wealth. Now, one of the things they were doing with their wealth was hiring large retinues of private soldiers. This phenomenon is often referred to by historians as "bastard feudalism"; of course, nobody called it that in the 14th century, because you don't even have the word "feudalism" yet. But the idea is that whereas earlier, lords had granted lands to their followers in exchange for military service, now you have lords paying salaries, granting money in exchange for service.

Recently, this whole idea of bastard feudalism has been attacked or, at least, the idea that it's new in this period, the 14th century. Scholars have tracked nobles' hiring household troops all the way back to the 12th century. But I think the essential point for our purposes is that by the time of Richard II's reign, there are a lot of these people around, these rich, powerful nobles with significant private military resources behind them. This obviously would tend to tip the power balance between the king and the nobles a bit more in favor of the nobles. The explosive dynamic in Richard's reign is that Richard wants to push back. He sees that the king has lost power both to Parliament and to his own nobles, and he wants to reverse course. He wants to restore the authority of the crown, dial back the clock to a time before the power of the king was so constrained by Parliament. Let's see how well he succeeded.

First, I think it helps to know a little bit about what Richard was like. We've already seen that he was personally brave; we saw that at the time of the Peasants' Revolt. But he just never fit the tenor of the times; he didn't seem to be the right king for the right moment in English history. For one thing, even though he is the son of the Black Prince and the grandson of Edward III, both famous military commanders, he is not very interested in warfare himself, and in fact, most of his 22-year reign constitutes a lull in the fighting between England and France. There were many reasons for this, but the English public wanted victory, and Richard didn't deliver it, so that told against him.

Richard was also not the kind of king who liked fighting in tournaments or other popular kinds of royal pursuits; he was a more sensitive, introspective sort who liked art and literature. He was a fairly knowledgeable artistic patron. I also don't think it helped his popularity that he tended to overdo the pomp and glitz associated with kingship. He made a very big deal out of the importance of royal anointing, the ceremony that marked out kings as having a quasi-priestly character. Richard displayed the sun on all his banners, with the idea being that he was himself the sun. Richard instituted all sorts of new ceremonies at court associated with the everyday activities, so everything got more elaborate, and there was more and more distance between the monarch and his people. None of this would tend to lead Richard's people to fight for him when the time comes.

Now, we have to remember, of course, that Richard takes the throne when he is only 10 years old. For the first few years of his reign, he is shielded somewhat by his advisers, especially his powerful uncle, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. You'll remember that John of Gaunt was one of the major targets of the rebels in 1381. They believed that it was John of Gaunt and not the young king who was really responsible for royal policy. But already, the young king is beginning to steer an independent course. He is building an inner circle of advisers who are directly loyal to him and ignoring the advice of the other barons. This is the same dynamic that had led to problems under Henry III and Edward II, and it would cause trouble again under Richard.

The first big issue to arise is the handling of the war with France. Everybody knew that things weren't going well. We saw at the end of our lecture on

Edward III's reign that most of the English gains in the war had evaporated by the time Richard took the throne. Now, a lot of money had been spent on the war. Rumors went around that some of the money was ending up in the pockets of the king's favorites, or possibly, some of it was even ending up paid out as bribes to the enemies of the English. This was one palatable way of explaining so many English defeats: Maybe it's due to treachery and mismanagement. Parliament also attacked the whole management of the king's finances.

In 1384, two of Richard's favorites were accused of financial irregularities. This infuriated the king, and instead of investigating the complaints, Richard punished the accusers. In 1385, Parliament asked for an annual review of the accounts of the royal household. Richard refused to put this into effect. He was blocking every avenue Parliament tried to use to regulate the financial affairs of the kingdom, and naturally, this caused tremendous frustration, because by this point, Parliament feels a great deal of ownership in the king's finances. A lot of his money is their money.

When Parliament assembled in the fall of 1386, they demanded the dismissal of the treasurer and of the chancellor, Michael de la Pole. Pole had started life as a merchant's son, but he caught the king's eye, and Richard made him earl of Suffolk. The House of Commons blamed Pole for some of the recent losses in the French war, and they wanted to get rid of him. The king made a defiant reply. He told the Parliament that he would not dismiss a scullion from his kitchen at their request. That was pretty much the tone Richard took with the Parliament, and predictably, it didn't go over very well. The Parliament reminded the king that there was a precedent in recent times for getting rid of a king who refused to govern according to the laws of the land. They were talking, of course, about Richard's own great-grandfather, Edward II, whom Parliament had deposed. Richard gave in.

And Richard also had to give in to strict controls on his freedom to run his own finances as he saw fit. A council was appointed to oversee revenues and expenses, called the Commission Council, but the king did everything he could not to cooperate with the council, and he took proactive steps to get rid of it. He convened a great council of royal judges at which he solicited legal

opinions on whether the Parliament really had the right to impeach royal officials without the king's consent.

Now, these royal judges are hardly impartial. They owe their jobs to the king. And to no one's surprise, they declared the actions of the Parliament illegal, and they ruled that the sentence imposed on Chancellor Pole was erroneous. They said that the king could dissolve Parliament at will. What's more, the judges said that the actions of those who had forced the king to accept the Commission Council were tantamount to treason. Essentially, the judges are pushing back against more than a century of developments that had increasingly hemmed in the power of the kings to act without restraint. The judges were restating the maximum case for the royal prerogative.

But Richard's opponents were not cowed. They felt they had to act, because this very broad definition of treason was a serious threat to anybody who opposed the king on matters of policy. The crime of treason brought with it the forfeiture of property, so it would affect not just the accused but his whole family. So in the fall of 1387, several barons charged five of the king's favorites, including Pole, with an "appeal," or charge, of treason of their own. For that reason, these barons were called the Lords Appellant. The charge was "accroaching royal power," which just meant expanding the royal prerogative without justification. It wasn't really any more legally sound than the king's definition of treason, but that's where politics had wound up. The king and the Parliament are reduced to accusing each other's supporters of treason.

Richard bought himself some time by promising that the five accused would appear in Parliament to answer the charges. But meanwhile, one of the five accused, Robert de Vere, was leading a royal army from Cheshire in the west toward London to "rescue" the king from Parliament. The Appellants went to meet de Vere's army at Radcot Bridge in Oxfordshire and dispersed it. Then the Appellants proceeded toward London, and Richard was at their mercy. Incidentally, some new barons had joined the ranks of the Appellants at Radcot Bridge: Henry Bolingbroke, the son of John of Gaunt, and Thomas Mowbray, earl of Nottingham. We will have more to say about these two very shortly.

In 1388, the Parliament met that was to decide the fate of the accused favorites of the king. This Parliament became known as the Merciless Parliament. The name pretty much tells us what happened. There are five Lords Appellant by this point—five accusers—Bolingbroke, and Nottingham, and also the earls of Gloucester, Arundel, and Warwick. They enter the Parliament arm in arm, dressed in cloth of gold—clearly, they want to make a big impression. There are some legal difficulties over the appeal, but the Lords Appellant get around these by articulating the principle that Parliament acting as a court is supreme over all other courts.

All five of the accused were condemned, though only one of them was physically present; the other four had fled. Two were ultimately executed, and of course, all five lost their property. A number of minor officials of the king were also executed, and this despite some sentiment in their favor in the House of Lords. It was the House of Commons that pressed for the executions, and I think it's very significant that the Commons were successful in winning the point. The political classes as a whole are very much opposed to the king's administration, and the Lords don't feel it would be safe to hold out against the Commons on this point.

What are the effects of the Merciless Parliament? Basically, the bitterness caused by these executions overshadows the rest of the reign. But for the moment, the whole country seems to catch its breath. For a few years, both Parliament and the king trod a bit more carefully; they are pulling back from the brink of chaos. The royal administration tried harder to conciliate Parliament, and the king's enemies back off, as well.

But tensions were never very far from the surface. In 1394, Richard lost his queen, Anne of Bohemia. They had been married for more than a decade, but the marriage was childless. The king was passionately devoted to Anne; he never had any known mistresses, and he was so distraught when she died that he had the manor house at Sheen, where she breathed her last breath, razed to the ground. At her funeral in Westminster Abbey, the earl of Arundel, one of the Lords Appellant, apparently showed insufficient respect for the corpse of the queen. King Richard struck him across the face in full sight of all the mourners. The earl was so worried about his position that he solicited and

obtained a formal pardon for his role in the Merciless Parliament. Clearly, everyone at the apex of the political scene in England was nervous.

And the Lords Appellant had a reason to worry, because the king began gathering a new group of royal favorites, far more formidable than the group that had been destroyed by the Merciless Parliament. He attracted young noblemen, people with more of an independent power base than his earlier supporters, but he also recruited men with Parliamentary experience. He wanted their expertise in dealing with Parliament. The king was trying to learn from his earlier failures and to insulate himself from the kinds of attacks he had suffered from earlier.

The king's fortunes rose in the mid-1390s for two other reasons, both of which had to do with foreign policy. One was a change in relations with France. There had been a truce since 1389, and peace negotiations had dragged on ever since. They still could not agree on a final peace, but the two sides did strike a 28-year truce, and for Richard, the most important part of the agreement is that he would marry the young daughter of the king of France, Princess Isabella. She was only 6 at the time, but Richard himself was not yet 30; there was time yet to beget an heir. Most crucial was her dowry: 800,000 francs. This is going to give Richard some independence from Parliament, which he definitely wanted. Now, I want to say one more thing about this marriage agreement, because it tells us how tense things are in English politics. King Richard gave the negotiators of the agreement the power to reduce the dowry demand if, in exchange, the French king and his uncles would promise to support Richard if the need arose. Here, we see the king of England actually soliciting the king of France to help him against his own English subjects. This never made it into the final terms of the agreement, but it's a pretty powerful indication of how insecure Richard felt.

The other foreign policy development I want to touch on briefly took place actually just before the marriage treaty was negotiated. This is Richard's one big success as a military commander, and it happens in Ireland. We haven't really talked about Ireland since we discussed the Angevin Empire and Henry II's conquest of Ireland. In the two centuries since, the English had established settlements in Ireland, but they had never really conquered the country completely, and there were still many native Irish chieftains and

kings who exercised authority in their own local areas pretty much without interference from the English royal government. And in the 14th century, the English settlers had actually been losing ground. Areas that had been solidly English were once again getting taken over by native Irish rulers. This development is often called the Gaelic resurgence. During Richard's reign, one of these native Irish rulers had become especially powerful. His name was Art MacMurrough, and he ruled part of the area just south of Dublin, so he was poised to strike at the heart of the English royal administration. His attacks had gotten very brazen, and in 1394, King Richard decided to go to Ireland in person to teach Art MacMurrough a lesson.

The king met with considerable success. He brought a large army over to Ireland, and he did manage to get Art MacMurrough to submit formally to his rule, along with several other very important native chieftains. This was a serious morale booster for the king, but we need to keep in mind that when a man like Art MacMurrough "submits" to royal authority, he doesn't necessarily mean the same thing the king does. This is going to come back to haunt Richard later.

But now we have Richard by 1397 with a fairly substantial apparent foreign policy achievement to his credit and a large infusion of French cash. It was at this moment, when the king is stronger than he had been really at any point in his reign, that the House of Commons presents a petition by a member named Thomas Haxey designed to rein in the king's expenditures, the age-old complaint. But now, the king is much better prepared to meet such an attack. He has cultivated allies in the House of Lords. And the Lords arraign Haxey for treason and convict him. Furthermore, the Lords declare that if anybody excites the Commons to go after the king, that would be considered treason. This was a shot across the bow for the king's enemies, and more was to come.

The king moved against three of the Lords Appellant, the earls of Warwick, Arundel, and Gloucester (by the way, Gloucester is the king's own uncle). A carefully chosen group of pro-royal lords accused the three earls of treason for their actions at the time of the Merciless Parliament, now a decade in the past. The pardon that Arundel had taken out after the episode at the queen's funeral was solemnly revoked. The trials went forward. Warwick cracked;

he confessed his guilt and was exiled to the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea, a fairly terrible fate for somebody used to being at the center of English politics. Arundel was sentenced to death. Gloucester died in prison in Calais, probably murdered on Richard's orders. The estates of the three condemned men were confiscated.

Now, you may have noticed that only three of the Appellants were condemned. But there had originally been five. The two others, Henry Bolingbroke and Thomas Mowbray, had apparently switched sides. They actually helped the king to get the convictions of the other three, and they were duly rewarded. Bolingbroke was made duke of Hereford and Mowbray was made duke of Norfolk. But we aren't done with this pair of vacillating noblemen yet.

In the meantime, Richard took steps to consolidate his gains. In 1398, he forced Parliament to grant him a lifetime grant of a tax on wool; this meant he wasn't going to have to keep renegotiating it with Parliament all the time. The king also had that pro-royal statement of the royal judges from 1387, the one about the king's prerogative, made into official law. There would be no more debate about whether these were just legal opinions. They were the law of the land. And the king also forced all of his critics from the crisis of 1387–88 to pay an indemnity to be readmitted to his good graces. This included anybody who had ridden in arms against the king, and this provision was interpreted so broadly that it covered 17 entire counties. These counties had to pay 1,000 marks per shire, and they had to put their seals on blank charters, pledging themselves and their goods to the king as guarantees of their good behavior. He could fill them in in any way he wanted later on. This was obviously a very scary weapon for the king to have at his command. It added considerably to the general feeling of unease in England.

Now we have arrived, essentially, at the state of affairs in England at the beginning of Shakespeare's play, *Richard II.* What followed, the whole series of events that led to Richard's deposition and death, was really all fallout from the struggles in 1387–88 and of the revenge that the king had recently taken for the crisis. In January of 1398, Henry Bolingbroke appeared in Parliament before the king to accuse Thomas Mowbray of treason. Supposedly, Mowbray had told Bolingbroke that he figured the

king was going to act against the two of them for their part in the Merciless Parliament—remember, these two had switched sides, and maybe Mowbray was figuring that the king was still going to come after them. Mowbray denied that he had said any such thing, and since the proofs were insufficient, the matter was scheduled to be decided by a judicial duel; this is how points of honor were settled between noblemen.

The duel was set to be held at Coventry on September 16; Bolingbroke and Mowbray appeared fully armed in the lists, and then the king threw down his baton to stop the combat. Instead of allowing it to go forward, he banished both men. I think Mowbray had had the right idea. The king had been intending to move against them. Now he had given them an excuse. His revenge for the Merciless Parliament was now complete.

And Richard went farther. By the terms of the order of banishment, the exiled lords were supposed to be able to draw on their revenues in England to support them overseas. A few months after Bolingbroke left England, his father, John of Gaunt, died. This should have made Bolingbroke duke of Lancaster, but there was no way Richard wanted him to inherit all that wealth and prestige. The king and his advisers managed to devise a very dubious legal provision that allowed them not only to block Bolingbroke from inheriting his father's lands but also to take the whole inheritance into royal hands.

The king thus felt very secure. He was rid of all his enemies. Now was a good time to revisit an earlier scene of triumph, Ireland, because the situation there had deteriorated. Art MacMurrough had gone back on his word; he had actually surprised and killed the king's lieutenant in Ireland, the earl of March, who happened also to be King Richard's cousin. Richard wanted to restore order, so he set off from Milford Haven in Wales with a substantial force.

Richard's decision to go to Ireland in the spring of 1399 is one of the most famous political blunders in history. He left a country in ferment. The king may have thought that he was now safely rid of his enemies, but in reality, his treatment of Bolingbroke had spooked people who had previously been indifferent to political developments. Now, nobody's inheritance seemed

safe. Wild rumors flew that new and unheard of taxes were going to be imposed and that noblemen were going to be murdered so that the king could seize their estates. And those blank charters were still out there to worry about also.

At this moment, with the king out of the country, Henry Bolingbroke landed at Ravenspur, in Yorkshire, and proclaimed that he was back to claim his rightful inheritance. Yorkshire was a good place to land, because the north was in an uproar. I've mentioned before that the north of England is a bit rougher; the kings had to give lords a bit more room to act. But the most powerful family in the north, the Percy family, had been getting especially worried lately that King Richard was planning to supplant them with his own hand-picked men. The two leaders of the Percy family were the earl of Northumberland and his son Henry, known as "Hotspur." They joined up with Bolingbroke and brought their very substantial military retinues with them. Together, the lords marched south.

King Richard got the news in Ireland and immediately sent half his army back to England, but by the time he himself had crossed to Wales, that initial force was melting away in a panic. Bolingbroke sent messengers to tell the king that all he wanted was his rightful inheritance, not the throne. Richard agreed to go meet Bolingbroke, but this "escort" Bolingbroke sent turned into guards, and Richard was never free again. Whether Bolingbroke had aimed at deposing the king the whole time or whether he just seized the moment when it was clear that the king's support was evaporating—we'll never know.

Parliament once again forced the deposition of a king. It was a repeat of what had happened under Edward II, and it had the same result. You can't let an ex-king survive. He'll just be the focus for rebellion. So Richard was imprisoned in the castle of Pontefract in the north of England, and he probably died there in 1400, The rumor was that he had starved himself to death. Henry Bolingbroke took the throne as Henry IV, the first of the Lancastrian kings.

What are the lessons of Richard's reign? In many ways, it was a continuation of past conflicts between the king and his barons. Once again, you have the

barons taking issue with royal personnel and royal policy, and once again, you see them trying to constrain the king. Once again, this proves impossible. The only way to constrain the king is to remove him. But along the way, we see Parliament playing a much more extensive role. Both sides tried to use Parliament for their own purposes, and one of the frightening aspects of this development is that judicial murder is becoming a fairly standard weapon in English politics. This is going to continue throughout the rest of the period we are covering in this course and beyond.

And the deposition of Richard was much more disruptive than the deposition of Edward II had been. Edward was deposed in favor of his own son, Edward III. Richard had no son. Henry Bolingbroke was the king's first cousin, but he was not the nearest heir to the throne by blood; that would have been the young Edmund Mortimer, earl of March, the heir to the earl of March who had been killed in Ireland. But genealogy had to give way to power politics, and Bolingbroke became king.

There was thus a question mark over the legitimacy of the monarchy, and it was going to bedevil English politics for the next century. We're going to watch all of that play out, but first, we're going to pause and talk about what life was like in England in the midst of this great political turmoil.

Daily Life in the 15th Century

Lecture 31

In the 14th century, the political climate in England was nothing short of toxic; the 15th century would be more of the same. But for those not mixed up in the intrigues of king and Parliament, the 15th century wasn't so bad—in fact, it was a great improvement over the famine- and plague-ridden 14th. It was a century of economic improvement and a great age for art and architecture.

After the Black Death depleted the population of England, many peasants were able to become independent or semi-independent farmers due to the buyer's market in arable land. These small farmers who had enough land to support themselves and to produce for the market became the **yeoman** class. These people were not just prosperous in economic terms; they were also legally free, with access to the king's courts and the right to vote for Parliament. They even had the financial resources to educate their sons for careers in the church and, increasingly, the law.

Some yeomen were successful enough to establish large estates and climb into the lower ranks of the **gentry**. These were the rich and powerful families who were not technically members of the nobility; that is, they did not bear hereditary titles. A gentleman in this period had to have a coat of arms, whether or not he was technically a knight, and he obtained it by hiring a herald to invent one for him. Essentially, becoming a gentleman in the 15th century was really a question of whether or not you could pull it off.

Perhaps the most famous family to enter the gentry this way is the Pastons of Norfolk. Members of this family wrote a lot of letters to each other throughout the 15th century that have survived down to today, so we have a wonderful insight into the personal and public aspects of gentry life in this period. The family's founder was William Paston, a lawyer who lived from 1378 to 1444. In 1415, William became the steward of the duke of Norfolk—a role that likely would have been filled by a cleric in the past. Along the way, William acquired substantial estates and a wife who belonged unquestionably to the gentry, a woman named Agnes Berry, daughter of

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Eton College, the first of England's public schools, was founded in the 15th century to educate the sons of the growing gentry.

a knight from Hertfordshire. So William Paston has land and a socially prominent wife. He is a gentleman.

His children and grandchildren faced several obstacles in trying to maintain William's hard-won status. The low rents and high wages of the period hurt holders of large estates more than it did people on their way up from nothing. Many large landowners gave up on finding tenants and turned to raising sheep on their lands. They began to practice **enclosure**—partitioning once-open cropland into pastures by enclosing them in large hedges. This was a dramatic change in land use. For one thing, oxen could not plow short parcels of land, rendering them expensive but useless pieces of equipment. For another, many poorer farmers lost the use of common land in which to gather wild plants and pasture their personal livestock. It used to be thought that many villages were abandoned wholesale due to enclosure. Newer archaeological evidence indicates that enclosure only slightly—if at all—accelerated the normal life cycle of a medieval village. In fact, tenants began to enclose their own lands, and if we look at the financial records of the 15th century, it's very clear that enclosure increased an estate's yields. Wool paid.

The Hundred Years' War had disrupted trade with the Continent significantly, which dramatically altered the English wool trade. Instead of exporting raw wool to be finished in the Low Countries, merchants began manufacturing cloth in England, for both export and the domestic market, creating many new jobs, especially for women and children. The wool export trade was handled by the Company of Merchant Adventurers. They were granted a royal charter by King Henry IV in 1407, but they date back probably to the early 14th century. The charter granted them a monopoly, which was characteristic of medieval trade; merchants lobbied the king for special privileges, and they were often willing to pay to get them.

There is a striking current of anxiety running through the Paston Letters.

Because the wool trade was so valuable (and restricted), competition among the gentry for a share of the market could be fierce. There was only so much land to go around, and given the political disorder at the top in England, local property disputes could spiral out of control and become violent. The first resort for such disputes was naturally the royal courts, and this period saw a large increase in the number of lawyers and lawsuits. Many of the Pastons' letters were written to a family member stuck in London dealing with a lawsuit, apprising him of the situation on the estate. Oftentimes the news was ominous because while the man of the house was off defending the estate in court, the estate itself might come under physical attack from the Pastons' enemies.

In the Pastons' case, the most serious challenge ever levied against them was that their ancestors had been serfs; this would have invalidated the claim of William's son John to inherit his estate. Luckily for them, the king and council ruled against this claim in 1461, which at least put the paternal inheritance on a sound footing. But in 1465, John Paston was imprisoned in London as part of the legal maneuvering of the duke of Suffolk over the Paston estate at Drayton. To add to this trouble, the 15th century was the period of the Wars of the Roses—a war of succession between two groups of descendents of Edward III, the houses of Lancaster and York—and the bitterness of the national rivalry heightened local tensions. There is a striking

current of anxiety running through the Paston Letters; they have worked so hard to get where they are, and now they are besieged on all sides.

But it was not all bad news. When people in the Middle Ages decided to undertake a large building project, it was a vote of confidence in the economy of the realm due to the expense and time involved. But the 15th century was a great age of building: Towns built guildhalls and corn markets, as well as parish churches, chapels, and chantries. In London, there was a systematic remodeling of parish churches to conform to new flamboyant Gothic style, a sprucing up that demonstrated the prosperity of their patrons. The need to staff these new and bigger ecclesiastical buildings took many members of the clerical underclass off the unemployment rolls, not to mention what it did for builders and architects. There was also an increase in the number of inns built in this period, a sign that long-distance trade was burgeoning.

Along with economic prosperity came an increase in leisure time. Literacy was on the rise because it was now essential to upward social mobility. Eton, the first of the great English public (meaning private) schools, was founded in 1440; by 1500, many of the larger towns in England had grammar schools. Meanwhile Johannes Gutenberg had perfected movable type technology in Germany in 1450, and William Caxton brought it to England in 1476. (The first work Caxton printed was an edition of *The Canterbury Tales*.) This new, more efficient printing process made books cheaper and more widely available and started the English language down the path to standardization. So reading was becoming a popular leisure activity.

One of the most popular printed works of the period was first printed by Caxton in 1485: Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur*. Don't let the French title fool you; this was the first-ever version of the King Arthur story written in English prose. This huge compendium of all the Arthur stories, written in a straightforward style, was accessible to pretty much any educated person. What is more, Malory's Arthur was a very English Arthur—not Roman, not Briton, not French—written for a very English people. ■

Important Terms

enclosure: Practice of enclosing common land and converting it to pasture, usually for sheep. The practice was designed to maximize the profits of landlords at a time of falling rents for agricultural land and rising demand for wool.

gentry: In the later Middle Ages, substantial landowners who might bear coats of arms but did not belong to the peerage.

yeoman: In the later Middle Ages, a substantial farmer who did not have the social prestige of a member of the gentry but was able to live independently of the demands of a lord.

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

Daily Life in the 15th Century

Lecture 31—Transcript

Welcome back. We ended the last lecture with the deposition and death of Richard II. We saw that the political climate in England had gotten really toxic; noble factions were using Parliament in order to attack their rivals, and the result was a level of violence within the inner circle of the powerful that had not been seen in England for centuries.

The century to come, the 15th century, is going to be more of the same and would get even worse. There would be continued instability at the top, and the war in France would finally sputter to a close without providing any lasting benefits to England. So in terms of politics and foreign policy, the 15th century was a pretty tough one for England. But for most people in England, it wasn't so bad. It was going to be much, much better than the 14th century had been, the century of the Great Famine and especially the Black Death.

In this lecture, I'll talk a bit about what life was like for all segments of the English population. We'll talk mostly about the English economy, but at the end, we'll also talk about artistic developments. We'll talk about a great age of building in both the towns and the countryside. We'll see the arrival of the last of the great medieval versions of the Arthur myth, and we'll see how this new version fits in with the way society is changing in the 15th century.

Let's start by reviewing a few things that we've already talked about with regard to the English economy in the aftermath of the Black Death, because this gives us some background for the important trends we're going to be looking at. You'll remember that the Black Death led to huge population losses and that this meant peasants were able to bargain for better terms from their landlords, who now needed to compete against other landlords in order to get the most reliable, most productive tenants for their lands. Many peasants were able essentially to escape from lordship altogether and become independent farmers; they might lease most of their land, or they might own it, but they really are autonomous economic actors. They are in charge of their own fate.

These successful small farmers form the bedrock of what historians call the yeoman class. They are the ones who have enough land not just to support themselves but to produce for the market. They're really the heirs of that top layer of serfs on the 13th-century manors we looked at earlier; but now, in the 15th century, these people are not just comparatively prosperous in economic terms, they are also legally free. Now, they do have access to the king's court; they can vote to elect the knights of the shire in Parliamentary elections. They often have enough financial resources to educate their sons for a career in the church, which for a long time had been seen as a means of social mobility.

But now a second avenue of mobility is opening up. The law is now another option. The courts provide good opportunities for advancement; you train on the job, basically, at the Inns of Court in London rather than at the universities, and so this was one major route by which men from the countryside find their fortune in the city. But some yeomen farmers are even successful enough—they accumulate enough land—to climb up into the lower ranks of the gentry.

Here, I want to pause and talk about this term "gentry." It is related to the term "gentleman," and it means the people who are considered to be gentlemen and ladies. It's a rank that embraces essentially all the rich and powerful families in the kingdom who were not members of the nobility—that is, they don't bear hereditary titles, like barons or earls. To be a gentleman in this period, you have to bear arms, that is, you had to have a coat of arms, as we talked about in an earlier lecture. At first, this was restricted to knights, but increasingly, you have members of knightly families who don't get formally knighted themselves—it was too expensive, for one thing—and yet, these people still come from these good families with excellent pedigrees. So now you are a member of the gentry if you came from one of these arms-bearing families, whether or not you were technically a knight.

If you are a yeoman who wants to become a member of the gentry, you need to get a coat of arms, and so, in the 15th century, you make one up. You could just hire a herald to invent one. Essentially, becoming a gentleman in the 15th century is really a question of whether you can pull it off, that is, whether you cut a plausible figure as a gentleman. This obviously led to some nice

calculations. You had to judge whether it was a good time to unveil that new coat of arms. Will it be accepted? Will it be laughed at? But we certainly know of a number of families that made this climb successfully, and so I want to spend a few minutes talking about one such family, the Pastons of Norfolk. This family is very famous because they wrote a lot of letters to each other that spanned the 15th century, so we have a wonderful insight into their personal relationships, the hardships they encountered, all sorts of aspects of gentry life.

Let's first figure out how they became members of the gentry. The founder of the family was William Paston, who lived from 1378 to 1444. His origins are rather obscure. He was the son of a Clement Paston of the village of Paston on the coast of Norfolk. Possibly Clement Paston was one of those yeomen farmers who acquired enough resources to send his son off to train for the law, because William Paston became a lawyer, and he made his legal career largely in Norfolk. He acted as counsel for the city of Norwich and he did work for the bishop of Norwich. He also acted as a royal judge. In 1415, he became the steward of the duke of Norfolk; this is a very high office within the duke's household. He was fulfilling functions that might have had to be carried out by clerics in the past, but now you have a new class of educated, legally trained laymen who are making their living as administrators.

Along the way, William Paston acquired substantial estates, and that was clearly the goal of anyone on the make in the 15th century, because it is still vital to have land. That is still the ultimate source of wealth and power. And William also acquired a wife who belonged unquestionably to the gentry, a woman named Agnes Berry, daughter of a knight from Hertfordshire. So William Paston has arrived. He has land and a socially prominent wife. He is a gentleman.

Now, of course, his children and grandchildren are going to want to maintain this hard-won status, but they face several obstacles that every member of their class faces in the 15th century. For one thing, exactly the same conditions that make it possible for yeomen to climb up into the gentry could make it hard for the gentry to stay where they were. So let's set the Pastons aside for a moment to talk about the economic problems of the gentry as a whole. You have low rents and high wages; that hurts holders of large

estates more than it does people trying to build up an estate from scratch. One response that many large landowners had was to abandon the whole for good tenants for their lands, in fact, to abandon arable farming altogether in favor of pastoral farming, mainly the raising of sheep. We've talked before about the importance of wool in the English economy. This got even more pronounced in the 15th century. One result is that many landlords wind up "enclosing" lands that had formerly been used to grow crops by putting big hedges around them. This was a rather large change in the organization of the countryside. You'll remember in our earlier discussions of how farming was organized. You had largely open fields; you had those long strips that allowed people to plow with oxen who didn't like to turn around very often. Then there were also common lands that were open to anybody for pasturing their animals, gathering wild plants for food, that sort of thing.

But now you have a move toward enclosing land for sheep to graze on. That means that more and more lands were "privatized." You see a decline in the amount of common land available to common use. You can't wander freely across the land anymore because of all those hedges. Now, certainly, this hurt some of the small farmers; some were probably bullied into surrendering their holdings so that they could be enclosed, and the loss of the common lands was a substantial loss. Still, the scale of forcible enclosures has probably been exaggerated. It used to be thought that many villages were abandoned wholesale due to enclosure. If you actually look at aerial photography, you could see across the English landscape hundreds of "lost" villages, and it would be easy to conjure up a terrible image of whole communities destroyed by rapacious landlords. Archaeologists have studied these sites more carefully, and it looks as if they were abandoned not at one particular time, all at once, but in dribs and drabs over the whole of the Middle Ages. We're looking at the normal growth cycle of medieval towns.

So it wasn't all greedy landlords. In fact, at the same time as landlords are enclosing their fields, some tenants are enclosing their own lands. They saw the wisdom of the new methods. And if we look at the financial records of some landlords in the 15th century, it's very clear that enclosure worked. It increased the yields from their estates. Wool paid.

But the wool trade had changed a lot since we last looked at it in the 13th century. The Hundred Years' War had disrupted trade with the continent significantly. Merchants who specialized in exporting raw wool from England to the Low Countries had suffered. There is a tax on wool. So English tradesmen made an important adjustment. They increased their production of finished cloth both for export and for the internal market. Between the mid-14th century and the mid-15th century, the export of English broadcloth increased by more than tenfold.

Broadcloth gets its name from the fact that it is made on a broad loom. Production tended to be concentrated in certain areas of the country, especially East Anglia and the west country, which both had access to good sheep-raising areas. Cloth was produced by a process known as "farming out." A merchant would buy raw wool from individual sheep farmers, and then it would be parceled out to individual craftspeople who were engaged in the various steps of cloth production, from the carders, who would card the wool (that is, comb it and remove all the tangles and burrs and other impurities), to the spinners and weavers, all of whom would work in their own homes under the aegis of a "factor," who would be in charge of coordinating the whole process. Essentially, the factor would go around to the different carders and spinners and weavers and check up on them, making sure that the whole pipeline was flowing as it should. This kind of small-scale craftwork is referred to as "cottage industry," because it literally took place in the cottages of the workers themselves. This kind of work provided employment for many underemployed people, especially women and children.

Now, once the broadcloth was done, it would be marketed, either at home or abroad. The export trade was handled by the Company of Merchant Adventurers. This was a group of merchants that traded with the continent, particularly with the city of Antwerp in the Low Countries. They were granted a royal charter by King Henry IV in 1407, but they date back probably to the early 14th century. This was a guild of merchants, that is, you had to belong to it if you wanted to trade in broadcloth. It was a monopoly. One thing that is very characteristic of medieval trade is that it's very far from being free trade. There is a lot of politics involved. Merchants lobbied

the king for special privileges, and they were often willing to pay to get them. And the cloth lobby was very powerful in the Middle Ages.

But I want to get back to our gentry family now, the Pastons. They were trying to survive, as I said, in this atmosphere of economic change, and it is a very tough climate for gentry families, because the competition among them could be vicious. The gentry are all trying desperately to maintain their status. For some of them, like the Pastons, it's newly acquired; others have been part of the elite for centuries. But there's only so much land, so much social capital to go around. And given the political disorder at the top in England, disputes in the localities often spiral out of control and become violent.

These disputes often centered around claims to property acquired either by marriage or inheritance. The first resort for such disputes was naturally the royal courts, and as this period saw a large increase in the number of lawyers, it also saw a large increase in the number of lawsuits. Many of the letters of the Paston family were written because some member of the family or other was stuck in London dealing with one of these lawsuits over the family property, and the wives would be writing to tell them what was going on on the home front. Often, the news from home would be ominous, because at the same time as the man of the house was off defending the estate in court, the estate itself might come under physical attack from the Pastons' enemies.

The most serious challenge to the Pastons was a charge raised in court that their ancestors had actually been serfs; this would have invalidated the claim of William Paston's son John to inherit his estate, and it's a very telling reminder of how newly arrived the Pastons are. This was a claim that someone felt might stick. But the king and council ruled against this claim in 1461, and that at least put the paternal inheritance on a sound footing.

But things were especially bad for the Pastons in 1465. John Paston was actually imprisoned in London as part of the legal maneuvering in a lawsuit between him and the duke of Suffolk related to the Paston estate at Drayton, which he had inherited from a grateful client, Sir John Fastolf. (Incidentally, this Sir John Fastolf is probably the man on whom Shakespeare partly based his character of Falstaff, though Shakespeare puts him about 50

years earlier, in the reign of Henry IV.) So John Paston was in prison, and his wife, Margaret, is writing to him, rather frantically, to say that the duke of Suffolk's retainers had been boasting that they would get hold of Drayton because John Paston is in prison; the implication is that if Paston were home, in person, the retainers wouldn't have such a good chance of extracting the estate from him. Margaret Paston writes, "For the reverence of God, if you can manage it by any reasonable or honourable means, get out of there as soon as you can, and come home amongst your friends and tenants, and that would be the greatest comfort they could have, and the contrary for your enemies."

The atmosphere in Norfolk is made even more difficult by the fact that all of England is divided in this period between the two main political factions that are battling it out for the throne at this point, the Lancastrians and the Yorkists. This is the period of the so-called Wars of the Roses, which we'll be getting to in future lectures. The bitterness of political division at the top is added on to local rivalries over property and prestige, and the result is that gentry families, like the Pastons, feel embattled, even besieged. There is a current of anxiety running through the Paston letters that is quite striking; you have to feel for this family that has worked so hard to get where they are, and now they constantly have to defend their position on every side.

But I want to shift now to talk about some positive developments in this period in the sphere of culture, and they certainly suggest that however anxious an age this may be for some people, it was also a fairly prosperous age. I'm going to talk first about building and then about literature.

When people in the Middle Ages decided to undertake a large building project, it was a vote of confidence in the economy. Such projects could take many years to complete, and they were enormously expensive by contemporary measures. We've already seen that bishops sometimes got their churches into trouble by building too ambitiously. But the 15th century was a great age of building. One striking development is that many towns are building large guild halls or corn markets to facilitate trade. "Corn" here means grain in general, so a corn market was a place where people would gather to arrange the sale of grain. And these buildings are large and impressive; many of them still stand. For example, the Corn Exchange in

Cambridge has now been turned into a major municipal venue that hosts rock concerts, festivals, and sporting events of all kinds. These municipal buildings reflect the growing importance of trade in the 15th century. Of course, this is still an agricultural economy, but there has been a steady trend in favor of commercialization and urbanization.

Many new churches are built in this period, especially parish churches rather than monastic churches; this is an era when monasticism is, on the whole, on the decline. In London, there is a fairly systematic remodeling of parish churches to conform to contemporary style, the Flamboyant Gothic I talked about a few lectures back. Here are churches that are being spruced up to demonstrate the prosperity of their patrons. In addition, there is a huge increase in the number of small churches, chapels, and chantries that are being built in the towns. These are mini-churches that are basically there to provide a place for masses to be said to pray for the souls of the departed who might be languishing in purgatory. It became fashionable in this period to endow a chapel or chantry so that these masses could be said perpetually. The word “chantry” comes from “chanting” the mass. This was cheaper than founding a whole new monastery with maybe 40 monks to support; for a chantry, you just need one priest, and if you were too poor to endow a whole chantry, you could actually pay for just a set number of masses. This did actually take a significant portion of the clerical underclass off the unemployment rolls. They’d get jobs as chantry priests. So the chantry industry employed a lot of priests but also a lot of builders and architects.

But building is not confined to the towns. You also see a huge increase in the number of stone churches being built from scratch in the countryside, particularly in East Anglia and in the Cotswolds, both areas that were being newly enriched by the wool trade, and in fact, historians refer to these as the wool churches, because it was wool money that paid for them. Many of these churches also still stand today.

I just want to mention one other kind of building that was increasing in this period because it, too, tells us something about prosperity and trade and even the widening of horizons. You see an increase in the number of inns. If a town wanted to attract traders, it needed good, comfortable, safe places for them to stay. We’ve already encountered the Tabard Inn in Southwark, of

course, when we talked about the pilgrims heading off to Canterbury. But even very small towns, such as Coleshill in Warwickshire, had four inns. The inn built at Andover in Hampshire in 1444–45 cost £300, which was a lot of money at that time, especially for a relatively small market town like Andover. Clearly, it was seen as a good investment.

Obviously, people in the 15th century are not spending all their time worrying about politics. They are thinking about the economy and about displaying their wealth in a visible form to their neighbors in impressive churches and chapels. But they are also engaging in more private amusements. One of these was reading and listening to stories about King Arthur. This has been going on for a long time, but there had been some big changes. There were changes in the audience for the tales, in the form in which the tales were being presented, and in the technology of presenting the tales to the reading public.

Let me first say a few words about audience. Up until this point, the audience for literary works has been largely confined to the elite, because literacy rates are rather low. The rate of literacy began to rise, though, largely because it became clear that the ability to read and write was a ticket to social mobility. This had always been the case for those wanting to advance in the church, but as we saw earlier, the law had expanded enormously as a venue for economic and social advancement, and literacy is obviously required for the law. Many forms of trade also required the ability to read and do computations. Foreign trade could require very complex calculations of exchange rates, for example. So how did people learn to read?

Within gentry families, literacy seems to have been passed on by the women of the family or by hired tutors, usually clerics. Starting in 1440, rich young men would have the option of attending Eton, the first of the great English public schools ("public" here really means "private"). But for the lower orders, there were an increasing number of options as the Middle Ages progressed. Many parish priests had informal schools to earn extra income; this was a tradition that continued down to relatively modern times. There were also an increasing number of grammar schools in this period; these were more formal schools under the guidance of a master. Often, the whole school would occupy a single room. The master would teach the older boys,

and then the older boys would teach the younger boys. By 1500, many of the larger towns in England had grammar schools.

And of course, starting in the middle of the 15th century, there was a whole new way to employ these literate skills. The technology of moveable type, first perfected by the Gutenbergs in Germany in 1450, was introduced to England by William Caxton. Caxton was originally a merchant who got involved in overseas trade in the Low Countries and Germany. That's how he encountered the new technology of printing. He wasted no time setting up a press of his own, first in Bruges, in Flanders. But by 1476, he had a press in Westminster, and the first work he produced there was an edition of Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*.

Caxton was a big proponent of the English language, and though he did print works in other languages, four-fifths of the works he printed were in English. One effect of printing was that it caused a certain degree of standardization in the written form of the language. Caxton wanted to establish certain standard forms and keep to them. In the 14th century, you could tell from the dialect in a text what part of the country it was probably written in; we saw that when we talked about *Piers Ploughman.* That became less and less true as a kind of standard written English took over. This takes a while, but the development gets started right away with Caxton.

One other change due to the arrival of printing was that, obviously, the availability of print editions made a big impact on the circulation of texts. They could simply reach far more people, and the reading public expands enormously. All those lawyers and merchants who learned how to read because it was useful for their work could relax and read for pleasure.

Among the texts that they were reading was a very important work that Caxton printed in 1485. It was called *Le Morte d'Arthur*, but don't let the French title fool you, because this was the first-ever version of the King Arthur story in English *prose*. We've already seen that the 14th century brought the big advance that now you had Arthurian stories written in English *verse*—and very sophisticated verse at that. Now, in the 15th century, you have this huge compendium, the most extensive to date, of all the Arthur stories, in a fairly straightforward style, accessible to pretty much any educated person.

The author of this work was named Sir Thomas Malory, and his life seems to have been just about as colorful as that of the characters he wrote about. He was a knight from Warwickshire, probably born around 1405, and he was twice elected to Parliament. But during the 1450s, he was in trouble with the law on numerous occasions. At various points, he was accused of burglary, rape, sheep stealing, and attempting to ambush Humphrey Stafford, duke of Buckingham. On two occasions, he escaped from jail, once by seizing a number of weapons, fighting his way out, and swimming across a moat. So when Malory wrote about adventures, he knew what he was talking about, and in fact, he did write a lot of the text while he was in jail.

Malory's *Arthur* is geared to the new literate classes, the gentry to whom he himself belonged, and also the wider reading public of lawyers and tradesmen. And it was a very English *Arthur*. I just want to say a little bit about the preface to the edition that Caxton printed. It shows the great pride that the English were taking in Arthur. Caxton starts by saying that Arthur is famous all around Europe and that books are written about him in many languages, but it's a pity that until now, his whole story hasn't been available in English. Apparently, Caxton says, citing the Bible, no man is a prophet in his own country. But Caxton says Malory's work is going to change all that.

Think for a moment about what has happened to the story of King Arthur since we first encountered it. Arthur starts out, possibly as a British war leader trying to stem the tide of Germanic settlement in Britain. He is the enemy of the people who later become known as the English. Later on, he becomes the literary toast of Europe primarily via stories written in French. Finally, Arthur is reappropriated by the English and turned into their hero, a source of national pride. There is irony here, certainly, but it's pretty impressive how the English have managed to absorb these stories and make them their own.

I want to end this lecture by quoting a few lines from Caxton's preface, because I think they capture something about life in the 15th century. You've got some people newly prosperous, you have a lot of people anxious to keep what they've earned, and a new group of readers who need a break from those anxieties, the kind of break that they'd get by sitting down with a good book. This is what Caxton says: "And for to passe the tyme thys book shal

be plesaunte to rede in, but for to gyve faith and byleve that al is trewe that is conteyned herin, ye be at your lyberté.” In other words, I’m guaranteeing this is a good read, but as for it being true, you’re on your own with that.

In our next lecture, we’re going to go back to the chronological narrative. We’ll find out what happened after Henry Bolingbroke took over the throne from Richard II, and we’ll follow Bolingbroke’s son, Henry V, to victory at Agincourt.

Henry V and the Victory at Agincourt
Lecture 32

Our picture of Henry V, as Prince Hal became, is so colored by Shakespeare's play of the same name that it can be hard to separate the fictional prince from the historical one. Shakespeare gives us a prince who spends his time with low companions, hanging out in taverns, totally neglecting the responsibilities of a prince. … The reality of Prince Henry's career in the last years of his father was somewhat different.

Henry IV's accession to the throne as the first Lancastrian king caused a number of problems. For one thing, since the Norman Conquest, no one who was not the nearest heir by blood had seized the throne. Edmund Mortimer, earl of March, technically had a stronger claim, but it was through the female line—not that it should have mattered; the English claim to the French throne, over which they were still at war, was through the female line as well. But in addition, on Richard's deposition in 1399, Mortimer was eight years old. The magnates of England did not want another child king, not in a time of instability. Mortimer was passed over, and Bolingbroke took the throne. It was a realistic outcome politically, but it stored up trouble for later.

Henry IV had also set an uncomfortable precedent by seizing the throne. The main issues of Richard's reign hadn't been solved; the power struggles between the king and the barons continued and sometimes broke into open rebellion, one of which was the subject of William Shakespeare's plays about Henry: In 1403, Welsh prince Owen Glendower roused Wales into rebellion against England. He called a Welsh parliament, appointed a chancellor, and struck an alliance with France. Eventually he was joined in rebellion by the earl of Northumberland (a former supporter of Henry's) and Sir Edmund Mortimer (uncle of the earl of March). In 1405, the three took up arms in the name of the earl of March, with a private plan to divide the kingdom among the three of them—Wales to Glendower, the north to Northumberland, and the rest to Mortimer as regent for his nephew.

There were some powerful men involved in the conspiracy, but in the end the rebels were defeated. Glendower kept fighting until 1409, and after that, he simply melted away. He was never captured; no one knows what became of him. The upshot of all this is that Henry IV's reign was marked by instability. The king was never able to relax. Rumors went around that Richard was still alive. Plots were uncovered and foiled on a regular basis. As Shakespeare has Henry put it, "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown."

Henry V wanted to restore English power in France; it would be the perfect way of proving his right to the throne.

For the last few years of his reign, Henry was chronically ill, and the public was just waiting for him to die so that his popular son, Prince Hal, could take the reins of government. Despite the picture of him that Shakespeare paints, Hal was not a feckless scoundrel. He had an impressive military record in the Welsh revolt. He was deeply engaged in court politics, including a serious faction fight against his own younger brother, Thomas. When Prince Hal finally succeeded his father as Henry V in 1413, he was briefly able to restore order to English politics, in part by giving the English the magnificent distraction of military victory overseas.

When he first took the crown, Henry faced some very serious threats on the home front. Sir John Oldcastle, once his companion on the Welsh campaigns, was now a member of the House of Lords. He was also a Lollard who used his castle in Kent as a refuge for fellow Lollards. The archbishop of Canterbury got wind of this and wanted to proceed against Oldcastle, but he had to be careful: Oldcastle was the king's friend, making the matter dangerous but also all the more urgent. Oldcastle could probably have played the card of royal influence, but that would have meant renouncing his beliefs. Instead he was convicted of heresy and sentenced to execution. The king requested a stay to give him time to talk Oldcastle into recanting, but then Oldcastle escaped from the Tower of London and shortly led the Lollards in a revolt. It was swiftly put down, and its leaders were executed—except for Oldcastle, who escaped and spent three years on the run before being caught and put to death. In Oldcastle, we see one of Shakespeare's models for the character of

Falstaff, the companion of Prince Henry's youth who has to be cast aside for political reasons.

But the Oldcastle plot was not nearly as serious from a military perspective as the so-called Cambridge plot. The ringleaders were Richard, earl of Cambridge, the younger brother of the duke of York (and thus the king's cousin); Lord Scrope of Masham; and Sir Thomas Grey of Heton. Their plan was to assassinate the king while he was getting ready to embark for France and to crown the earl of March. But March made a prudent move: He gave away the plot to the king. The three ringleaders were executed, and Henry would never again face a serious threat to his throne. He set sail for France and victory.

England and France had been at truce during Richard's reign, but that agreement dissolved with his deposition. Henry IV had sent Richard's queen, Isabella, back to France but offered to arrange her marriage to one of his sons. France reconfirmed the truce but avoided acknowledging Henry's right to the English throne and declined the marriage proposal. Things deteriorated from there. Meanwhile, the French king, Charles VI, was undergoing one of his periodic bouts of insanity. The two main royal factions, Burgundy and Orleans, were quarreling over the right to rule in the king's stead.

Henry V wanted to restore English power in France; it would be the perfect way of proving his right to the throne. He invaded in August 1415 with a force of a bit less than 10,000 men and besieged the port of Harfleur, near the mouth of the Seine. Harfleur surrendered after about a month. As Edward III had done with Calais, Henry got rid of the French inhabitants of the city with the intention of replacing them with English colonists, but his army was depleted and wracked with dysentery. Henry wanted to quarter them for the winter at the more secure Calais, 170 miles away. A large French army gathered at Rouen to block the English advance. Again and again, the English had to change direction to avoid the French, making their march much longer.

Finally, the armies met near the town of Agincourt. The French outnumbered the English several times over and were eager to fight. But the English fought the smarter battle. They deployed their forces to take best advantage

of the terrain. The field of battle was muddy, which caused the heavily-armored French far more trouble than the less-burdened English. The English arranged their men at arms in rows four deep, with archers to protect them on the flanks. They also fixed long pointed stakes in the ground to force the French cavalry to veer off. By contrast, the French archers were poorly deployed and played almost no role in the battle. Their cavalry charge was a disaster. By the time their men at arms made it across the muddy field, they were almost too exhausted to fight. Late in the battle, the French did manage to attack the rear of the English army, where the baggage train was stationed. Probably at around this point the king decided to kill the many French prisoners who had already been taken in the battle. By then, the battle was effectively over. The French counterattack never materialized.

Agincourt was a disaster for the French. They lost as many as nine or ten times more men than the English had, including some very highly placed nobles. For the next five years, the fighting died down into a series of long sieges punctuated by diplomatic maneuvers. Slowly but surely, Henry extended his control over northern France. But his main success came not from English arms but from French in-fighting. Partisans of the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne, assassinated the duke of Burgundy, and his heir allied with the English for revenge. Caught between England and Burgundy, France was forced to come to terms. In 1420, the French and the English signed the **Treaty of Troyes**. By the terms of the treaty, King Henry married Princess Katherine, the daughter of the French king, and the French succession was granted to their heirs. The Dauphin, Katherine's brother, was disinherited.

Perhaps Henry V could have forged a united kingdom out of England and France. We'll never know, because he died of dysentery in 1422, leaving his 9-month-old son Henry VI the daunting task of living up to a father who had subdued one rebellious kingdom and conquered another. Alas, poor Henry VI would find the task impossible. ■

Important Term

Troyes, Treaty of: Agreement made in 1420 between England and France that gave the French princess Catherine to Henry V in marriage and provided for the inheritance of both England and France by the couple's heirs.

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

Henry V and the Victory at Agincourt
Lecture 32—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at life in England in the 15th century, and we saw that for the broad mass of English men and women, it was pretty good, despite the fact that at the top, there was lots of political disorder and instability. Over the next few lectures, we're going to look at what that instability and disorder consisted of.

This is a period when the authority of the crown came under serious question; it changed hands a number of times between rival branches of the English royal family. It was a very dangerous time to be part of the ruling elite; politics had gotten very bloody, as we saw already when we looked at Richard II's reign. But there was one brief bright spot amidst all the faction fighting and political murder. England did make a spectacular comeback in the war against France. All the gains were lost afterwards, but for a little while at least, it looked as if all the glory of the good old days of Edward III might be coming back. So today, we're going to look at this brief shining moment, the reign of Henry V and his splendid victory at Agincourt.

But first, we have to talk about his father, Henry IV. You'll remember back one lecture that we talked about the deposition and death of Richard II, and the man who replaced him on the throne was Henry Bolingbroke, duke of Lancaster. Because he was duke of Lancaster, we call his family the Lancastrian dynasty. Now, Henry's accession to the throne caused a number of problems. It was unprecedented in recent centuries for someone who was not the nearest heir by blood simply to seize the throne.

As I mentioned earlier, since Richard II had no children, the nearest heir would have been Edmund Mortimer, earl of March, because he was descended from the *third* son of Edward III, Lionel, duke of Clarence, whereas Henry Bolingbroke was descended from the *fourth* son, John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster. So the earl of March has priority of Henry Bolinbroke. To make matters slightly more complicated, though, Mortimer was descended from Edward III through the female line; the succession had come through the *daughter* of Lionel, duke of Clarence.

Now, that shouldn't matter, should it, because the whole English claim to the French throne that they'd been fighting for since the 1330s is based on descent through the female line, so it was hardly fair to claim now that that female succession is a bar. But in 1399, Mortimer is 8 years old. The magnates of England don't want a child king. Interestingly, this is totally different from what had happened only a few decades before, in 1377, when Richard II took the throne at the age of 10. At that point, England seemed pretty stable, and the royal family was united—all Richard's uncles are happy to help him rule.

But now, in 1399, the situation is a lot more chaotic, and the consensus is that England needs a strong ruler. So Mortimer is passed over and Bolingbroke takes the throne. It is a realistic outcome politically, certainly, but it stores up trouble for later. The fact that the "legitimate" heir had been passed over was going to haunt English politics. Edward III had five sons who lived to adulthood and fathered children. Then their offspring started intermarrying, and that created a whole bewildering array of claims to the throne. We're going to get to all that in future lectures. For right now, let's figure out what's going on with the new king, crowned as Henry IV.

Henry IV has a problem. He has set an uncomfortable precedent by seizing the throne. His magnates have seen this done. And throughout his brief reign—he only ruled for 14 years—Henry faces a series of rebellions designed to reverse the coup and put some more acceptable monarch on the throne. This was the case largely because the main issues of Richard II's reign weren't really solved by getting rid of him. It was still hard to strike a balance between, on the one hand, the king, who saw himself as God's anointed with more or less unrestrained authority in England, and on the other hand, the barons, who were richer and more powerful than ever and certainly feeling their oats now that they had deposed one king and created another.

I'll just talk about one of these rebellions in Henry's reign. It's the one Shakespeare writes about in his plays *Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2*, and it proved the most serious threat to the regime by far. It broke out in 1403, but some of the principals involved had been disaffected for some time before that. The thing that made the rebellion so dangerous is that it ended up being

led by an alliance of powerful men, all of whom had some axe to grind against Henry IV.

The first rebel to emerge was a formidable Welsh prince named Owen Glendower. He started causing trouble in Wales right at the start of Henry's reign. Glendower was an interesting figure. He was descended from Welsh princes on both sides of his family, but earlier in his career, he had served in the English royal forces. Then, in 1400, he had gotten into a dispute with a marcher lord who backed Henry IV (Glendower and most of Wales had been pro–Richard II), and that drove Glendower into rebellion. He succeeded in rousing much of Wales to his cause. He did some very interesting things. He called a Welsh parliament, appointed a chancellor, and drew up rather grandiose plans for two new Welsh universities. He struck an alliance with France and had diplomatic feelers out to other states in Europe. He wanted to turn Wales into a proper kingdom on a par with England. People mentioned him in the same breath as King Arthur.

Glendower ended up allying with Henry Percy, known as Hotspur, the son of the earl of Northumberland. Hotspur had a grievance against Henry IV. Hotspur had won a great battle against the Scots and captured the earl of Dunbar. The earl of Dunbar was a very valuable prisoner, and Hotspur wanted to collect a ransom for him. King Henry demanded that Hotspur turn over custody of Dunbar to him personally, so he wasn't going to get a ransom out of this. So there was certainly a personal grievance between Hotspur and the king. Hotspur claimed to be rebelling in favor of the earl of March, the "rightful" heir. Now, this was pretty rich. Hotspur had been up to his neck in the deposition of Richard, but he claimed after the fact that he had just been helping Henry Bolingbroke claim his rightful inheritance as duke of Lancaster; he hadn't seen the deposition coming. This was totally disingenuous, of course. But Hotspur also threw in a list of criticisms of how Henry had been ruling as king; Henry had not been able to keep a pledge not to raise taxes. In 1403, Hotspur goes up against a royal army, but in the Battle at Shrewsbury, he is defeated and killed.

After the Battle of Shrewsbury, Hotspur's father, the earl of Northumberland, takes up his cause and makes a triple alliance with Glendower and a third rebel, Sir Edmund Mortimer. Mortimer, in a personal sense, is the least

impressive of the rebels, but he is potentially dangerous to the king simply because of who he is. Sir Edmund Mortimer is the uncle of the young earl of March, who as we've said, is technically the one with the best claim to the English throne. Mortimer was captured in the fighting against the Welsh rebels, but then King Henry refused to ransom him. From Henry's point of view, he was quite happy to have him out of the way where his claim to the English throne wouldn't cause any problems for Henry himself. This obviously made Mortimer pretty angry, so he switched sides, joined up with Glendower, and married Glendower's daughter.

Now we have three rebels, Northumberland, Glendower, and Mortimer, and in 1405, they take up arms. They claim to be trying to put the rightful heir on the throne. The plan of the rebels was to make a tripartite division of England, known as the "tripartite indenture." Glendower would, of course, get Wales but also some of the border counties of England. Northumberland would get the northern counties, and Mortimer would be left with the rest, a rump of England. They would dismantle the country. There were some powerful men involved in the conspiracy, including the archbishop of York. In the end, though, only Glendower poses a serious military threat. The northern rebels are defeated; the archbishop of York is tricked into surrendering and was then beheaded. Glendower keeps fighting until 1409, but after that, he simply melts away. He is never captured; no one knows what became of him.

The upshot of all this is that Henry IV's reign is marked by chronic instability. The king was never able to relax. Rumors went around that Richard was still alive. Plots were uncovered and foiled on a regular basis. Shakespeare has Henry deliver the well-known line: "Uneasy lies the head that wears a crown." That fits Henry IV's reign very well. For the last few years of his reign, Henry was chronically ill, and the public was basically just waiting for him to die so that he could be succeeded by his popular son, Prince Hal.

Our picture of Henry V, as Prince Hal became, is so colored by Shakespeare's play of the same name that it can be hard to separate the fictional prince from the historical one. Shakespeare gives us a prince who spends his time with low companions, hanging out in taverns, totally neglecting the responsibilities of a prince. But Prince Hal lets us know that he's got a plan: He's going to undergo a reformation when he finally becomes king, and that's

going to make him seem even more impressive. The reality of Prince Henry's career in the last years of his father was somewhat different. Henry had an impressive military record in the Welsh revolt. He also wasn't divorced from affairs at court—far from it. He was engaged in a serious faction fight against his own brother, Prince Thomas, the second son of Henry IV. Each had his band of noble supporters. At one point, Prince Henry declared that he feared for his own safety. With the king himself semi-incapacitated due to illness, the situation was very tense and threatened to spiral out of control.

So when Henry finally did succeed his father in 1413, he inherited a legacy of instability. He was briefly able to restore order to English politics, partly by giving the English the magnificent distraction of military victory overseas. Henry's overriding ambition was to restore the glory of the victories won in France by his great-grandfather, Edward III. He wanted glory for its own sake, certainly, but he was also determined to siphon off some of the troublemakers who were threatening to make his reign just as difficult as his father's. So before we can follow him to France, we need to talk about some of the very serious threats he had to face in England.

One of these troublemakers was a man named Sir John Oldcastle. Oldcastle had been close to Prince Henry during the Welsh campaigns, and Henry had even used his influence to help Oldcastle marry a rich heiress, whose title allowed Oldcastle to take a seat in the House of Lords. So he was a socially prominent individual. He was also a Lollard. We talked about the Lollard heresy back when we discussed the Peasants' Revolt. Lollardy had gone underground, but it still had supporters, and Oldcastle was one of them. Since he was wealthy and well connected, he was able to use his castle in Kent as a place of refuge for fellow Lollards. The archbishop of Canterbury got wind of this and wanted to proceed against Oldcastle, but he had to be careful because he was the king's friend. But on the other hand, that made it even more important to act against Oldcastle because it didn't set a good example to have the king's friend be such a notorious heretic.

Oldcastle could probably have gotten off if he had just played the card of royal influence, but that would have meant renouncing his beliefs. (Henry was not going to countenance heresy openly—he was quite orthodox in how own religious convictions.) So Oldcastle defied the ecclesiastical court, and

he was handed over to the secular courts for punishment; you'll remember, since 1401, it had been the law in England that heretics could be burned (though, in reality, this had happened only very rarely—it wasn't something anybody really liked to do). The king requested a stay of execution to give him time to try to talk Oldcastle out of his stubborn position.

But then Oldcastle escapes from the Tower of London, where he had been imprisoned (for all its formidable appearance, you can get out of it). In early 1414, the Lollards, under Oldcastle's leadership, attempt a revolt in London; contingents of Lollards converged on the capital from all over the country, from as far away as Warwick and Derby. But the authorities had gotten wind of this, and the rising is swiftly put down, and the most important leaders [are] all executed, except for Oldcastle. He escaped, and he spent three years on the run before he was finally captured and put to death.

One reason I've spent some time talking about Oldcastle is that he is one of the models for Shakespeare's character Falstaff. There was another whom I've already talked about, a knight named Sir John Fastolf who lived later in the 15th century and got involved in legal transactions with the Paston family in Norfolk. But Oldcastle gives Shakespeare one of the central elements of Falstaff's character, the companion of Prince Henry's youth who has to be cast aside for political reasons when he becomes king. It's just that those political reasons were totally different in reality than they are in the play. In the play, Falstaff is a riotous man, a glutton, and a thief; when the prince turns his back on Falstaff, he is turning his back on his dissolute youth. In reality, Sir John Oldcastle is a very serious man, a convinced Lollard; Henry has to turn his back on him because it would be politically dangerous to be seen to approve of heresy.

But the Oldcastle plot is not nearly as serious from a military perspective as the other major plot that Henry faces early in his reign. This second plot is very much a continuation of the power struggles that had been going on in his father's reign, and the whole dynamic goes back to the instability caused by the deposition of Richard. There were just a lot of people out there now who don't see why they shouldn't go ahead and topple the king if that is going to work out well for them. Clearly, there were nobles who figured

that the best way to get wealth and influence was for the king to owe you everything, even his throne. They want to be kingmakers.

The plot is known as the Cambridge plot, because one of the ringleaders was Richard, earl of Cambridge, the younger brother of the duke of York. (He was, thus, the king's cousin.) The other two main confederates were Lord Scrope of Masham and Sir Thomas Grey of Heton. Their plan is to assassinate the king while he was getting ready to embark for France and to replace him on the throne with the earl of March. (You can see how destabilizing it is to have such a person around—later on, English kings would draw the obvious conclusion and just systematically get rid of people like that, but we're not quite there yet.) Apparently, some of the rebels had been urging the earl of March for several years to try to claim his rightful throne. But March made a prudent move. He gives away the plot to the king. The three ringleaders are executed, and Henry never again faces a serious threat to his throne, largely because of what he is about to accomplish. He sets sail for France—and victory.

Before we follow him to the battlefield, though, we need to pause and figure out what had been going on between England and France in the last 20 years or so. We saw that under Richard II, a truce was agreed between the two countries, but that had pretty much collapsed when Richard was deposed. The new Lancastrian government had sent Richard's young French queen, Isabella, back to France, and France reconfirmed the truce, but they had cleverly managed to avoid officially acknowledging Henry IV's right to the English throne. The French turn down Henry's offer to have one of his sons marry Isabella. And things deteriorated from there.

As we've seen, the French allied with Owen Glendower, and they raided the Channel coast and the Channel Islands. This would have been a great opportunity for the French to get rid of the English in France once and for all, but they were divided among themselves; the French royal house was divided into two hostile factions, and that fact was probably the only thing that saved the English garrison at Calais in this period. This was the serious situation that Henry V is trying to remedy. He wants to restore English glory in France. He wanted to be the chivalric hero that the English expected their

king to be. That would be a way of legitimizing his rather questionable right to the throne.

So off Henry goes to France in August of 1415. It was probably a good time to attack France, because the French government was in a crisis. The king, Charles VI, is undergoing one of his periodic bouts of insanity. (There seems to have been a genetic disorder in the family.) The two main royal factions, Burgundy and Orleans, are quarreling over the right to rule in the king's stead while he's insane. The English are clearly hoping to take advantage of their opponents' difficulties.

Henry lands with a relatively small force of around 10,000 men. He settles down to besiege the Channel port of Harfleur, near the mouth of the Seine, which surrendered after about a month. Then Henry does basically the same thing Edward III had done with Calais. He gets rid of the French inhabitants of the city and is planning to replace them with English colonists. The siege had taken longer than Henry had hoped, and the army was depleted by the need to garrison Harfleur while they waited for reinforcements to arrive. [Then,] there was an outbreak of dysentery among the English soldiers.

Henry decided to postpone marching on Paris or Bordeaux. He could have just hunkered down at Harfleur. Instead, he wanted to show himself in France a bit, see some of this country he was now claiming to be king of. He wants to get his army from Harfleur to Calais to take up winter quarters; this would have been a march of about 170 miles if they had been able to go in a straight line. But the French haven't been idle. A large French army had gathered at Rouen, and they moved to block the English advance. Again and again, the English had to change direction to avoid the French, thus making their march much longer. Finally, the French army got in between the English and Calais near the town of Agincourt. The French outnumbered the English probably several times over, though the statistics in these cases are notoriously unreliable. Still, the smart thing for the French would probably have been just to keep shadowing the English as they marched around the countryside getting weaker and weaker. As I've said before, battles in medieval warfare are comparatively rare, and the smart decision is often not to fight them and just to let your enemy defeat himself.

But the French were eager to fight. They were officially led by two very experienced commanders, the constable of France, Charles d'Albret, and the marshal of France, Boucicault. The marshal and the constable wanted to postpone the battle, but they were overruled by some of the eager young noblemen in the army who want glory. That turns out to be a very bad decision.

The battle was similar in some ways to the earlier battles of the Hundred Years' War that we've talked about before, Crécy and Poitiers. Once again, you have a smaller English force facing a numerically superior French force. But once again, the English fought the smarter battle. They deployed their forces very effectively to take good advantage of the terrain. The English were protected by a small wood, and the ground in front of them consisted of a recently plowed field that turned very quickly to mud. The mud caused the French far more trouble than the English because the French were more heavily armed, and they often literally could not get up again once they fell in the mud. The English also arranged their forces in the best possible way to maximize their strength and even up the discrepancy in numbers between them and the French. They arranged their men-at-arms in rows four deep, with archers to protect them on the flanks, and perhaps a central block of archers as well, splitting the men-at-arms into two groups.

In addition, the English fixed long, pointed stakes in the ground to force the French cavalry to veer off. A horse does not want to charge at a long, pointed stake. The French, by contrast, don't seem to have figured out a good way to deploy their archers. Their archers are in the rear, with the men-at-arms in the front, and no one wanted to let the archers fire for fear they would hit their own men, so the French archers play almost no role in the battle. Essentially, the French men-at-arms and cavalry are on their own.

The French cavalry charged, but the charge was a disaster. The cavalry were hoping to outflank the English archers, but they were hemmed in by the woods, and then ran up against those pointed stakes. Many horses were shot down, and their riders were floundering in the mud. Then the French foot soldiers, men-at-arms, advanced across the field, which was getting muddier and muddier, and they actually did make it as far as the English line, but by the time they got there, they were essentially too exhausted to fight. They had

had to put their visors down to avoid being shot in the face by the English archers, and that made it hard for them to breathe. They were wearing 50 to 60 pounds of armor. By the time they met the enemy, some reports say they were unable to use their weapons, they were so tired. It got ugly after that. The archers, who were out of arrows by now, pick up whatever weapons they could find and join in the hand-to-hand fighting. They had an advantage being unencumbered by heavy armor, and they were able to cut down many of the French men-at-arms. This goes on for about three hours, probably a very long three hours for those involved.

Late in the battle, the French did manage to attack the rear of the English army, where the baggage train was stationed, and they even made off with one of King Henry's crowns. Probably at around this point, King Henry made the decision to kill the French prisoners who had already been taken in the battle—there may have been several thousand. Possibly, he feared further attacks by French reinforcements; possibly, he wants revenge for the attack on the baggage train. Shakespeare invents a justification for killing the prisoners in the play; he has the French soldiers who attack the baggage train slaughter the boys who are guarding the baggage, so then the king orders the prisoners to be killed out of anger at the murder of the defenseless boys.

Clearly, Shakespeare was uncomfortable with this action of the king, so he has to give Henry a good pretext for doing it, but it's interesting to note that at the time, not even the French protested. This is just war. The only people who were angry were the noblemen in the English army who had hoped to hold the prisoners for ransom. Apparently, the king had to get some of his archers to do the deed; his noble followers just couldn't bear to see all that money go to waste. By this point, the battle was effectively over. The French counterattack never materialized.

What is the result of the Battle of Agincourt? It is a total disaster for the French. They lose possibly 9 or 10 times more men than the English, including some very highly placed nobles. The English were thrilled by the victory. Many texts were raised to praise the king, including the famous "Agincourt Song," which talks about the king's prowess in battle and names the other English nobles who had distinguished themselves. The song

embodies the national pride of the English; it is written in English. The battle is simply the best news the English had had in decades.

For the next five years, though, there aren't a lot of battles, just a series of long sieges punctuated by diplomatic maneuvering. One innovation of this period is that for the first time in the west, cannons were used effectively in attacking enemy fortresses. Slowly but surely, Henry extends his control over northern France. But his main success comes not from English arms but from the results of the longstanding feud within the French royal family that I've already mentioned. The two French royal factions attempted to make peace, but in 1419, the duke of Burgundy was assassinated by partisans of the Dauphin, the heir to the French throne, and the next duke of Burgundy, infuriated by the assassination, makes an alliance with the English. The French are now caught between England and Burgundy, and they are forced to come to terms.

In 1420, the French and the English sign the Treaty of Troyes. By the terms of the treaty, King Henry marries Princess Katherine, the daughter of the French king. Incidentally, Princess Katherine is the younger sister of the Princess Isabella who had briefly been Richard II's queen; Isabella had died by this point. The crucial thing about the marriage between Henry and Katherine is that the French succession is reserved for their heirs. The Dauphin, Katherine's brother, is disinherited. The following year, Queen Katherine bore King Henry a son, also called Henry, and King Henry V became regent for his son, who was destined to inherit the thrones of both England and France. The English Parliament had ratified the Treaty of Troyes in May of 1420. This made the Parliament responsible for the king's French policy; they have a stake in its success. And that was going to mean that for the next few decades, the royal government was going to be judged based on how well it is able to enforce the terms of the Treaty of Troyes.

Perhaps Henry V could have forged a united kingdom out of England and France. We'll never know, of course, because he died of dysentery in 1422, leaving his nine-month-old son the daunting task of living up to a father who had subdued one rebellious kingdom and conquered another. Alas, poor Henry VI would find the task too much for him, as we will find out in our next lecture.

Henry VI—Defeat and Division

Lecture 33

The essential problem in English politics was how to get the king to behave the way you wanted him to behave. … The deposition of Richard II and the accession of Henry Bolingbroke had given opponents of the king a good fallback option. They didn't even have to prove anymore that the king wasn't a good king. They could just get away with saying he wasn't the legitimate king.

The reign of Henry VI was marked by defeat overseas and instability at home. The war in France dragged on and drained English resources. Discontent over the state of the war led to opposition at home, within Parliament and among the nobility. And then the essential instability at the heart of English politics finally reared its head: the questionable Lancastrian claim to the throne.

At first, after the death of Henry V, it looked as if things were going to be fine. Henry had several very competent close relatives who could rule on behalf of the infant king, and the Burgundian alliance was still in effect. The king's uncle—John, duke of Bedford—was an experienced military commander and made territorial gains for England throughout the 1420s. The Dauphin was still fighting to get his inheritance back, but despite the death of his father in the same year as Henry V, he had not managed to get himself crowned king of France, and his popularity with his own people was sinking.

In 1429, an English army under the command of the duke of Suffolk besieged Orleans, the last French royal stronghold, and English victory looked certain. But it was not to be: Joan of Arc appeared on the scene to aid the Dauphin and lead his troops into battle. She relieved the siege of Orleans (and captured Suffolk) and defeated an English force at Patay, clearing the way for the French to march on Paris. But wisely, Joan convinced the Dauphin to go to Rheims, the traditional site of French coronations, and have himself crowned as Charles VII first.

Ominously for the English, the duke of Burgundy was present at the Dauphin's coronation, although he remained an English ally, besieging the town of Compiègne in 1430 and capturing Joan of Arc there. Joan was tried for heresy and convicted for heresy, although the records of the trial had to be doctored because the original version reflected so well on her. She was burnt at the stake on May 30, 1431. The English were rid of their great enemy, but this didn't help them much in the long run. In 1435, four years after Joan's death, the duke of Bedford, England's great military commander, died. In that same year, the two warring French royal factions made peace. For the first time in decades, the English faced a united French front. Slowly, the English were pushed back toward the sea, until by 1453 all that remained to them was Calais. For all intents and purposes, the Hundred Years' War was over. The English had lost.

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The heresy trial and execution of Joan of Arc was motivated by politics, not religion.

Back at home, meanwhile, the English royal government was hopelessly divided among warring factions of the young king's relatives. Henry VI was not a very promising candidate for the kingship. It seems he was never completely sound of mind; later in his reign, he suffered from periodic bouts of actual insanity, and when he wasn't insane, he wasn't much help, because he was completely uninterested in affairs of state. This vacuum at the center of English political life led to tremendous competition among those who would hold Henry's reins for him.

The court polarized into two camps: One was led by Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, the last surviving full-blooded brother of Henry V. The other was

led by Henry Beaufort—bishop of Winchester and later a cardinal—and his numerous relatives, who were also close relatives of the king. Henry Beaufort was also chancellor, but Gloucester was lord protector of the king. The two factions repeatedly clashed in the early 1420s; one of the most serious was over Flemish trade policy which led to such serious riots in London that Parliament had to be called in Leicester. This led Beaufort to resign the chancellorship, but he was by no means out of the fight.

This vacuum at the center of English political life led to tremendous competition among those who would hold Henry's reins for him.

The rivalry between Beaufort and Gloucester got quite nasty, but periodically Gloucester's brother Bedford would return from France to smooth things over. When Bedford died in 1435, there was no one to fill this role. Plus, Gloucester lost the reflected glow of his popular war-hero brother. Things came to a head in 1441 when Beaufort accused Gloucester's wife, Eleanor, of attempting to kill the king with witchcraft. Eleanor admitted to dabbling in love potions but flatly denied any attempt on the king. Her sentence was life in prison. The whole affair was purely political, and the man behind it was William de la Pole, a Beaufort supporter and later duke of Suffolk. Increasingly, Suffolk took over the reins of government from the aging Beaufort.

Suffolk was responsible for one of the most controversial diplomatic maneuvers of the 15th century, the marriage of King Henry VI to the French princess Margaret of Anjou. Under the terms of the agreement, England ceded Maine and Anjou to the French—specifically to Margaret's father, Duke René of Anjou. As soon as word of the agreement became public, there was a firestorm of criticism. Gloucester was particularly furious. Certain that Gloucester would cause him trouble, in the spring of 1447 Suffolk arranged to have Parliament held in Bury, in Suffolk (his own stronghold), rather than in London, where Gloucester had always been popular. When Gloucester appeared in Bury, he was arrested. Suffolk was planning to bring a trumped-up charge of treason against him, but Gloucester died in captivity within a week, probably of a heart attack. The aged cardinal Beaufort also died a few

weeks later. One set of embittered opponents had passed from the scene. A new set of opponents was about to appear.

The principles in this faction fight were Queen Margaret for the House of Lancaster and Richard, earl of Cambridge and later duke of York, for the House of York. Richard was descended from one of Edward III's sons, and his wife, Anne Mortimer, was descended from another, so Richard had a viable claim to the throne—a ticking time bomb for the Lancasters. Richard commanded the English forces in Normandy and felt that the ceding of Maine and Anjou had undermined his authority. Margaret, of course, supported Suffolk's treaty. The court became polarized, and Richard was recalled from Normandy and sent to Ireland to get him out of the way.

This was the situation in 1450, when a revolt of the yeomen and minor gentry around London broke out, led by Jack Cade. Cade was a critic of Henry VI's government. He drew up a list of demands that boiled down to more fiscal restraint on the part of the king and a more aggressive policy toward France, with the added complaint that the parliamentary election process was being interfered with. Finally, Cade demanded that Richard, duke of York, be added to the royal council. The revolt didn't amount to much militarily; Cade and his allies were quickly captured and executed. But the news inspired York to make a play for power. Incidentally, the revolt also inspired one of the most famous lines in Shakespeare's corpus; when discussing their plans, one of Cade's confederates says, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!"

At first, Richard was content to bide his time because after a decade of marriage, Henry and Margaret had failed to produce an heir, making Richard heir apparent. But in 1453, Margaret gave birth to a son, Edward, and Henry suffered the first of his bouts of insanity. It was time for Richard to assert his claim to the throne. ■

Important Term

Jack Cade's Revolt: Rebellion in 1450 by lesser gentry in the counties around London to protest mismanagement of the royal household and incompetent prosecution of the war in France. The rebels also demanded that

Richard, duke of York, be given a prominent role in the royal administration. Cade was captured and executed.

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

Henry VI—Defeat and Division
Lecture 33—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the reign of Henry V. It seemed to end in triumph. Henry had won the battle of Agincourt against all odds. He had taken advantage of a terrible split within the French royal family to force the French to sign a peace deal that gave his heirs the right to the French throne. But then Henry had died, leaving a nine-month-old son, Henry VI. And the new king just couldn't measure up to his father. His reign was marked by defeat overseas and instability at home.

The war in France dragged on and became a drain on English resources. Discontent over the state of the war led to opposition at home, within Parliament and among the nobility. And then the essential instability at the heart of English politics reared its head. This was the questionable nature of the Lancastrian claim to the throne. While everything was going well, nobody wanted to make a big deal out of this. But when things were going badly, there was a ready-made way to challenge the king. You could claim he wasn't rightfully the king.

We've seen in various struggles going all the way back to the reign of King John that the essential problem in English politics is how to get the king to behave the way you want him to behave. How do you constrain the king? All sorts of things had been tried against troublesome kings: councils of various kinds, parliamentary measures. Already in two cases, kings had finally had to be deposed because they just weren't responsive to the political will of the people (at least, the very small segment of the people whose opinions really counted). But the deposition of Richard II and the accession of Henry Bolingbroke had given opponents of the king a good fallback option. They didn't even have to prove anymore that the king wasn't a good king. They could just get away with saying he wasn't the legitimate king.

And that was a dangerous element to add into the mix in the 15th century. You already had a lot of nobles with too much power who were deeply divided among themselves; the Commons [was] eager for victory in France, and they are frantic at seeing their tax money seemingly frittered away in the war without success. There's a lot to worry about, a lot of events and a

lot of people, a lot to keep straight. So I'm going to divide this lecture into three main sections. First, we'll look at the war in France and how things start to go wrong for the English there. Then, we're going to look at the political struggles back in England, and we'll see that Henry VI's reign falls into two main phases: First, we see a struggle between two segments of the royal family, led by the king's uncle, Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, on the one hand, and the king's great-uncle, Cardinal Beaufort, on the other. And then the leadership of these two factions changes hands, and we see the two factions led by Henry's queen, Margaret of Anjou, on the one hand, and by Richard, duke of York, on the other. So first a war, and then two rounds of political infighting. Let's see how it all plays out.

At first, after the death of Henry V, it looked as if things are going to be fine. Henry had several very competent close relatives who could rule on behalf of the young king and the Burgundian alliance was still in effect. The king's uncle John, duke of Bedford, was an experienced military commander, and he actually gained territory in France throughout the 1420s. The Dauphin Charles, who had been disinherited by the Treaty of Troyes, was still in the field trying to fight back against the English, but despite the fact that his father, the king, had died the same year as Henry V, in 1422, the Dauphin had not managed to get himself crowned king of France. This was because the English controlled the city of Rheims, which was the traditional site for French royal coronations. The Dauphin was not very popular with the French people because he seemed rather helpless against the English. The French are not fans of the English. In fact, there is considerable ethnic hostility between the French and the English. The French at this point called the English soldiers "*les goddams*," apparently because the English soldiers made frequent use of that particular profane oath.

By 1429, an English army under the command of the duke of Suffolk is besieging Orleans, the last French royal stronghold. Once the English have Orleans, they would truly be able to claim that the dual monarchy of England and France is a reality. But it was not to be. It was just at this moment that a young French girl known as Joan of Arc heard voices telling her to aid the Dauphin in his struggle against the English. Joan put on men's clothing and persuaded the reluctant Dauphin to let her lead troops into battle. She marched on Orleans in May of 1429, relieved the siege, and captured

Suffolk, the English commander. Her troops then beat another English force at Patay. (Incidentally, one of the English commanders at that battle was Sir John Fastolf, our old friend from the Paston letters.) This victory at Patay left the way clear for the French to march on Paris.

But Joan wasn't just a brave warrior; she was also a very good public relations strategist. She knew the symbolic importance of coronation. She figured that the French were far more likely to fight for Charles if he were their anointed king. They had to get this guy crowned. So instead of heading for Paris, she convinced the Dauphin to go to Rheims, and on July 17, the Dauphin was solemnly crowned Charles VII of France. The English have to make a comeback to this, so the young Henry VI was also crowned king of France later that year in Paris, but that just didn't cut the same ice with the French. It's got to be Rheims. Now, there were some very important people at the coronation of Charles VII—there were representatives of the duke of Burgundy. This was a somewhat ominous sign for the future for England. The Dauphin, now king, and the duke of Burgundy are still enemies, but Burgundy is starting to think it would be smart to hedge his bets a little bit.

But for now, Burgundy is still firmly allied with the English, and in 1430, the duke joined in decisively on the English side. The Burgundian army besieges the town of Compiègne in Champagne; Joan marches to relieve the siege, but at that point, she is captured by the Burgundians. The Burgundians sell her to the English for 10,000 crowns.

She was tried for heresy at Rouen in Normandy in 1431. It was a political trial; there aren't really any grounds for thinking Joan was a heretic. In fact, the records of the trial had to be doctored because the original version reflected very well on Joan; she was asked some very theological questions and made some very canny answers. The technical grounds on which she finally ends up getting executed had to do with men's clothes. She promises to stop wearing men's clothes, but when she was in prison she had resumed male attire. Now, she probably did this to protect herself against assault in prison—she may have been molested at one point—we're not sure exactly why. But technically, the fact that she put men's clothes back on allowed her to be treated as a relapsed heretic, and that allowed the English to burn her at the stake. On May 30, 1431, Joan was burned at the stake in the marketplace

of Rouen. At the time, an English soldier is said to have remarked that the English had just burned a saint. In fact, Joan was not formally canonized until 1909.

But the English have gotten rid of their great enemy, the Maid of Orleans, but this doesn't help them much in the long run. In 1435, four years after Joan's death, the duke of Bedford died, and the English never found a commander who could replace him. Equally problematic for the English, if not more so, was the fact that in that same year, 1435, the two warring French royal factions made peace. For the first time in decades, the English now faced a united French front. The odds are now decisively against the English, and they never shift back. It was really just a matter of time from this point on. Slowly, the English are pushed back toward the sea, until by 1453, all that's left for them is the port city of Calais. They would keep Calais for another century, but for all intents and purposes, the Hundred Years' War is effectively over. The English had lost.

And domestic matters are not going any better, partly due to the fallout back in England of the disasters in France. At least in France, while Bedford is alive, the English command is relatively united. Back at home, the English royal government is hopelessly divided among warring factions of the young king's relatives. Henry VI himself is not a very promising candidate for the kingship. He never seems to have been completely sound in his mind, and later in his reign, he suffered from periodic bouts of complete insanity, no doubt inherited from his maternal grandfather, King Charles VI of France. And when he wasn't insane, he wasn't much help, because he was totally uninterested in affairs of state; he was actually a kind, gentle sort of man who would have been far better off living a quiet, retired life. The fact that you had this vacuum, basically, at the center of English political life means that there is tremendous competition to fill that vacuum, and that competition causes the instability of Henry's reign.

The instability has a rhythm to it. When the war in France is going well, things back in England go pretty well also, because a lot of the most troublesome nobles would go off to France to try to win glory and get rich in the war. But after 1435, after the death of Bedford and the end of the Burgundian alliance, a lot of noble energy gets refocused on competition

for power back in England. The court is basically polarized into two camps. A lot of what happens for the rest of Henry's reign was basically a series of attacks by one faction against another. It's not necessarily important to keep the details straight; the main point is simply that these people are very embittered against each other, and they're willing to use whatever weapon they can find to score points against each other. I'll just give you some of the highlights, but first, I'll explain who the main players are.

One of the two factions is led by Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, the last surviving full-blooded brother of Henry V. The other faction is led by Henry Beaufort, bishop of Winchester and later cardinal, and his numerous relatives. Now, the Beauforts are actually also closely related to the king. Here, we have to go back for a minute to that very complicated genealogy of the English royal family. You'll remember John of Gaunt, duke of Lancaster, the father of Henry Bolingbroke. Well, he had had a long-time mistress named Catherine Swinford, by whom he had several children, and eventually, he married her. Their children were legitimized after the fact and known as the Beaufort family. Henry Beaufort, the bishop of Winchester, was one of these children of John of Gaunt and Catherine Swinford. So—wait for it—he is the half-great-uncle of Henry VI. And he is a very ambitious man.

Humphrey, duke of Gloucester, of course, is also a very ambitious man. He is the brother of the dead king and uncle of the new king; he is the lord protector on behalf of his infant nephew. Humphrey is probably the least capable of the four sons of Henry IV, at least in a military and political sense, but he is a very cultivated man. He was well known as a collector of books; in fact, the rare books library at Oxford University is named Duke Humphrey's Library because Duke Humphrey donated a large collection of manuscripts to the university in the 1430s. There was no love lost between the Beauforts and Humphrey, duke of Gloucester. The Beauforts had tied up a lot of key positions of court; Henry Beaufort was chancellor. But Gloucester is still very powerful because he is lord protector of the king. The balance of power is in a very uneasy situation.

The two factions repeatedly clash in the early 1420s, for example, over Flemish trade. Gloucester backed a tax break for native merchants against Flemish merchants; Beaufort wanted to keep the two rates the same. The

dispute ends up spilling over into the streets of London, and peace is only finally restored in 1426 at a Parliament called in Leicester. (London is too unsettled at the time for the Parliament to be held there.) This session of Parliament became known as the Parliament of Bats, because Gloucester, the lord protector, in an effort to try to prevent violence, bans the carrying of swords into the Parliament chamber. So instead of swords, people bring in clubs, or bats, or whatever they can get. It is not Parliament's finest hour, and it ends with Beaufort resigning the chancellorship, but he is by no means finished as a political force.

Gloucester still wants to get rid of him, so in 1431, when Beaufort is temporarily in France, Gloucester takes advantage of his absence to charge Beaufort with violating the Statute of Praemunire. Now, we have to remind ourselves of what the Statute of Praemunire was. It was a law passed back in 1353 to regulate appeals of ecclesiastical cases to the Roman Curia. Beaufort had just been made a cardinal; Gloucester is claiming that the position of cardinal was incompatible with Beaufort's other job as bishop of Winchester, and he is trying to nail Beaufort under the rather arcane provisions of the Statute of Praemunire. But Beaufort is a smart politician. He enlists the Commons on his side and gets them specifically to authorize him holding both ecclesiastical jobs at once. So they're using Parliament to score points off each other in these very arcane power struggles.

We don't need to go into more detail here about this rivalry. It is certainly nasty, but periodically, Gloucester's brother Bedford would come back from France and make the warring factions see sense. But when he died in 1435, everything got worse. Now Gloucester doesn't have his popular brother Bedford, the French war hero, to protect him. Beaufort gets more and more powerful. Finally, in 1441, he humiliates Gloucester. He accuses Gloucester's second wife, Eleanor, of witchcraft. Apparently, there had been some plot to kill the king by sorcery, and one of the accused implicated Duchess Eleanor of Gloucester. Eleanor did admit to dabbling in sorcery; apparently, she had tried to obtain a love potion that would win her her husband's love. But she flatly denied trying to use magic to kill the king. But she was given a very severe sentence. She had to walk through the streets of London holding a taper (candle) in her hand to offer this candle at three important London churches, and she had to do this three times, on the

next three market days in the city—a very public humiliating event. After that, she was to be imprisoned for the rest of her life. The whole affair was purely political; it is just like the way Joan of Arc was accused of heresy and witchcraft to get her out of the way. And the man behind this ingenious, rather sordid plot to discredit the Gloucesters was a new man on the scene in the Beaufort faction, William de la Pole, later duke of Suffolk. (He is the grandson of the Michael de la Pole who had been driven into exile by the Lords Appellant during Richard II's reign.) Increasingly, Suffolk took over the reins of government from Beaufort, who was getting older.

Suffolk was responsible for one of the most controversial diplomatic maneuvers of the whole Middle Ages. In 1445, he arranged the marriage of King Henry VI to a French princess named Margaret of Anjou. Under the terms of the agreement, the English had to cede the counties of Maine and Anjou to the French. Suffolk is willing to trade away these territories because the new queen wants it very much. They would be going back to her father, René of Anjou, who was the titular duke of Anjou; he had a hereditary claim on Anjou, so getting lands meant a great deal to him and his family. Suffolk felt that getting influence with the queen was worth paying this price, but it was a miscalculation. As soon as it became public knowledge that the English were going to give these lands back to the French, there was a firestorm of criticism, and it was all laid at Suffolk's door.

Suffolk felt he had to defend himself, so he moved against his most dangerous opponent, Gloucester. Gloucester had always been a hawk on the war, so he was particularly angered by the decision to give over Maine and Anjou to the French without even striking a blow. Suffolk was worried that Gloucester would cause problems, so in the spring of 1447, Suffolk arranged to have Parliament held in Bury St. Edmunds, in Suffolk (his own stronghold), rather than in London, where Gloucester had always been popular. When Gloucester appeared at Parliament in Bury, he was arrested. Suffolk was planning to bring a trumped-up charge of treason against him, but Gloucester died in captivity within a week, probably of a heart attack brought on by the stress of the arrest. The aged cardinal Beaufort also died within a few weeks of Gloucester. One set of embittered opponents had passed from the scene. But a new set of opponents is about to appear. Suffolk's ascendancy really

marks the beginning of phase 2 of the domestic rivalries I want to talk about in this lecture.

In fact, it's a sign of just how bad things are in English politics that you just get enmities perpetuated. Same story, different people. The court, by this point, is permanently polarized, and King Henry is pretty much helpless to do anything about it. This tells us how important royal leadership really is in England. If you don't have solid royal leadership, the government just doesn't function properly.

Who are these two new players? They end up being the leaders of the two factions that would fight the Wars of the Roses, as we now call them. Nobody called them that then; the term wasn't invented until the 19th century. And obviously, the war had nothing to do with actual roses. It came from the roses that were used on the badges of the two families that fought the war, the red rose of the House of Lancaster and the white rose of the House of York, but they didn't even really use these badges all the time. Still, it helps us keep them straight, so we'll use the roses whenever we can.

I'm going to have to go into some detail about genealogy here, so be warned. Here are our principals: The leader of the House of Lancaster, the royal house at this point, is not really King Henry VI; it is his wife, Queen Margaret. Margaret is the niece of the king of France. It is her marriage to Henry that leads the English to give Maine and Anjou back to the French. Margaret was a very determined woman. Shakespeare wrote three plays about Henry VI's reign, and Margaret is by far the strongest, most memorable character in these plays. She even shows up in Shakespeare's *Richard III* after she's dead. And this is one instance where Shakespeare is not exaggerating; he calls her the she-wolf of France. Now, Margaret was saddled with a husband who wasn't up to very much, so she is going to have to make the most of her opportunities for herself, and she is just as ruthless as any of the other actors on the political stage at this period. She is really the head of the House of Lancaster, the red rose, but she has very able assistance from Suffolk and from the surviving members of the Beaufort family.

Where do we get the House of York from, the white rose? This is where we really do have to resort very heavily to the genealogy. You remember the

earl of March—he had been the rightful heir at the time when Richard II was deposed, but Henry Bolingbroke took the throne as Henry IV instead. The earl of March died without heirs, but he had a sister, Anne Mortimer, who married Richard, earl of Cambridge, who happened to be one of the traitors who tried to assassinate Henry V before he went off to fight at Agincourt. Richard, earl of Cambridge, the traitor, was the second son of Edmund of Langley, duke of York, who was a son of Edward III. So you have Anne Mortimer, who descends from Edward III's son, Lionel, duke of Clarence, marrying Richard, earl of Cambridge, who descends from Edward III's son Edmund of Langley, duke of York. They both descend from sons of Edward III. Since Richard, earl of Cambridge's brother died without heirs, Richard transmits a claim to the duchy of York. When Anne Mortimer and Richard, earl of Cambridge, have a son, he will have a claim to the duchy of York from his father, and in fact, he would be known as Richard, duke of York. But, and this is what really matters, Richard, duke of York, also has a claim through his mother to the crown itself. He represents that legitimate line that was shunted aside at the time of the usurpation by Henry Bolingbroke. Now, for the moment, this is purely a theoretical claim. No one is advancing it yet. But it's out there, like a ticking time bomb, waiting for the right political circumstances to make it go off. Let's see how that happened.

Richard, duke of York, had had a long career in the French war, like many other English noblemen. He, in fact, had risen to command the English forces in France. Then along came the peace treaty we talked about that ceded Maine and Anjou to the French. York felt that this treaty had undermined his position in France, so he becomes the leader of the pro-war faction. Of course, Queen Margaret supports the treaty that Suffolk had negotiated, and she becomes the leader of the pro-peace faction. The court is thus polarized, and in an effort to try to get rid of York, he is recalled from his command in Normandy and sent off to Ireland as lord lieutenant for the unusually long term of 10 years. The idea is clearly to get him out of the way. What mischief could he get up to in Ireland? Surely, he'd just be swallowed up by all of the various problems there and never be heard from again.

And we'll leave him there for just a moment, because I want to make a brief digression here to talk about a revolt that took place in England in 1450, but we'll see that the faction fight at court is related to the revolt. The revolt

turns out to be the second most serious rebellion of this period after the great Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

The rebels came from a slightly different social class than in 1381; they were minor gentry and yeomen, really people on the borderline between the people with property and the less well off. They came from the counties right around London, and they were led by a man named Jack Cade. Cade was a critic of the Lancastrian government, of the royal regime of Henry VI. He drew up a list of demands, and they boiled down to a desire to have the royal government work better, have a better foreign policy that is successful and more cost-effective—certainly, goals most people at that time could agree on. First, Cade wanted the king to stop giving away royal land to reward his favorites; he said this is making the king poorer, and thus, he has to ask us for more taxes. Second, Cade complained that members of Parliament were not being elected freely, so he thinks the integrity of the parliamentary process is being interfered with. He obviously has a stake in the system working properly. He also is very clearly pro-war; he wanted a return to the aggressive stance the English had taken at the time of Agincourt. That's the third of his demands. According to Cade, the current policy, as seen in the peace treaty, is a betrayal of the Agincourt legacy. But the last of Cade's demands was the most explosive. Cade demands that Richard, duke of York, be added to the royal council. Remember, York at this point has been sent off to exile in Ireland. Now, Cade wants York back because he's pro-war, but this is a dangerous sign for the Lancastrians, because of course, York is the legitimate claimant to the English throne (at least, by some people's reckoning).

Now, the revolt didn't amount to much militarily when all is said and done, but it does lead to one of the most memorable lines in Shakespeare, though it's not from one of his most memorable plays. Jack Cade's Rebellion shows up in the play *Henry VI*, *Part 2*, and we see Cade at one point talking to his confederate, Dick, about the great things they're going to accomplish in the revolt. And Dick comes out with a plan that very much echoes one of the currents we saw in the Peasants' Revolt of 1381: hostility to the law. Dick says to Cade, "The first thing we do, let's kill all the lawyers!" This line inevitably provokes cheers and applause in a modern audience, as I'm sure

it did in Shakespeare's time, as well, though then as now, there are likely to have been quite a few lawyers in the audience.

Now, this is a true story. I once went to see a performance in Washington, DC, of the three *Henry VI* plays condensed down into a single-evening version, and it happened to be "lawyers' night" at the theater, when the lawyers' guild that supports the theater came out that night to see the play. And they had a special surprise guest star to deliver that immortal line about killing all the lawyers: Supreme Court Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg, a big supporter of the theater. As soon as people in the audience realized who it was dressed up as Dick, the theater erupted into even greater applause than usual.

But let's get back to the revolt itself. Cade was captured and executed, along with his confederates, but the fact that he had called for York to be put back at the center of affairs, that news made its way to Ireland, and it encouraged York to come back to England and demand to be given what he considered to be his rightful place in government.

From this point on, conflict between York and the royal government became inevitable, and you can really see the creation of two factions, a Yorkist party and a Lancastrian party. Now, at first, York is content to bide his time, because King Henry VI so far has failed to produce an heir. He's been married to Queen Margaret for nearly a decade, but so far, no children. That means that Richard, duke of York, is the heir apparent. He would technically stand to inherit the throne when Henry VI died. He could just wait. But then, in 1453, two things happened to change the picture: Queen Margaret at last gave birth to a son, who was named Edward, and Henry VI suffered the first of a series of serious bouts of insanity.

So York has been displaced from the succession by the birth of the king's son, and the king's insanity means that the royal government is going to be even more under the direct control of the faction led by Queen Margaret. Richard, duke of York, is going to have to assert his claim to the throne if he is going to matter in English politics. And that means there is going to be war. And we'll find out what happened next in the next lecture.

The Wars of the Roses

Lecture 34

By 1464, the new king had managed to seize all the remaining Lancastrian strongholds, and in 1465, Edward had an enormous stroke of good luck. The ex-king, Henry VI … was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London. So the Lancastrian threat was, for the moment, neutralized. Of course, Queen Margaret was still at large, and she was by far the more dangerous of the two.

The decision of Richard, duke of York, to assert his claim to the English throne led directly to what we call the Wars of the Roses. Over the course of the conflict, the momentum frequently shifted between the House of York, whose banner bore a white rose, and the House of Lancaster, whose banner bore a red one. But the main trajectory was this: In the 1450s, the two sides fought each other to a stalemate; in 1461, the Yorkists were victorious and took the throne for 10 years; in 1471, the Lancastrians made a brief comeback but were swiftly driven off the throne again; and finally, in 1485, the Lancastrians were victorious for good, though their family had a new name, the Tudors.

At the outset, York was hesitant to make his claim; he decided first to insist only on his right to advise the king. He, like many powerful barons, had the huge military retinue needed to force the issue. The two sides' forces met in the Battle of St. Albans in May 1455. It was a victory for the Yorkists, and York was appointed protector of the insane king. But when the king shortly recovered his wits, York was pushed aside and sent back to Ireland. He returned in 1459, but was defeated at the Battle of Ludford. York had to flee back to Ireland again, and his oldest son, Edward, earl of March, took refuge in Calais. In 1460, York and his ally, the powerful Richard Neville, earl of Warwick, captured King Henry VI at Northampton. This emboldened York to go to Parliament and claim the throne at last.

Parliament resisted York's claim; the Lancastrian faction was just too strong. As a compromise, York was made the king's protector again, this time for Henry's lifetime, and was given the right to succeed him. But York was not

satisfied. He decided to destroy the last royal army standing—and this was his fatal mistake, literally. He was killed at the Battle of Wakefield in December 1460. His supporters suffered a further blow when Queen Margaret freed King Henry from captivity at the second Battle of St. Albans in February 1461. But Warwick still had a plan. Richard's son, Edward, was now duke of York, and with Warwick's support, he took up his father's cause. This is how Warwick earned the nickname "Kingmaker."

Warwick and Edward took on the Lancastrians at the Battle of Towton, the bloodiest battle of the war, possibly the bloodiest ever fought on English soil, on March 29, 1461. The Yorkists had to advance uphill against the Lancastrian position, but the wind was at their backs, giving their archers an advantage and blowing snow in the Lancastrians' faces. In the end, the Lancastrians broke and ran, and apparently, more soldiers died in the rout than in the actual battle. King Henry and Queen Margaret fled to Scotland. Parliament formally deposed Henry, and Edward claimed the throne as Edward IV.

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Edward IV (r. 1461–1483) was the founding monarch of the House of York.

Edward spent the next few years consolidating his rule, with the aid of Warwick, of course, and his two brothers, George, duke of Clarence, and Richard, duke of Gloucester. They seized the remaining Lancastrian strongholds and, finally in 1465, Henry himself, though Margaret was still at large. The biggest problem Edward faced was his dependence on his noble backers, especially Warwick. He made the crucial blunder of allowing Warwick to enter negotiations for a French marriage alliance for the king before revealing he, Edward,

was already married to an obscure Lancastrian widow named Elizabeth Woodville. Plus she brought to court a host of relatives, all of whom needed to be provided for.

The revelation of Edward's marriage ruined Warwick's reputation with the French and turned him against the king. In the summer of 1469, the split between them came out into the open and led to a brief revival of the Lancastrian cause. Warwick fomented a rebellion in the north of England led by a shadowy figure calling himself Robin of Redesdale. This was probably a pseudonym for one of Warwick's own supporters, chosen for the allusion to Robin Hood. Whoever he was, Robin published a manifesto listing grievances similar to Jack Cade's. Warwick's motive in all this may have been that he had a new candidate for the throne, one he thought would be easier to control: his new son-in-law, George, duke of Clarence. After the marriage took place in Calais, Warwick returned to England and captured Edward. He then executed Elizabeth Woodville's father and brother as traitors. But there was disorder in the streets. It was too dangerous to call a Parliament to ratify Edward's deposition. Warwick had no choice but to release Edward. He and Clarence fled and took refuge with King Louis XI of France, who in exchange demanded Warwick's support in putting Henry VI back on the throne. This meant allying with Queen Margaret; Warwick married his daughter Anne to Margaret's son, Edward, the prince of Wales.

Warwick gathered allies with the help of French money and landed in England in the fall of 1470. He drove Edward into exile in the Low Countries; Elizabeth Woodville took refuge in Westminster Abbey. Warwick then engineered Henry's restoration. But he had forgotten one important player on the field: Clarence. Seeing no point in maintaining his alliance with Warwick, Clarence went crawling back to Edward. They somehow made up their quarrel and plotted to get back to England and the throne. Edward went to the duke of Burgundy, who was still at odds with the king of France. So, just as French money got Henry VI back on the throne, Burgundian money would get Edward IV back on the throne.

Edward returned to England in March 1471 and on April 14 met Warwick's forces at the Battle of Barnet. Warwick was killed. On that same day, Queen Margaret and Prince Edward landed at Weymouth and moved west to meet

up with a crucial ally from Wales, Jasper Tudor. But King Edward caught up with Margaret and took her captive. Clarence captured Prince Edward and executed him on the spot. Edward IV was restored to the throne by Parliament, and King Henry VI was quietly murdered in the Tower of London. The Lancastrian cause seemed buried for good.

The second period of Edward's rule proved successful in the realms of foreign policy, finance, and public order. Edward basically turned his back on warfare and concentrated on more peaceful pursuits. He concluded a peace treaty with France in 1475, the **Treaty of Picquigny**, which led to a big trade boom. He shored up the royal finances (in part through confiscating Lancastrian lands) and made an effort not to raise taxes. But he did directly demand payments, known as benevolences, from his supposedly grateful subjects; glad to have peace, law, and order at last, the people paid without complaint. Edward would be the first English king since Henry II not to die in debt. He put an end to faction fights at court by shutting the nobles out of his inner circle and relying instead on functionaries. Finally, to address the problems of disorder in the north, he appointed his brother Richard, duke of Gloucester and a hero of the Battle of Barnet, as his lieutenant in the north. Richard made a great success of the post. The only serious threat to Edward's later rule came in 1477 from the now-widowed Clarence, who was angry when Edward refused to let him marry the heiress to the duchy of Burgundy. When Clarence was discovered plotting against Edward, Edward had him imprisoned in the Tower of London and attainted as a traitor by Parliament. Clarence was killed in prison in 1478, though the means are unclear; Shakespeare has him drowned in a butt of malmsey wine.

Edward's death at age 40 in 1483 was largely attributed to overindulgence. When he died, he left a young and numerous family with the formidable task of consolidating the Yorkist ascendancy. ■

Important Term

Picquigny, Treaty of: Agreement concluded in 1475 between Edward IV of England and Louis XI of France, leaving Edward's Burgundian allies in the lurch. In return for a truce and the promise to submit the English claim to the

French throne to a court of arbitration (which never sat), the English were promised an annual subsidy of 50,000 gold crowns.

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

The Wars of the Roses

Lecture 34—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we looked at the reign of Henry VI down to the 1450s, and it wasn't a very happy story. We saw England losing territory in France thanks to Joan of Arc and also due to the marriage alliance between Henry VI and Queen Margaret of Anjou. We saw chronic political instability at home; the court is divided into two factions. And by 1453, there is a deep polarization between these two factions.

Who are they? One is the royal or Lancastrian faction, led by Queen Margaret, with her allies the earl of Suffolk and the Beaufort family. The other faction is the Yorkist faction, led by Richard, duke of York, who has a very powerful claim to the English throne. And we saw that once King Henry VI and Queen Margaret produced an heir in 1453, conflict between the two factions is practically inevitable, because now Richard, duke of York, is now faced with a choice: either accept being marginalized or claim the throne. In this lecture, we're going to see what happened when he made the fateful decision to claim the English throne. That claim led directly to what we call the Wars of the Roses, the red rose of Lancaster against the white rose of York.

We'll cover the battles in this lecture, and there are a lot of them, so we're really only going to dwell on the highlights, the battles that turned the tide in one direction or another, and even then, there are a lot of battles. We'll see that over the course of the Wars of the Roses, the momentum shifts back and forth between York and Lancaster a number of times, but this is the main trajectory: First, there is a period in the 1450s when the two sides are battling it out inconclusively; second, in 1461, the Yorkists are victorious and take the throne for 10 years; third, the Lancastrians make a brief comeback in 1471, but then they're driven off the throne again; and finally, in 1485, the Lancastrians are victorious for good, though their family will have a new name by then, the Tudors. We're going to cover most of the first three phases of the wars in this lecture, and then we'll look at the last phase, the very eventful reign of the last Yorkist king, Richard III, that led to the Tudor takeover, in the next lecture. Let's plunge in.

As I said, once there is an heir to the throne, young Prince Edward, that means that Richard, duke of York, is not in the direct line of succession anymore, but at first, he is hesitant to claim the throne; that would be risky. He decides that his best strategy for now is simply to insist on his right to advise the king, a very traditional rebel demand. English barons have been making it for centuries. And he has the means to insist on it. He has a huge military retinue, just like a lot of other important nobles in this period, and the king doesn't really have many more soldiers than the duke does. Both sides also needed to recruit other nobles and their large retinues. So in a military sense, these two factions are not really that unequal.

The first set-piece battle between the main opponents in the conflict took place in May of 1455 at the Battle of St. Albans, just outside of London. It was a victory for the Yorkists; two of the most important Lancastrian commanders were killed, and York was able to insist on being made protector of the king. He has to be protector because the king has once again lapsed into insanity, and so York is going to rule essentially in his stead. For now, that's essentially as good as being king.

But then, unfortunately for York, the king recovers his wits, such as they were, and so from 1456 to 1459, once again, York is marginalized, and he went back to Ireland, where he was still officially lord lieutenant, to rally support. When he felt strong enough, in 1459, he briefly returned to England, but his forces were defeated at the Battle of Ludford. Interestingly, one big factor in the Yorkists' defeat at Ludford is the fact that King Henry was there in person at the head of the royal army. He wasn't much of a military threat himself—he's not calling the shots in battle—but his symbolic value was huge. The Yorkists knew this. They want to attract supporters, so they tried to convince people the king wasn't actually there with the royal army. They actually said he was dead; the Yorkists held masses for the soul of the king. But it didn't help; people didn't buy it. It was still a big deal to attack the anointed king; people just didn't want to do it, and that meant that the Yorkists were outnumbered. York had to flee back to Ireland again, and his oldest son, Edward, earl of March, took refuge in Calais.

But in 1460, York made a much more concerted effort. He had a very staunch ally named Richard Neville, earl of Warwick. The Neville family was very

powerful in the north of England, and York was actually married to the earl of Warwick's aunt, so there is a close family tie. Warwick brought York's oldest son, Edward, the earl of March, back to England from Calais, and they captured King Henry VI at Northampton. Now the Yorkists control the king. This allowed Richard, duke of York, to appear in Parliament to claim the throne at last. But Parliament resisted the claim; they were reluctant to depose the king. The Lancastrian faction was just too strong. York had to be content with a compromise; he would get to be protector of the king during the king's lifetime, and then he would have the right to succeed him. This compromise is actually going to disinherit the young son of Henry VI, Prince Edward. The Yorkists have enough leverage for that; they've got the king in captivity. But that is as far as Parliament wants to go. I think they are worried about causing any more questions about the legitimacy of royal rule; that hadn't been working so well in recent decades.

But York is not satisfied. He decides to try to destroy the last royal army still in the field. And this was his fatal mistake, for at the Battle of Wakefield, in December of 1460, the Yorkists suffered a major defeat, and Richard, duke of York, was killed. The standard-bearer of the Yorkist faction was dead. The Yorkists suffered a further blow when Queen Margaret managed to free her husband the king from captivity at the second Battle of St. Albans in February of 1461. But the earl of Warwick, Richard Neville, was still around, and he is still an ambitious man. Now is when he really earns his later nickname, the "Kingmaker." York's son Edward, earl of March, who has now succeeded his dead father as duke of York, takes up the Yorkist banner, and Warwick is right there by his side to advise him.

Together, they take on the Lancastrians at the Battle of Towton in Yorkshire. It turns out to be the bloodiest battle of the war, possibly the bloodiest ever fought on English soil. The armies fought on March 29, 1461, which was Palm Sunday, but it was bitterly cold and snowing—snowing hard. The Yorkists had to advance uphill against the Lancastrian position. Often, this can be disastrous—we've seen that in the English victories in the Hundred Years' War—but in this case, the weather was a huge help.

The wind was at the Yorkists' backs, and this meant two things: First, the Yorkist archers could outrange the Lancastrian archers—their arrows

go farther—and second, the snow was blowing right into the faces of the Lancastrian soldiers. This allowed the Yorkists to close easily with their opponents, and there is bitter hand-to-hand fighting. Then the Lancastrians broke and ran, and apparently, more soldiers died in the rout than in the actual battle. Several bridges collapsed as soldiers pressed across them trying to get away, and the soldiers were then plunged into the icy water below. It was a very bitter struggle; civil conflicts often are. It is said that both sides had sworn to give no quarter—that was rather unusual in this period. The result of the battle is that King Henry and Queen Margaret have to flee to Scotland. Parliament formally deposed Henry VI (they don't have much of a choice at this point), and young Edward claimed the throne as Edward IV. Edward had finally accomplished what his father, the duke of York, had spent the better part of a decade trying to achieve.

Now we have the Yorkist line on the throne. Edward spent the next few years consolidating his rule, with Warwick's help, of course, and also with the help of his two brothers, George, duke of Clarence, and Richard, duke of Gloucester. By 1464, the new king has managed to seize all the remaining Lancastrian strongholds, and in 1465, Edward has an enormous stroke of good luck. The ex-king, Henry VI, has spent some of the time since the Battle of Towton on the run in the north of England. But now he was captured and imprisoned in the Tower of London. So for the moment, the Lancastrian threat was neutralized. Of course, Queen Margaret is still at large, and she was by far the more dangerous of the two, but for the moment, she is biding her time.

The biggest problem Edward has as king is the fact that he was so dependent on his noble backers, the people who had staked all to bring about the change of dynasty, especially Warwick the Kingmaker. Without Warwick's men and his network of noble allies, Edward would never have become king, and Warwick was very conscious of that fact; unfortunately, Edward seems to have forgotten it on one very crucial occasion. In the fall of 1464, Warwick was in the process of negotiating a French marriage alliance for the king. The negotiations were at a very advanced stage when the king suddenly revealed that he was, in fact, already married; he had contracted a marriage in secret the previous May. The bride was a relatively obscure widow named Elizabeth Woodville; to make matters worse, she was from a Lancastrian

family. But the two had met, she apparently had something the king wanted, and she had the wit and the will to insist on a formal marriage before she gave it to him, even though it was contracted in secret. Elizabeth Woodville was a beautiful woman—everybody acknowledges that—but also a very controversial figure, because she brought to court with her a host of relatives by birth and marriage (a couple of sons by her first marriage), all of whom needed to be provided for, so once again, we have the problem of patronage rearing its head. The Woodville faction at court was going to cause great instability down the road.

Now, the revelation of this marriage was devastating to Warwick. To the French, it made him look as if either he didn't know what he was doing or as if he was trying to deceive them. This was deeply humiliating to him. This was probably the origin of Warwick's alienation from the king. And it didn't help that the king found rich marriages to endow all his wife's relatives, but he would do nothing in particular to help Warwick provide for his own two daughters. (He had no sons; his daughters were his only hope.) Warwick wanted his two daughters to marry the king's two brothers, George, duke of Clarence, and Richard, duke of Gloucester, but the king said no. Warwick must have felt as if he had been very unfairly rewarded for his help in making Edward king.

In the summer of 1469, the split between Warwick and the king came out into the open, and ultimately, it led to a brief revival of the Lancastrian cause. Warwick fomented a rebellion in the north of England led by a shadowy figure who called himself Robin of Redesdale. This was probably a pseudonym for one of Warwick's own supporters, and before I describe the rebellion, I want to finally fulfill a promise made at the very beginning of the course. I want to explain why someone would choose the name Robin under which to rebel. We've come at last to Robin Hood.

In some ways, we know much less about Robin Hood than we do about King Arthur. We can't even point to one specific time and place when stories began to circulate about Robin Hood. Scholars aren't even sure if these stories are ancient mythological tales, or if they originally came about surrounding a specific person. There are scattered references to people with names similar to Robin Hood in royal judicial records all the way back to the 13th century,

but Robin was a very common name at that time; it was the nickname for Robert, one of the most popular first names. Hood was also a very common last name. So whether any of these people was the "original" Robin Hood is impossible to say, made worse by the fact that "Robin Hood" became a kind of catchall nickname for outlaws generally, so we don't even know if the people referred to in these records were really named Robin Hood or whether they were just being called that as a kind of job description because they were notorious criminals.

We do know that there were songs about Robin Hood by at least the late 14th century, mentioned in *Piers Ploughman*, but we don't have a complete Robin Hood ballad until the early 15th century; it's called *Robin Hood and the Monk*. In these ballads, Robin Hood is a yeoman (remember, that's a relatively prosperous farmer), he's an excellent archer, but he is an outlaw, usually living in the forest surrounded by a colorful cast of followers (later termed the Merry Men). In his adventures, Robin Hood usually manages some sort of daring escape from a legal predicament, like being imprisoned in the sheriff's prison. The time when the stories supposedly take place isn't clear; some ballads mention a King Edward, so that could be anywhere from the late 13th to the late 14th century, certainly not during the reign of Richard the Lionheart. But the precise date doesn't seem to make much difference in the stories. We also don't see Maid Marian and Friar Tuck yet—they arrive after our period—but you do see Little John and Will Scarlet, who become two of the most important Merry Men. They are already part of the tradition in the 15th century. We also do see Robin Hood helping people in financial distress, but we don't yet quite have the formula about Robin Hood robbing from the rich so he can give to the poor. That will also come later. But there's definitely the idea that Robin Hood takes the law into his own hands to do justice.

The most important thing about these stories is that they are outlaw adventures. You get a lot of the same traditions attached to Robin Hood that we saw attached to Hereward the Wake back at the time of the Norman Conquest. There is something appealing about this figure who outwits the powers that be. Robin Hood is enormously appealing: He is personally virtuous and yet able to slip through the net of the law.

And that's the legacy that this rebel was appealing to in 1469 when he called himself Robin of Redesdale: casting himself as the virtuous but defiant figure who calls the authorities to task. Robin of Redesdale, or whoever he is, publishes a manifesto listing demands very similar to Jack Cade's demands from the rebellion in 1450, only this time, they are directed against the Yorkist government. These are probably ghostwritten by Warwick. Warwick is probably trying to create a popular outcry against King Edward, maybe with a view to getting rid of the king altogether. It is very interesting that he is appealing to the public.

Warwick the Kingmaker now has a new candidate for the throne, one he thinks he might be able to control a bit better than he had been able to control Edward IV. His new candidate is Edward's younger brother, George, duke of Clarence. In July of 1469, Warwick secretly marries his daughter Isabel to the duke of Clarence in Calais; remember, the king had already denied permission for this marriage. Probably Clarence agreed to the marriage with the understanding that his new father-in-law would install him on the throne in place of his brother. Warwick then crossed to England from Calais and captured King Edward. He executed the queen's father and brother (the Woodvilles) as traitors; here, he is prosecuting the feud against the Woodvilles, who had blocked his way to patronage. But kingmaking didn't prove as easy this time. Disorder spread; it was too dangerous to call a Parliament to ratify Edward's deposition (which by now was mandatory if you wanted to get rid of a king). Warwick found he could not rule without Edward's authority as anointed king. He had no choice but to release Edward from captivity.

But now Warwick knows that he has permanently lost the king's trust, so in the following year, in 1470, he and his son-in-law, Clarence, fled the country and took refuge with the king of France, Louis XI. Now, of course, the French kings are going to be supporters of the Lancastrians, because Queen Margaret, the wife of Henry VI, is a French princess. So King Louis of France offers to help Warwick, but only if he would help put Henry VI back on the throne of England. The earl of Warwick has already created one Yorkist king and had tried to replace him with another Yorkist king. Now he changes sides entirely and becomes a Lancastrian. He agrees to work for a restoration of Henry VI to the throne. This meant allying with Queen Margaret. I don't

think either Warwick or Margaret relished this idea. But the king of France was the one paying for all this, and that was his price for supporting them. So Warwick and Queen Margaret become allies, and to cement the alliance, Warwick marries his second daughter, Anne, to Margaret's son, Edward, the prince of Wales.

Warwick gathered allies with the help of his French money and landed in England in the fall of 1470. He quickly managed to drive Edward into exile in the Low Countries; Edward's queen, Elizabeth Woodville, took refuge in Westminster Abbey, a sanctuary that couldn't be violated without causing a very serious backlash in public opinion. Warwick then engineered the restoration of Henry VI to the throne: He's a kingmaker again. This period when Henry is back on the throne is known as the "readeption," which really just means "restoration."

But Warwick has reckoned without his *other* son-in-law. Remember him? The one Warwick rebelled for the first time? That's Clarence. Well, Clarence wasn't very happy when Warwick became a Lancastrian, because obviously, now the whole plan of putting Clarence on the throne has disappeared from view. Clarence doesn't see any point any more in maintaining the alliance with Warwick. He figured he'd do better crawling back to his brother Edward, the ex-king, so that's what he did. The York brothers somehow made up their quarrel and plotted to get back to England to get rid of Warwick and his new Lancastrian allies.

Foreign money is very important throughout all these complicated maneuvers. We've already seen that French money was crucial to getting the Lancastrians back into power. Now Edward went for help to the duke of Burgundy. The fact is that the continental powers are using the struggle over the English crown for their own purposes. France and Burgundy were at odds again by now. Each wants an alliance with the English. Each was prepared to shell out to support whichever claimant to the English throne was most likely to lend them support in their struggle against each other. And just as French money is enough to get Henry VI back on the throne, Burgundian money is enough to put Edward IV back on the throne.

In March 1471, Edward lands in England. On April 14, Edward goes up against Warwick at the Battle of Barnet, just north of London. Warwick is killed; he had tried to make a king one time too many. On the very same day, Queen Margaret and her only son, Edward, the prince of Wales (now 18), land at Weymouth and move west to meet up with a crucial ally from Wales, Jasper Tudor (the uncle of Henry Tudor, about whom we will have more to say in the next lecture). But before Margaret could get to the rendezvous, King Edward caught up with her at Tewkesbury in Gloucestershire. The battle was a Yorkist triumph. The Lancastrian commander, Somerset, just didn't have the tactical skill that King Edward had. Edward's brother, Richard of Gloucester, led a successful flanking maneuver, and Edward used a detachment of mounted spearmen to ambush the Lancastrians from the rear. The slaughter was extensive enough that one part of the battlefield became known as the Bloody Meadow, though it must be said that a lot of battlefields have a spot called the Bloody Meadow. That seems almost to come with the territory.

Now, it was obviously very significant that the Lancastrian army never was allowed to meet up with Jasper Tudor, but in a lot of ways, the most important single outcome of the battle was the fact that Edward, prince of Wales, the Lancastrian heir, did not survive it. He was captured by George, duke of Clarence, and executed on the spot. Queen Margaret was captured too, but it almost didn't matter, because her dynastic hopes died with her son. And in fact, as soon as Edward IV is properly restored to the throne by Parliament, King Henry VI was quietly murdered in the Tower of London. Edward didn't want any more Lancastrian readeptions. It was given out that Henry had died of a broken heart, which would have been very understandable under the circumstances, and he was widely mourned. He hadn't been an effective king—far from it—but people thought of him as a pious, simple soul, and there was considerable sympathy for him among the public. But with Henry, the Lancastrian cause seemed to have been buried for good. There didn't seem to be any plausible claimant to replace the dead prince of Wales.

So now Edward IV is back on the throne, and his second period of rule proved to be the most successful England had enjoyed since the brief reign of Henry V. Edward made progress in the areas of foreign policy, finance, and public order. Unlike Henry V, Edward basically turned his back on

warfare. He'd had enough fighting during the struggles over the throne, and he concentrated on more peaceful pursuits and on enjoying life as king, which he did. To make sure he could do this, he concluded a peace treaty with France in 1475, the Treaty of Picquigny, which ended a lot of economic uncertainty about trade, and in fact, there was a big trade boom.

Edward also took steps to shore up the royal finances, and he especially worked hard to avoid asking Parliament for taxes. (Everybody knew that's where kings got in trouble.) He confiscated the estates of the defeated Lancastrians; that brought in considerable resources for the crown. He also demanded payments directly from supposedly grateful subjects; these were officially known as "benevolences," because supposedly, they were offered out of good will—really, people don't have much of a choice about it. But England was glad to have peace and order at last, so people paid, and as a result, Edward was the first king since Henry II in the 12th century not to die in debt.

Edward also made progress with regard to public order. He rather ruthlessly shut the magnates out of his inner court circle, relying instead on functionaries whom he could control rather easily. This damped down some of the faction fighting that had been rampant in English politics for the better part of a century. Edward also attacked the problem of disorder in the north of England for the first time in a very long time. He installed his brother Richard, duke of Gloucester, as king's lieutenant in the north, and Richard made a great success of the post. He was well liked in the north, and he was effective at keeping the very fractious northern nobles in check.

The only serious threat to Edward's rule came in 1477 from his own brother, Clarence, who was angry when Edward refused to let him marry the heiress to the duchy of Burgundy. (Clarence's first wife had died—once again, marriages causing trouble between the brothers.) When a plot by Clarence was revealed, Edward had him imprisoned in the Tower of London and attainted as a traitor by Parliament. Parliament actually clamored for his execution. Clarence was killed in the Tower of London in 1478, though the means are unclear; Shakespeare has him drowned in a butt of malmsey wine. This might be a distortion of an actual fact about Clarence's burial—a folk memory. His body was sent to be buried at Tewkesbury Abbey, and it's

just possible that the body was preserved in a barrel of malmsey wine. This sort of thing was done when a body had to be transported a long distance for burial. We'll never know for sure. The fact is that King Edward had not scrupled to remove his feckless brother. He was determined to have peace at last.

Mainly, it seems that Edward wanted peace so that he could have a good time. He liked eating rather more than was good for his health, and he also enjoyed the company of ladies other than the queen. In fact, his early death at the age of 40 was widely attributed to overindulgence. When he died, he left a young and numerous family with the very formidable task of consolidating the Yorkist ascendancy.

Before we take up that story in the next lecture, though, I want to talk a little but about one of the key centers of Yorkist power, namely, London. It was small by modern standards, but it was by far the largest city in England, with about 50,000 inhabitants. It had a lord mayor who was elected yearly; we've already met one of these, William Walworth, who stabbed Wat Tyler during the Peasants' Revolt. But the most famous lord mayor of London during the Middle Ages was Sir Richard Whittington, or Dick Whittington. He was the younger son of a gentleman from Staffordshire. He came to London in the late 14th century to make his fortune in the cloth trade, which he did. He became rich enough to lend money to kings, and he was elected lord mayor three times, an unprecedented achievement, and he also served in Parliament.

The reason he is remembered, though, is that somehow he became a character in the English pantomime tradition, the comic plays that are still a part of the tradition of English childhood. Starting in the early 17th century, there were stories about Dick Whittington as a poor boy who comes to London to make good; at first, he gets nowhere, and he finally turns to leave London discouraged, then he hears the sound of Bow Bells, the famous church bells of St. Mary-le-Bow, calling him back to London to try again. In many of the stories, he gets rich with the aid of his cat; he takes this fabulous cat on a trading voyage, and the cat's rat-catching abilities win him many friends. In some versions, the cat can talk. The story is obviously meant to be a rags-to-riches story, but for us, the lesson is that the profile of the real Sir Richard Whittington was far more typical. He starts out with some means, and he

gets even richer. That sort of success that he achieved was definitely possible in London in the 15th century.

Lord mayor of London is really a ceremonial post. London is dominated by the great merchant guilds, especially those involved with the cloth trade. London merchants often made such large fortunes that the crown turned to them for loans. Edward IV helped cement his relationships with some of these merchants by conferring knighthood on them: a little social prestige in exchange for a little cash. This is obviously not the way knights start out—they're supposed to be warriors—but things had been changing for some time, and everyone had to recognize the vital importance of money and trade.

Still, social prejudices remained, and often successful London merchants would try to buy landed estates and then retire to the countryside. Still, London is a force to be reckoned with, and it would play a decisive role in the very dramatic events that followed the death of Edward IV in 1483, and that's what we'll take up next time.

Richard III—Betrayal and Defeat

Lecture 35

The story about him being a hunchback is really later propaganda; in a very crude way, later writers were trying to make a physical deformity stand for a moral deformity. … The real blows to Richard's image were dealt by the usurpation and then the rumors, almost certainly true, that he had killed the princes. Nobody needed to invent that.

Despite Edward IV's early death in 1483, it looked as if the new Yorkist dynasty was secure. He had left the crown's finances in excellent shape, and he had dealt with the last disruptive elements among the barons. Unfortunately, he had also left a 12-year-old son as his heir, Edward V. As we have seen before, members of the court began jockeying for power over the young king, and they split into two factions: one under the king's mother, Elizabeth Woodville, and the other under his uncle, Richard, duke of Gloucester.

Elizabeth's relatives had demanded and received a lot of patronage under Edward IV, and they were deeply unpopular. Richard, on the other hand, was famed for his loyalty to his brother Edward and had been successful in managing the north. He was, in many ways, the ideal advisor to his nephew and in fact was named Edward V's protector in Edward IV's will. But the queen's faction had custody of the young king and hoped to create a regency council around him. The inevitable conflict happened: When the queen's brother, Earl Rivers, was bringing Edward V to London to the arms of the Woodvilles, Richard and the duke of Buckingham intercepted Rivers, took charge of the king, and brought him to London themselves. Rivers was executed on no legal basis whatsoever, and the queen fled into Westminster Abbey again with her other children. Richard was now in control of the king.

When exactly Richard decided to seize the throne for himself, we can't know for sure. Perhaps he had it in mind from the start; what we do know is, within two months of his nephew's accession, Richard claimed the throne. But how was he going to get rid of his nephew? What he did in fact says a lot about how English politics had developed in the last couple of centuries. He went

through Parliament, claiming the throne on the pretext that the marriage of Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville was invalid because when they married, Edward was already contracted to marry one Lady Eleanor Butler. In other words, Edward V was a bastard.

There seems to be no evidence whatsoever to support Richard's story, but Richard and Buckingham orchestrated a shrewd propaganda campaign to convince the people of its truth, even producing a bishop to swear he had married Edward and Lady Eleanor. Parliament met on June 25, 1483, and officially petitioned Richard to take the crown.

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Edward V (r. April–July 1483) "disappeared" from the Tower of London. In truth, he was likely murdered by his uncle, Richard III.

The usurpation, however, was deeply unpopular. Most people did not believe the story about Edward's prior marriage. But for the moment, Richard had coerced the people he needed to coerce, and thus, on July 6, he was crowned King Richard III of England. The former king, now once again called Edward, prince of Wales, was confined to the Tower of London with his younger brother, Richard, duke of York, "for safekeeping"; by the fall of 1483, they had disappeared. No one knows for sure what happened to the boys, but in the 17th century, the skeletons of two teenage boys were found buried beneath a staircase at the Tower. The majority opinion is that the obvious happened: Richard had them murdered.

That said, not everything we've been told about Richard III is true. His popular image, like Henry V's, is largely derived from the play Shakespeare

wrote about him. It's a wonderful play, but Shakespeare was an entertainer, not a historian. He was adapting the sources he had to their best dramatic effect. Many of these accounts were written well after Richard's reign by his political rivals. For example, the second most famous thing about Richard after his supposed murder of his nephews was the "fact" that he was a hunchback, yet there is no evidence that this was the case. In fact, one thing that can be said in mitigation of Richard's crimes of usurpation and murder: His actions weren't so different from his predecessors. It was politics as usual for England in that period.

Henry Tudor's claim to the throne was not particularly strong. … What Henry really had going for him was the Beaufort grit—and the fact that he was the only Lancaster left.

The disappearance of the princes did not guarantee Richard a smooth ride, however. Gaining the throne had cost him a lot of political capital. The people were disillusioned, and so were many of the barons. Under Richard, the people renamed Edward's benevolences "the malevolences." People also did not like or trust Richard's close advisers, William Catesby, Sir Richard Ratcliffe, and Lord Lovel. This is memorialized in a doggerel rhyme by Thomas Collingbourne: "The Cat, the Rat, and Lovel our dog / All rule England under the Hog." Incidentally, Collingbourne was hanged for writing this, a sign of how insecure Richard felt on the throne. With good reason.

In the fall of 1483, the gentry of southern England revolted in protest at Richard's treatment of his nephews. Meanwhile, Elizabeth Woodville entered into secret negotiations with Henry Tudor, the surviving Lancastrian claimant to the throne, promising support for his claim if he would marry her oldest daughter, Elizabeth. This is strong evidence that by this point, Elizabeth Woodville had concluded that her sons had been killed. Henry accepted the offer and swore publicly to marry Elizabeth of York.

Then something odd happened. The duke of Buckingham—who had stood by Richard through all of the tumultuous weeks in the spring and early summer, who had stage-managed the process of Richard's claiming the throne and his

coronation—joined in the revolt. To this day, we have no idea why. Despite Buckingham's support, the revolt failed. Buckingham was captured and was executed after a summary trial. Henry Tudor, who was coming from Brittany, appeared off the coast of Dorset in the southwest but never landed; he had arrived too late. He returned to Brittany, but he was not beaten yet.

Henry Tudor's claim to the throne was not particularly strong. On his mother's side, he was descended from the Beauforts, who had a tenuous claim to legitimacy. On his father's side, it was more a matter of association than descent: After Henry V's death, his queen, Katherine, married a Welsh page in the royal household named Owen Tudor; this pair were Henry's paternal grandparents. On top of this, Henry had spent most of his life in exile in France; he had few English connections, though he had a few more relatives in Wales. What Henry really had going for him was the Beaufort grit—and the fact that he was the only Lancaster left.

After Buckingham's failed revolt, Richard demanded that the Bretons send Henry to England to stand trial for treason. Henry fled to the French court. Richard then threatened to invade Brittany, so the French decided to back Henry's claim and provided him with money and a small force of French and Scottish soldiers. Henry also made the prudent move of securing the support of his stepfather, Lord Stanley, and his family.

In August 1485, Henry Tudor landed at Milford Haven in Wales. Hearing of Henry's landing, Richard moved against the Stanleys first. Lord Stanley's son was seized and held as a hostage for his father's good behavior, so Stanley could not keep his promise to Henry. Nevertheless, Henry pressed on toward Leicester. Richard gathered his army via writs, ordering men to fight for him on the threat of losing their goods, estates, and lives. Richard got word from the north that his supposedly trusted lieutenant, the earl of Northumberland, hadn't raised troops on his behalf. Things looked bad for Richard, but he had to intercept Henry before he reached London.

On Aug. 22, 1485, the two armies met at Bosworth Field in Leicestershire. The Yorkists had twice the number of Lancastrian troops and had the hilltop position. Richard commanded the center of the army, while the duke of Norfolk had the left flank and the earl of Northumberland had the right.

The Stanleys were held in reserve nearby; the big question was, what would they do? Richard sent Stanley a message threatening to execute his son if Stanley did not advance. Stanley replied that he had other sons. In fury, Richard ordered the captive executed, but his men waffled. When Henry sent a message asking for Stanley's help, Stanley equivocated. Once the battle was joined, Northumberland refused to fight. Henry made a move to meet with Stanley, but Richard spotted this and led a charge at Henry's contingent. There was fierce hand to hand fighting, then Stanley finally joined the Lancastrian side. Richard fought bravely to the end, but he was unseated from his horse and killed. That was the end of the Yorkists, and the beginning of the new Tudor dynasty.

This is an exciting story, but what does it matter? One conclusion we may draw from the last act of the Wars of the Roses is how, despite how restricted the power of the king had become toward the end of the Middle Ages, in some ways the crown was more important than ever. In the 15th century, the English economy had expanded, and that wealth needed a competent king to administer it. Even for those without a claim to the crown, the succession was an issue worth fighting and dying for. ■

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

Richard III—Betrayal and Defeat
Lecture 35—Transcript

Welcome back. In our last lecture, we covered most of the period known as the Wars of the Roses. We saw the momentum shift back and forth between Yorkists and Lancastrians: First, the Yorkists gain the throne, then they lose it temporarily, then they're back. We ended with the death of Edward IV in 1483, and it looked at that point as if the new Yorkist dynasty was secure.

Edward had left a fairly secure financial situation for the crown; he had also dealt with the last of the really disruptive elements among the barons. Everything seemed good. But I warned you last time that there is going to be one more act in the Wars of the Roses, and that's going to be the subject of our lecture today. We're going to spend the whole lecture talking about a period of a little more than two years. But they were two of the most eventful years in our whole period. We're going to see one king murdered (almost certainly); another will die in battle. And that battle will mark the endpoint of our course, because then a new dynasty takes over, the Tudors, and that really belongs to the Early Modern period or the Renaissance, not the Middle Ages. So we're going to watch the last act unfold today.

We start in the spring of 1483 with the death of Edward IV. His realm is prosperous, but unfortunately, he leaves a child as his heir, his oldest son, Edward, age 12, and he becomes Edward V. But the court is split between two powerful factions. We've seen this dynamic before, especially during the minority of Henry VI. The first of these two factions is led by Richard, duke of Gloucester, the only surviving brother of Edward IV. The other faction is led by Elizabeth Woodville, the queen, and she has a numerous family. A lot of these relatives had gotten patronage under Edward IV. They prospered, and they are deeply unpopular as a result. Richard of Gloucester, though, is quite popular. He has been very loyal to his brother, the king; he never got involved in the sorts of plots that tripped up his brother, the duke of Clarence. Richard has also been very successful serving as the king's lieutenant in the north. So Richard is, in many ways, ideally placed to help his young nephew and train him in statecraft.

And in fact, Richard is named lord protector in the king's will, but the queen's faction wants to get hold of the new king; they want to secure the person of young Edward. They want a regency council, because they are going to hope to dominate that. The queen's brother, Earl Rivers, temporarily has custody of the king at the time that Edward IV dies and wants to bring him to London to meet up with the rest of the Woodville faction, but Richard, duke of Gloucester, has other plans. He and his ally, the duke of Buckingham, intercepted Earl Rivers on the way to London. They have a stronger band of followers; they seize control of the king. They bring him to London themselves and they have Earl Rivers executed; there was not any legal pretext for this. This, of course, makes the queen panic. She flees into sanctuary in Westminster Abbey with her other children, just as she had done many years earlier, when her husband was temporarily driven from the throne. Richard, duke of Gloucester, has essentially staged a successful coup against his rivals. He now has sole control of the new king.

Now, when exactly Richard decided that he was going to seize the throne for himself, we don't know for sure. Maybe he always had it in mind, but at any rate, within two months of his nephew's accession, Richard claimed the throne. He probably acted partly out of self-preservation. He knew his nephew would grow up, and then there would be a decline in his influence, obviously, and Richard probably feared that the Woodville faction would act against him. Given how ruthless politics had become in this period, it was probably a reasonable fear. So Richard may have felt that if he was going to stay alive, he himself had to be king. But how was he going to get rid of his nephew?

It's actually pretty interesting how he did this, and it says a lot about how English politics had developed in the last couple of centuries. First, he went through Parliament. By this point it, was well established that if you want to depose a king, you had to get Parliament to approve of this. This had already happened several times: We've seen Edward II, Richard II, [and] Henry VI all deposed by Parliament. Edward IV was temporarily deposed. So Richard knows that if he wants to take over, he needs Parliament to help him do it. That's how important the institution has become by now.

The second think is that Richard needs a pretext to give Parliament something to go on. So far, we've seen two depositions that were basically due to the fact that the king was incompetent; he had just alienated too many of his supporters. That's what had happened with Edward II and Richard II. But nobody at that time had claimed that they weren't legitimate kings in a genealogical sense; they clearly were. But then you had Henry VI. He was deposed for a mixture of two reasons: First, he was incompetent, but second, his right to the throne was questionable; he came from the Lancastrian line. They are the ones who had inserted themselves into the royal succession illegitimately at the time of Richard II's deposition. Now, the issue of the legitimacy of the dynasty would not have come up if Henry had been a successful king—people would have left it alone. But he wasn't a successful king, and that opened the door. So there are these two grounds that have been used to challenge the right of a king to rule: incompetence and legitimacy. If Richard, duke of Gloucester, wants to challenge the right of his nephew to rule, what's going to be his pretext?

He can't really challenge Edward V's competence. Edward is 12. He hasn't done anything yet, and Richard is the protector, so that's not an option. The only option left is to question Edward's right to the throne. But wait. At the time of the struggle between York and Lancaster, you have two different branches of the English royal family competing against each other. They trace their descent from different sons of Edward III. You could have an argument about whether it is legitimate to trace descent through the female line, which the Yorkists had to do, but you've got essentially two rationales for two different branches of the royal family. But what is Richard going to argue? He and his nephew come from the *same* branch of the royal family. If he's going to challenge Edward V's claim to the throne, he's going to have to be very careful. He's going to have to come up with a rationale that disallows his nephew's claim to the throne but leaves his own claim intact. So he decides to claim that Edward is a bastard.

He claims that the marriage between Edward IV and Elizabeth Woodville was invalid, and obviously, that would make their children illegitimate. The pretext for claiming this is that Edward IV had been under contract of marriage even *before* he married Elizabeth Woodville, supposedly to a woman named Lady Eleanor Butler. Under canon law, this would indeed

make Edward's marriage to Elizabeth Woodville invalid. The trouble is there seems to be no evidence whatsoever of this story at all; it was purely invented. Richard does produce a bishop who swears that he performed the wedding between Edward and Lady Eleanor, but almost certainly, the bishop was lying. Richard had his close ally Buckingham recount this story of the supposed marriage to the mayor and citizens of London, and then he has the story repeated from all the pulpits of the city. It is a very well orchestrated propaganda campaign; it shows that Richard thinks that the public opinion of the Londoners is worth cultivating. Certainly, London public opinion has an impact on Parliament. We've seen that before: What the crowds in London are thinking—that certainly influences Parliament. Parliament meets on June 25 and officially petitions Richard to take the crown on the grounds that Buckingham had outlined about the marriage of Edward IV being invalid.

This brings me to my third point about how politics has developed. You can sway Parliament, you can use propaganda, you can exert public pressure. England has made a lot of progress, but we are not at the point where the rich and powerful can't bend the will of the people for their own purposes. But—and this is a very large "but"—the will of the people has a way of making itself felt in any case. The usurpation of the throne proves to be deeply unpopular. When people had time to think about it, they did not believe this story about Edward's marriage, and they saw the whole thing as what it was: a pretty naked power grab. We will see that discontent dogged Richard throughout his reign, and in the end, he suffered the fate of unpopular kings: People didn't want to fight to keep him on the throne. That was the ultimate verdict on Richard's reign.

But for the moment, Richard had coerced the people he needed to coerce, and thus, on July 6, Richard was crowned king of England. The former king, now once again Edward, prince of Wales, is confined to the Tower, along with his younger brother, Richard, duke of York. Supposedly, these two princes are in the Tower for safekeeping, but really, they are in jail. But by the fall of 1483, they had disappeared. No one saw them alive again. And we have finally come to the greatest medieval mystery of all. What happened to the princes in the Tower? Nobody knows for sure, but in 1674, two skeletons were found at the Tower that seemed to be about the right ages

for the two princes—so maybe those are the princes—but we can't tell from the skeletons how the children died.

I'm going to lay my cards right out on the table. I think Richard had them murdered. There just isn't any good reason to believe otherwise. There have been lots of very ingenious attempts—very ingenious attempts—to deflect blame away from Richard; in fact, there's a whole society called the Richard III Society devoted to rescuing Richard's reputation. Other suspects have been put forward: the duke of Buckingham, for instance, or Henry Tudor, the man who would ultimately defeat Richard and take the throne. None of these possible theories really holds water. Richard had means, motive, and opportunity, and none of the other possible suspects had all three.

So I do think Richard is responsible for killing the princes. But that doesn't mean that everything we've been told about Richard is true. Probably many people first encounter Richard through Shakespeare's play *Richard III*. It's a wonderful play, but just as with a lot of other things in Shakespeare, it's not purely historical. Here, Shakespeare in this case is merely adapting the sources he had, which were historical accounts written after Richard's death by his political enemies. These writers had a stake in making Richard look as bad as possible because they wanted to justify the fact that he was defeated and removed from the throne. So that's why you get the picture of Richard as the personification of evil.

Now, certainly, the second most famous thing about Richard, after the fact that he supposedly killed the princes, is the fact that he supposedly was a hunchback. You will often see him portrayed on stage this way—that's how he is in Shakespeare's play. There is no contemporary evidence for this; it is just possible that he had one shoulder a little higher than the other—but even that is uncertain. The story about him being a hunchback is really later propaganda; in a very crude way, later writers were trying to make a physical deformity stand for a moral deformity. What is true is the fact that he was probably short and maybe slight of build, and that is something in itself that hurts a king's image—if he doesn't look like a king the way some of the others did, [such as] his own brother Edward IV. But the real blows to Richard's image are dealt by his own actions: first, the usurpation and, then,

the rumors, almost certainly true, that he had killed the princes. Nobody needed to invent that.

Now, if you want to say anything at all to get him off the hook, it would have to be that in killing the princes, Richard isn't acting too far outside the norms of English politics as they had developed in recent decades. It had been a pretty rough time lately. King Edward IV had had his own brother—Richard's brother, too—the duke of Clarence, murdered. Now, it's a bit different to kill children, but I think Richard felt driven to get rid of the princes just the way all the previous usurping monarchs in the past two centuries had gotten rid of their predecessors. I think that was the precedent Richard was following. You can't allow an ex-king to live. It's just too dangerous. They'll be a focus for potential rebellion.

But getting rid of the princes did not guarantee Richard a smooth ride. He had taken the throne under unusual circumstances, to say the least, and this had cost him a lot of political capital. All of that earlier popularity is really gone. The people are disillusioned and so are many of the barons. I don't think they swallow the story about the marriage. They see his rule as illegitimate from the start. Remember the "benevolences" from Edward IV's reigns, the supposedly free payments that people make to the king? Really, they are extorted. Under Richard, people renamed these the "malevolences" because they are extracted with such ill will. You can't even put a fig leaf on this anymore. People also don't like or trust Richard's close advisers, William Catesby, Sir Richard Ratcliffe, and Lord Lovel. There's a very famous rhyme about these henchmen of Richard's. This is how it goes: "The Cat, the Rat, and Lovel our dog / All rule England under the Hog.

The Cat was Catesby, the Rat was Ratcliffe, and Lovel our dog was, of course, Lord Lovel. And the Hog was Richard himself; his emblem was the white boar. Nobody likes those over-powerful royal advisors. The author of this little rhyme, a gentleman from Wiltshire, was named Thomas Collingbourne. He was hanged for writing it. I think that's a sign of how insecure Richard felt on the throne.

And he had very good reason to feel insecure. In the fall of 1483, the gentry of southern England rose in revolt in protest at Richard's treatment of his

nephews. Some of these rebels were former servants of Edward IV, who were angry that their patron's honor had been impugned; they didn't like Edward's sons being declared bastards. Queen Elizabeth Woodville also entered into secret negotiations with Henry Tudor, the surviving Lancastrian claimant to the throne. I'll explain why he is a claimant to the throne in a moment. Elizabeth promised to support Henry Tudor's claim to the throne if he would marry her oldest daughter, Elizabeth of York, and thus, make her queen of England. I think this is pretty good evidence that by this point in 1483, Elizabeth Woodville has concluded that her sons in the Tower have been killed; she's willing to transfer their claim to the throne to their sister. And Henry Tudor did swear publicly in exile in France to marry Elizabeth of York.

So we have this revolt involving the mother of the deposed Yorkist king and the current Lancastrian claimant to the throne. That's already hard enough to grasp. But then something odd happened, and we don't really understand it to this day. The duke of Buckingham, who had stood by Richard through all of those tumultuous weeks in the spring and early summer, who had stage-managed the process of claiming the throne—Buckingham joined in the revolt. Some later fictional accounts suggest that Buckingham may have revolted because he got wind of the fact that Richard had had the princes murdered by this point, but we have no solid evidence to back that up. We don't know why he changed sides.

But the revolt failed. It was the usual story of different allies trying unsuccessfully to gather their forces and being picked off one by one. Buckingham was captured in Shropshire while trying to bring troops from Wales to meet up with the rebels who were closer to London. Buckingham was executed after a summary trial. Henry Tudor, who was coming from Brittany, appeared off the coast of Dorset in the southwest but never landed; he had arrived too late.

But Henry Tudor persevered. Now, who is he, and why is he even under discussion as a potential claimant to the English throne? It turns out that he is the last best Lancastrian hope. He had a claim on both sides of his family, though either way, the claim is a little tenuous. His mother was Margaret Beaufort, a member of the very powerful Beaufort family, who were the

offspring of Edward III's son John of Gaunt and his mistress, Catherine Swinford. These children had been legitimized after the fact, but later on, Henry IV had procured a measure that barred the Beauforts from the succession to the throne. So that's something of a problem right there. That was probably Henry Tudor's strongest claim to the throne: he's a descendant of Edward III but through an originally illegitimate line that has officially been debarred from the succession by act of Parliament. So that not an especially strong claim.

The claim Henry Tudor had on his father's side was more of association than of actual descent. Henry Tudor's father, Edmund Tudor, was the son of the widow of Henry V, Queen Katherine, the one from France that Henry V had married. After Henry V died, Katherine had married a second time (if there even was a legal marriage—there is some doubt about this). The man in question was Owen Tudor, a Welsh page in the royal household. So it seems as if Queen Katherine contracted an alliance for love in this case. She surely had no idea that she was also going to be helping to found a new English dynasty.

So here's Henry Tudor's claim to the throne. It's not very impressive in itself. Furthermore, due to the fact that the Lancastrians had been out of power since 1471, Henry Tudor had spent most of his life thus far in exile in France, so he has very few English connections; he has more Welsh relatives than English relatives. But Henry comes from very stern stock. The Beauforts, his mother's family, were a formidable lot, and Henry seems to have inherited their grit. And there was nobody else. Henry Tudor is the last Lancastrian claimant.

And once again, we see continental politics getting involved in the struggle for the English throne. Henry Tudor has launched his first attempt on England in 1483 from Brittany, and he had fled back to Brittany when the revolt unraveled. King Richard had then tried to have the Bretons send Henry back to England to stand trial—he wanted him extradited, essentially (Brittany was a semiautonomous duchy at this point), but Henry escaped to the French court. Richard is threatening to send troops to Brittany, and in order to avert this, the French decided to back Henry's claim to the throne

and provided him with money and a small force of French and Scottish soldiers; remember, the French and the Scots are allies.

Thus, in August of 1485, Henry Tudor lands at Milford Haven, in Wales, to try to seize the throne. He has done all he can in advance to prepare for the landing. He has canvassed potential supporters, calling particularly on the Stanley family. The Stanleys were Yorkists, but Lord Stanley was the third husband of Henry's mother, Margaret Beaufort—so Lord Stanley is Henry's stepfather—Henry has a potential in with Stanley. And Henry sets out from Milford Haven with the intent of joining up with his supporters along the way.

But the whole process was nerve-wracking. This was always the dangerous part of a rebellion, as you tried to gather your forces. The fact that Henry Tudor has landed is swiftly known in London, and clearly, the king is going to respond. He moves against the Stanleys. Lord Stanley's son is seized and held as a hostage for his father's good behavior, so Stanley could not, in fact, promise to come to Henry Tudor's aid. Nevertheless, Henry presses on toward Leicester. He wants a quick decision because the longer he waits to bring the king to battle, the greater the risk that his forces, so painstakingly gathered together, would disperse again.

Richard may have wanted a battle also. Richard probably felt that as long as Henry Tudor is out there, his throne is not secure. He certainly knew he had not managed to win over his subjects. When the invasion came, he had to send out writs ordering men to come out and fight for him on the threat of losing their goods, estates, and lives. The realm is being invaded. It's not a good sign if people have to be threatened into coming out to repel an invader. It's also clear that Richard felt he couldn't trust his own men. He is reported to have told Sir Robert Brackenbury, one of his followers, to keep an eye on certain questionable gentry as the army moves toward Leicester. He also got word from the north that his supposedly trusted lieutenant, the earl of Northumberland, hadn't been doing much of anything to raise troops on his behalf. So the signs were looking bad.

Nevertheless, Richard pressed on, because he wanted to intercept Henry before he could reach London. On August 22, 1485, the two armies met at

Bosworth Field in Leicestershire. The Yorkist army numbered maybe 10,000, and they deployed on a hilltop, which is usually a very strong position. Richard commanded the center of the army, while the duke of Norfolk had the left flank and the earl of Northumberland had the right. Norfolk was guarding a group of cannons, and they had a sizable contingent of archers. The Stanleys are held in reserve holding a nearby hill.

Henry Tudor's army is about half the size of the royal army, maybe 5,000 men. They are positioned to the southwest of the hill where the Yorkists are deployed. The big question now was what are the Stanleys going to do? Stanley is Henry Tudor's stepfather. But his oldest son is a captive of King Richard. He is actually with Richard. Richard sends Stanley a message threatening to execute his son if Stanley does not advance. Stanley replies that he has other sons. In fury, Richard orders the captive to be executed, but his men waffle. They say it would be better to wait until after the battle; clearly, they are nervous about how it was all going to turn out. Stanley also got a message from Henry Tudor asking for his help, and Stanley replied that he would come, of course, after it is clear what Henry's battle arrangements are going to be. In other words, he wasn't coming right away. He, too, is going to wait and see.

And so battle is joined. The Lancastrian army is led by the earl of Oxford, an experienced commander; Henry Tudor knows he's not an experienced soldier, and he feels he is more valuable in the rear. Oxford groups his soldiers tightly together to maneuver them successfully around a marsh that lay between them and the enemy, and then they advance, harassed all the time by the Yorkists' cannon. But the two armies close with each other, and you have hand-to-hand fighting. At this point, King Richard ordered Northumberland to advance, but his force did not move. No one is sure whether this refusal to support Richard in battle was planned in advance, but it certainly hurt the Yorkist cause substantially.

At this point, Henry Tudor rode over to try to confer with Stanley, who was still holding aloof. Richard spotted Henry's movement and decided to end the battle quickly by killing the opposing commander. Richard led a charge of about 800 mounted soldiers right at Henry Tudor's contingent. He got very close to Henry himself; he even killed Henry's standard-bearer

personally before Henry's bodyguard managed to close around him, and there was fierce hand-to-hand fighting.

At that point, Stanley finally made a move. He joined in decisively on the Lancastrian side. His troops overwhelmed the Yorkist contingent that was trying to get to Henry Tudor. Richard's own standard-bearer was cut down, and the king's horse got his hooves stuck in the mud, so Richard had to continue to fight on foot. Shakespeare has Richard call out, "A horse! A horse! My kingdom for a horse!" but contemporary accounts suggest that Richard's followers offered their own horses so the king could escape, but he refused. He fought bravely to the end. I think he knew that there was not a lot of point in him surviving the battle if he lost; his fate was likely to be a very unhappy one. And that was the end of the Yorkists and the beginning of the new Tudor dynasty.

Well, it's an exciting story. The Wars of the Roses are full of epic battles and colorful characters. But what does it all mean? What does it matter? I think there is a mixed legacy from the wars. One thing you can certainly say is that politics had gotten a lot more savage. There are a lot more executions for basically political purposes in this period than we saw in earlier times. It was very risky to be at the center of political life in England, because it so often polarized into two factions, and those factions, by the end of this period, are not scrupling to execute each other's supporters on very flimsy grounds or no grounds at all.

In another sense, though, the very savagery of politics shows us how high the stakes are seen to be. I think possession of the crown became so contentious because it had become so important. The power of the crown, in one sense, had been increasingly restricted over the course of the last two centuries. Now you have Parliament to contend with; you had to ask for taxes. But it's also true that there are more taxes to ask for than ever before. The economy had expanded. England is much richer than it had been at the time of the Norman Conquest. There is more wealth to compete for. But all of that wealth has to be administered by a competent king. If you don't have someone at the center who knows what they're doing, who can balance the competing interests among the barons, placate the Commons, conduct a competent foreign policy, then the whole kingdom is going to lose.

It mattered who was king. A good king could help the whole kingdom; a bad king can bring the whole kingdom down. England can't afford a bad king, and if they get a bad king, someone among the various powerful barons with some ghost of a claim to the throne is going to be found to get rid of him.

But there's another fundamental truth about the Wars of the Roses that we shouldn't overlook, and that's something we talked about a few lectures ago, when we talked about daily life in England. The 15th century may have been a very risky time to be at the center of politics, but it was basically a good time to be anybody else. The economy is largely flourishing; it's bounced back from the Black Death. And most people are largely unaffected by the Wars of the Roses. There are some areas of the country that never saw any fighting at all, and if you add up all the battle casualties, they probably number in the tens of thousands, certainly not hundreds of thousands. This is not the sort of struggle that affects every English village—far from it.

So when Henry Tudor wins his victory at Bosworth, he is inheriting a kingdom that is basically in good shape. There is certainly going to have to be some political realignment. Henry does get rid of a lot of Yorkists. But he also makes an effort to reconcile them to his cause; he carries out his promise to marry Elizabeth of York. This is very important to Henry, because as we've seen, his own claim to the throne was pretty shaky. Elizabeth's was a lot better. But if you combine her pedigree with his right of conquest, you have a combination that English people are willing to support. So the Battle of Bosworth Field does mark the end of a long period of instability at the center of English politics, and this is a good place to end our survey of medieval England.

In our next lecture, we'll look back at what we've covered in this course and draw some general lessons.

England in 1485

Lecture 36

In 1485, England was by no means among the wealthiest and most powerful countries in Europe. … [But] the English had good, solid institutions of government that worked fairly well and that were fairly responsive to the popular will. They had a united people who were proud to be English. There was a lot of greatness to come.

As historians reckon such things, England left the Middle Ages with the ascent of the House of Tudor. But at the time, no one knew that the battles of 1485 would bring about the end of English dynastic instability—at least for the time being. They could not have forseen what a successful king Henry VII would be. Henry restored the royal finances to good health, largely by extreme tight-fistedness, removing one constant source of friction between the king and his people. He also shrewdly saw the dangers of the weakness of his claim to the throne. Thus he proactively eliminated his potential rivals before they had a chance to gather support. The first Yorkist challenger was a 10-year-old boy named Lambert Simnel, who was actually the instrument of a London priest (and con man) Roger Simon, who passed him off as the son and heir of the duke of Clarence and the earl of Warwick. (The real child was actually imprisoned in the Tower from the start of Henry's reign.) Simon took this imposter to Ireland and raised a force against Henry, but Henry defeated them, had Simon imprisoned for life, and gave the child a job in the royal kitchens. Henry would not be merciful a second time. When another pretender arose claiming to be the Richard, duke of York, one of the missing princes, Henry had him executed. Over the next several decades,

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Henry VII's reign (r. 1485–1509), marks England's entry into the Renaissance.

Henry VII and his son, Henry VIII, systematically got rid of all the genuine Yorkist claimants they could get their hands on, even the women.

So Henry was good with money and ruthless with enemies. But what were the defining characteristics of a successful English king over the centuries? Perhaps the most important was a king's ability to acquire and keep the allegiance of the great barons. But what made the barons likely to support a particular king? It helped if kings seemed "kinglike"—attractive and chivalrous, someone to admire. Kings who didn't live up to these expectations often got into trouble. Of course, it was important to back up appearances with deeds. A certain degree of carefully deployed ruthlessness made a big impression.

But barons weren't just going to follow the king because they were afraid of him. Kings had to reward faithful service and create a climate of hopeful expectation among their followers. The proper use of patronage could be one of the trickiest aspects of being the king of England. Inevitably someone would be dissatisfied with what they had, no matter how careful you were with distributing lands and titles. Mostly, though, patronage became a problem when kings were thought to be abusing it, rewarding the wrong people. Barons were willing to take up arms to make sure the flow of patronage was to their liking.

© iStockphoto/Thinkstock.
Edward III was regarded in his own time as the epitome of the English monarch.

One of the best ways to guarantee that there was extra patronage to go around was to be successful in war. It helped a king if he expanded the territory under English control, or at least successfully held on to what he had. Edward I, Edward III, and Henry V were very popular kings. By contrast, John and Edward II were decidedly not. One of the factors that led to the Wars of the Roses was the perceived mismanagement of the war in France. English kings were definitely expected to win.

But kings had to win other kinds of battles as well. They had to be adept at the art of compromise, and this often meant the willingness to take good advice, and the barons regarded themselves as the king's natural counselors. But not all of the barons had good advice to give. Good kings surrounded themselves with sensible advisers; bad kings listened to fools. Over time, the number of people the king had to compromise with expanded—first the barons, then the gentry and the yeomen, then even the peasants. This broadening led to the institution of Parliament, made up of the barons and representatives of the shires. During the 14th century, Parliament's House of Commons gained the right to approve or reject the king's taxes, giving them true leverage over royal policy. It's a fundamental fact about English history that the rise of Parliament, the rise really of political rights in England, might never have taken place if the English kings had been richer.

Fundamentally, England was a remarkably stable entity, perhaps uniquely so in medieval Europe.

We've spent a lot of time on disputes between the king and his barons, between the king and Parliament, but fundamentally, England was a remarkably stable entity, perhaps uniquely so in medieval Europe. When the Wessex monarchy united the various separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms into a single, well-governed state, this actually made England easier for the Danes and Normans to conquer. So this stability may be a weakness if you face foreign invasion, but it's a strength the rest of the time. Of course, there were many regional differences in terrain, in economy, in dialect; we've seen that northern England always needed a little bit of special handling. But overall, the commonalities were far more striking than the differences. The kingdom of England was simply conceived of as a unit. Even England's long history of involvement with France didn't really do anything to shake the fundamental sense that England was its own entity. Another byproduct of this remarkable unity within England was the very strong support in the kingdom for a strong monarchy. The English as a whole really preferred strong kings. They saw them as the best protection against potential enemies, both foreign and domestic. A strong king could

keep public order; a strong king could keep lordly violence in check. That was worth supporting.

The English really developed as a people right alongside their institutions, and they identified very strongly with those institutions. Even the Normans were assimilated quickly into English society after the Norman Conquest and proudly identified themselves with England's glorious past, perhaps best demonstrated by their wholesale adoption of the legend of King Arthur. The English people also became strongly attached to Parliament almost as soon as it developed.

Despite the prestige position of the French language for a time by the elite, to the average English person, to be English also meant to speak English, and increasingly to read and write English. Literacy brought with it not just skills important for the new trading economy but also a strong sense of belonging to a great literary tradition that included the tales of King Arthur and Robin Hood, the poetry of Langland and Chaucer. England was also fairly unified with regard to religious observance. Although there was a strong strain of anti-clericalism in society, this did not tip over into outright defiance of the church; the Lollard heretics were a tiny minority of the population.

So England in 1485 had come a long way. The average English man or woman was far better off in a material sense than his or her predecessor of 1,000 years before—less likely to go hungry and possessed of greater social mobility, access to education, and a nascent representative government. And all this progress came despite a long series of invasions, famines, wars, and the biggest catastrophe of them all, the Black Death. Or maybe partly because of these disasters. The English people had proved they could not just survive but flourish in the face of the greatest challenges. Soon, England would found the empire on which the sun never set, and it would influence countries and peoples around the globe, none which would have been possible without the developments of the Middle Ages. ■

Suggested Reading

Keen, *England in the Later Middle Ages*.

Rubin, *The Hollow Crown*.

Smith, *This Realm of England*.

England in 1485

Lecture 36—Transcript

Welcome back for the final time. In our last lecture, we looked at the brief and disastrous reign of Richard III, and we saw him lose his throne to Henry Tudor, the Lancastrian claimant to the throne. But Henry was really the founder of a new dynasty, and with the Tudors, we finally leave the Middle Ages and, hence, our course.

So in this lecture, I want to take some time to reflect on what we've been doing up till now. We'll look briefly at the changeover to Tudor rule, but then we're going to sum up a few of the most important themes of the course. We'll talk about kingship and how it developed over the period we've covered. We'll look at the rise of Parliament and the political nation in England. We'll revisit the question of what England was, what made it a coherent entity. And finally, we'll end with the English people themselves. What had been their journey over these 1,000 years of history? How was their future going to be shaped by the developments we've been examining?

First, though, I want to say a bit more about the transition from Yorkist rule to Tudor rule in 1485 and the years immediately following. The first thing to say is that *we* know 1485 was going to turn out to be a major dividing line in English history, but of course, people at the time didn't know this. They didn't know that dynastic instability was basically over for the time being. Things had been very unsettled at the top in England for many years now, really since the reign of Richard II, and for all anybody knew, it was going to continue that way. But it didn't. And one big reason why was that Henry VII, Henry Tudor, was a successful king. He was able to meet the challenges that England faced in the late 15th century, and he paved the way for a pretty long period of relative stability and peace in English history. He restored the royal finances to good health, largely by being very tight-fisted. He was determined not to live beyond his means. So that removed one constant source of friction between the king and his people—all of those disputes over lavish spending and high taxes.

But that was the positive side of Henry's achievement. The negative side is that Henry clearly looked back at the last few decades of English politics

and concluded that the problem was the existence of too many people with a plausible claim to the English throne. Remember, that was the issue with Richard, duke of York, back in Henry VI's reign. Richard of York had a claim, and the question was: Would he use it? Henry Tudor does not want any of those ticking genealogical time bombs out there. He does want to eliminate potential rivals proactively, *before* they get it in their heads to remind people of their royal descent and maybe start gathering support for a revolt. Now, he doesn't come to this conclusion just by looking to the rather distant past, all the way back to the 1450s. He has to face a couple of challenges to his rule from people who are claiming to be legitimate Yorkist heirs to the throne.

The first of these challenges arises very early in Henry's reign. A 10-year-old boy named Lambert Simnel, a Londoner of very humble birth, catches the eye of a priest named Roger Simon. Simon thinks this boy bears a very striking resemblance to the Yorkist family. Simon takes young Simnel under his wing, teaches him courtly manners, and passes him off as the earl of Warwick, who would have been the young son of George, duke of Clarence, King Richard's brother. The young earl had been kept in the Tower of London ever since King Henry came to the throne because his claim to the throne was seen as a threat.

Simon took young Simnel, the supposed earl of Warwick, to Ireland, where there had always been a lot of support for the Yorkists—remember, that's where Richard, duke of York, had spent time gathering his forces before he made his claim to the throne. The Irish administration welcomed young Simnel with open arms, and he was actually crowned king in Dublin. Other Yorkists began coming out of the woodwork, and Simnel also got considerable help from Margaret of Burgundy, the sister of Edward IV and Richard III.

So Simnel was the figurehead, and a Yorkist army lands in Lancashire in June of 1487. On June 16, they go up against the royal army at Stoke Field in Nottinghamshire, but they are defeated. Roger Simon was captured and imprisoned for life; he's a cleric, so he isn't executed. King Henry is merciful to poor Lambert Simnel. Clearly, he had been taken advantage of; he was too young to be responsible for any of the planning of the rebellion. But the king wanted to make it very clear that he did not believe the claim that Simnel was the earl of Warwick, so he gave Simnel a job as a spit-turner in the palace

kitchens; that's the guy who stands there turning the joint of meat as it roasts on a spit. That was obviously a pretty humble occupation. Later, though, Simnel became a falconer, which is a fairly skilled profession, and he lived until 1525, well into the reign of Henry's son, Henry VIII. But Henry VII was not going to be merciful a second time. Another Yorkist pretender arose a few years later—"pretender" is the technical term for anybody advancing a claim to a title. This second pretender is claiming to be Richard, duke of York, the younger of the two princes in the Tower; the story was that he had escaped from the Tower and made his way to the continent. In reality, this guy, named Perkin Warbeck, is probably just an apprentice from Flanders, and he bears a striking resemblance, again, to the Yorkist family.

Warbeck gathers support on the continent, and in 1497, he lands in Cornwall, but a royal force comes to meet him, and Warbeck panics and deserts his army, and he is captured and imprisoned in the Tower. Two years later, he is executed. Over the next several decades, Henry VII and his son, Henry VIII, systematically get rid of any genuine Yorkist claimants they could get their hands on, and this extends to the female members of the family. For example, Margaret de la Pole is the sister of the earl of Warwick; she is executed by Henry VIII in 1541 at the age of 68. The Tudors are taking no chances of any sort of Yorkist revival. But as I said, we know that the Tudors are going to succeed; we know they are now securely on the throne, so for us, it's time to look back. We'll do what we've done a few times before. We'll look at all of the main political actors in English society. We'll start at the top and work our way down. So let's start with kings. We've talked about a lot of individual kings in this course, but now I want to talk about them as a whole. What made them succeed? What made them fail?

The most important thing that determined a king's success or failure throughout the period covered in our course was the ability of the king to keep the allegiance of the great barons. The kings in this period are never rich and powerful enough to rule without the support of their barons; they have to have their military support—there isn't a large standing army that the king can command independently. Now, of course, the kings could and did hire mercenaries, more and more as the Middle Ages progressed, but for that, they needed money, and they could get that most easily from the barons and, later, from Parliament. So the kings need their barons.

What made the barons likely to support a particular king? There are certain qualities that seem to make for a good king, a popular king, a king people would fight for (and pay taxes to). It helps if kings seemed “kinglike.” Being tall and handsome seemed to help. Increasingly, it helped to be seen as chivalrous; think of Edward III founding the Order of the Garter, supposedly to save a woman from embarrassment. That’s one way in which kingship changes along with social mores. But kings also have to command a certain degree of personal respect; it helps if the king was someone you were just a little bit in awe of. Think of Edward I being so intimidating that he didn’t even have to come home to England from crusade for two years; no one is going to put a foot wrong while he is away because they are afraid of what he is going to do when he gets back.

By contrast, kings who don’t live up to this expectation of what kings are supposed to be like often got into trouble. Kings are not supposed to engage in behavior that seemed to violate taboos. For example, nobody blinks an eye at kings having mistresses, but they object very strongly when King John engages in predatory sexual behavior; you are not supposed to go after your own barons’ wives and daughters. The English barons also don’t like Edward II’s “unkingly” hobbies. The English liked their kings to do certain things that seem “royal,” like hunting and hawking. They don’t want them out there working in the yard. There is an image of how a king should behave, and it helps a lot if the king can conform to that image.

But of course, it is also important to back up that general kingly impression with actual deeds when necessary. A certain degree of ruthlessness makes a big impression. It convinces people that the king is willing to do whatever he has to do. Think of Henry I and the dreadful punishment handed out to his moneyers. Think of Edward III seeming absolutely ready to hang the burghers of Calais. (And whether or not he really planned to pardon them all along, everybody at the time clearly believed he might just go ahead with executing them.) Poor King Stephen, on the other hand, was always being generous and chivalrous at just the wrong times. He spares Empress Matilda when she first lands in England, and this paves the way for civil war; he refused to kill his hostage, little William Marshall. We might admire him for that, but his contemporaries thought he was a bit soft.

So you had to look like a king, and act like a king, and be a little intimidating. But barons aren't just going to follow the king because they are afraid of him. There has to be something in it for them, as well, something positive. Kings need to reward faithful service to create a climate of hopeful expectation among their followers. They need to give out those escheats and wardships to the right people at the right time, but they have to be very careful about their use of patronage. Of course, the most spectacular patron in English history was William the Conqueror; he has essentially an entire kingdom to hand out. But even then, he has some trouble with his followers, because inevitably, some people were dissatisfied with what they had, and he has to put down several rebellions by disgruntled barons.

But mostly, we hear about patronage when kings were seen to be abusing it, rewarding the wrong people. This was a huge issue in the baronial revolt against Henry III. He gave out rewards to all his numerous in-laws and his very unpopular Poitevin half-brothers. That was a problem. It was the central issue in the conflicts of Edward II's reign; there was huge opposition to the king's favorites—first, Piers Gaveston and, then, the two Despensers—mostly because they had a virtual monopoly on royal patronage. They were choking off the stream of royal gifts that made the whole system function. And the barons were willing to take up arms to make sure the flow of patronage returned to normal.

And of course, one of the best ways to guarantee that there is extra patronage to go around is to be successful in war. It helps a king a lot if he has expanded the territory under English control, or at least, if he has successfully held on to what he has. Think of Edward I and his conquest of Wales; think of Edward III and Henry V and their triumphs in France. They were all very popular kings. By contrast, think of John losing Normandy and how badly that affected his reputation; think of Edward II losing the Battle of Bannockburn in Scotland. He really never lived that down. One of the factors that definitely led to the Wars of the Roses in England is the perceived mismanagement of the war in France. That is possibly the decisive factor that tips Richard, duke of York, over into claiming the English throne for himself. So English kings are definitely expected to win.

But English kings also had to win other kinds of battles. They had to learn to be adept at the art of compromise, and this often meant being willing to take good advice. We've seen that this is a huge issue in many of the controversies between the kings and their barons because the barons see themselves as the king's natural counselors. Good kings surround themselves with sensible advisers; bad kings listen to fools. We've seen this; we've seen Henry III's very silly scheme to conquer Sicily. You contrast that with his son, Edward I, who needs taxes from his barons, and he gives them a quid pro quo: I'll banish the Jews for you and cancel your debts if you give me taxes. This is not a compromise we would admire today, but under political circumstances in the late 13th century, it was perceived as a win-win situation.

So far, I've mainly talked about the kings and their barons, but one of the striking things you see in English history, and we've touched on this, is how the number of people the king has to compromise with expands over time. The number of people who are actors on the political stage gets greater. Slowly, it becomes an established reality that English kings have to consult their subjects about certain important aspects of government, especially taxes. This movement starts at the time of Magna Carta in 1215. At that point, the people who want their voices heard are mainly the important magnates, the very top of English society. But that will broaden out during subsequent disputes, and it will get focused in the institution of Parliament.

We see a huge step forward in this development during the reign of Henry III, when you have the rebel Simon de Montfort establishing the model for all future Parliaments—there are going to be representatives from the entire country, and they won't be only the barons. There will be knights from the shires and representatives from the towns, as well. Already, the number of people whose voices need to be heard is growing. These are propertied people, certainly, but they extend way beyond the small circle of barons who would have known the king personally. We're really starting to get a concept of abstract representation here.

Then, during the 14th century, Parliament takes its final shape as two houses, the Lords and the Commons, and the Commons gain the right to approve or reject taxation. This comes about in the context of an expensive foreign war, the Hundred Years' War; that's how the Commons got so much leverage,

and they used it to influence royal policy. So this was a very important development on the way to the English people, at least a segment of them, having a say in the way their government was run.

But we shouldn't be too sunny in our interpretation of the rise of Parliament. It was still open to manipulation by factions of the barons. Parliament had gained a lot of legitimacy in the nation. It was seen as the repository of the national will, to a certain extent. That made Parliament's approval worth having. But often, that approval was extorted under very questionable conditions. For example, we've seen Parliament used to legitimate judicial murder. This is a trend that really takes off during the reign of Richard II in the 1380s and 1390s, when you see power see-sawing back and forth between the king and his political opponents.

There were many instances of this to follow, especially during the Wars of the Roses. But the most dramatic manipulations of Parliament came when Parliament was used to ratify the deposition of kings. This happened first with Edward II, then with Richard II, and then there is a flood of depositions during the Wars of the Roses: You have Henry VI, Edward IV, Henry VI again, and finally, the most egregious case of all, the deposition of young Edward V by his uncle, Richard III. And we've seen that that probably pushed things a bit too far. People were not totally comfortable with that deposition. Mostly, the English wanted to get rid of kings when they had demonstrated that they were incompetent. Getting rid of an innocent child didn't feel quite so legitimate.

But here we need to repeat a point about Parliament that I've made a number of times already, simply because we need to explain why the kings got themselves into a position where they had to be on Parliament's good side so that they could get taxes and avoid being deposed. That point is that Parliament would never have become so powerful if the English kings had not needed money, especially to finance foreign wars. If the kings had been able to live off their own resources, they would have been quite happy not to ask Parliament for anything. It wasn't something kings liked, having to summon Parliament. They were likely to hear a lot of complaining, for one thing. But they did it, because they needed money. It's a fundamental fact about English history that the rise of Parliament, the rise really of political

rights in England, might never have taken place if the English kings had been richer.

Now, it might occur to you that one of the reasons the kings needed money to fight foreign wars is that fighting foreign wars successfully is a good way to be a popular king. So there's an ironic aspect to this relationship between the king and the Parliament; it's kind of circular. The king needs the Parliament to help him pay for the activity that helps keep him popular so that the Parliament will keep voting him taxes. This drove the kings crazy. As we've seen, they hated being beholden to Parliament. They especially hated it when Parliament spoke its mind about royal administration: about appointments of household officials, expenditures of the royal household, that sort of thing. But the kings really couldn't do without Parliament. So one of the big reasons that Parliament developed as it did—and, of course, it becomes the model for representative democracies around the world—is that the English kings aren't rich enough to do without it.

Parliament develops as a kind of foil to the king, a permanently semi-antagonistic dancing partner, and they are destined to clash rather spectacularly, of course, in the 17th century, when Parliament executed King Charles I. But the fact that you've got this dynamic in place, this standing dialogue between king and Parliament, this is actually a sign, in fact, of how stable the English polity really is, and that's a point that I think we really need to make as we conclude our course. We've spent a lot of time on disputes between the king and his barons, between the king and Parliament, but fundamentally, England is a remarkably stable entity—I think uniquely so in medieval Europe. We saw way back at the beginning of the course how the Wessex monarchy unites the various separate Anglo-Saxon kingdoms into a single, well-governed state. This actually, ironically, makes England easier to conquer in the 11th century, first for the Danes and then for the Normans. If you can capture the center, the rest of England is going to fall into line also. So maybe that's a weakness if you are facing foreign invasion, but the rest of the time, it is really a strength, because that's how it is for the rest of the Middle Ages. There is just a remarkable degree of unity in the English kingdom. Of course, there are many regional differences in terrain, in the economy, even in dialect; we've also seen that northern England always needed a little bit of special handling. But overall, the commonalities

are much more striking than the differences. This kingdom of England is conceived of as a single unit. There are some fuzzy areas on the borders, of course; the marches with Scotland and Wales shift their location a little bit depending on power struggles. But by and large, England itself is a single unit. There had been one brief proposal to break it at the time of a revolt during Henry IV's reign, but it never got anywhere.

Even England's long history of involvement with France doesn't really do anything to shake its fundamental sense that England is its own entity. In part, this is due to the fact that England came with a royal title, so the Norman kings naturally want to play up their identity as kings of England even more than as dukes of Normandy. The French lands of the English kings never really seriously threatened the separateness of England.

And one byproduct of this remarkable unity within England is the very strong support in the kingdom for a strong monarchy. The English as a whole really prefer strong kings. They see a strong king as the best protection against other potential enemies, both foreign and domestic. A strong king can keep public order; a strong king can keep lordly violence in check. We saw this at the time of the anarchy of Stephen's reign. That is worth supporting.

We come now to the last of the main political actors I wanted to talk about in this look back at the main developments we've covered, namely, the English people. The English really developed as a people right alongside their institutions, and they identified very strongly with those institutions. For example, just at the time when the Wessex monarchy is uniting England into one unified government, that's when you see people begin to refer to themselves as "the English." We saw in the great Anglo-Saxon sermons of the early 11th century an appeal to the English public. We also saw the remarkable speed with which the Normans are assimilated into English society after the Norman Conquest. There were initial tensions, but after less than a century, they have largely disappeared, and Normans, by this point, were proudly identifying themselves with England's glorious past, a past that many of their own Anglo-Norman historians had helped to preserve.

You get a very strongly united English people. They take pride in their past, in the tales of King Arthur and other English heroes. They are also very

attached to their kings; think about how they mourn poor old Henry VI when he died in 1471. But they also identify very strongly with their laws and institutions; they become strongly attached to Parliament as it develops. By 1485, they really do form a remarkably united people.

For one thing, they are linguistically united around a common tongue. To be English means to speak English and, increasingly, to read and write English; literacy in English is spreading, and it is bringing with it not just skills important for the new trading economy but also a strong sense of belonging to a great literary tradition. Think of Caxton publishing *The Canterbury Tales* and also Malory's new version of the stories of King Arthur. People can now read about King Arthur and Robin Hood, and these become quintessentially English national myths. Of course, the educated still knew Latin and French, but English had risen enormously in prestige.

England was also pretty unified with regard to religious observance. There was a greater attendance at religious services than ever before. There was certainly a strong anticlerical strain in society, but for most people, this did not tip over into outright defiance of the church; the Lollard heretics are a tiny minority of the population.

You have a fairly unified England in a cultural sense, with regard to language, literature, and religion, and in comparison to other parts of Europe at the time, England is ruled pretty justly, with the consent of at least some of the governed. And even people below the level of the propertied classes—those were the people who have a direct voice in Parliament—even the people below that level do have the means of making themselves heard. As we saw at the time of the Peasants' Revolt in 1381, a revolt against the poll tax, the government learned its lesson; they never tried to impose such an unpopular tax in England again. Of course, they got into trouble with taxes in the American colonies, but that's another story. The important point for our purposes is that in the 14th century, mass public action could make the government see sense. And even at the time of Richard III's usurpation, we can see that he felt it was important to try to take his rather bizarre claim to the throne to the people, to try to get their ratification, but they never really bought it, and that was a major factor in his downfall. Public opinion has really been born as a factor in English politics. Think of how things have

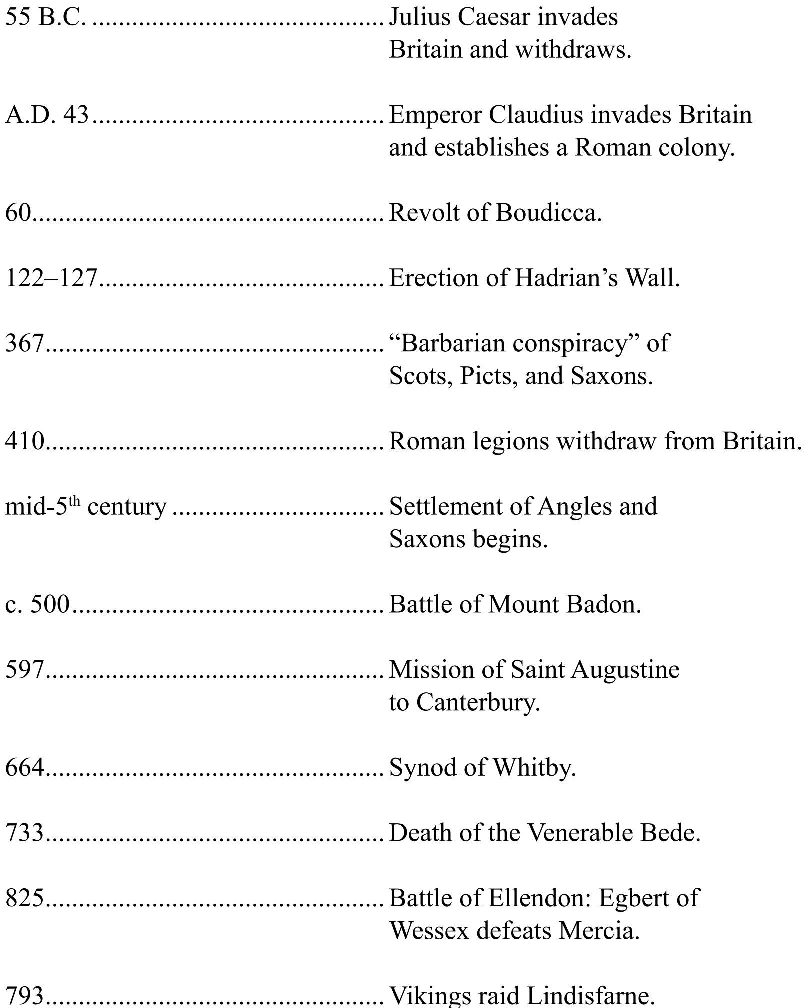
changed in just a few centuries with regard to political propaganda. In the 13th century, we had the "Song of Lewes" in Latin, and clearly, that's directed at the elite. That comes from the time of the baronial revolt of Henry III's reign. In the 15th century, we have the "Agincourt Song" in English; clearly, that's directed at all the people of England.

So England in 1485 has come a long way. The average English man or woman is far better off in a material sense than his or her predecessor of 1,000 years before. English people are far less likely to go hungry, for one thing. Trade has expanded enormously; horizons have expanded; social mobility has increased. Think of a family like the Pastons; it is possible that they started out as serfs—this was never proved, but it's at least possible—and they end up as members of the gentry. Think of somebody like Dick Whittington, the lord mayor of London. He didn't go exactly from rags to riches and he probably accomplished everything without the aid of a cat, but his rise was certainly spectacular, and it would have been inconceivable even a few hundred years before. And all this progress comes despite a long series of challenges: invasions, famines, wars and revolts of all kinds, and of course, the biggest catastrophe of them all, the Black Death. Or maybe this progress comes partly *because* of these disasters. The English people have proved they could not just survive but flourish in the face of all these challenges.

Now, it's important to say that in 1485, England is by no means among the wealthiest and most powerful countries in Europe—far from it. France is far richer; Spain is far richer. But England has a lot of advantages that are going to help lead it to greatness in the next several centuries. The English have good, solid institutions of government that work fairly well and that are fairly responsive to the popular will. They have a united people who are proud to be English. There was a lot of greatness to come; England was going to go on to found the empire on which the sun never set, and it was going to influence countries and peoples around the globe. But none of that would have been possible without the developments of the Middle Ages in England.

Thank you very much.

Timeline



55 B.C. .... Julius Caesar invades Britain and withdraws.

A.D. 43 .... Emperor Claudius invades Britain and establishes a Roman colony.

60 .... Revolt of Boudicca.

122–127 .... Erection of Hadrian's Wall.

367 .... "Barbarian conspiracy" of Scots, Picts, and Saxons.

410 .... Roman legions withdraw from Britain.

mid-5th century .... Settlement of Angles and Saxons begins.

c. 500 .... Battle of Mount Badon.

597 .... Mission of Saint Augustine to Canterbury.

664 .... Synod of Whitby.

733 .... Death of the Venerable Bede.

825 .... Battle of Ellendon: Egbert of Wessex defeats Mercia.

793 .... Vikings raid Lindisfarne.

850.. Viking army winters on the island of Thanet.

869.. King Edmund of East Anglia killed by Danes.

871–899.................................. Alfred the Great

878.. Battle of Edington: Alfred defeats the Danes.

886.. Alfred recaptures London from the Danes.

899–924.................................. Edward the Elder

918.. All Danes south of the Humber owe allegiance to Edward the Elder.

924–939.................................. Athelstan

939–946.................................. Edmund

946–955.................................. Eadred

c. 950–1000.............................. Earliest surviving *Beowulf* manuscript created.

955–959.................................. Eadwig

959–975.................................. Edgar the Peaceable

975–978.................................. Edward the Martyr

975–978.................................. The antimonastic reaction.

978–1016................................ Æthelred **II Unræd (**“of no counsel”)

991.. Battle of Maldon: The Danes defeat the English; Æthelred pays Danegeld for the first time.

c. 1000... *Battle of Maldon* composed.

1014... Archbishop Wulstand composes "Sermon of the Wolf to the English."

1016–10**35**...................................... **Cnut**

1027... Cnut makes pilgrimage to Rome.

1035–10**40**...................................... **Harold Harefoot**

1040–10**42**...................................... **Harthacnut**

1042–10**66**...................................... **Edward the Confessor**

1051–1052...................................... Revolt of the Godwinsons.

1064... Harold Godwinson's alleged oath to Duke William of Normandy.

1066.. **Harold II Godwinson**

September 25, 1066 .... Battle of Stamford Bridge: Harold Godwinson defeats Harold Hardraada of Norway.

October 14, 1066............................. Battle of Hastings: Duke William of Normandy defeats Harold Godwinson.

December 25, 1066 .... Duke William is crowned king of England.

1066–10**87**...................................... **William I the Conqueror**

1069–1070.. The Harrying of the North.

1070.. Revolt of Hereward the Wake.

1086.. Salisbury Oath; Domesday survey.

1087–1100.. William II Rufus

1100–1135.. Henry I

1106.. Battle of Tinchebrai.

1107.. Settlement of the investiture controversy.

1120.. Wreck of the White Ship.

1123.. Punishment of the royal moneyers.

1135–11**54.. Stephen**

1138.. Revolt of Robert, earl of Gloucester; Geoffrey of Monmouth composes *History of the Kings of Britain*.

1139.. Empress Matilda invades England.

1140.. Matilda briefly holds London.

1152.. Marriage of Henry of Anjou and Eleanor of Aquitaine.

1153.. Peace agreement between Stephen and Henry of Anjou.

1154–11**89.. Henry II**

1164.. Constitutions of Clarendon and exile of Archbishop Thomas Becket.

1166.. Assize of *Novel disseisin*.

1170.. Murder of Thomas Becket.

1170–1190................................ Chrétien de Troyes writes his Arthurian romances.

1173–1174................................ Revolt of the sons of Henry II and imprisonment of Eleanor of Aquitaine.

1183.. Death of Henry the Young King.

1184–1186................................ Andreas Capellanus writes *The Art of Courtly Love*.

1186.. Death of Geoffrey, duke of Brittany.

1187.. Saladin captures Jerusalem.

1189–1199................................ Richard I the Lion-Heart

1189–1190................................ Anti-Jewish outbreaks in England.

1191–1193................................ Richard participates in the Third Crusade.

1193–1194................................ Richard is held in German captivity.

1199–1216................................ John

1200.. Marriage of John and Isabelle of Angoulême.

1203?...................................... Murder of Arthur of Brittany.

1204 .... John loses Normandy to Philip II Augustus of France.

1206–1213 .... Papal interdict is imposed on England.

1214 .... Battle of Bouvines: Philip Augustus defeats Otto the Welf.

1215 .... The Magna Carta is signed at Runnymede.

1216–1272 .... Henry III

1254 .... Henry III accepts the crown of Sicily for his younger son, Edmund.

1258–1265 .... Baronial revolt in England.

1258 .... Provisions of Oxford.

1264 .... Mise of Amiens; Battle of Lewes: Simon de Montfort defeats the royal army.

1265 .... Battle of Evesham: Royal army defeats Simonde Montfort.

1272–1307 .... Edward I

1274 .... *Quo warranto* proceedings.

1275 .... Statute of Westminster I.

1279 .... Statute of Mortmain.

1282–1283 .... War of conquest in Wales.

1285...Statute of Westminster II.

1290...Statute of *Quo warranto*; Expulsion of the Jews from England.

1291...Edward I recognized as overlord in Scotland.

1297...*Confirmatio Cartarum*; Revolt of William Wallace in Scotland.

1297–1304.......................................War with France concerning Gascony.

1305–1378.......................................Papacy in Avignon (a.k.a. the Babylonian Caoptivity).

1307–1327.......................................Edward II

1310...Ordinances imposed on Edward II by Lords Ordainers.

1311...Return of Piers Gaveston from exile**.**

1312...Murder of Gaveston.

1314...Battle of Bannockburn: Scottish army defeats the royal army.

1322...Battle of Boroughbridge: Royal army defeats Thomas, earl of Lancaster; murder of Lancaster.

1326...Roger Mortimer and Queen Isabella invade England.

1327...Edward II deposed by Parliament and murdered.

1327–1377..................................... Edward III

1330... Execution of Roger Mortimer and imprisonment of Queen Isabella.

1338–1453...................................... The Hundred Years' War.

1340... Battle of Sluys: English fleet defeats French fleet.

1346... Battle of Neville's Cross: Royal army defeats Scottish army and captures King Alexander III of Scotland; Battle of Crécy: English army defeats French army.

1348–1349...................................... Black Death.

c. 1350–1400.................................. *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* written.

1351... Statute of Provisors; Statute of Laborers.

1353... Statute of *Praemunire*.

1356... Battle of Poitiers: English army defeats French army.

1360... Treaty of Brétigny between France and England.

1361–62... Recurrence of Black Death.

c. 1362... First version of William Langland's *Piers Plowman* composed.

1376... Death of Edward the Black Prince.

1377–1399................................. Richard II

1378–1417................................. Papal Schism.

c. 1380...................................... Julian of Norwich writes *Showings*.

1381... Peasants' Revolt.

1386–1400................................. Geoffrey Chaucer writes *The Canterbury Tales*.

1388... Merciless Parliament.

1398... Banishment of Henry Bolingbroke.

1399... Invasion of England by Bolingbroke; deposition of Richard II.

1399–1413................................. Henry IV

1400–1408................................. Revolt of Owen Glendower.

1401... *De haeretico comburendo* enacted.

1403... Battle of Shrewsbury: Royal army defeats Harry Hotspur.

1413–1422................................. Henry V

1414... Revolt of Sir John Oldcastle.

1415... Battle of Agincourt: English army defeats French army.

1420.. Treaty of Troyes between France and England.

1422–1461...................................... Henry VI

1429.. Joan of Arc leads French royal army.

1431.. Execution of Joan of Arc.

1432–1436...................................... *The Book of Margery Kempe* composed.

1435.. Death of John, duke of Bedford.

1445.. Marriage of Henry VI and Margaret of Anjou.

1450.. Jack Cade's Revolt.

1455.. First Battle of Stamford Bridge: Yorkists defeat Lancastrians.

1455.. William Caxton publishes *Le Morte d'Arthur* by Sir Thomas Malory.

1459.. Battle of Ludford: Lancastrians defeat Yorkists.

1460.. Henry VI captured at Northampton by Edward, earl of March; Battle of Wakefield: Lancastrians defeat Yorkists; Richard, duke of York, killed.

1461.. Second Battle of St. Albans: Lancastrians defeat Yorkists; Henry VI freed from captivity Battle of Towton: Yorkists defeat Lancastrians; Queen Margaret and Henry VI forced to flee.

1461–1483....................................... Edward IV

1465.. Capture of Henry VI.

1469.. Revolt of Robin of Redesdale.

1470.. Richard earl of Warwick and George duke of Clarence take refuge with Louis XI in France; Warwick allies with Queen Margaret and lands in England; Edward IV flees to the Low Countries.

1471.. Edward returns to England; Battle of Barnet: Warwick killed; Battle of Tewkesbury: Edward, prince of Wales, killed; Edward IV restored to the throne.

1475.. Treaty of Picquigny.

April–July 1483............................. Edward V

1483–1485....................................... Richard III

1483.. Revolt of the duke of Buckingham.

1485.. Invasion of England by Henry Tudor; Battle of Bosworth Field: Henry Tudor defeats Richard III; Richard III killed.

Glossary

aetheling: Anglo-Saxon title designating the heir to the throne.

alliterative verse: Verse that relies on repeated initial sounds for its structure. Lines are divided into two parts, divided by a caesura, or pause; usually the alliterative element occurs once or twice in the first part of the line and then once in the second part of the line. This verse form was characteristic of all ancient Germanic poetry, including Old English poetry. Examples include *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. Later, alliterative verse might also include rhyme, as in the 14th-century *Piers Plowman* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Anglo-Saxon heptarchy: Modern historical term for the seven most significant Anglo-Saxon kingdoms: Wessex, Sussex, and Essex (settled by Saxons); Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia (settled by Angles); and Kent (possibly settled by Jutes, though this is uncertain).

Brétigny, Treaty of: Agreement between England and France made in 1360 that guaranteed English possession of Gascony and pledged a ransom of £500,000 for the captured French king, John the Good, in exchange for the promise of Edward III's renunciation of his right to the French throne (which he never fulfilled). The treaty brought nine years of peace before hostilities resumed.

bretwalda: Anglo-Saxon title that may have designated the preeminent king among the kingdoms of the heptarchy between the 5th and 9th centuries. The rights of the bretwalda seem to have included tribute, military service, and appearance at his court, but the details of how these rights were exercised are unclear.

burh: Anglo-Saxon term for a fortified town or settlement. Alfred systematically strengthened existing *burhs* and founded new ones to defend Wessex from Viking attack. The taxes required to pay for these *burhs* were enumerated in the Burghal Hidage.

ceorl: Anglo-Saxon peasant farmer.

chancery: Royal writing office, in charge of all royal documents. The head of the chancery, the chancellor, was one of the king's closest advisers.

clamores: From the Latin for "outcries"; complaints recorded in the Domesday Book about unjust seizures of land following the Norman Conquest. The *clamores* were presented by juries with knowledge of the history of local estates.

comitatus: From the Latin for "retinue"; the war band of a Germanic tribal leader. It formed the chief fighting unit defending the early Anglo-Saxon settlers.

Confirmatio Cartarum: confirmation of Magna Carta and the Forest Charter issued in 1297 by Edward I in exchange for taxes to pay for his war in Gascony. It set the precedent for the right of the whole realm, as represented in Parliament, to approve or refuse taxation.

consanguinity: A relationship that was considered too close for marriage. Consanguinity was often used as a pretext for dissolving royal and noble marriages in the 11th and 12th centuries until the church tightened up the rules in 1215.

Constitutions of Clarendon: Imposed on Thomas Becket, archbishop of Canterbury, by Henry II in 1164, the constitutions spelled out the rights of the English royal courts with respect to the church courts in England, especially the right to try criminous clerks. Becket's humiliating acceptance of the constitutions and subsequent renunciation of his oath to abide by them cost him support among his bishops. *See also* **criminous clerks**.

council: Advisers to the king, derived from the Anglo-Saxon witan. After the Norman Conquest, the council was typically divided into the small council of the king's closest household advisers and the great council consisting of the important magnates of the realm.

court rolls: Records kept by various English courts, so called because they were arranged as continuous rolls of parchment leaves sewn end to end.

criminous clerk: A man in one of the seven grades of the clerical order who has been accused of a secular crime. Ordinarily, criminous clerks were supposed to be turned over to the church courts for trial, but Henry II demanded that the worst offenders be tried by the royal courts. Treatment of criminous clerks was one of the salient issues in the dispute between the king and Thomas Becket. *See also* **Constitutions of Clarendon**.

Danegeld: Tax imposed on England for the first time in 991 by Æthelred II to buy protection from the invading Danish armies. After the victory of Cnut, the tax was known as the heregeld and was used to pay for the king's bodyguard, the housecarles. It later became a tax levied regularly to pay for the defense of the realm. It was collected for the last time in 1163. *See* **housecarles**.

Danelaw: the areas of northern, central, and eastern England that were heavily settled by the Danes beginning in the 9th century. In these areas, Danish law was followed rather than English law, and Danish units of land measurement were in use.

De haeretico comburendo: Act of Parliament passed in 1401 authorizing the burning at the stake of heretics. The measure was aimed at the Lollards, who had grown in popularity as the result of the writings of John Wycliffe.

dubbing: Ceremony that officially conferred knighthood. It began in the 11th century as an informal rite but developed into an elaborate ritual. Vassals were required to pay for the dubbing of the eldest son of their lord.

ealdorman: Anglo-Saxon royal official in charge of a shire, responsible for summoning the fyrd. The ealdorman was replaced by the earl in the Danish regions of England and then throughout the kingdom under Cnut. *See also* **fyrd** and **shire**.

enclosure: Practice of enclosing common land and converting it to pasture, usually for sheep. The practice was designed to maximize the profits of landlords at a time of falling rents for agricultural land and rising demand for wool.

eyre: Circuit of courts under the jurisdiction of an itinerant commission of judges. The circuit of the justices in eyre was established on a regular basis by Henry II in 1176, though itinerant judges had occasionally been used earlier.

Exchequer: Accounting branch of the medieval English treasury. By the reign of Henry I, sheriffs would account for their expenditures at twice-yearly sessions at which counters representing various sums of money would be manipulated on a board covered by a checkered cloth. Records of the exchequer accounts were kept in the Pipe Rolls. *See also* **Pipe Rolls** and **sheriff**.

forest law: Law applied to areas of England set aside for hunting by the king after the Norman Conquest. Interference with animals in areas designated as forest (which were not necessarily wooded) could be punished by mutilation or death until the granting of the Forest Charter in 1217, which accompanied the reissue of the Magna Carta by Henry III.

fyrd: Anglo-Saxon military force consisting of all free men of the shire, who were obligated to serve as requested for 60 days.

gentry: In the later Middle Ages, substantial landowners who might bear coats of arms but did not belong to the peerage.

hide: Anglo-Saxon unit of land, originally consisting of enough land to support a single peasant family; the size of the hide varied by region. Hides were used to assess taxes and military obligations.

housecarles: Danish royal bodyguard serving in England from the time of Cnut, paid for by the Danegeld. *See also* **Danegeld**.

household: Originally the personal entourage of the king, it developed into a department of government responsible for the personal expenses of the ruler. Meticulous records were kept beginning from the reign of John.

hundred: Anglo-Saxon unit of local government that survived the Norman Conquest, consisting of groupings of perhaps a hundred hides. Hundred courts assessed taxes and met every four weeks to hear cases of local importance. *See also* **hides**.

interdict: Penalty imposed by the church on an entire ecclesiastical jurisdiction whereby public sacraments may not be performed; usually, interdicts are intended to force compliance with a specific church policy. Pope Innocent III placed England under interdict for seven years to pressure John to accept Stephen Langton as archbishop of Canterbury.

Jack Cade's Revolt: Rebellion in 1450 by lesser gentry in the counties around London to protest mismanagement of the royal household and incompetent prosecution of the war in France. The rebels also demanded that Richard, duke of York, be given a prominent role in the royal administration. Cade was captured and executed.

Laborers, Statute of: Measure passed in 1351 intended to protect employers from the market forces set in motion by the great mortality caused by the Black Death. Wage rates were to be kept at pre-plague levels, and able-bodied men were required to accept work under those terms. The statute caused widespread resentment and contributed to the Peasants' Revolt of 1381.

lords appellants: English magnates who opposed Richard II by appealing (accusing) his chief household officers, who were tried by the Merciless Parliament in 1388. The lords appellants were the Duke of Gloucester, the Earl of Arundel, the Earl of Warwick, the Earl of Nottingham, and the Earl of Derby (Henry Bolingbroke, later Henry IV). *See also* **Merciless Parliament**.

lords ordainers: Committee of 21 lords imposed on Edward II in 1311 to regulate the king's adherence to the Ordinances, which were designed to restore good government after a period of mismanagement. *See also* **Ordinances**.

maintenance agreement: Formal agreement, registered in a manor court, whereby adult children assumed management of the family holding in return for guaranteeing their elderly parents a specified domicile and allowance of food and clothing.

manor: Dating from late Anglo-Saxon times, a unit of landholding comprising the land in a specific location that was held by a lord. It often coincided with the village, but some manors comprised several villages, whereas some villages were divided between two or more manors. The lord presided over the manor court that held jurisdiction over most of the affairs of the tenants.

matter of Britain: Literary corpus comprising stories of King Arthur and his knights.

Merciless Parliament: Parliament of 1388 at which the lords appellants accused five of the household officers of Richard II of treason, leading to the execution of two of them and the flight of the other three. The king's steps in 1397–1398 to avenge the actions of the Merciless Parliament led to his deposition in 1399 by one of the lords appellants, Henry Bolingbroke. *See also* **lords appellants**.

mort d'ancestor: Writ devised in 1176 under Henry II whereby tenants could be swiftly put in possession of inherited lands.

novel disseisin: Writ devised in 1166 under Henry II whereby those disseised (deprived) of land could purchase a writ ordering the sheriff of the shire in which the estate lay to restore them to possession until the case could be adjudicated.

oath-helper: Beginning in the Anglo-Saxon period, the persons produced by an individual in court who would swear to the truth of what he said. Different numbers of oath-helpers were required in different contexts, and in some cases the oath-helpers had to include men from outside the kin group of the man whose oath was being sworn.

Order of the Garter: Order of chivalry founded in 1348 by Edward III to foster unity among his closest supporters and increase support for the war in France. Membership was highly selective.

Ordinances: Measures imposed on Edward II in 1311 by the lords ordainers to try to restore good government. Piers Gaveston and the king's Italian bankers were banished, and Parliament was required to be summoned once a year. *See also* **lords ordainers**.

Parliament: Assembly of representatives of the realm that began meeting sporadically during the reign of Henry III to discuss and approve grants of taxation. Membership became fixed in the 14th century into the House of Commons, consisting of two knights from every shire and representatives from the important boroughs or towns, and the House of Lords, consisting of the members of the peerage, a specified group of important barons. *See also* **peerage**.

peerage: Group of barons who were summoned by name to meetings of Parliament. The list was fixed in the 14th century, and the right to a summons to Parliament became hereditary.

Picquigny, Treaty of: Agreement concluded in 1475 between Edward IV of England and Louis XI of France, leaving Edward's Burgundian allies in the lurch. In return for a truce and the promise to submit the English claim to the French throne to a court of arbitration (which never sat), the English were promised an annual subsidy of 50,000 gold crowns.

Pipe Rolls: Records kept of the accounts made by the sheriffs in the Exchequer, so called because they consisted of sheets of parchment sewn end to end and rolled up for storage. The earliest surviving Pipe Roll dates from 1130. *See also* **sheriffs** and **Exchequer**.

poll tax: Tax on every individual in England imposed under Richard II in 1377, 1379, and 1381. It proved very unpopular and helped touch off the Peasants' Revolt in 1381.

Praemunire, Statutes of: Measures enacted in 1353, 1365, and 1393 to prevent the appeal of ecclesiastical cases to foreign courts in which jurisdiction pertained to the royal courts. The first statute applied to foreign courts in general, whereas the later statutes were more narrowly directed at the papal court.

Provisions of Oxford: Measures imposed on Henry III in 1258 by a committee of 24 men, half chosen by the king and half by the barons. Three formal meetings of the great council were to be held each year, and a Council of Fifteen would handle daily business, including the supervision of the Exchequer and sheriffs. The restriction of royal authority proved difficult to impose in practice, and the king renounced the provisions in 1262.

Provisors, Statutes of: Measures enacted in 1351 and 1390 against the practice of papal provision, by which the pope could nominate his own candidates for English ecclesiastical offices. Papal provisions were extremely unpopular because they deprived the king and the local church of a rich source of patronage, and the men "provided" to English offices often failed to perform their duties in person, instead hiring ill-paid and ill-qualified substitutes.

Quia emptores, Statute of: Measure enacted in 1290 to prevent further subinfeudation—that is, the lengthening of the chain of feudal obligation. The statute mandated that when the estate of a tenant changed hands, any feudal dues owed from that estate would be paid directly to the lord of the original tenant, not to the tenant himself. The statute accelerated the process by which feudal ties were slowly breaking down.

Quo warranto, Statute of: Measure enacted in 1290 that regulated private franchises or courts. Any courts that could not produce a royal charter of foundation had to be confirmed by a royal grant. The statute grew out of the *quo warranto* proceedings initiated in 1274 to investigate the origins of all private franchises as part of the efforts of Edward I to regularize the English court system.

relief: Payment exacted by a lord from the heir of his tenant on the occasion of his inheriting the property. The amount of a relief was usually fixed by custom, and efforts to exceed the customary amount were very unpopular. William Rufus was criticized for charging very high reliefs.

royal courts: By the late 13th century, the three main central courts based at Westminster: the Exchequer, which handled matters respecting revenue collection; the King's Bench, which handled cases relating directly to the king**;** and Common Pleas, which handled all other cases.

schism, papal: Result of a disputed papal election in which more than one candidate for the papacy claims to be the legitimately elected pope. The most serious schism occurred from 1378 to 1417, during which time one pope resided in Avignon and enjoyed French support, while the other lived in Rome, backed by England. The schism exacerbated anticlerical feeling in England and complicated diplomatic efforts to end the Hundred Years' War.

sheriff: From "shire reeve"; beginning in the 11th century, the royal official in charge of administering the shire on behalf of the king. The sheriff accounted for the expenses and revenues of the shire at the Exchequer and, from the Norman Conquest onward, presided over the shire court. *See also* **Exchequer** and **shire**.

shire: Largest unit of local government from the Anglo-Saxon England onward. The shire was administered by an ealdorman or later by a sheriff, who was responsible for judicial, financial, and military matters within the shire on behalf of the king. *See also* **ealdorman** and **sheriff**.

sokemen: Originally, a Danish designation for those substantial tenants who had the right and obligation to appear in the local courts.

thegn: Important Anglo-Saxon landholder who owed the king military service, attendance at court, and help with administrative tasks. The thegns were the backbone of the royal government on the local level, but their position was undermined in the 11th century by the advent of the housecarles.

Troyes, Treaty of: Agreement made in 1420 between England and France that gave the French princess Catherine to Henry V in marriage and provided for the inheritance of both England and France by the couple's heirs.

wapentake: From "the taking up of arms"; Danish landholding unit, roughly equivalent to the hide, used in the Danelaw. It most likely originated in the assembly of able-bodied men held to inspect their condition and that of their weapons.

wergild: Literally, "man money"; the value assessed in Anglo-Saxon law for the death or injury of a specific individual, intended to forestall family feuding. The amount of the wergild varied according to the age, gender, and social status of the individual concerned. All members of one's close kin were obligated to contribute to the payment of a wergild fine.

witan: Anglo-Saxon royal council, consisting of the "wise men" of the realm. The witenagemot was a formal meeting of these advisers.

writ: Legal document recording a royal order, first used by the Anglo-Saxon kings, when writs were written in English, and adopted by the Normans, who changed the language of the writs to Latin. Under Henry II, many forms of writ proliferated to streamline legal procedures and increase the prestige of the royal courts.

yeoman: In the later Middle Ages, a substantial farmer who did not have the social prestige of a member of the gentry but was able to live independently of the demands of a lord.

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