Welcome to the age of chivalry, fealty, and piety. GURPS Middle Ages 1 takes you to the rich, dark world of medieval England, where heroic knights fight for King and God, nobles trade favors and treacheries, and peasants work the land.

GURPS Middle Ages 1 covers three periods: the Saxon Kingdoms, Norman England, and the High Middle Ages. Each has a distinctive flavor and campaign style – combined with the cinematic “Hollywood Middle Ages,” they provide a complete guide to medieval roleplaying.

Within this book, you’ll find:

- Details on combat in the Middle Ages, from simple jousts to full-scale Crusades, including complete descriptions of melee and siege weapons, armor, and castle defenses.
- A guide to the religions of medieval England, from the pagan druids to the Christian monks.
- Complete information on using magic in a Middle Ages game.
- Adventure and campaign ideas for all three major time periods in the Middle Ages.

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**INTRODUCTION**

*GURPS Middle Ages 1* is a guide to England of the Middle Ages, that vast span from the end of the Dark Ages to the dawn of the Renaissance. This includes three distinct periods, each with its own style and problems, and with its own opportunities for roleplaying.

**The Saxon Kingdoms:** Germanic invaders who had come as war bands, looting the crumbling Roman Empire, settled in England and established petty kingdoms. They adopted Christianity, warred among themselves and with the Celts, and were finally battered into a sort of national unity by the hammer of the Vikings.

**Norman England:** In 1066 England was invaded by the Normans, the descendants of Vikings who had settled in France. The ruthlessly enforced Norman rule provides the backdrop for the legends of Robin Hood and the dawn of chivalry. This was also the time of the Crusades.

**The High Middle Ages:** This was the age of great castles, wars in France, plate-armored knights, jousts, and longbows. It ended in 1485, when Henry Tudor led an army of European mercenaries and disaffected Englishmen against Richard III at the battle of Bosworth, establishing England’s great Renaissance dynasty.

*GURPS Middle Ages 1* provides source material for historical medieval life, and for a few Middle Ages that exist only in fiction.

In the romantic “High Chivalry,” questing knights ride alone against giants, enchanters, and Saracens, with never a thought to food, horseshoes, or Black Plague. The heroes of “Cinematic Chivalry” buckle their plate firmly to joust, but prefer rapiers and a light, unencumbered style of fighting – armor makes the final clinch with the heroine uncomfortable, and a helmet hides your face in the close-ups. The “Heroic Fantasy Middle Ages” mixes everything together, incorporating magic and other fantastic elements.

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**Page References**

Rules and statistics in this book are specifically for the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Any page reference that begins with a B refers to the *GURPS Basic Set* – e.g., p. B102 means p. 102 of the *GURPS Basic Set, Third Edition*. Page references that begin with CI indicate *GURPS Compendium I*. Other references are BE for *GURPS Bestiary*, CI for *GURPS Compendium II*, HT for *GURPS High-Tech*, MA for *GURPS Martial Arts*, MO for *GURPS Monsters*, PM for *GURPS Places of Mystery*, VE for *GURPS Vehicles*, WT for *GURPS Warehouse 23*, and WiFi for *GURPS Who’s Who I*. A full list of abbreviations can be found on p. CI181, or see the updated web list at www.sjgames.com/gurps/abbrevs.html.

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**About the Author**

Graeme Davis also wrote *GURPS Vikings*. He has contributed to various other *GURPS* volumes, and to other games including *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Vampire: the Masquerade*, and *Dungeons & Dragons*. He lives in Denver, Colorado with his long-suffering wife, Gina, and two very pampered cats.
The Middle Ages in England lasted for 800 years. The plural in the term “Middle Ages” is significant – there was more than one age here, and in many ways that is the key to understanding medieval England. Depending on time and place (and wealth!), society was oppressive and tyrannical, anarchic, idealistic, stratified, progressive, fossilized, and many things beside.
This period of history has been known as the Middle Ages since the Renaissance. To later historians, the Middle Ages represented a period of barbarism between the great cultural high points of the Roman Empire and the Renaissance. The word “Renaissance” means “rebirth” in French, and to many people this period represents the rebirth of civilization and the arts. This is a very simplistic view, and modern historians agree that the medieval period was one of tremendous advances in both science and culture.

**The Dark Age**

Also known as the Early (or Pagan) Saxon Period, the Dark Ages began when Rome relinquished control of Britain. The northern frontier was under increasing pressure from migrating Germanic tribes, and the Roman Empire had been weakened by a succession of civil wars caused by ambitious governors stripping their provinces of troops and marching on Rome in a bid to become emperor. *GURPS Imperial Rome* contains more information on the end of the Roman Empire.

The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes came from what is now northern Germany and Denmark. Like their historical successors, the Vikings, they raided Britain at first, but turned increasingly to settlement. The Roman policy of paying some Saxon mercenaries with land to keep out other Saxons backfired; soon the east and southeast of Britain were overrun. The province had largely been stripped of Roman troops to shore up the continental frontiers of the Empire and to support various governors and generals in their bids for power; the end came officially in 410, when an appeal to the Emperor Honorius was met with a statement that Britain must see to its own defense.

According to some scholars, the legendary King Arthur started out as a Christian British warlord fighting against the encroaching pagan Saxons. Ultimately, the British were pushed back into what became known as the Celtic Fringe: Scotland, Wales, and Cornwall. Some sailed to continental Europe and settled in what is now Brittany.

**The Later Saxon Period**

**The Saxon Kingdoms (650 to 1066)**

As the Saxon period progressed, England went from a land dominated by local warlords to a collection of small kingdoms, finally becoming a single political entity. The map shows the names and locations of the major Saxon kingdoms. War and peace came and went as the kingdoms competed for political power, and at various times various kings assumed the title of Bretwalda, or ruler of Britain, demanding tribute from neighboring kingdoms and leading them in battle.

For much of the eighth century, the great kings Aethelbald and Offa of Mercia held this overlordship, but early in the ninth century it passed to the kings of Wessex, and stayed in their hands while many other kingdoms were destroyed by the Danes. When the kings of Wessex reconquered the Danelaw in the 10th century, they became the first rulers of a united England.

The Saxon kingdoms of Wessex, Mercia, Northumbria, and East Anglia were more or less established by the time Christianity was reintroduced, and their boundaries remained much the same until the coming of the Vikings. The conversion of Saxon England to Christianity is discussed on pp. 39-40. Adopting Christianity put the Saxon kingdoms in closer touch with mainland Europe; in many ways, Rome still ruled Europe, but through religion rather than force of arms.

The seventh and eighth centuries were comparatively peaceful. The various Saxon kingdoms rose and fell in influence, and alliances were made and broken, but for the common folk, life went on in reasonable serenity. This peace was shattered in 793, when the island monastery of Lindisfarne off the Northumbrian coast was attacked by the first recorded Viking raid.
A conquered Danelaw was not a pacified Danelaw. Aethelstan and his successors fought against a string of rebellions, especially by the wild Irish-Norse Vikings of York. In 954, Eadred (another grandson of Alfred) conquered York. His troops killed the great Viking Eric Bloodaxe (an exiled King of Norway so ferocious that even other Vikings were afraid of him) and Eadred could really be called King of England.

Eadred’s immediate successors managed almost 25 years of relative peace. There were always rebellions, raids, and banditry, but no great military actions. In 979, the 15-year-old king, Edward the Martyr, was murdered by a conspiracy of nobles, who wanted a safer puppet. The new king was Edward’s brother, Aethelred. His name means “noble counsel”; his byname, used even in his lifetime, was Unrede (bad or no counsel). History knows him as Ethelred the Unready. There were sporadic raids, as the word got back to the northlands that the strong hand was gone in England.

In 991 an army of Vikings invaded, spent a hearty and profitable summer of looting, and collected a vast Danegeld for leaving. This custom was followed by others. Aethelred tried hiring Vikings to fight Vikings; they preferred to join forces and collect from him.

On November 13, 1002 (St. Brice’s Day), Aethelred ordered a massacre of all the Vikings in his service (catching them unarmed and unsuspecting, of course). One of the dead was Gunnhild, sister of Swein Forkbeard, the formidable King of Denmark, the most powerful figure in the north. In reprisal, Swein’s armies ravaged England continuously from 1003; he had conquered all but London when he died suddenly and unexpectedly in 1014.

Swein’s son Cnut the Great (also known as King Canute, reigned 1016-1035) became King of all England after a few years of succession wars. Aethelred Unrede fled to Normandy with his sons (he was married to Emma, sister of the Duke of Normandy).

Inheriting Denmark and Norway from Swein, Cnut came closer than anyone else to unifying the Viking world. He was a devout Christian (and possibly a devout pagan when it was more useful), a talented statesman, a ruthless killer, and one of the most ferocious Vikings. He had a fondness for wives (one was Emma, sister of the Duke of Normandy, and formerly wife of Aethelred Unrede; she is the only woman to have been Queen of England for two kings). He had too many sons. One, Harald Hardrada, became King of England, but another, Hardacnut (son of Emma of Normandy), took it away from him in 1040. Hardacnut died in 1042, “at his drink.” See GURPS Vikings for more on this period from the Norse side.
particularly disliked and distrusted the great Saxon Earls: Leofric of Mercia, Siward of Northumbria, and Godwin of Wessex. Especially Godwin; Edward had a pious abhorrence of women, and Godwin forced him to contract a marriage (childless, of course) with Godwin’s daughter, Edith. Godwin was a tough and canny veteran. He was a wealthy noble by inheritance (a descendant of King Alfred the Great’s older brother) and had bettered his position under Cnut the Great. He had married a Danish relation of the king, which gave him strong connections in Scandinavia. Godwin was the greatest noble in England, much richer than the king. Edward forced him and his sons into exile in 1051. In 1052 they returned with a fleet to regain power. Godwin died in 1053, suddenly and unexpectedly taken ill while dining with King Edward.

His son, Harold Godwinson, continued the family tradition of accumulating power. When King Edward died in 1066, Harold Godwinson was incontestably the most powerful of the Saxon Earls; the Witan (a council of nobles) selected him as king.

England was almost immediately invaded by Harald Hardrada, a hard-driving adventurer who had been an exile in Russia, a Varangian guardsman, a Byzantine general, and a pilgrim to Jerusalem, and was now King of Norway. Harold defeated and killed Harald at Stamford Bridge (in the north of England) and rushed south to fend off another invasion. William, Duke of Normandy, was a nephew of Queen Emma and husband to Matilda of Flanders, a descendant of King Alfred. William’s claim to England was based on Edward’s dying bequest, on Harold Godwinson’s oath of support for his claim (extorted when Harold was shipwrecked in Normandy and captured by William), and on the blessings of the Pope (who thought the English church listened too much to the king of England and not enough to Rome). Harold lost and died, and his two brothers with him. (A third brother had died at Stamford Bridge, fighting as an ally of Hardrada; all Godwin’s get were turbulent.) So Alfred’s England finally fell to a Viking chief. But any winner of the three-way struggle would have been a descendant of Vikings!

The Battle of Hastings (1066) was a victory of professional warriors over armed farmers. Except for the housecarls of the king’s bodyguard, the Saxons had very few full-time fighters. The Normans had many more men who made their living at war. The continent was full of mercenaries, landless knights, and younger sons, with no wealth but their arms; William had invited them all to join him in looting England.

The two armies seem to have been about the same size. Estimates run from 6,000 to over 30,000 for each; the smaller figure is more likely. William’s force was more practiced and better equipped for modern war than Harold’s. The Saxons, for the most part, still rode to battle then fought on foot with axe, sword, spear, and shield. They had stirrups, but not the fully developed horse-gear and tactics of the Norman cavalry. They were also short of archers; most of their missile strength was in javelins and slings. They had marched north to Stamford Bridge, whipped the Viking army, then rushed south again to Hastings. The local levies, the fyrdmen, were poorly equipped, poorly trained, and (apparently) poorly led. Harold took up a defensive position on Senlac Hill.

William had a fully articulated army for the period; armored cavalry with lance (still short enough to be used overhand or couched), sword, and shield; infantry with striking weapons, spear, sword, and shield; and archers. His strategic position was weak. He had to attack Harold before reinforcements, and possibly an English fleet, could come up and cut him off from retreat or resupply. He was forced to attack Harold’s strong position.

The battle was close. The Normans had to use every trick in their bag – feigned retreats, high-angle archery, cavalry and infantry charges – to break the shield wall. At the end of the day, Harold and his brothers, Gyth and Leofwine, were dead, and the road was open to London and the throne.
THANES AND EARLS

Although changes were to come under Norman rule – most notably the feudal system – Anglo-Saxon social structure laid the foundation for English society. A king was attended by thanes – members of a warrior class who formed his household in peace and his bodyguard in war, just like a Viking jarl and his huscarls (see GURPS Vikings).

As kingdoms became bigger and the demands on a king became greater, a need was felt for deputies, who could oversee an area with the king’s authority. At first called ealdormen, this class became known as ears, and formed the earliest stratum of English nobility.

A SAXON OATH OF LOYALTY

This formal oath of allegiance from Christian Saxon times was sworn on holy relics.

By the Lord, to whom these relics are holy, I will be loyal and true to (lord’s name), and love all that he loves, and hate all that he hates, in accordance with (i.e., except where this would conflict with) God’s rights and secular obligations; and never, willingly and intentionally, in word or deed, do anything that is hateful to him; on condition that he shall keep me as I deserve, and carry out all that was our agreement, when I subjected myself to him and chose his favor.

This oath was binding on both sides, but one party need no longer keep to it if the other had broken it. A man might leave a lord’s service if the lord had acted dishonorably towards him, or had ordered him to do something which conflicted with “God’s rights and secular obligations” – in other words, something illegal, immoral, or treasonous. Under other circumstances a follower might seek to be released from an oath of loyalty, but this took either the agreement of the lord to whom the oath was given or that of the king.

SAXON LAW

Survival of Roman Law

Many Saxon kings issued legal codes which referred to Roman laws, but the details of these Roman laws are often unclear. One famous Roman law, the lex iulia de vi publici (“the Julian law on public force”), dates back to the time of Julius Caesar and forbids civilians to carry weapons. When a message came from Rome in 410 instructing the people of Britain to look after their own defense against the incoming Saxons, it lifted this ban. Other Roman laws dealt with taxation or set penalties for common crimes like theft, assault, and killing. Kings and churchmen were fond of citing Roman law, since it posited a strong, central government rather than supporting local privileges and powers.

Saxon Law

Judging by the historical record, issuing legal codes was a favorite pastime of Saxon kings, amounting almost to an obsession in some cases. Perhaps it was a reaction to the years of anarchy between the Roman collapse and the establishment of stable Saxon kingdoms in England.

The details of pagan Saxon law can only be guessed at, but disputes were probably settled by an adjudicator such as a respected leader; the two parties would be supported by as many people as they could persuade to witness for them. Judgment would then have been rendered according to the nature of the crime, the number of witnesses on either side, and the reputations of the two parties involved.

Issuing legal codes was a favorite pastime of Saxon kings.

This kind of legal process would have resulted in an intolerable workload for a king, and the legal codes enabled others to pass judgment with the authority of the king. Laws varied widely over both time and distance, and in addition to the written laws there was a great mass of common practice and local custom which was handed down by word of mouth.

Legislation was enacted by the king and his council (or sometimes by the council acting with the king’s authority but without his participation) and put into final form by a member of the clergy. As has already been mentioned, the Church held a virtual monopoly on education and many priests were granted lands and offices because they were learned in the law. Disputes were conducted in a local assembly known as a folk-moot. Appeals were made directly to the king. By the 10th century, a shire-moot had been added above the folk-moot; at this time the folk-moot met every four weeks and the shire-moot twice a year. Such meetings probably coincided with fairs, markets, and other events which brought people in to a local meeting place.

Some nobles and landowners were granted the right to administer the law within their lands (and sometimes in other lands as well). They stood to make a great profit, not only from any fines they charged, but also from bribes. Several Saxon kings set penalties for officials who were influenced by bribery.

Wergild and Oath-Price

Wergild (literally “person-money”) was a Saxon legal concept, although the Vikings had an identical idea in mannbætr and it seems to have been an established part of northern European legal tradition.

Saxon law, like Viking law, provided that most crimes could be punishable by a fine, which was normally proportional to the social status of the victim. This was expressed in monetary terms by the wergild. Thus, someone guilty of unlawful killing might have to pay the victim’s kin a fine equal to the whole wergild.

Other crimes might carry a fine equal to a fraction of the wergild. The Saxon kingdoms had very precise laws...
governing which relatives were entitled to what proportion of a slain man’s wergild, and when it had to be paid.

As in Viking law, there was little provision for enforcement, and on many occasions it was necessary to resort to a feud if a slayer could not or would not pay the compensation. Many Saxon legal codes have complex rules governing the circumstances in which a feud was and was not allowed, and the rules by which a feud should be conducted. When a man was executed for a capital crime, his kin were normally required to take an oath that they would not seek vengeance or compensation for his death.

Related to wergild was the concept of oath-price. Just as a man himself had a certain value according to his social standing, so his oath had a certain value, which could be expressed in money or in hides of land. This was used in several ways.

Much of Saxon law revolved around the taking of oaths, and if there was doubt in a case, then victory went to the side which had the greater total value of oaths sworn in its favor. Sometimes, a defendant was required by a court to produce oaths to a certain value in order to clear his name. The value of a man’s oath determined the amount of the fine with which he could be punished if the case went against him – a man with an oath-price of 120 hides might be fined 120 shillings, for example.

Both wergild and oath-price varied through the Saxon period and from kingdom to kingdom. For gaming purposes, both wergild and oath-price can be treated as a function of Status, Reputation, and Wealth – total the number of points spent on these three things and multiply by 50 to find both a character’s wergild and the value of his oath, expressed in game dollars. Treat a negative total as zero.

Note that both wergild and oath-price will increase with any increase in Status, Reputation, and Wealth. A character with a negative Reputation, or one who is known to have committed perjury, will have no oath-price; his oath is worthless. His wergild will be as normal, but he will not be able to take oath on any legal matter until he somehow clears his name.

**Wolf’s Head**

If a man did not pay any required fines and compensation after losing a case – or if his kindred did not pay it for him – he became a “wolf’s head” or outlaw. He utterly lost the protection of the law, and anyone could kill him with impunity. Anyone who harbored him or took vengeance against someone who killed him was liable to heavy penalties. Only the king’s pardon could remove outlaw status.

**The Danelaw**

During the Viking rule of northern England, Scandinavian laws and legal processes were observed in the lands called the “Danelaw.” *GURPS Vikings* contains a fuller discussion of Viking law, but essentially it involved local and regional assemblies called things, where a body of magistrates would hear disputes and pass judgment according to laws which were handed down in an oral tradition. Witnesses and status were as important as they were in Saxon courts, but procedure was not as rigid.
TRIAL BY ORDEAL

As a last resort, a defendant might appeal for the right of a trial by ordeal. In effect, this was appealing the case to God, in the certainty that He would intercede on behalf of an innocent party. There were various ordeals, which were set according to the crime and the defendant:

**Cold Water:** The defendant’s thumbs were tied to his feet, and a rope was tied around his waist. He was then thrown in a convenient body of water. If he sank past a certain point marked by a knot in the rope (12 feet – or more, in some codes), he was innocent; if not, he was guilty. It was not uncommon for those proved innocent by the ordeal of cold water to drown in the process.

**Hot Water:** A stone was dropped into a pot of boiling water, and the defendant had to take it out. The depth of the water depended on the seriousness of the charge; wrist-deep and elbow-deep were common. Then the defendant’s arm was bandaged, and if it had healed after three days he was judged innocent.

**Hot Iron:** An iron rod was heated to glowing, and the defendant had to carry it in his hand while walking a distance of nine feet. The hand was bandaged and examined after three days as in the ordeal by hot water. In a variant, the defendant was blindfolded and had to walk barefoot over nine red-hot plowshares without injury. Used by nobles as an alternative to the “common” ordeal by hot water.

**Corsned:** Also known as parsned, this is ordeal by communion wafer. After swearing his innocence or the justice of his cause, the accused ate a wafer with a prayer that it might choke him if he lied. This ordeal was reserved for the clergy.

**Cross:** Two different ordeals share this name. In the first, the defendant was blindfolded and had to pick one of two wooden bars wrapped in wool. One had a cross carved under the wool, and denoted innocence; the other did not and denoted guilt. The second ordeal of the cross was reserved for the clergy. Both parties stood in front of the high altar of a church with their arms outstretched as if crucified. The first one to lower his arms lost the case. Clergymen could appoint champions to do this for them, to avoid compromising their dignity.

**Gaming Ordeals**

Here are some suggestions for gaming the various trials by ordeal. They are by no means the only ways of handling such matters, and GMs are welcome to come up with rules of their own if they wish.

**Cold Water:** To succeed, the defendant must make a Swimming roll at -4 to skill. Characters with the Fat disadvantage have a -5-point penalty instead of a 5-point bonus, as they are more prone to floating and the object of the ordeal is to sink. Apply drowning rules as normal.

**Hot Iron and Hot Water:** Base damage is 1d-3 for wrist-deep water, 1d-2 for elbow-deep water, and 1d-1 for hot iron. For the ordeal by hot water, damage is halved (round up) by a successful DX roll. Three days are allowed for healing, without medical care.

**Corsned:** A lot depends on the level of divine activity in the campaign. GMs can make what they like of this ordeal.

**Cross:** The first ordeal by the cross is a simple 50-50 chance. Characters may attempt an IQ-8 roll to judge by weight which bar bears the cross. Intuition and/or Luck could be useful here! The second ordeal by the cross requires each participant to make a ST roll once per number of minutes equal to his HT score. Each failed roll costs 1 fatigue point; when fatigue drops to 1, the person on trial can no longer hold his arms up. For a faster resolution, a simple Contest of Strength, modified by Strong Will and Weak Will, is satisfactory.

In a campaign where divine forces are active, die rolls may be further modified by true innocence or guilt. At the GM’s option, there may be no need to roll dice at all – perhaps the ordeals work exactly as the medieval authorities believed them to! Even in a campaign without divine intervention, a guilty party might have to take a penalty – perhaps based on IQ and modified according his belief in divine power (which is not the same as his piety!) – to represent his conscience working against him.

THE NORMAN PERIOD

The Norman rule of England started in 1066, when Duke William of Normandy defeated the Saxon Harold Godwinson at the Battle of Hastings and declared himself King of England. Precisely when it ended is a matter for scholastic debate, but the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 arguably marks the start of the High Middle Ages.

The Normans were descended from Vikings who had been granted land in western France (see GURPS Vikings); their name comes from the Old French Normand – “Northman.” Like the Romans, the Normans conquered the south of England fairly quickly, but took longer to subdue the rougher country of the north and west. After the conquest of England was completed, the Normans campaigned in Wales, Ireland, and the south of Scotland, but without lasting success. Apart from the conquest of Wales by Edward I, the boundaries of Norman rule lasted for most of the Middle Ages.

By now, the earlier idea of a noble warrior with a retinue had developed into the beginnings of feudalism. Society was a pyramid, with the king (and, theoretically, God) at the top and serfs at the bottom; everyone had a duty
Something Terrible Will Happen!

Perhaps the biggest problem surrounding the end of the first millennium was ignorance. The average person, when they counted the years at all, used regnal years (see p. 33) for dating. Even those who knew that a certain year was the 1,000th of the Christian Era had probably never heard of the Millennium, or made the connection between the year 1000 and the end of the world.

Among the clergy and other intellectuals, there was a general disagreement over which year actually marked the turning of the millennium. Was it 1000 or 1001? Was it the 1,000th anniversary of Jesus’ birth or death? For that matter, did the Anno Domini dating system start at Jesus’ birth, at his death, or at some other time, such as the start of Jesus’ ministry? Whenever it started, most scholars of the time agreed that the dating system was almost certainly inaccurate, so that there was no guarantee that the year 1000 actually was the 1,000th anniversary of Jesus’ birth, death, teaching, or any other event.

There wasn’t even any general agreement that the year 1000 (or whatever) was the same millennium that was foretold as marking the end of the world. Prophecies from a variety of sources – including the Old and New Testaments, ancient Hebrew texts, apocryphal sources of various kinds, and even astrology – were interpreted in different ways by different scholars, resulting in dates from the eighth to the 15th centuries.

The Black Death (see p. 34) and other events saw the founding of short-lived doomsday cults, such as the Flagellants, but these were mostly active on the mainland of Europe; England was mostly untouched by this kind of hysteria up until the time of the Reformation.

In the real medieval England, then, the year 1000 passed largely unmarked. But that doesn’t need to be the case in a roleplaying campaign.

Intellectual disagreements over the interpretation of ancient prophecies and obscure texts would be a perfect theme for an Illuminated medieval campaign. The PCs could be searching for lost prophetic scrolls (or stealing them from an opposing faction!), spreading false information (knowingly or unknowingly), or even protecting an influential scholar from jealous rivals.

Another fertile area for the Y1K problem is in satirical and silly campaigns. In 1999 and 2000, any number of satires and parodies appeared, set 1,000 years earlier and featuring anything from stone circles that suddenly stopped working (funny, but somewhat anachronistic), to the recalibration of every abacus in the world, to churchmen worried that Something Terrible Will Happen unless three syllables are added to every prayer in the missal. But which three syllables, and where?

The Church was a temporal power as well as a spiritual one. It had enormous wealth, widespread landholdings, and the service of many fighting men. It was practically the only source of education; advisers, ministers, lawyers, and estate managers were, if not churchmen, at least church-trained. The church legitimized the king’s position by anointing his head and with other religious elements in the coronation ceremony. The Church intimately touched every aspect of life. The calendar and clock were based on saint’s days and the time of services. Baptism, marriage, and death were solemnized by priests.
Norman England (1066-1215)

The Battle of Hastings won William the crown, but it took years of hard fighting to win the country. By the time the Domesday Book (a survey of England for tax purposes) was compiled in 1086, only two of the king's leading tenants were of English descent – the rest of the land-holding class were Normans. Saxon had become synonymous with peasant. England was ruled by a French-speaking nobility.

William I (The Conqueror) 1066-1087

William's conquest was helped by the disunity of the Saxon kingdom. Too many wars and dynasties had left little enthusiasm for a national rebellion. There were revolts, and even long-sustained guerrilla war, but the conflict was piecemeal, not concerted. But William also was the skillful user of a long-developed technique for subduing conquered territory – Normandy was not a peacable dukedom! He parcelled out the land to his nobles. They, in turn, shared it with their followers. At every critical point rose a castle; not towering stone walls as yet, but a wooden tower and stockade as a strongpoint for defense and a base for offensives. The castles were royal; it was a capital offense for a baron to build a castle without royal permission (an adulterine castle) and castle guard was one of the duties every landholder owed to the king. William had recruited his army from all over Europe with a promise of land and loot; he kept his word. He had the ruthlessness necessary for conquest. In 1070 he so devastated the Archbishopric of York (for rebellion) that much of it was still wasteland 16 years later, when the Domesday Book was compiled. He also had a shrewd understanding of his own nobility. In 1086 he required every landowner in England to swear fealty to the king, even in defiance of their immediate feudal overlords.

Saxon had become synonymous with peasant.

The Conqueror died in 1087, while leading a revolt against his feudal overlord, the King of France. He had grown fat, but never soft. During the taking of a town, his horse stepped on a burning ember and he was thrown against the cantle of his saddle. He died, probably of peritonitis, a few days later. His oldest son, Robert, inherited Normandy, and his second son, William Rufus (the Red, for his high-colored complexion) received England. This was the traditional division of lands among the Norman nobility. The continental properties were more valued. The English still don't like to admit this.
William II (Rufus) 1087-1100

Robert (nicknamed Curthose; he was short but tremendously strong) was a mighty fighter, at his best at the head of a cavalry charge. He was also a lazy drunkard and no match for William the Red.

William and Robert fought a few wars with each other, and each had trouble with baronial revolts. Robert went off crusading in 1096 and William took over both England and Normandy.

William was a ruler in the mold of his father. He appointed a Chancellor, Ranulf Flambard, who was a genius at thinking of new taxes. These helped finance the mercenaries who kept the barons in line. He also battled with the church over authority and money (especially with Anselm, Archbishop of Canterbury – philosopher, saint, and zealous defender of the primacy of Rome). He has a bad reputation; since it was written entirely by churchmen, there is some doubt of its merit.

In 1100, William II was hunting and was “shot by an arrow from among his own men,” an accidental death. Henry, the Conqueror’s youngest son, was coincidentally sitting on top of the treasury with an armed retinue. He was crowned as Henry I.

Henry I (Beauclerc) 1100-1135

Henry beat the barons into line. He defeated and confiscated all the lands of his richest and most powerful subjects, the great house of Belleme, in 1101. With a few other sharp lessons, this kept the barons quiet for his whole reign.

His brother Robert had came back from the First Crusade in 1101 with a claim on Normandy and England. Henry kept him dangling with promises. In 1106, Henry crossed to Normandy, defeated and captured Robert, and locked him away with an unlimited supply of wine and an invitation to drink himself to death. Robert had the family’s strong constitution and took 28 years to oblige.

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Henry was an able king, a good soldier, and a good administrator. He liked money, so he arranged for taxes to be collected regularly and accounted accurately. This may explain his nickname of “Beauclerc” – “the good clerk.” Both law and royal power were greatly regularized under Henry; for commoners this still usually meant exaction and oppression, but it was predictable exaction and oppression.

Henry married Edith, a descendant of the old line of Wessex kings (but changed her name to the good Norman Matilda). His heir and only legitimate son to survive childhood died in the wreck of the White Ship in 1120. Henry’s daughter, Matilda, had been married to the Holy Roman Emperor, then widowed. She is usually called the Empress. Henry married her to Geoffrey, heir to the County of Anjou (which borders Normandy). He required all the barons of England and Normandy to take oath of fealty to her and her issue as heirs to England. (Geoffrey of Anjou used a sprig of broom, planta genesta, as a helmet badge; this later gave a name, Plantagenet, to the dynasty.) The barons were not pleased with this oath. There had never been a ruling Duchess in Normandy or a ruling Queen in England.

Matilda was a forceful, intelligent woman, but not diplomatic. She did not fit the medieval ideal of female submissiveness, and would not pretend to it. It was no help that Anjou was the traditional enemy of Normandy.

Henry, in his later years, was a glutton with a particular fondness for eels. He overindulged and died, after an agonizing illness, on December 1, 1135.

Stephen 1135-1154

Stephen of Blois, Count of Boulogne, was a great landholder in France, Normandy, and England. His wife (Matilda) was descended from the Wessex kings; his mother was a daughter of the Conqueror. In his own right he was brave, a fierce fighter, and notably good-natured. When he declared for King, in violation of his oath to Matilda, there was overwhelming support and almost no opposition. His reign was a disaster.

Stephen had two tremendous faults as king; he was soft-hearted and open-minded. The barons of England and Normandy ran wild. They built unlicensed castles, made private wars and alliances, oppressed their own tenants and slaughtered those of their neighbors. (Killing serfs was the most effective form of medieval economic warfare; it starved out the enemy without permanently damaging the land.) The most notorious of the robber-barons was Geoffrey de Mandeville, Earl of Essex. His extortions, tortures, murders, and treasons drove even Stephen too far. In 1143 Stephen tried to remove Essex from his castles; this drove him to open revolt. Fortunately for Stephen, Essex died of fever a year later. Other barons did not push Stephen quite so far, unfortunately for their tenants.

The church also took advantage of Stephen’s weakness to assert its own power. The churchmen claimed the right to elect bishops and abbots, rather than accept royal appointments. They also claimed immunity from royal law; all servants of the church were subject only to church courts.

The Empress Matilda, her husband Geoffrey and their son Henry were constantly at war with Stephen. Geoffrey conquered all of Normandy and turned it over to Henry. (A very shrewd move; no pure Angevin [member of the House of Anjou] could have ruled the Normans, but a half-Norman was acceptable.) The Empress Matilda actually conquered England and captured Stephen once (1141) but was forced out by Stephen’s queen (Matilda). In 1152, young Duke Henry married Eleanor of Aquitaine (the annulled wife of the King of France and heiress in her own right to the richest provinces in Europe). In 1153, under truce, Henry made a tour of England and was greeted with enthusiasm by the nobility. The fun of stealing from Stephen was gone; now they wanted a strong king to guarantee them possession of their gains. When Stephen’s son, Eustace, died (suddenly and conveniently), Stephen lost heart and named Henry his heir. Stephen died a year later, of natural causes.
Henry II (Fitzempress) 1154-1189

Henry II came to the throne young, welcomed as the savior of England. He was also the wealthiest ruler in Europe. By the end of his reign, he was old, sick, and harried by civil war against his sons and wife. In between, he had one of the most glorious reigns of the Middle Ages. Henry was middle-sized, stocky, and notable as a slovenly dresser, looking more like a huntsman than a king. He had the mutable Angevin temper, going from geniality to screaming rage in an eyblink. He was energetic enough to drive his attendants and servants to distraction. Like all medieval courts, his was peripatetic. It was easier to move a lot of people to food than food to a lot of people. Besides, it gave the king a chance to look in on his barons, and a royal visit could so deplete local resources as to postpone any rebellion until stocks were back up. Henry moved faster and farther than other kings, and had a habit of changing his mind about destination and time of departure without prior warning. For roleplayers, this makes him a deus ex machina, liable to show up anywhere in England (or much of France) at any time.

Henry had no great gifts as a soldier or warrior, but was an able administrator, with a talent for picking competent and loyal subordinates. He was especially interested in law, pressing any legal point . . . especially any that increased royal power and revenue. Starting with the Assize of Clarendon, in 1166, Henry gradually extended royal courts to every part of England. He sent itinerant justices, with royal authority, to even the most remote villages and manors. Operating courts was extremely profitable, and Henry vastly increased royal income by expanding royal justice over that of local, baronial courts. Most litigants seemed to feel that royal justice was less partial and corruptible, as long as royal privilege was not involved. In royal courts, decision was based on evidence rather than on ordeal or combat. Less popular was the extension of the Forest Laws to much more land; Henry was a keen huntsman with no mercy for poachers.

Henry spent less than half of his long reign in England; his French lands by marriage and inheritance (more than half of modern France) were both richer and more threatened. He was fortunate in having a (usually) peaceful Scots border. He managed to buy peace with Wales (nominal submission) and rather unworldly King Louis VII (former husband of Henry’s queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.) There were skirmishing wars all through the reign (fertile fields for mercenaries and bandits). In 1173, Louis joined a motley alliance of Norman and English nobles, the King of Scotland, Welsh chiefs, and Henry’s wife and sons in a concerted attack on Henry. The unwieldy alliance collapsed in a year of clumsy fighting, but Henry had no peace from his family for the rest of his life. Louis VII died in 1180, leaving a young son on the throne. France and England had no more than skirmishes while the young king, Philip II, matured.

Eleanor of Aquitaine was another medieval woman who refused to fit the pattern of submission. She rode off on the Second Crusade with her first husband, Louis VII of France, to the scandal of church and laity (and husbands who only went on crusade to get away from their wives!). She bore more than a dozen children to two husbands. She was in and out of marriage, jail, love, war, and assorted trouble for all of a long life (1122-1204). She outlived both her husbands and all but one of her sons, and was still traveling Europe on horseback until the year of her death. She was a diplomat, intriguer, patron of artists, inspiration of knightly deeds, and center of whirlwinds. Romantics credit

“Benefit of Clergy”; Literacy might be a useful advantage for any rogue.

In 1162, King Henry appointed his chancellor and intimate friend, Thomas Becket, to be Archbishop of Canterbury. Becket, to the surprise of Henry and possibly himself, then became Henry’s bitterest and most effective clerical enemy. There were many points of conflict, but the final break was over Henry’s demand that clerics found guilty of criminal offenses by church courts should be handed over to royal courts for punishment (Council of Clarendon, January 1164). Becket refused, denounced the king, excommunicated anyone who would obey such laws, and fled to exile in France. (This was one of the periods when there were two rival popes, both of whom wanted Henry’s support, which complicated Becket’s problems.) There were great exchanges of words, but finally a strained reconciliation; Becket returned to Canterbury in 1170. Here he denounced Henry and Henry’s laws again. The king went into a foaming Angevin rage, screaming “Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?” Four knights of the king’s household went to Canterbury and slaughtered the archbishop before his own altar. Henry had to do a light penance and give up trying the clergy; he enjoyed papal support for the rest of his reign. Thomas Becket became a saint, and Canterbury became a popular site for pilgrimages, to the great profit of the local population.

Will no one rid me of this turbulent priest?

– Henry II, about Thomas Becket

Henry was the feudal subordinate to the King of France for all of his continental lands. He was also richer, more powerful, and infinitely craftier and greedier than the pious and rather unworlly King Louis VII (former husband of Henry’s queen, Eleanor of Aquitaine.) There were skirmishing wars all through the reign (fertile fields for mercenaries and bandits). In 1173, Louis joined a motley alliance of Norman and English nobles, the King of Scotland, Welsh chiefs, and Henry’s wife and sons in a concerted attack on Henry. The unwieldy alliance collapsed in a year of clumsy fighting, but Henry had no peace from his family for the rest of his life. Louis VII died in 1180, leaving a young son on the throne. France and England had no more than skirmishes while the young king, Philip II, matured.

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a mighty love, betrayed by Henry’s roving eye, for her rebellion. Cynics point to Henry’s attempts to diminish Eleanor’s power within her own rich and mighty province of Aquitaine.

Henry II had given land and titles to his elder sons. Brittany went to Geoffrey. Normandy, Anjou, and Maine went to young Henry (who was also crowned as King of England during his father’s lifetime, unprecedented for England). Richard got the governorship, and promise of full possession, of Aquitaine. This enfeoffed them to the King of France. However, Henry II had no intention of actually allowing his sons any control of these provinces while he lived.

After the rebellion of 1173-1174, Richard made peace, and actually was granted Aquitaine to rule in 1175. Young Henry retired to the French court, and died of a fever in 1183. Geoffrey had his brains kicked in at a tournament in 1186. He left a son, Arthur, who died in prison under mysterious circumstances during the reign of King John (see below). Eleanor was shut in prison and stayed there until Richard came to the throne. John, Henry’s youngest and favorite, joined the revolt eventually. Henry II died, old, tired, and discouraged, in 1189.

**Richard I (Coeur-de-Lion, Lionheart) 1189-1199**

Richard belongs more to European than to English history. He spent barely six months in England during his reign. Almost three years (1189-1192) were spent on crusade. Another two years were spent as a prisoner in Austria, until a mighty ransom was paid. (This has been the plot of many a Robin Hood tale.) The rest was spent fighting to defend and expand England’s continental lands, especially the rich towns and vineyards of Aquitaine and Gascony. Even Richard’s (childless) marriage, to Berengaria of Navarre, was to secure allies for the defense of the wealth of the south. Richard was killed fighting at Chaluz, in the south of France, in 1199. England, which was quiet, orderly, and paid its dues, was never much on his mind.

Richard was both a great warrior and a great soldier, master of medieval military tactics and technology. He never lost a battle in which he was in personal command. He preferred mercenaries and household knights, personally loyal to himself, to feudal hosts. He would be a good employer for adventurers, but merciless to traitors and failures.

Except for two brief periods (1192, to be crowned and raise money to crusade, and 1194, to put down John’s rebellion, confiscate money to fight in France, and be crowned again in case there was any doubt as to who was king) Richard stayed outside England.

**CRUSADES**

The Holy Land was an important place of pilgrimage for European Christians, who sought to prove their piety or atone for their sins by undertaking the journey to the places where Christ lived, preached, and died. Until the expansion of Islam wrested the Middle East from Byzantine control, it was possible to travel to the Holy Land from anywhere in Europe through lands which were entirely controlled by Christian rulers.

Jerusalem was a particularly important place of pilgrimage, since it was there that Christ spent the last few days before the Crucifixion. However, Jerusalem was also a sacred city to the Muslims, for it is from there that Mohammed ascended into heaven.

The First Crusade began in 1095, when Pope Urban II responded to an appeal for help from Byzantium by calling on all Christians to come to the aid of the Christian lands in the Middle East. Those who took part in the great Crusade were promised forgiveness of their sins, and many swore to fight the infidel, sewing a red cross on their clothing as proof of their vow.

The first Crusaders (“Peasants’ Crusade”) were more of an armed mob than a military expedition. Most of them had the idea they were to fight infidels, but weren’t sure exactly what infidels were. They massacred Jews, foreign Christians, and anyone strange as they passed through. The Emperor at Constantinople happily shipped them off to be slaughtered by the Turks.

In 1096, properly organized military expeditions set out. Initial successes were marred by internal squabbles, and many leaders tried to keep control of the cities and lands they reconquered from Islam, rather than returning them to the Byzantine emperor. Finally, in July 1099, they stormed Jerusalem.

A Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem was set up under the rule of Godfrey de Bouillon, Duke of Lorraine. Other leading nobles claimed lands elsewhere. The “Crusader kingdoms” formed a chain of city-states along the coast of Palestine. There were further major expeditions up to about 1270; most historians list seven Crusades total. Individuals and small groups came out to Palestine every year; they also count as Crusaders by law and custom. (So do those who fought the Moors in Spain, the Baltic pagans, the Albigenians, and assorted other infidels, if they had the blessing of the church.)

In 1187, the great Muslim leader Saladin retook Jerusalem. He and his successors destroyed the Crusader states; Acre, the last, fell in 1291.
John Lackland 1199-1216

John is another king with a bad reputation mostly based on the dislike of churchly chroniclers. John inherited Richard’s wars, with neither Richard’s military skill nor the money Richard had already spent fighting. His enemy, Philip II Augustus of France, was much more capable than the king Henry II had dealt with. In 1199 he had to face a revolt in the name of Arthur of Brittany, son of his dead brother Geoffrey. He lost the family possessions in northern France (hence his byname, Lackland) and the barons of England forced him to accede to the Magna Carta (see below). Anjou and Aquitaine were in revolt for most of the reign; only the efforts of his mother, Eleanor, held any of southern France for England. At one time, he had the whole kingdom under Papal interdict (no religious services, including baptisms and burials, allowed) for refusing to accept a Papal candidate as Archbishop of Canterbury (the result of the old family feud with the Church). He is a favorite villain of Robin Hood stories, with Richard as a benign deus ex machina.

Withal, John seems to have been a hard-working administrator, and no more of a tyrant than any Norman king. He managed to stay on top of events through a rough period, and leave his son a kingdom that still functioned.

The Magna Carta

The acceptance of the Magna Carta at Runnymede near Windsor in June, 1215 was an event of major historical importance — in many ways it was as important as the conquest in 1066 which had placed John’s ancestors on the throne of England. Some historians see it as the first step towards a constitutional monarchy. But this great document was not all that the barons had hoped, and in some ways it seems as though John might have outmaneuvered them.

The document was supposed to guarantee the rights of the barons; in fact, it grants the same rights to all free Englishmen, eroding the barons’ power as much as protecting it. And, it has been observed, there is no definitive text. Copies were made and distributed to every shire, and there are differences. No copy was filed in the king’s chancery, where a search might be made for a definitive text in the event of a dispute; the result is that, technically, parts of the Magna Carta are probably unenforceable in law. John was a capable and painstaking administrator, and it seems difficult to believe that these things were oversights on his part.

Feudalism

The feudal pyramid was never as neat in life as it was on parchment. The king was never truly supreme. He was limited by the power of the nobles, and then by the rise of the urban mercantile and craftsman classes. Not even the most powerful king had enough wealth or troops to rule absolutely.

The word feudal has a Latin root, from a word meaning treaty or agreement. The theory of feudalism was that the king owned the entire country, and granted estates in return for service. The most fundamental service was military, but the nobles were also administrators, jurists, and tax-collectors. The great nobles subdivided their estates in return for the same sort of service. At the bottom of the pyramid, serfs, bound to the land, paid with their labor for the protection and law provided by those above, all the way to the king. Although there were local variations, this kind of feudalism was widespread throughout medieval Europe.

Developed feudalism was a complete model for society. Everyone had a place in the divinely ordained scheme, with clearly defined duties and privileges.

God, of course, was the ruler of all, and Christ’s title was “King of Kings.” Everyone in Christendom owed loyalty and obedience to God, through the Church.

The King

The king ruled below God, making and enforcing royal law, judging disputes, and leading in war. The King of England was a great feudal magnate, with his own extensive lands and with knights directly enfeoffed. He was also a feudal subordinate through much of the Middle Ages, holding Normandy and other French lands as vassal to the King of France; this led to some delicate legal situations, which often turned military. The king’s demands of service were limited by law and custom, and could be somewhat different for every tenure. Military service, for instance, was usually limited to 40 days per year, and could not be required for service outside the kingdom. Later kings often preferred to commute the service for a cash payment, and use the money to hire mercenaries.

The Nobles

Each noble ruled his own land. In theory, he held the land only as long as he served the king; in fact, fiefs became hereditary almost as soon as feudalism developed.

Although obliged to uphold the king’s laws, a great noble could make other, noncontradictory laws, hear cases, and dispense justice in his own domain (demesne in Norman French). He was charged to keep the peace, so the serfs could keep producing the food on which all depended. Nobles granted land by subinfeudation to lessernobles and to commoner farmers in return for labor, military service, and a share of the crops. The process of subinfeudation could go all the way down to a single knight’s fee: a drafty two-story tower, a handful of serfs, an aging warhorse, a rusty mail shirt, and the gnawing worry of providing horse and arms for his sons and dowry for his daughters.

The most powerful nobles were almost absolute rulers.

Just what a noble could do to make money and not disgrace his class was a matter for debate. Consensus said, for instance, that he could not keep a tavern and sell by the drink, but he could sell, by the barrel, ale brewed on his estate. The most powerful nobles were almost absolute rulers, with hundreds of troops, thousands of serfs and free tenants, and castles and walled towns at their command.
The least powerful struggled desperately to stay noble at all, and not sink to the level of simple freemen.

In England, the rule of primogeniture usually meant that all of an estate went to the eldest son. Originally, this was so that estates could not be carved up into pieces too small to provide the necessary fighting men. The chief side effect of this policy was a population of younger sons, trained for war but without lands to support themselves. They were good recruits for mercenary companies, but were also prone to banditry, rebellion, and adventure.

The Commoners

The commoners consisted of freemen and serfs. Serfs were the very bottom of the social heap, and were little more than slaves. Serfs were bound to the land and could not leave their lord’s estate. If the estate changed hands, the serfs changed hands as well. Freemen held land in return for rent, usually paid in labor and a share of the crop rather than money. In return for the protection and justice offered by their lord, they worked the fields and paid taxes, and took the battlefield as peasant levies when required. Freemen owed the king military service, for 40 days a year, and taxes. Serfs did not. Freemen could leave the estate, appeal to the king’s justice against manor courts and keep and bear arms. Serfs could not. Which condition was happier is a matter of temperament.

Feudal Law

Under the Normans, the lord of the manor heard all cases regarding people or events on his lands.

Royal justice was the province of sheriffs, appointed by the king. The Saxon folk-moots and shire-moots survived as “hundred” and “shire” courts, run by sheriffs (from the Saxon shire-reeve). They could hear appeals from the manor courts as well as original cases. In most instances, leave was required from the manor court to appeal to the hundred or shire court; this must have kept complaints to a minimum. Serfs had no rights to the king’s justice at all; the king’s courts were only for freemen.

Disputes over the ownership of land were settled by the Grand Assize, a court which was specially convened for each case. Twelve knights, of the shire where the disputed land lay, were chosen to decide whose claim was greater. Knights of the king’s household were sometimes sent to assess the health of summoned jurors who pleaded illness or infirmity.

Knights also served in the king’s courts, which were present in many large towns by the reign of King John. The judges often made a circuit from one court to another, beginning and ending at Westminster.
Oaths of Loyalty

The feudal order was maintained by oaths of allegiance. Even now, it is common for the nobility of Britain to make oaths of allegiance to the monarch at various times – coronation, for example, and upon receiving admission into a knightly order or some other honor, although these occasions have become purely ceremonial.

As a rule of thumb, a character might be required to swear allegiance to the monarch (or to his feudal superior, as appropriate for the circumstances) on much the same occasions as an American citizen might pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States, sign a contract pledging loyalty and obedience to an employer, or swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth in a court or other government office.

To the 20th-century mind, an oath seems a very slight guarantee on which to base a whole social system, but it should be remembered that these oaths were taken before God. In the medieval mind, it was accepted as fact that God would punish an oathbreaker, just as He would surely provide a miracle when an innocent person underwent trial by ordeal (see p. 12). Of course, this did not prevent oaths from being broken, just as contracts and treaties are broken today, but a feudal oath of allegiance was the most sacred promise a medieval person could make – which may explain why medieval punishments for treason were among the most imaginative and gruesome legal sanctions in history.

Problems

In its theoretical and idealized form, feudalism was a force for stability. Everyone was born into a certain station in life, and had a well-defined set of duties and rights. A good person need only keep his place, perform his duties diligently, and repent of his sins in order to enter Heaven. However, it was the stability of idealized feudalism which proved its downfall, by denying upward social mobility and the recognition of individual talent and effort.

The stability of idealized feudalism proved its downfall.

For the nobility, to keep one’s place meant to be forever within sight of power but out of reach of it; most dynastic changes began with weak kings and able, ambitious nobles. Society relied upon the goodwill of everyone involved to make feudalism work; a commoner with a complaint about his lord might theoretically be able to appeal to the king, but would probably have to go through his lord in order to do so.

The feudal ideal was never attained by medieval society, although some periods came closer to it than others. Given human nature, it probably could never have been attained. But its divinely ordered stability and tranquility has exerted a strong pull on the European mind throughout the centuries, and chivalric romances from the 14th century to the 19th were celebrations of what ideal feudalism could have been.
A knight’s training began in adolescence – as did an apprenticeship for almost any trade – and continued to the age of 21, when the young knight was seen as reaching the full strength needed to wield knightly weapons. This was regarded as the age of maturity in much of Europe and the European-influenced world well into the 20th century.

The young men and boys who went to noble houses to train as knights were from the higher ranks of society. Some were the eldest sons, and needed training in all the skills needed to run the fief they expected to inherit. Younger sons, who could expect no inheritance, might go into the Church if they were academically inclined, but many trained as knights and sought places in other noble households. They flocked to almost any adventure in the hope of riches and – more important – lands to call their own. The core of William the Conqueror’s invasion force was made up of such men.

**Orders of Knighthood**

The Crusades saw the founding of the first holy orders of knighthood. Organized in a similar way to monastic religious orders, these orders – including the Knights Templar, the Knights Hospitaller, and the Teutonic Knights – took the place of a household knight’s lord and king. The Templars acknowledged no authority but that of the Pope – and, like modern-day multinational corporations, these orders of knighthood worried many of the monarchs in whose lands they operated. Some kings instituted chivalric orders of their own, such as the Orders of the Garter and the Bath in England, and the Order of the Golden Fleece in Burgundy.

As feudalism developed, its virtues of obedience and duty were fossilized in place. The nobility began to cultivate “culture” as well as martial virtues, paying attention to the arts and the scriptures. The ideal man of this period was not unlike the ideal samurai of Tokugawa Japan – a fierce warrior, a sensitive poet and musician, and a man of spiritual wisdom. This concept was extended and further idealized by later, romanticized views of the Middle Ages.

**Saxons and Normans**

After the conquest, Normans replaced nearly the whole of the ruling class, and Saxons were regarded as second-class citizens. Even today, the Saxon title of earl stands below the Norman title of duke on the ladder of English nobility. The Norman rule may not have been as oppressive as Robin Hood legends would have us believe, but it was certainly firm.

Norman French became the language of the court and the administration, although Latin was still used for legal and religious purposes. Either way, English-speaking Saxons were at a disadvantage. Because almost all of the documents that survive from this period were written by – or at the behest of – Normans, there is little direct evidence for discrimination against Saxons, although there are telling entries scattered throughout legal records. A ruling affirming the right of free Saxons to trial by combat in legal proceedings against Normans, for example, indicates that at least sometimes this right was withheld.

Although feudalism was not specifically intended to be an instrument of racial oppression, it frequently had that effect. With the almost wholesale replacement of the Saxon ruling classes by Normans, those at the bottom of the feudal order were inevitably Saxons; they went from a fairly egalitarian system – in theory, at least – to one in which their rights were tightly controlled and their obligations were rigidly enforced.

**Lunch and Linguistics**

The Norman period was the first time (of several) that French elements entered the basically Germanic English language. Even today, some intriguing clues can be found embedded in the language, showing a little of how things were in Norman England. Consider this: many names of domestic meat animals (cow, sheep, swine) are French in origin. The names of their meat (beef, mutton, pork) are French in origin. Does this imply that Saxons raised the animals and Normans ate them?

**The Church and the Crusades**

The Church was the great avenue to power for the humbly born; any freeman could aspire to a rank in the monasteries or the secular church. Anyone in the church who was not in monastic orders was part of the “secular” church; this included almost everyone who could read and keep accounts and thus was vital to administration.

Since God was theoretically at the top of the feudal order (see p. 18), the Pope, as his deputy on Earth, was the foremost ruler of Christendom. He had the power to excommunicate anyone, from serf to king, cutting them off from divine grace and condemning them irrevocably – at least, according to medieval belief – to the fires of Hell. More important – at least in political terms – he could call a crusade against any land or ruler who seemed to be getting out of line.

Not all the Crusades were fought in the Middle East against Muslims: one of the bloodiest was the Albigensian Crusade of 1208-1229, which was fought in the south of France against heretics and suspected heretics. Coincidentally – or perhaps not – it enriched and strengthened the King of France at the expense of his often-troublesome southern nobles.

The Church was also active on a smaller scale, inside individual kingdoms. For most of the Middle Ages it had an almost complete monopoly on learning, and churchmen traveled widely as tutors and advisers to the courts of Europe’s kings. Bishops were treated as nobles, and in Britain they still have the parliamentary rank of Lords Spiritual.
To harm any member of the clergy was to invite the wrath of the entire Church – reaching all the way to Rome – and according to their individual inclinations, clergy could garner great power and influence. Some could provide a means of bypassing the normal feudal chain of command with complaints and problems. Although the character of Friar Tuck is probably fictional, it is known that certain of the clergy – especially the friars, who were sworn to poverty and moved among the common people – could champion the cause of the oppressed and take complaints to high places.

The Church was more active in reinforcing feudal stability than in championing the lower classes, however. A more detailed discussion of the Church is found on pp. 39-40.

Kings and Barons

The Norman kings kept on the move. William I held three great feasts each year: Easter was celebrated at Winchester, the old capital of Saxon Wessex; Whitsuntide was spent at Westminster, then on the outskirts of London; and Christmas was celebrated at Gloucester. Between these festivals, the King spent a great deal of time traveling throughout the kingdom on what would become known as the Royal Progress – a tradition that would last well into Tudor times.

The Royal Progress enabled the King to stay in touch with what was going on throughout the kingdom, and to be seen by his subjects, serf and noble alike. It saved the economic demands that a permanent court would have made on its surrounding areas – and, cynical historians assert, drained the resources of the hosting nobles to the point where they could ill afford to support a rebellion. No one could be seen to be lacking in hospitality toward the King, after all.

The more powerful nobles also traveled a great deal. The King always took care to ensure that the lands of his most influential retainers were spread widely throughout the land rather than being concentrated in one area; this ensured that no ambitious noble could easily establish a power base in one region without leaving many of his lands vulnerable.

The High Middle Ages

The High Middle Ages lasted approximately from the signing of the Magna Carta in 1215 to the battle of Bosworth in 1485. It was marked by a dynamic tension in the balance of power among king, church, and nobility, which was to lead eventually to the Wars of the Roses in the middle to late 15th century. It was also a period of increasing urbanization, and saw the rise of the merchant class and the trade guilds as powerful factions.

The High Middle Ages is most people’s idea of the Middle Ages. It was the age of soaring cathedrals, great castles, and walled, half-timbered towns. There was enough regular traffic to support the kind of inns where a hot pot simmered endlessly on the fire and mysterious strangers sat at shadowed tables. It was an age when there were more sheep than men, and English wool was traded from Norway to Constantinople. The church was at its most powerful and pervasive . . . and at its most troubled. Weak and strong kings alternated, nobles and churchmen intrigued, merchants wiggled to wealth through the cracks of feudalism. This was the age of plate armor and the longbow, of Crecy, Agincourt, and Bannockburn. It was the age of Chaucer and Malory, of the Black Death and the revival of learning, of black powder and stained glass.
1263 the rivalry became open war. The great leaders of the barons were the Simon de Montforts, father and son. The de Montforts were great nobles in both England and France. The older Simon’s father, also Simon, had taken a major part in the massacre and dispossession of the Albigensian heretics in southern France. Simon de Montfort the elder is credited with originating English parliaments. In 1265 he summoned representatives of all the shires and boroughs to a single meeting – the French word “parlement” simply means “discussions.”

King Henry was defeated and captured at Lewes on May 14, 1264; the elder de Montfort kept him as a puppet ruler, but de Montfort was virtual ruler of England. Prince Edward, Henry’s oldest son, escaped to the west of England to raise an army. In the summer of 1265, both de Montforts marched against Edward. In one of the most brilliant campaigns of the Middle Ages, Edward defeated and killed both de Montforts and restored his father. Henry reigned, in name, for seven more years, but Edward was the real ruler.

The great social change of Henry’s reign was the expansion of large-scale sheep farming and the large-scale wool trade in England. This had repercussions in every field of life; more and better food (milk, cheese, meat), more money, more jobs in towns, more opportunity for commoners to rise in the world, more parchment for record keeping, and more leisure (for instance, for archery practice). It was the beginning of the great trade in wool, cloth, and wine that bound Flanders, Gascony, and England in opposition to France.

**Edward I Longshanks 1272-1307**

Edward I was another of the great kings; warrior, soldier, administrator, legislator, judge. He had ruled, in all but name, during the last years of his father’s reign. His talent for picking loyal and effective subordinates was so great that he could afford to go off crusading in Palestine from 1270 to 1272. He was still overseas when he received the news of his father’s death. His administration was so sound that he was able to deal with continental business for almost two years (swearing fealty to France for the French lands, dealing with their administration, organizing some diplomatic intrigues) before returning to England for his coronation in 1274.

Edward adopted the practice of calling “parliaments.” The word still meant discussions, and the composition of the bodies was different for every occasion, but it did mean that the king sought at least the support, and sometimes the advice, of some of his subjects for important affairs. In 1295, he called a parliament (he needed support and money for French and Scottish wars) that included representatives of the clergy, the barons, two knights from every county, and two representatives of every town and borough. This was as near as medieval England came to a representative assembly; it has been called a “Model Parliament,” establishing the features of modern English government.

As a soldier, Edward was a master at combined tactics using mounted and dismounted armored fighters and lightly equipped archers. He may have introduced, and certainly encouraged, the great development of archery that was an English specialty for the rest of the Middle Ages. He conquered Wales in campaigns from 1282-1284 (and gave his eldest son the title Prince of Wales, a custom still followed by the English monarchy). In 1290, he intervened in Scotland. The direct royal succession had failed and there were 12 claimants to the throne. Edward chose the new king, John Baliol, in return for recognition of English overlordship. In 1295, King John of Scotland quarreled with Edward and made a treaty with France. Edward declared John forfeit and claimed the throne of Scotland for himself. Edward’s invasion, in 1296, began a long war in which Edward won almost every battle. Despite devastation and massacre, as well as the capture and execution by torture of the Scottish leader, Sir William Wallace, he could not stop a succession of Scots rebellions and a continuous guerrilla war.

Edward was simultaneously at war with France (1294-1303) over Gascony. He was never able to give full attention to either front, lost Gascony, but got it back by a negotiated peace in 1303. Edward died in 1307, while marching north for another campaign in Scotland.

Edward was an intriguing character. He was tall (hence the byname), handsome, and strong: the image of a king. He seems to have been both clever and wise. In his younger days, he had both politic patience and a streak of geniality, but he could not stand to be crossed in important matters. In his elder years, his patience seems to have evaporated.
Edward II 1307-1327

Edward II was a weak and unpopular king, and his reign was marked by plots and rebellions. He had a weakness for playing favorites; gossip accused him of homosexuality. In the early years, the favorite was a handsome and extravagant Gascon, Piers Gaveston, who had been a childhood friend. Gaveston was several times forced into exile by baronial pressure, but always returned. In 1312, Gaveston surrendered himself to a baronial force under terms guaranteeing his life, but the barons killed him anyway. Edward was never in a position to avenge his friend, but he never forgave the barons, and they knew of his hatred.

Robert the Bruce united Scotland and routed Edward at the Battle of Bannockburn (June 24, 1314). This further lowered Edward’s standing.

Edward’s new favorite was Hugh Despenser the younger. He was another friend from childhood, and a more forceful and tactful man than Gaveston. Eventually, Despenser’s push for power alienated too many of the barons. There was a repetition of the pattern of exile and return. The situation was further complicated by a break
between Edward II and his queen, Isabella (a daughter of the King of France). She was living in the English possessions in France, with her son (heir to the throne) and her lover, Roger Mortimer. The French had once more taken Gascony from a weak English king; Isabella was negotiating for an end to the French war and a return of Gascony to the English king as a fief of France. In September of 1326, Isabella and Roger Mortimer landed in England with a force of mercenaries. They were joined by most of the barons. Edward’s forces were defeated and his partisans, including both Despensers, were slaughtered. Edward himself was taken prisoner and forced to abdicate in favor of his son, Edward III. In September of 1327, Edward, formerly King of England, died in prison “of natural causes.” There were persistent rumors that Edward had escaped and was still living; they are the same sort of rumors that were spread about Harold Godwinson, Prince Arthur, Edward V, and, for that matter, Adolf Hitler and John Kennedy.

Christopher Marlowe’s play Edward II gives a sensationalized account of his reign. Edward was almost certainly murdered – according to gossip, the means was a red-hot poker applied with a medieval sense of the appropriate.

As was common under a weak king at this time, banditry and other lawlessness became rife. Some scholars believe that the tales of Robin Hood are actually based on events in the reign of Edward II rather than those of Richard I and John; the stories were set over a century in the past, it is said, partly to invest them with an air of romance and partly to avoid the accusations of treason which would almost certainly have been leveled against such tales if they had been given a contemporary setting.

**Edward III 1327-1377**

Edward III was a boy of 14 when he took the throne. The country was actually controlled by his mother, Queen Isabella, and her lover, Mortimer. Mortimer had the usual fate of royal favorites. He increased his wealth and power to an extent that frightened the barons. Edward married Phillipa, daughter of the Count of Hainault (in Flanders) in 1328. In 1330, she produced a son, also christened Edward. A party of young nobles, allies of the king, stormed the royal apartments at midnight and arrested Mortimer. Within a month, a special Parliament executed Mortimer, stripped Isabella of all but her dower lands, and banished her from court. She lived until 1358, a bitter woman eager for revenge against her son and his supporters.

Edward was 18 years old when he announced that he had taken over the government. He was a great king of chivalry, consciously modeling himself on the heroes of romance. He loved war and the hunt, tournaments and banquets, poetry, fine clothes, and beautiful women. Government existed to provide funds and troops so he could indulge these pleasures. A working majority of his subjects agreed; war was not only the greatest sport, but the road to personal wealth and power from loot and ransoms. Edward won great victories – Halidon Hill (1333) against the Scots; Sluys (1340), Crecy (1346), and Poitiers (1356) against the French – but he could never organize and administer conquered territory. His wars were merely giant raids, ever searching for unlooted towns and prisoners to ransom. They were the delight of mercenaries and the joy of chivalric chroniclers (such as Froissart) but a little hard on the country and people. Since the wars were mostly fought on somebody else’s farm, they remained popular in England. Most raids against England were by the Scots, and Scots raiding was only to be expected; the king was not blamed.

The Black Death struck England in 1347, and killed perhaps a third of the population. It returned several times in the next few years. Some of the pious thought the end of the world was at hand, but the plague hardly affected Edward’s wars in France.

In 1360, Edward renounced his claim to the French throne (through his mother Isabella, sister of Charles IV of France), and accepted Calais, Ponthieu, and Aquitaine as well as a vast ransom for the captured King John of France. It proved difficult to secure these territorial gains, however.

In 1367, Edward’s son, Edward the Black Prince, invaded Castile in support of King Pedro the Cruel, but at great cost. The army was ravaged by dysentery, the Prince’s health was broken and King Pedro died soon afterward. The only lasting effects were the depletion of English resources and the creation of another enemy in Spain. Aquitaine revolted after taxation was raised to cover the cost of the Spanish expedition. France threatened Edward, who promptly renewed his claim to the French throne, and the war gathered momentum once more.

Things were turning against England. The glories of Crecy and Poitiers were past, and France had developed hit-and-run tactics and avoided pitched battles. Charles V was a much abler king than his predecessors, while Edward III was aging and the Black Prince was in indifferent health. England resented paying taxes for inconclusive campaigns, and in France determination to expel the English was constantly growing, fueled by English reprisals such as the Black Prince’s destruction of Limoges in 1370. When Edward III died in 1377, all that remained of his conquests in France were the four fortified towns of Calais, Brest, Bordeaux, and Bayonne.

**Richard II 1377-1399**

The Black Prince had died a year before his father, and his oldest son succeeded Edward at the age of 10, as Richard II. The government was once more in the hands of the nobles, and several strong factions had grown up during the discontent at the inconclusive French wars. Prominent in one of the factions was the new king’s uncle, the Black Prince’s younger brother John of Gaunt.

England was exhausted by the cost of the wars in France, and was powerless to stop the navies of France and Castile taking complete command of the English Channel and the surrounding waters. England was effectively cut off from its few remaining French possessions, and they were probably only saved by the deaths in 1380 of Charles V and his able Constable, Bertrand de Guesclin. Like Richard, the new French king Charles VI was still a boy, and France was soon paralyzed by infighting among his uncles.
There was fresh trouble with Scotland as well as the loss of the Channel, and a parliament was called and asked to levy fresh taxes. But the parliament represented the property-owning classes which would be most affected by renewed taxation. They were reluctant to fund a series of campaigns which were not assured of success. In 1380, therefore, a poll tax was introduced.

The name of the tax means “head tax,” and the tax was levied equally on everyone in the land. Since it took no account of an individual’s ability to pay, the tax favored the landowners while pressing hardest on the poor. Combined with a series of moves (such as a law forbidding laborers to ask more money for work, or artisans more for goods, than before the plague) the result was the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. The revolt was crushed, but at great cost to the king’s standing with his subjects.

**ILLUMINATED PEASANTS**

One of the more persistent conspiracy theories has its origin in the persecution of the Templars. The idea that the Templars were not suppressed, but simply driven underground, has produced a sizable body of literature, most of it bizarre.

One theory is that the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381 was in fact a rising of underground Templars. One of the leaders of the revolt was a mysterious figure named Walter, or Wat, Tyler. Tyler is a very uncommon English name for the period; the trade of tile-making was almost unknown. *Tailleur* however, is a perfectly good medieval French word, meaning *cutter*. In Masonic ritual, the man who stands at the door of a lodge to keep outsiders outside is a Tiler. He is armed with a ceremonial sword. Since, as all good conspirationalists know, the Mosons are the descendants of the Templars, then Wat the Tyler must have been an underground Templar! Why the Illuminati failed – if indeed they did fail – in this blatant attempt to seize England is a matter for further investigation.

Richard opposed the continuation of the war with France, since it weakened the king’s position at home and brought poverty and disorder to the realm. Like others before him, though, he was caught in the classic medieval dilemma – the cost of discontinuing the war was the certain loss of any holdings in France, more unpopularity, and a possibly fatal reputation as a weak monarch.

Richard’s opposition to the war brought him into conflict with the nobles, who saw his opposition as a threat to their power and prestige. In 1386 they ordered the king to dismiss his chief ministers, some of whom were imprisoned. When he continued to resist, they accused him of cowardice and betraying England’s interests and raised a revolt, led by his youngest uncle, Thomas, Duke of Gloucester. Richard was short of money and many of his friends and supporters had already been removed. He was defeated in 1387, and at a parliament the next year the rebels forced the king to reward them and their friends, while exiling or imprisoning most of his own supporters.

But the rebels’ victory was short-lived. Their mismanagement led to an English defeat by the Scots at Otterburn in 1388, and it became known that, despite their loud disapproval of the king’s desire for peace, they had been negotiating with France. Their taxation produced no results, and people were still offended by the sight of a king who was not allowed to govern.

Richard kept his head down and concentrated on rebuilding alliances and influence. He drew closer to his uncle John of Gaunt, the Duke of Lancaster, using him to balance Gloucester. His second marriage was to the daughter of Charles VI of France; while there were howls of protest in some quarters, the marriage came with a promise from Charles to help Richard at need, against his own subjects if necessary. It also ended a great drain on the country’s finances, for England and France were now at peace. He also mended fences with the Vatican; anti-papal legislation earlier in his reign had offended the Pope, as had his alliance with France, which had set up a Pope of its own at Avignon. Even so, the Pope of Rome was easily reconciled, probably for fear of losing England as well as France to Avignon.

By 1397, Richard was ready. Gloucester and his allies were arrested for treason, and the parliament where they tried found itself surrounded by troops wearing Richard’s personal badge, the white hart. Richard was back in charge.

With the threat of Gloucester removed, Richard found himself alone with the disturbingly powerful house of Lancaster. He found an excuse to exile John of Gaunt’s son, Henry. When John of Gaunt died in 1399, Richard refused Henry’s inheritance and banished him for life. Richard then set off to pacify Ireland, which was in its usual disturbed state.

Henry of Lancaster, a famous knight and veteran commander, landed in the north of England. He gathered a number of dissatisfied northern lords, especially the Percies of Northumberland, to his banner. They took England before Richard’s less-than-competent supporters could organize their forces.

Henry promised that Richard would remain king if the inheritance of Lancaster were restored, so Richard surrendered rather than attempting an escape. He was imprisoned in the Tower, and an alleged document of abdication was read out. Henry assumed the throne. In 1400, Richard’s few remaining supporters revolted. Richard then died, abruptly and conveniently, of natural causes.

**Henry IV** 1399-1413

The early years of his reign were difficult; he had deposed Richard for autocratic high-handedness in raising money from parliament. He dared not do the same – but those who had supported him expected rewards, and the financial and administrative problems of the country had not gone away. As resentment of Richard faded, disillusionment with Henry took its place.

There were problems with both Scotland and France. The Welsh rose under Owen Glyndŵr, a great guerrilla chief and reputed wizard, who allied himself with both...
Scotland and Henry’s former allies, the Percies of Northumberland. Henry managed to prevent the allies from linking up by defeating the Scots and Northumbrians at Shrewsbury in 1403, but Owen promptly made an alliance with France. Like Richard, Henry did not control the Channel. He relied on privateers, whose excesses led him into disputes with Brittany, Flanders, and the Hanseatic League, all of which harmed England’s overseas trade. Meanwhile, the French ravaged the south coast and sent an expedition to Wales in 1405 to help the rebels. Northumberland revolted again, and it was three years later, in 1408, that Henry finally crushed the rebels and began to restore order.

By this time, Henry’s son, the Prince of Wales, was turning the tide against Owen Glyndwr, who had lost the support of France. The French king Charles VI was suffering from prolonged bouts of insanity, and in-fighting among the French nobility led to civil war. Both sides negotiated with Henry for support. Henry did not want to get involved; he had enough problems at home. But the Prince of Wales took a small force to support one faction, the Armagnacs. Henry recalled this force, but the Armagnacs responded by offering him Aquitaine in exchange for England’s support. Henry sent a force to help them in 1412, but the expedition failed when the Armagnacs changed sides. Henry had been in bad health since 1408, and he died in 1413.

**Henry V** 1413-1422

When Henry IV died, England stood on the brink of more turmoil. His second son, Thomas, Duke of Woodstock, was supported by a faction of nobles and had always been a rival of the Prince of Wales, who was crowned Henry V.

Henry came to the throne full of self-confidence. His campaigns against Owen Glyndwr in Wales had been a success, as had his forays into the weakened France. The same year he was crowned, Henry asserted his claim to the French throne. Negotiations dragged on for two years, but Henry was not committed to a peaceful solution; he had seen the weakness of France and dreamed of uniting England and France under his own rule, then leading them together to liberate Jerusalem. The negotiations only bought time to prepare.

Although the country rallied to the call for a war of conquest in France, Henry did not have the unequivocal support of the nobility, as was revealed by the exposure of a plot against him on the eve of his crossing the Channel. Conditions in England had scarcely improved, with widespread lawlessness and a great deal of raiding on both the Welsh and Scottish borders. A major heresy, Lollardy (see p. 41) was also in open revolt; Henry was a devoutly orthodox Catholic and used the full rigor of stake and rope against them.

Henry’s expedition was carefully planned, and he proved himself a master of organization and tactics. Harfleur fell after four weeks of siege, and he marched on Calais, despite his army being ravaged by dysentery. The French tried to block his way with a much larger force at Agincourt, but Henry chose a position between two woods, which made the most of English numbers while causing the French forces to hamper themselves. The French command was divided among nobles with little military experience who were torn by internal dissension, while Henry had the sole command and complete confidence of a seasoned army. The proven English combination of archers and footmen won the day as it had at Crecy and Poitiers, almost 80 years before.

English casualties were reckoned at around 500 from Henry’s force of 2,000 footmen and 6,000 archers. France, on the other hand, lost 7,000 men, including much of the nobility. Henry was too weak to do much more than stagger back to Calais, but the political implications of the battle were enormous. Henry had proved himself a soldier king of great stature, and England was once more a force to be reckoned with in Europe.

Henry’s second campaign in France began in 1417 after long and careful preparations. There were no more brilliant victories comparable to Agincourt; this was hard, steady siege work, reducing towns one by one. In 1419 the Duke of Burgundy was murdered by followers of the Dauphin Charles. (Dauphin was the title of the heir to the French throne, as Prince of Wales was the title of the English heir.) This led to an alliance between Burgundy, England, and the French queen, who had repudiated the Dauphin. By the Treaty of Troyes in 1420, Henry and his heirs were to rule France after the death of Charles VI. But the Treaty of Troyes was not accepted by most of France, and expenses in ruling conquered territories added to the expense of new campaigns. England was in serious financial trouble.

Henry contracted dysentery in the winter of 1421-1422 and died in August that year, aged 35. He was remembered as the ideal warrior-king, but it would be some time before England was free of the financial problems caused by his campaigns. It has been said that he was fortunate to die before these problems came to light.
England and France would have fought anyway; they had for 300 years and would for another 500. But the official excuse that kept them in a series of conflicts for 116 years was the claim of the English kings to the throne of France. Edward III’s mother was the eldest surviving child of the direct line of Capetian kings when Charles V of France died in 1328; there had never been a ruling queen in France and it was accepted that there could not be. Edward asserted that the claim to the throne, however, passed through her to her male issue. The French nobility disputed this, insisting (the “Salic Law”) that such title could not pass through the female line; Phillip VI became the first king of the Valois dynasty. For 116 years, from the Sluys campaign to the Battle of Castillon in 1453, the English contested for France. At times they held a great deal more than the French king, but the French always came back. In the end, England held only the port of Calais and a few square miles around it.

The English won most of the battles, but decisively lost the war. At first, they had a significant tactical advantage. They had more and better archers, and much better coordination of archers with cavalry and armored infantry. Almost to the end, if the English could set up a good defensive position, preferably with stakes or a hedge to protect the archers, and lure the French into a head-on attack, they had an excellent chance to win. Fortunately, the French were prone to head-on attacks against fortified archers.

For the early part of the war, the English also had a better method of raising armies: military contracting. Powerful nobles got a contract from the king to raise an armed force, and subcontracted to lesser captains, who hired individual fighters. Pay was fairly regular, food as well-supplied as possible, and the potential for loot was enormous. Many of these contractors went on to be straight-out mercenaries, the “free companies” that devastated France and held the Pope for ransom.

The French triumphed first by guerrilla warfare, avoiding massed battles but giving the English a country impossible to govern. Then, as is frequently the case, the side that was behind in one technological change was ahead in the next. The French were more than a century ahead of the English in the adoption of gunpowder, pikes, and a regular national army.
Henry VI 1422-1461

Henry VI was nine months old when he came to the throne, and once again the nobles seized the opportunity to rule. Henry’s uncle, Humphrey, Duke of Gloucester, wanted to be named Regent and rule as monarch until Henry came of age. The nobles opposed him. Having just lost one strong master in Henry V, they had no wish to gain another.

Gloucester was named Protector, but the real power lay with a council of nobles. This council had full royal power, filled its own vacancies, and was accountable to no one. The lords on the council seemed to be in an ideal position, but dissension soon arose over the division of the spoils of power. The council split into two factions, one headed by Gloucester and the other by his uncle, the Bishop of Westminster. The bitterness between these two rose to such a pitch that in 1426 Gloucester’s elder brother, the Duke of Bedford, had to be recalled from France to stop armed attacks on the Bishop’s life.

Bedford was Regent of France at the time, and the greatest English commander since Henry V. He had won several victories in the course of defending the infant Henry’s claim to the French throne, and these against better foes than King Henry V ever faced. It was an uphill struggle, and the cost was too great for England to bear. English forces were already exhausted when Joan of Arc appeared to restore confidence in France and arouse the will of the people. The Dauphin was crowned at Rheims in 1429. Bedford tried to counter this by having young Henry crowned in Paris in 1431, but no one was convinced.

In 1434 Normandy rose in revolt. In 1435 a conference was held at Arras between the English, the French, and the Burgundians, who held the balance of power. England refused to give up any demands, whereupon Burgundy went over to France. Without Burgundy’s help, it was only a matter of time before English possessions in France disappeared. Bedford died in 1435, and his brother Humphrey carried on as Regent of France, vainly trying to avert the French reconquest of town after town. The Council began to urge peace with France. Henry had grown up into a pious, scholarly king, and would clearly not be able to repeat his father’s successes. Charles VII, on the other hand, was an able military planner and had built a large and well-trained army. A series of truces and treaties came and went, and by 1450 England had lost the whole of Normandy.

This disaster sent a shock through England. One government minister, the Bishop of Chichester, was lynched as a traitor by the troops he had gone to pay at Portsmouth. The chief minister, the Duke of Suffolk, had made many enemies, and was impeached. He tried to escape to France with the king’s aid, but was caught and beheaded by the mutinous crew of a royal ship. Kent rose in protest against governmental incompetence and oppression, and the Kentishmen occupied London for three days.

Shortly afterward, Richard, Duke of York, returned from Ireland, where he had been effectively exiled as King’s Lieutenant in Ireland. He had been the effective leader of the opposition since Gloucester’s death in 1447. Some flocked to him; others crowded to his rival Edmund Beaufort, Duke of Somerset. The two sides were evenly matched.

In 1453, the king went mad. York immediately asserted his claim to be Regent. Shortly thereafter, Henry’s queen, Margaret of Anjou, bore a son, Edward, whom York acknowledged as heir to the throne. Queen Margaret was doubtful of York’s sincerity. When the king recovered his sanity in 1454, Somerset was brought to power. In May 1455, York and his supporters marched on London.

Somerset was killed in battle at St. Albans, and although the Yorkists treated the king and his family with respect, the queen remained implacably opposed to them. The two factions jockeyed for position during the next four years, and by 1459 both sides were ready for a civil war.

In October 1460, York finally claimed the throne outright, but just after Christmas he was killed at the Battle of Wakefield. The Queen Margaret defeated several prominent Yorkists, and was poised to enter London – but refrained after the king expressed concern that her wild Welsh and northern troops would run amok. As she hesitated, the Duke of York’s eldest son, Edward, hurried to London from the Welsh border, and was crowned Edward IV in March 1461. Then, he and his ally Warwick marched out of the city. The Lancastrians retreated north, ravaging the countryside as they went. Edward caught them at Towton in Yorkshire and almost wiped them out – Henry, his queen Margaret and their son were forced to flee to Scotland.

Edward IV 1461-1483

Edward IV was 19 when he came to the throne, and found himself in the shadow of his powerful and popular cousin Warwick, known as the Kingmaker. Warwick defeated Queen Margaret in the north of England, and captured Henry VI in 1465. But Edward was shrewd and cunning, and determined to assert his own independence when the time was right.

The time came when Warwick was in the midst of negotiations to marry Edward to a French princess. The young king calmly announced that he was already married, to a young widow named Elizabeth Wydeville. Warwick was humiliated and annoyed. The new queen’s family was of no particular importance, and had been Lancastrian supporters. Edward began to shower her and her family with favors, building up a power bloc which would be an effective counterbalance to Warwick and his clan, the Nevilles.

Warwick lost much of his influence at court, and fell further when Edward made an alliance with Burgundy, France’s enemy at the time. Edward planned to invade France – a popular move in England – but the French retaliated by stirring up rebellions in England, with Warwick’s support. Warwick planned to put Edward’s weak brother, George, Duke of Clarence, on the throne, but Edward declared them both traitors and they had to flee to France. Louis XI of France promised them support, on condition that they reconcile with the exiled Queen Margaret. Neither side was happy with this arrangement, for Warwick and his supporters had been instrumental in the downfall of Margaret’s husband Henry VI, but an alliance was concluded, and together they made a force that could threaten England.
In September 1470, Warwick, along with Clarence and several prominent Lancastrians, invaded England and marched on London. Edward was forced to flee to the Netherlands, and Warwick took Henry VI – now incurably insane – from the Tower and set him on the throne. His reign lasted seven months. Warwick was now effectively king, and his moves towards an alliance with France led Burgundy to finance an expedition for Edward. He landed in the Humber estuary, and Yorkists flocked to him. Clarence, too, joined him, realizing that his own advancement had been effectively blocked by Warwick and Queen Margaret.

The two sides met at Barnet on Easter Sunday, 1471. Both sides suffered heavy losses, and Warwick was killed. Margaret escaped, and rallied her supporters in the west. Edward caught up with her at Tewkesbury, and there on May 4th the last hopes of the house of Lancaster were crushed. All the prominent Lancastrians were killed, including Prince Edward, heir to Henry VI. The day after Edward IV returned to London in triumph it was announced that Henry VI had died in the tower, “of pure displeasure and melancholy.”

From then on, the nation’s fortunes took a turn for the better. The power of the monarchy was enhanced by the bitter memories of the civil war. Nobles and commons alike would endure high taxes and autocratic behavior rather than risk a return to slaughter and destruction.

Edward’s victory saw many of the richest and most troublesome nobles dead on the battlefield, or executed for treason. The people looked once more to the king as the one hope for stability. Confiscation of the losers’ property refilled the royal coffers, and there was no costly war with France to drain the country’s resources.

There was much to do. The almost constant neglect of administration and order at home would take time to repair, but at least Edward was free of the dilemma that had haunted previous would-be reformers. There was no doubt that everyone wanted peace. The Welsh and Scottish borders were secured. When some nobles began to express the opinion that Edward should press his claim to the throne of France, he made preparations and invaded. However, he quickly accepted Louis XI’s offer to buy him out of the claim with a lump sum and an annual pension. This brought more money to the Crown, money which did not have to be raised by taxes in England and over which no parliament had control.

With peace came increased trade, especially with the mainland of Europe. The king kept in close touch with the increasingly powerful merchants of London, and dabbled in trade himself. When he died in 1483 he was worth a fortune – the first king to die in such a happy state since Henry II, almost three centuries earlier.

Richard III 1483-1485

see also pp. WWii44-45

Edward IV’s successor was a boy of 12, and once more England faced the depressing prospect of a ruinous government by self-aggrandizing nobles until the young king could come of age. The factions consisted of his mother’s relatives, the Wydevilles and Greys, and Edward’s younger brother, Richard, Duke of Gloucester.

Although later Tudor propagandists (most notably William Shakespeare) paint Richard as a monster, he was known to his contemporaries as a pious and able prince and a deadly fighter. He gained a great deal of support in having himself made Protector, diminishing the Wydevilles and the Greys, and putting the government in his own hands.

Even when he shut the young king and his brother in the Tower, declared them and their sisters illegitimate, and made himself heir to the throne, there was no opposition. The Wydevilles and Greys were unpopular, and Richard seemed to offer a firmer rule than a squabbling coalition of nobles. But the disappearance of the two boys in the Tower – probably killed on Richard’s orders – changed all that. The Yorkist party was divided, and the Lancastrians gained new hope from the popular revulsion that greeted the news of their deaths. The Wars of the Roses threatened to break out anew.

Richard tried to make himself popular, encouraging trade and abolishing the practice of benevolences, or forced gifts to the throne, which Edward IV had begun. He suppressed corruption and intimidation in the judiciary, and passed various other measures. If he had come to the throne another way, he would have been popular, but the usurpation and possible child murder could not be ignored. To make matters worse, his own son died in 1484, leaving him without an heir. A rebellion by the Duke of Buckingham – a former supporter – in 1483, and the invasion by Lancastrian claimant Henry Tudor in 1485 forced Richard to raise money for an army, which increased his unpopularity.

Richard met Henry Tudor’s invasion at Bosworth in 1485. He had a larger force and was an able soldier, but the disaffection of a large part of his forces cost him the battle. He refused to flee, and died fighting.
The Wars of the Roses

They were not, of course, actually fought about roses. The Wars of the Roses were a civil war between two branches of the royal house of Plantagenet. Red roses are the badge of Lancaster and white roses are the badge of York. Actually, at the time, both houses had and used other badges. The tag “Wars of the Roses” seems to have been invented by later historians. Still, the badges were well enough identified that the House of Tudor, which united York and Lancaster, used an intertwined red and white rose as a badge.

The houses of York and Lancaster both descended from Edward III. Henry, Duke of Lancaster, who deposed Richard II and became Henry IV, was the son of John of Gaunt (born at Ghent in Flanders, hence the nickname), Duke of Lancaster, a younger son of Edward III. Richard, Duke of York, who revolted against Henry VI and whose son became Edward IV, was the grandson of Edmund, an even younger son of Edward III. The Lancastrian kings were Henry IV, Henry V, and Henry VI. The Yorkist kings were Edward IV and Richard III.

The wars began with Richard of York’s march on London in 1455, and ended finally with the victory of Henry Tudor at Bosworth in 1485. They were notably bloody for the time. England was full of veterans of the continental wars. One side effect of the effective English “contract” system of warfare was a nobility used to raising and commanding private armies. They were the last real demonstration of the English “bow and bill” warfare, with little use of gunpowder or pikes.
CHURCH AND STATE

Throughout the High Middle Ages, the Church became wealthier and more influential. Those who could afford to do so often willed money and lands to the Church – some even endowing chapels and monasteries – in exchange for which, the priests and monks said regular masses for their souls. This was thought to reduce the amount of time a person had to spend in Purgatory before being admitted to heaven. Many bishops became powerful feudal magnates in their own right – some, like the Prince-Bishops of Durham, had military duties in addition to their sees.

The growing wealth and power of the Church was reflected in the magnificence of the cathedrals and abbeys of the High Middle Ages. As the population became more mobile, pilgrimages became popular, and religious institutions vied with each other in collecting the bones of saints and other holy relics. Pilgrims’ offerings were an important source of income for many cathedrals and abbeys, and miracles were always good for attracting pilgrims.

As the power of the Church grew, ecclesiastical courts flourished, hearing cases which touched upon religious matters and judging them according to the canon law. This stood apart from secular law, which not infrequently led to disputes over jurisdiction.

THE ROYAL COURT

The court continued to move around the country in the High Middle Ages as it had under the Norman Kings. It was a highly organized mobile operation, carrying with it everything that was needed to conduct government, dispense justice, and carry on the symbolic and ritual functions of the King. It was also comparable to an ever-growing swarm of locusts, moving on to another baron’s lands whenever the food ran out.

The court was a hotbed of intrigue at every conceivable level. Ambitious nobles struggled for influence over a weak king or for the favor of a strong one. Foreign ambassadors (who were nobles sent on specific missions, such as arranging dynastic marriages and negotiating territorial disputes, rather than being full-time diplomats) frequently followed the court as it moved around the country. Litigants seeking the king’s justice – or just the favor of an audience – were often obliged to follow the court for weeks or months in order to get a hearing, supporting themselves at their own expense. Even the king’s own retainers fought among themselves as the three great divisions of the royal household – the Exchequer, the Chancery, and the Wardrobe – struggled for power.

The Exchequer survives today – in name, at least – as the financial arm of British government. Originally, the Exchequer was a large checkered cloth, laid upon a table and used for counting the king’s income. The officers of the Exchequer kept the royal accounts. By 1209 it had a permanent location at Westminster Hall, but the king’s household remained the center of government.

The Chancery grew up around the Lord Chancellor and dealt with drawing up legal documents for the king’s signature, and keeping legal records. Like the Exchequer, it eventually grew and separated from the royal household, taking up the site now occupied by the Public Record Office in London’s Chancery Lane.

The Wardrobe, as its name suggests, started out as a group of servants whose duties were to look after the king’s clothing and other personal possessions as the court moved about the land. These possessions included the Privy ("private") Seal – a smaller version of the Great Seal, which was used for the king’s personal business and for anything else that did not require the use of the Great Seal. The king’s cash on hand also came under the department of the Wardrobe, and at times it was used to finance small wars when the king could not, or did not wish to, involve the Exchequer – often in times of revolt. The Wardrobe remained a part of the royal household long after the other two great departments of state had moved into permanent buildings, and became in effect the king’s personal staff.

TOWNS AND MANORS

The High Middle Ages was a period of urban growth. Agriculture throughout most of Europe became increasingly efficient during the 10th and 11th centuries; grain yields doubled in many places and almost tripled in some (in GURPS terms, European agriculture can be said to have moved from TL2 to TL3 at this time). Even the peasantry came to enjoy a food surplus after their feudal obligations had been paid. Surplus food was sold for cash in nearby towns, and peasants could use the cash to commute, or buy off, their labor obligations in their lord’s fields. Cash rents increasingly replaced labor obligations, and landowners hired workers, rather than demanding service of their tenants. Feudalism was giving way to a nascent market economy.

The food surplus was accompanied by a population increase, but even then, fewer people had to live off the land. As more people began to support themselves by practicing crafts and trades for cash, the towns grew in importance as market centers. Their economies grew, attracting more people, and the process became self-accelerating.

GUILDS AND MERCHANTS

The growing cash economy gave a tremendous stimulus to the rise of the middle classes. Where a craftsman might previously have worked exclusively for a landowner under a feudal arrangement in exchange for keep and lodging, now he could find a sufficient market for his goods in a nearby town, and earn enough money to support a comfortable lifestyle. Merchants thrived as the market economy began to mature, and long-distance trade along rivers and across the sea became profitable.

It was against this background that the guild system arose. Gilds, as they were first called, arose as associations for mutual support. They developed into regulatory bodies that held a monopoly on a trade or group of trades in their town, supervised training and apprenticeships, regulated standards, and generally furthered the interests of their members. In many towns it became impossible to do business without joining a guild.
People of the Middle Ages usually dated events by the feasts of the church rather than by months and numbered days. Tourneys are held on Whitsun (Whit Sunday) or St. Michael’s Day, not on May 22 or September 29. Feasts may be fixed, always on the same calendar day, or movable, on different days each year.

**Fixed Feasts**

Fixed feasts usually honor a particular saint; medieval people usually celebrated the day of the saint whose name they bore rather than their birthday. In England, the quarter days, on which rents, contracts, and payments are usually due, are particularly important. They are Lady Day (March 25, Feast of the Annunciation of the Blessed Virgin Mary), Midsummer Day (June 24, Feast of St. John the Baptist), Michaelmas (September 29, Feast of the Archangel Michael, patron of all soldiers and commander of the hosts of heaven), and Christmas (December 25, which was not a day for gift-giving in medieval England).

Some other feast days, or saint’s days, commonly used for dating are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>St. Edward the Confessor</td>
<td>January 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Epiphany (Twelfth-Day)</td>
<td>January 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Agnes Day</td>
<td>January 21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Candlemas (Feast of the Purification)</td>
<td>February 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Valentine</td>
<td>February 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. David</td>
<td>March 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Patrick</td>
<td>March 17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. George</td>
<td>April 23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Aldhelm</td>
<td>May 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Venerable Bede</td>
<td>May 27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Eadburga</td>
<td>June 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sts. Peter and Paul</td>
<td>June 29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Swithin</td>
<td>July 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Mary Magdalene</td>
<td>July 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Christopher</td>
<td>July 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Peter ad Vincula (Lammas)</td>
<td>August 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assumption</td>
<td>August 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Bartholomew</td>
<td>August 24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Augustine of Hippo</td>
<td>August 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Giles</td>
<td>September 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Denys</td>
<td>September 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Wilfrid</td>
<td>October 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sts. Crispin and Crispian</td>
<td>October 25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Saints (All Hallows)</td>
<td>November 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Souls</td>
<td>November 2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Andrew</td>
<td>November 30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Nicolas</td>
<td>December 6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Holy Innocents</td>
<td>December 28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>St. Thomas Becket</td>
<td>December 29</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Movable Feasts**

The most important movable feast is Easter Sunday. It falls on the first Sunday after the full moon that is on or after March 21. It is always between March 22 and April 25. Good Friday is the Friday before Easter Sunday. Palm Sunday is the Sunday before Easter; Passion Sunday is the Sunday before Palm Sunday.

Ash Wednesday is the first day of Lent; 40 days (less Sundays) before Easter Sunday (early February to early March). Shrove Tuesday is the day before Ash Wednesday; Shrove Tide is the three days (Sunday, Monday and Tuesday) before Ash Wednesday. Ascension Day or Holy Thursday is the fortieth day after Easter Sunday (usually sometime in May).

Pentecost, Whit Sunday, or Whitsun is the Sunday after Ascension Day; Trinity Sunday is the next Sunday. Corpus Christi is the Thursday after Trinity Sunday.

Advent Sunday is the Sunday closest to (before, after, or on) November 30 (St. Andrew’s Day).

**Dates of Reigns**

Dates in medieval England (and even today, in English law) are given in terms of regnal years. 1 William I (first year of the reign of William the First) begins on October 14, 1066 and runs to October 13, 1067. 2 William I begins on October 14, 1067 and ends on October 13, 1068. Here is a list of the rulers of England, with dates, from the Norman conquest to the death of Richard III. Occasionally there is a gap or overlap; a king’s reign sometimes is held to begin with his coronation, not with the death of his predecessor. Medieval folk didn’t worry about a few undatable days.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>King</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>William I</td>
<td>Oct 14, 1066-Sep 9, 1087</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>William II “Rufus”</td>
<td>Sep 26, 1087-Aug 2, 1100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry I</td>
<td>Aug 5, 1100-Dec 1, 1135</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td>Dec 26, 1135-Oct 25, 1154</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry II</td>
<td>Dec 19, 1154-Jul 6, 1189</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard I</td>
<td>Sep 3, 1189-Apr 6, 1199</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>May 27, 1199-Oct 19, 1216</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry III</td>
<td>Oct 28, 1216-Nov 16, 1272</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward I</td>
<td>Nov 20, 1272-Jul 7, 1307</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward II</td>
<td>Jul 8, 1307-Jan 20, 1327</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward III</td>
<td>Jan 25, 1327-Jun 21, 1377</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard II</td>
<td>Jun 22, 1377-Sep 29, 1399</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry IV</td>
<td>Sep 30, 1399-Mar 20, 1413</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry V</td>
<td>Mar 21, 1413-Aug 31, 1422</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry VI</td>
<td>Sep 1, 1422-Mar 4, 1461</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward IV</td>
<td>Mar 4, 1461-Apr 9, 1483</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry VI</td>
<td>Oct 9, 1470-Apr 14, 1471*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Edward V</td>
<td>Apr 9, 1483-Jun 25, 1483**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard III</td>
<td>Jun 26, 1483-Aug 22, 1485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Henry VI was deposed in 1461, restored for less than a year in 1470, then deposed again.

** One of the “Princes in the Tower.”
Disease

In the years before modern medicine and sanitation, disease was one of the major causes of death.

The Black Death

The Black Death was one of the pivotal events of the Middle Ages, not just in England but across the known world. Many scholars have claimed that it made the Renaissance possible; by killing about 30% of Europe’s population, it concentrated wealth in fewer hands, which resulted in wealthier individuals having enough surplus to invest in the resurgence of the arts and sciences.

The Black Death was a pandemic – a succession of epidemics – which first reached England in 1348. Through the end of 1349, around 30% of the population died – as much as 50% in some villages – and plague epidemics recurred every 5-12 years into the 1500s. This was actually the second plague pandemic in history; the Mediterranean basin was hit hard by several outbreaks of plague – known as Justinian’s Plague after the Byzantine emperor who ruled at the time of the first outbreak – between 541 and 750. That plague returned cyclically, every 10-24 years. The Mediterranean countries were decimated, and the disease reached as far north as Denmark and as far west as Ireland; arguably it made the Dark Ages longer.

Bring out your dead!

The Black Death is often equated with bubonic plague, but in fact it was a deadly mixture of three separate plagues: bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic, all caused by the same organism, Yersinia pestis. The bacteria were carried principally by rat fleas, which would attack other livestock and humans if there was a sharp rise in rat mortality. When the rat population recovered, the fleas stuck with the rats, and the plague abated, but once the rats died off again, the fleas went looking for new hosts and the plague returned to the human population.

The rat flea can survive for six months to a year without a host, typically in rat dung and other debris in a burrow. This means that even if the plague kills all the rats in an area, the fleas – and therefore the plague bacteria – can usually survive until the following spring, when a fresh supply of rats may be expected to move into the empty territory. However, the fleas are active only in temperatures of 15-20°C (approx 70-80°F), with humidity of 90-95%). Humidity of less than 70% kills them. Because of this, plague outbreaks generally took place in the late summer and early autumn.

Bubonic plague was the most common strain. It incubates for around six days before signs become evident. A blackish, often gangrenous pustule at the point of the flea bite is followed by swelling of the lymph nodes in the armpits, groin, or neck – whichever is closest to the site of the bite. The victim starts to hemorrhage under the skin, causing purplish blotches and swollen lymph glands – the “buboes” from which the plague takes its name. Cell damage and degeneration of the nervous system sets in, and while bubonic plague is the mildest of the three, it still kills 50-60% of its victims.

Pneumonic plague infects the lungs, and can be transmitted from human to human by coughed-up mucus. A spell of colder weather makes the bacterium change its tactics. After a three-day incubation period the victim’s body temperature drops sharply and his lungs begin to fill with blood and infected matter. Pneumonic plague is fatal in 95-100% of cases.

The most deadly – and fortunately the rarest – of the three plagues is septicemic plague. It is not understood how and why it occurs, but it only seems to occur when the plague-causing bacteria enter the body in extremely large numbers. A rash forms within hours, and death occurs within a day, before buboes even have time to form. Septicemic plague was – and still is – fatal in 100% of cases.

People didn’t know what spread the disease, but there was no shortage of theories: poison spread by the Jews, a conspiracy of sorcerers, God’s punishment for the sins of the wealthy (the poor are fond of the notion that poverty is proof of virtue), bad water, bad air, bad food. Some wild-minded theorists even thought it might have something to do with rats (ridiculous, rats were always around but the plague only appeared sometimes). Con artists might peddle quick plague cures, or form religious sects to placate the wrath of God.

Giving an adventurer plague should be carefully considered by a GM; it’s a painful death, incurable at this TL (without magic). If plot and character demand such a result, use this rule. For every day in which the potential victim is exposed to plague, roll against HT. On any failure, he contracts the disease. Roll against HT once a day for three subsequent days; on any failure he dies. If he lives through three days, he recovers in 3d days. Recovery is nasty to eye and nose, as the buboes and pustules burst and scab over, and the patient is at half HT and DX until the recovery period is completed.

Leprosy

Also known as Hansen’s Disease, leprosy was the most important infectious disease in Europe between the 10th and 13th centuries. It is rarely fatal in itself, but from ancient times it was held in great fear and horror because of its disfiguring nature and because of the suffering associated with it.

Leprosy is a rotting disease. After initial numbness as the nerves are attacked, the face and extremities of the victim slowly rot away, giving off a foul odor. Loss of sensation in the affected areas can result in cuts and other minor injuries going unnoticed, which opens the way for all kinds of infections. Although leprosy is among the least contagious of all infectious diseases, no disease was more dreaded before the coming of the Black Death.

Medieval medicine had no way of preventing or treating leprosy, and lepers were generally isolated from the rest of society or required to take stringent precautions to avoid direct contact. Once leprosy was diagnosed, the leper was treated as though he were dead. A mass was sung for his
soul and earth was shoveled on the leper’s feet in a mock burial. All the leper’s property was inherited just as if death had taken place, and then – depending on the time and place – the leper was removed to a leper hospital or Lazar House to live out his days, or was forced to live according to a complex set of rules.

Lepers were barred from all churches, markets, shops, inns, taverns, and other public places. They could not use any public water source for washing or drinking. They had to wear distinctive clothing, and make their presence known by ringing a bell and/or crying out “Unclean! Unclean!” or some similar warning. They could not touch anything directly, but had to wear gloves or use a stick; shoes had to be worn at all times, to prevent the feet from touching the ground. While conversing with any uninfected person, a leper was required to stand downwind, so that the breeze would not carry his breath toward the other.

Leprosy in Europe increased from the eighth to the 13th centuries, reaching a peak early in the 14th century. Then, it disappeared almost entirely; by 1400 it almost ceased to exist outside a few isolated regions in Norway and Poland. Leper houses became plague hospitals or almshouses.

Several theories have been advanced to explain the disappearance of leprosy. One credits the Black Death for wiping out the already-weakened lepers, among the 30% or so of Europe’s population that succumbed. Another claims that increasing medical knowledge allowed doctors to diagnose leprosy more accurately, distinguishing it from a number of deforming skin conditions from measles to acne. Yet another points to a rise in the incidence of pulmonary tuberculosis at about the same time; patients who survived the tuberculosis gained a degree of resistance to leprosy. A fourth theory credits improved urban hygiene, and a fifth suggests that more vitamin C in the average diet was responsible.

The real cause was probably a combination of these factors, and more beside, though GMs with a taste for conspiracy might invoke the Illuminati to explain the sudden and almost complete disappearance of leprosy. Who’s to say they didn’t invent it in the first place, as an early form of biological warfare?

Leprosy is not highly contagious, and the roll to resist it is at +3. Once contracted, it progresses slowly, over the course of months and years. No recovery rolls are made, and the disease cannot be cured by any means other than magic, or medical treatment at TL6 or above. A leprosy vaccine requires TL8 or above.

**Technology**

Most of England went from TL2 to TL4 during the Middle Ages, although some remote areas did not rise above TL3 for some time afterward and the rate of progress was by no means steady and uniform across the whole country. For more detail, the GM is referred to Chapter 5 of GURPS Low-Tech. By and large, the Saxon Kingdoms were TL2, and TL3 was reached by the start of the High Middle Ages, although mathematics with zero (one of the attributes of TL3) came only after the Crusades, along with other strange Saracen ideas like regular bathing. Through the High Middle Ages, technology progressed piecemeal to TL3-4.

**Transportation:** Foot and horse remained the main forms of land transportation throughout the Middle Ages. The saddle had been introduced by the Romans, and stirrups came with the Normans. Horse and ox carts were used to transport goods. Both wagon design and road construction were primitive; wheeled transportation was both slower and much less comfortable than horseback. The main passenger vehicle was a litter, slung between two horses or mules. In town, transport for the very wealthy was a sedan chair, with human bearers. Oar and wind power were used to propel boats and ships; most larger vessels relied on a combination of the two.

**Weapons and Armor:** The steel sword and the crossbow were the peak of medieval weapon technology. Mail was the standard armor for most of the period. Ever more advanced versions of plate armor supplemented mail from the High Medieval period to the Renaissance. In the High Medieval period, primitive gunpowder weapons like the bombard were developed. Cannon were still being refined as the Middle Ages came to an end; gunpowder small arms were extremely rare in England until the Renaissance.

**Power:** Wind, water, and beasts (horses or oxen; occasionally donkeys) were the principal sources of energy throughout the Middle Ages. In the High Middle Ages, the design of wind and water mills became more sophisticated, and they continued to develop in complexity up until the Industrial Revolution.

**Medicine:** Through most of the Middle Ages, medicine was based on herbs and superstition. Hot iron was the main way of closing and sterilizing a wound, and surgery was more dangerous than most injuries. Some medical knowledge, along with other Mediterranean sciences, reached Europe during the latter part of the High Medieval period. The Knights Hospitaller were dedicated, among other things, to preserving the medical knowledge of the classical world. However, it was not until the Renaissance that people began to study medicine.

**Communications:** Writing was not widespread, even at the height of Roman civilization in Britain. Throughout most of the Middle Ages, literacy and learning were the sole domain of the Church, and the main channel of communication was word of mouth. Beacons could give simple messages – such as an alarm – over reasonable distances. In the High Medieval period literacy spread among the nobility, and then to the middle classes, but the ability to read was still rare. The first books printed in England date from the 1470s.
In many people’s minds, medieval English is characterized by eccentric spelling, with ye instead of the and an e on the end of any word that will reasonably take it. England is littered with Ye Olde Tea Shoppes, with their signs painted in Gothic style Old English script. But in fact, English was scarcely a written language until the end of any word that will reasonably take it. England is lit-bodkins” comes from the Biblical stricture against taking God’

rune
Saxons had a runic alphabet similar to the Viking futhark, that was important enough to be written down. The pagan standardize English spelling.

the publication of dictionaries in the 17th century began to drag down to Hell and/or tormented once there), and “Od’ Bodkins” is an abbreviated form of God’s hooks (by which, presumably, sinners were dragged down to Hell and/or tormented once there), and “Od’d bodkins” comes from God’s little body. Hell’s teeth! is an oath still current in many parts of England.

Perhaps the habit of abbreviation started as a way around the Biblical stricture against taking God’s name in vain, or perhaps the God part came to be understood as implicit in an oath, and emphasis switched to the particular aspect of the divine that the oath was invoking.

“Slid” was an oath popular up to the early 17th century, and referred, strangely, to God’s eyelid. GMs and players of silly campaigns should have no trouble in producing similar oaths based on different body parts: “Snaughty bits!” simply begs to be used in a Monty Python inspired campaign.

Although the oath referential was allegedly created by the landowner and would-be town wit Acres, in Sheridan’s 18th-century farce The Rivals, it is not out of place in a medieval campaign, especially a silly one. In describing a dance, for example, Acres begins with “Od’s jigs and reels,” while the musicians draw an admiring “Od’s pipes and tabors!” The title at the top of this box is another example of the oath referential.

How to Quoth

Using medieval forms like doth and dost, thee and thou, can add to the feel of a medieval roleplaying session, but a few simple rules must be borne in mind.

Hath and Hast

The -(e)st verb ending (applicable to most verbs) is only used in the second person singular: thou seekest the treasure; thou didst save my life, etc.

The -(e)th verb ending, likewise, is strictly third person singular: she hath the fairest eyes I have ever seen, he smiteth the dragon.

With few exceptions (such as didst for the simple past of dost and hadst for the simple past of hast), these endings are only used in the present tense. The future and past tenses are handled using auxiliary verbs — shalst and shalt for the future, and hast and hath (or didst and did) for the past.

Thee and Thou

Thee and thou both mean you, in the singular. Thee is the object form (I love thee), and thou is the subject form (Thou lovest me not). The plural of both is ye, and the possessive is thine.

My and Mine

Another simple way to give speech a medieval flavor is to substitute mine for my before nouns that start with a vowel: mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord, for example. This also works — though not always — before an h: mine heart is broken.

Silly Quothing

Many otherwise serious books and movies (and no few roleplaying adventures) have ventured into unintentional silliness by ignoring the basic rules of quothing. While using endings like -est and -eth with reckless abandon will produce memorable turns of phrase like layeth the smacketh down, quothing is most conducive to silliness when combined with modern expressions. The medieval sketch in Woody Allen’s Everything You Always Wanted to Know About Sex, where the queen accusingly asks the jester, “didst thou just cop a feel?” is a classic example.
The Germanic Gods

Almost no written details survive about the pagan Germanic gods, but by their names and areas of interest it can be seen that they are almost identical to the deities of the Vikings. The names are slightly different – Woden instead of Odin, Thunor instead of Thor, and Tiw or Tiwaz instead of Tyr. As in the Viking religion, these three seem to have been the principal deities, and have left their names scattered throughout the English language and landscape.

Woden

Like his Viking counterpart Odin, Woden was a god of knowledge and wisdom. Although we do not have the wealth of written sources that are available for the Viking gods, Woden’s name figures in certain charms to ward off evil, and his name is linked with various earthworks and other monuments, which would have seemed incredible things to the newly arrived Saxons. Wansdyke is one example.

Thunor

There is even less written evidence for Thunor than for Woden. Like Thor, he is associated with thunder; the English word has its origins in his name. Early Church records provide a further clue when they mention attempts to suppress heathen customs on the fifth day of the week in honor of Jove. The fifth day of the week is Thursday, and from Roman times educated men had always equated pagan gods with the Greco-Roman pantheon; Jove (Jupiter) was armed with thunderbolts in Classical mythology, and so was Thor in Norse mythology.

Tiw

The association of Tiw with Tyr, the Norse god of the law, is made almost entirely on the basis of their names and the fact that Tiw seems to have been one of the three most prominent pagan Saxon deities. If Woden was Odin and Thunor was Thor, then logically Tiw must be connected with Tyr. No evidence survives about his worship or areas of interest, but in a pagan Saxon campaign he might be the defender of the law and the guardian of oaths.

Other Deities

Our knowledge of other Germanic deities is scant and comes largely from classical sources at the time of the Roman conquest of Germany in the first century A.D., coupled with apparent similarities in Norse mythology.

The Roman historian Tacitus mentions in his Germania a goddess called Nerthus who was worshipped by the Angli and other north German peoples. The goddess lived in a sanctuary attended by one priest; when she perceived her presence (which ordinary mortals could not), she was paraded around with great reverence in a sacred cart, covered so no one could see inside. The cart was then washed in a lake by a number of slaves, none of whom returned. Linguistically, the name Nerthus is linked with the Viking minor deity Njorthus or Njord. The ceremony seems to be linked to a nature cult similar to that of the Vanir in Scandinavia, with slaves being sacrificed to appease the forces of nature. There is no evidence that this cult was ever active in England.

Another deity is called Ing, which is also the name of one of the Saxon runes. Scholars link this deity with the Norse Frey, who was sometimes called Ingunar-Freyr or Yngvi Freyr.

Two other words have come down from the pagan Saxons to modern English which may or may not be the names of deities. The name Yule has been connected with the midwinter festival since pagan times, and in most modern Scandinavian languages the name for Christmas is Juul or Jul (with the J pronounced as a Y, in the German/Scandinavian manner). The pagan spring festival, celebrating the return of life and fertility to the land, was associated with a goddess called Eoster, according to early Church sources; this name has now become Easter.

Pagan Traces

Many of the traditions which survive in modern festivals – especially those associated with the seasons – seem to have their origin in the pagan Germanic religion.

The traditions of a Yule log and a Christmas tree are both Germanic in origin, and some scholars even suggest that the modern tradition of the angel on top of the tree is an echo of a human sacrifice by impalement, which is known to have been practiced in Germany during the Roman Iron Age. The date of Christmas is the feast celebrating the birth of Mithras, a religion common in Britain in Roman times. Biblical evidence suggests that Christ was born in the spring. Celebrations at the winter solstice are common to most European pagan religions.

The name of Easter is not the only thing about this Christian festival that is pagan in origin. Some early Church sources hint that the date of the Christian festival commemorating the death and resurrection of Christ was deliberately shifted in Europe to fit in with the pagan festival celebrating the return of life to the land after winter. The common use of eggs and rabbits – both symbols of fertility and new life – in connection with Easter also has pagan origins. The Church’s strategy seems to have been to co-opt pagan festivals and mold them to Christian ends, thus minimizing resistance to Christianity among the superstitious folk who made up the bulk of the population.

Another festival which has pagan origins is May Day, which was originally a summer fertility festival, probably connected with the prosperity of the year’s crops and the fecundity of livestock. Maypole dances, traditional in parts of Britain and elsewhere, involve an enormous fertility symbol whose meaning is now lost on most of the participants. Although most of the pagan significance has been removed from this festival, it has never been subsumed into a Christian celebration.
Roman Christianity was the religion of Britain before the Saxons came – it had been the official religion of the entire Roman Empire since the reign of Constantine the Great in the early fourth century A.D. When the pagan Saxons came to Britain, they forced the native Britons out of most of what is now England, and Christianity disappeared along with them.

Cut off from Rome, Christianity survived in the Celtic areas, especially in Ireland and the Scottish Isles, and the Celtic Church developed its own style during the years of isolation. Its most numerous monuments are the hundreds of beautifully carved stone crosses that can be found throughout its area of influence. Celtic crosses are characterized by a circle or halo which stands behind the arms of the cross.

The Celtic Church did not take the pagan Saxon advance lying down. Missionaries from Ireland and Scotland visited the courts of Saxon rulers frequently, and were also active on the continent of Europe. St. Columba founded the island monastery of Iona in western Scotland, and it was thence that most of northern England was converted to Christianity. Northumbria was the first of the northern kingdoms to accept Christianity, and as Northumbria’s influence spread over the Midlands, so did the Church. The Northumbrian monastery of Lindisfarne was founded from Iona as a stronghold on the east coast of Britain; it became one of the holiest places in England, until its destruction by the Vikings.

**Organization**

The Celtic Church was a purely monastic organization. There might be a number of bishops in a monastery or its daughter houses, but all were under the authority of the abbot. These bishops did not have fixed dioceses, but were free to go where they wanted. Some made long journeys, preaching and baptizing wherever they went, eventually returning to their monastery. Some monks of the Celtic Church even founded monasteries in France and Italy. But on their travels, they made no attempt to set up churches and ordain priests to serve the community.

While this organization made the most of the available manpower in missionary work, it was not suited to the religious needs of a community once conversion was complete.
The Roman Church was also making great efforts to recover England from the pagans. Using Frankish missionaries, it began working on the southern kingdoms while the Celtic Church was converting the north. Kent was the first target, for it was nearest to the mainland of Europe and its queen was a Christian Frankish princess who had her own bishop as part of the royal household. St. Augustine led a mission to Kent in 597 at the instigation of Pope Gregory. His conversion of King Ethelbert of Kent was a notable success, since this monarch was also overlord of all the lands south of the Humber. Augustine became bishop of Canterbury, and on Christmas Day, 597, more than 10,000 of the English were baptized.

On Christmas Day, 597, more than 10,000 were baptized.

Ethelbert's nephew was king of Essex, and accepted Christianity soon after his uncle, installing a bishop in his capital, London. When Ethelbert died in 616 there was a backlash of paganism which Kent survived but Essex did not. Ten years later, a Kentish Princess married King Edwin of Northumbria. Between Kent and Northumbria, much of the country was converted rapidly, with nobles following kings and commoners following nobles. However, there were repeated lapses into paganism in various parts of the country, and when a Christian king died, as often as not Christianity in his lands died with him.

As might be expected, the Roman Church encountered the Celtic Church during this process. Pope Gregory had intended that the bishops of the Celtic Church should fall under the authority of Canterbury and St. Augustine, but the Celtic bishops and abbots were not convinced — according to some sources, because of Augustine’s arrogant and high-handed manner in his dealings with them. The years of isolation had given the Celtic Church its own character, and it was not willing to make sweeping changes at the command of a foreigner, even if he did have the authority of Rome behind him. The date of Easter, which had been re-calculated in Rome during the years of separation, was something on which the Celtic Church did not agree until many years later.

Many Saxon kings found that soon after they had converted to Christianity under the guidance of Celtic missionaries, they were required to change their observances to the Roman form by missions from Canterbury. Eventually, though, the Roman form of Christianity was firmly established throughout England, and Archbishops were installed at Canterbury and York. It had been Pope Gregory's original intention to base the southern archbishopric at London, but by the time Essex had been converted and there was no danger of any lapse into paganism, Canterbury had become well enough established to remain the seat of the southern archbishop permanently.

Pilgrimages

Making a pilgrimage was seen as an act of great piety in the Middle Ages. Some pilgrims traveled on their own initiative, while others hoped to atone for some sin or crime by making the long and arduous journey to Rome or even Jerusalem. Some Saxon kings retired to Rome to end their days near the tombs of the saints, handing over their kingdoms to successors.

Travel was dangerous, and it was a common practice for a pilgrim to settle his affairs and draw up a will before setting out. Disease, accident, and bad weather claimed at least as many lives as bandits and wolves, from the highest to the lowest. The first abbot of the monastery of St. Peter and St. Paul in Canterbury was drowned crossing the English Channel, and St. Wilfrid was shipwrecked on one crossing. An English priest sent by the Pope to King Eardwulf of Northumbria in 809 was captured by pirates. In the mid-10th century, an Archbishop of Canterbury froze to death crossing the Alps, and in the 11th century Archbishop Ealdred of York was robbed by bandits on his homeward journey from Rome, and had to return to ask the Pope for assistance. And, of course, more than one group of pilgrims was slaughtered by the Saracens.

In Rome there was a district known as “The School of the English,” where newly arrived pilgrims could receive aid and shelter. Some of the larger towns along the way also had English populations where a traveler could find a welcome, but not all were pious in nature; many consisted of onetime pilgrims who had simply given up. St. Boniface suggested that women should be forbidden to go on pilgrimages, “because for the most part they are lost, few remaining pure. There are few cities in Lombardy, France, or Gaul in which there is not an adulteress or harlot of the English race.” Like modern tourists in some places, pilgrims were regarded as fair game for every robber baron and dishonest trader along the way, and many of these women had probably found themselves stranded when their money ran out.

Pilgrimage became a craze, and at times so many men were absent from their homes and lands on pilgrimage that the economy and security of the countryside was seriously threatened. In the High Medieval period, it was also common to make pilgrimages to various cathedrals, monasteries, and shrines which housed holy relics or had some other significance. Canterbury (the destination of Chaucer’s pilgrims) was a favorite, and many came to pray at the shrine of Thomas Becket.
The Roman Church had a very strict diocesan organization, which was a complete contrast to the Celtic Church. Beneath the Pope came a number of bishops, each responsible for a diocese. In the early days, a diocese was more or less equivalent to a kingdom, but as time went by the larger kingdoms were divided into two or more dioceses.

The bishops were subject to archbishops, of which England had two. Each was intended to have 12 bishops under him, but the Archbishop of York had somewhat fewer – this was probably because the Pope had intended the Celtic Church in Scotland to come under the see of York.

Archbishops and bishops were expected to confine their activities to their own bishoprics, which was a great contrast to the freedom of the Celtic Church and was one of many reasons for the conflict between the two. However, it served the community better, especially with the development of parishes. These were subdivisions of bishoprics, which sprang up as churches were built to serve individual communities. These churches were manned by priests ordained by the bishops, and were divided into three categories.

A minster was a local center, with a number of priests covering a fairly large area; the word survives as a suffix in a number of English place names, like Westminster in London and Leominster in Herefordshire. The next category was a church with a graveyard, and the lowest was a “field church” – one without a graveyard, whose parishioners had to be buried elsewhere.

All churches were supported by the local community through tithes, taxes, and various other charges. This money was also used sometimes to support the poor of the parish and to assist pilgrims. It was not uncommon for wealthy men to build churches on their estates, or in towns and villages within their lands – they were regarded as owners of the churches, and could expect a share in the profits. The Church opposed this, as might be expected, but it lasted throughout the Middle Ages.

Keeping one’s place and doing one’s duty were the commands of God as well as man.

Bishops wielded temporal as well as spiritual power through much of the Middle Ages. Church and king were the twin pillars of feudalism. Just as a man had duties to the king for his material well-being, so he had duties to the Church for his spiritual well-being. To the medieval mind, heaven, hell, and purgatory were as real as Greece, Turkey, and Abyssinia – never seen, but there nonetheless. The future of one’s soul was a serious matter, and those who could afford it bought the prayers of priests and bishops with gifts of land and goods. Some historians call this time the Age of Faith.

The Church and Crown reinforced each other in maintaining the hierarchical model of feudal society. Power passed from God to kings just as surely as it passed from kings to lords and from lords to commoners. This social order was seen as divinely maintained, and keeping one’s place and doing one’s duty were the commands of God as well as man. This was the basis of the idea of the Divine Right of Kings, which lasted until the 17th and 18th centuries in many parts of Europe.

The High Medieval period was a time of stunning church architecture, and most of the great cathedrals of Europe date to this period. These great buildings were landmarks, their spires and towers visible for miles around – an ever-present reminder of the power and glory of God. The only structures that rivaled them in size were the castles of the king and his lords. Medieval people were left in no doubt about where power lay.
PAYING FOR THE CHURCH

Medieval churches were supported by an array of taxes and other charges levied on the local community.

**Tithe**s were originally a voluntary contribution, but became mandatory in the 10th century; the word “tithe” means “tenth,” and this tax was 10% of each person’s income. Penalties for nonpayment involved loss of ninetenths of the defaulter’s possessions; the king’s reeve, the bishop’s reeve, and the priest shared one-tenth, and the lord and the bishop shared eight-tenths. This law can make a very effective instrument of oppression in outlaw campaigns.

**Plow-alms** was a charge of one penny for each working plow and team in the parish, to be paid each year within a fortnight of Easter.

**Soul-scot** was a portion of a dead man’s wealth devoted to the Church for the good of his soul.

**Church-scot** was a portion of grain – the amount varied from place to place – given at Martinmas (St. Martin’s Day, November 11); through most of the Middle Ages, nonpayment was punishable by a heavy fine and 12-fold payment.

**Burial fees** were charged for funerals, and “best paid at the open grave.”

**Peter’s Pence** was a tribute to Rome (the office of Pope is said to have started with St. Peter), to be paid by St. Peter’s Day. One penny was expected from each household, and one law code states that anyone who does not pay Peter’s Pence in time must take the money to Rome himself – a long and treacherous journey (see Pilgrimages, p. 39) – as well as paying a fine to the king. It is doubtful whether this extreme penalty was enforced, but an evil sheriff in an outlaw campaign might find it useful.

HERESIES

The Church was faced with various heresies during the Middle Ages, and although it was not as widespread in England as it was in continental Europe (which will be covered in GURPS Middle Ages 2), heresy provides many opportunities for adventure.

**Gnosticism**

Gnosticism (derived from the Greek gnosis, meaning knowledge) was widespread throughout the Roman Empire at the dawn of the Middle Ages. Gnostics denied Christ as a redeemer, substituting an abstract being to whom access might be attained by study into spiritual truth. They claimed that salvation could only be attained when faith enabled one to transcend material things – much like the tenets of some Buddhist sects.

In campaigns set in the Saxon period, some enchanters might be gnostic magi; later in the Middle Ages, the Templars and other Illuminated groups might be using – or seeking – ancient gnostic texts.

**Pelagianism**

Pelagianism is said by some to take its name from a founder named Pelagius; others claim that its name is derived from the Greek pelagos, meaning island, suggesting that it was a uniquely British heresy.

Current in Britain at the end of Roman rule and the beginning of the Dark Ages, Pelagianism was officially condemned in 417. The main tenet was the denial of original sin, which made divine grace unnecessary. According to Pelagians, it was possible to reach Heaven simply by living a good and righteous life.

Saint Germanus was sent to Britain to combat Pelagianism, and seems to have made a specialty of calling down pillars of fire from the heavens upon towns that failed to renounce the heresy. Like more orthodox Christianity, Pelagianism seems to have faded from the British Isles amid the pagan Saxon settlement.

**Lollardism**

Lollardism was current mainly in England in the latter half of the 14th century. In 1374, a teacher named John Wyclif wrote a treatise at Oxford in which he suggested the abolition of class and the end of private property. He went on to say that the world was an imperfect place, and that his formula for perfection was not to be expected in everyday life, but the cry of “all things in common” was taken up by the more radical leaders of the Peasants’ Revolt of 1381. Like many in the rest of Europe who were condemned as heretics – including the Cathars, Waldensians, and ultimately Martin Luther – Wyclif condemned Church abuses, such as the sale of indulgences. He also issued the first translation of the Bible into English. His followers traveled, preaching as they went.
From the High Medieval period onward, Jewish communities grew up in most European cities of any size. In this Age of Faith, where wars were fought against Islam and heresies were brutally stamped out, it seems a miracle that they survived at all. Certainly they were not free from prejudice and persecution, but the fact was that the Christians needed them.

Christian law forbade usury – that is, lending money to another Christian and charging interest. This made money-lending and other financial services profitless for Christians, and to all intents and purposes stopped them engaging in such business. Jews, however, were under no such restrictions, and found a thriving market lending money to merchants, kings, and everyone in between.

It was at this time that much of the anti-Semitic stereotype of the European Jew was formed, which survived into the 20th century. In addition to being proud and intractable infidels, the Jews were creditors to many of the most powerful Christians in Europe, and basic human nature dictates that no one likes his creditors. Moreover, they were often learned, speaking and writing Hebrew and sometimes Latin or Greek in addition to the native tongue of the land where they settled. They had books which no one could understand, and all of this smacked to some Christians of witchcraft. Persecutions came and went, and in many cities Jews were restricted to one area, sowing the seeds of later ghettos.

Jews first arrived in England in the wake of the Norman conquest, and there were several flourishing communities by the reign of Henry II in the latter half of the 12th century. Later kings gradually bled them of their wealth, until they were expelled from the country in 1290 by Edward I. Many English cities, including London and Lincoln, have areas which are still known as Jewry, where in the Middle Ages Jews were allowed to live. York had no separate Jewry. Jews lived, as a royal decree of 1278 states, “among the Christians, as they were wont to do in times past.”

In several parts of England, Jews were held to be responsible for various unexplained deaths, and often the Jewish community as a whole was fined in these cases. Henry II protected the Jews, because he saw them as a means of raising money. He decreed that since usurers followed a profession condemned by the Church, a Jew’s property passed to the Crown on his death, and the heirs must purchase it from the king if they wished to inherit. Thus, he could fill the Exchequer without increasing taxes and risking unpopularity among his Christian subjects, who probably applauded his measures against the infidels. The Jews, of course, were caught in a cleft stick – in order to pay what the Crown demanded they had to lend more money, charge more interest, and grow in unpopularity.

This was the time of the Crusades, and to many eyes Jews were just as much infidels as Muslims. Henry took one-tenth of the wealth of his Christian subjects to fund the Crusades, and one-fourth from Jews. The term “infidel” applied to Jews as well as Saracens, and the Jews of England suffered a great deal of hatred which their rulers would rather had been directed at Islam.

Things got worse when Henry died. A riot broke out at the coronation of Richard I, apparently fueled by a rumor that the new king had ordered the extermination of all Jews in the country. Similar riots followed in towns throughout the country. In some places the trouble was blamed on young men, who were keen to go on the Crusades and fight the infidel but lacked the funds to do so. Seeing infidels with money close at hand, they apparently decided to begin their Crusade at home. Some prominent men encouraged these riots, hoping to destroy the records of their debts, if not the creditors themselves.

This prompted a number of measures to protect these records in cities where there were important Jewish communities. All loans were to be made in the presence of an official, and copy documents were kept securely in chests with triple locks. This soon developed into the Exchequer of the Jews, a court where all Jewish matters were settled. Controlled ultimately by the king, this gave the Crown a tighter grip on Jewish business, at the same time demanding money from them on every conceivable occasion – royal weddings, Crusades, and other events. Charges of counterfeiting, debasing currency, and even ritual murder were brought against Jewish communities regularly, always settled with a fine payable to the king.

Not all Jews were moneylenders, of course, but history reflects the prejudice of the time and very little is heard of Jews in other professions.
Usury

The practice of lending money at interest was forbidden to Christians, and this was the basis of Jewish wealth – and ironically, persecution of Jews – through much of the Middle Ages. Rates of interest were high, partly because it was a lender’s market, partly because the king made a practice of extorting money from the Jews, and partly because there was little recourse for them against a debtor who stoutly refused to pay.

Interest rates varied, but a rate of 2-4 pence per pound per week seems to have been common. Unless some other prior arrangement had been made, all payments represented interest until the principal was paid in full; normally the whole amount, principal and interest, had to be repaid at the same time.

Mixed Marriages

Hatred and persecution of the Jews in Christian Europe was so routine that mixed marriages were regarded as scandalous, unless the Jewish partner converted to Christianity. Christians who married Jews and converted to Judaism were regarded as traitors to their people.

A deacon who fell in love with a Jewish woman and abandoned Christianity for Judaism was brought to trial before the archbishop at Osney by Oxford in 1222, and condemned to death by burning. The sentence was carried out by the secular authorities, even though it was passed by a canon court.

A deacon who fell in love with a Jewish woman was condemned to death by burning.

In the reign of Henry II a Jew named Jurnet of Norwich married a Christian heiress who converted to Judaism. All her lands were forfeit to the Crown, and her husband was fined 6,000 marks (around 4,000 pounds), the fine being levied from the whole Jewish community. The two fled abroad, but were back in England before the end of Henry’s reign, and both their sons became moneylenders.

Lost Sheep

Jews who converted to Christianity were well-treated in medieval England. By 1154 there was a school for converts in Bristol, and St. Anselm had written at the beginning of that century, “Let no poverty or any other cause which we can avert make him regret leaving his kin and his law for Christ’s sake.” In other words, converted Jews were to have the full support of the Christian community. Henry III, despite a lack of funds, founded a home for converts in London; converts gave up their property and men received three halfpence per day and women eight pence per week from the king. It is possible that this enterprise made a profit from some of its converts.
Inquisitor: Although England was one of several countries that drew Rome’s ire by refusing to let the Inquisition operate within its borders, there may be occasions when the GM wants to use an NPC inquisitor. A PC inquisitor, operating secretly in England without royal knowledge or consent, would be a challenging character to play. An inquisitor’s skills will focus on Theology, Law (Canon Law), and Interrogation. At least 15 in all these skills is recommended. The second-rank skills will include Occultism, enhanced Latin, and perhaps some History. The Reputation of the Inquisition should also be considered – it varies from time to time and place to place, but should always be worth at least 5 points.

Witchcraft, Sorcery, and Law

For most of the Middle Ages in England, sorcery was illegal, but not a very serious offense. It ranked about with prostitution, and far below petty theft, in severity of sentencing. The usual sentence was public confession, perhaps a little humiliation, and a promise not to do it again.

It was illegal to hurt someone, or damage his property, with magic, just as it was illegal to use an ax or a torch for the same thing. The result was punished, not the means. Nobles, especially court officers or royal intimates or relatives, who were caught using magic were usually punished much more severely. It was assumed that any sorcery near the throne was probably treason aimed at the king’s person. Especially forbidden, on pain of death, was any attempt to tell the king’s fortune or cast his horoscope – presumably because information gained by such means could be used to stir rebellion and for other treasonous purposes.

On the continent (always advanced) the Renaissance notion of witchcraft as a pact with the devil and treason against God developed toward the beginning of the High Medieval period. Cynics note that the Inquisition had stamped out heresy so successfully that the inquisitors were about to be out of work when this wonderful new heresy was discovered. In France and Germany especially, torture, confiscation, and execution by rope and fire were already claiming thousands before 1485. In England, this fruit of the New Learning took a bit longer to ripen. The Malleus Maleficarum of the German inquisitors Kramer and Sprenger, detailing the crimes and prescribing the penalties for witches, was first printed in 1486 and translated into English sometime after 1500.
Medieval England

Scotland, Ireland, and Wales (and France)

“England” is a term whose meaning changed throughout the course of the Middle Ages. In the Saxon period, it referred specifically to the lands occupied by the Anglo-Saxons. At its greatest extent, this was an area corresponding roughly to modern England (although Cornwall retained a Celtic language and a fiercely independent spirit), and excluding Wales, Scotland, and Ireland. From the eighth century to the 10th, England was smaller still, as the Danelaw – the Viking kingdom whose capital lay at York – occupied most of the north and east.

Norman England started out about the same as Saxon England, but Wales was conquered in 1284 and added to the political entity that was England. Throughout the Middle Ages and into the Tudor period (and indeed, well into the 20th century), repeated attempts were made to obliterate the separate Welsh culture and language, in order to make Wales more completely part of England, but these never entirely succeeded.

The English and Scots fought an ongoing series of border wars throughout the Middle Ages and on into Tudor times, when the traditional conflict became further inflamed by the religious issues of the Reformation. A law still on the books in the northern English city of Durham forbids anyone from calling another a Scot – Durham was an important fortress-city on the Scottish border in the Middle Ages, and apparently the term “Scot” became such a deadly insult that its use regularly led to breaches of the peace!

From Norman times onward, the English fought a series of campaigns in Ireland, but were not able to effect a lasting conquest until much later; rebellion flared whenever they turned their backs. Though the roots of the present Catholic-Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland date back only to the 17th century, the Irish spent the whole of the Middle Ages – and the best part of a thousand years – fighting to rid their land of the English.

The relationship between England and France in the Middle Ages was a complex one, made all the more confusing by the fact that the King of England ruled some French territories in his own right, and some as a feudal vassal of the King of France; this varied considerably from time to time and place to place. Calais remained in English hands throughout the Middle Ages. The Channel Islands of Jersey, Guernsey, Sark, and Alderney, off the coast of Normandy, remain under the British Crown to the present day, although they have their own customs and political institutions dating back to feudal times. Some Channel Islanders still refer to Queen Elizabeth as “the Duchess of Normandy,” emphasizing their prior feudal connection with what later became the royalty of England.

Paganism and Witchcraft

Witchcraft and paganism in post-Christian England is a much-debated topic. Some kind of local witchcraft seems to have been practiced: fertility charms, curses, healing spells, and scrying of many sorts. Whether this was a developed religion (or religions) or just a mélange of local superstitions is a matter of opinion. “Local superstition” is the orthodox historical teaching. There are two other common views.

Pagan survival posits an enduring pagan faith, with priests and/or priestesses, extensive public rituals, holy places of worship and pilgrimage, and perhaps even enough power to oppose church, king, and nobles. This structure existed alongside the official church and state. Since all its teachings were by word-of-mouth, it has left no historical record. The most extreme statement of this view was probably by Margaret Alice Murray, who maintained that “Witchcraft Religion” was a survival of the prehistoric fertility cult of the stone age. This version holds that the “Old Faith” had more communicants than the Catholic church, and included all the kings of England, Thomas Becket, and Joan of Arc. The deaths of Becket, Joan, and William Rufus are seen as sacrifices of a willing victim for the good of the land. This is a favorite hypothesis of historical novelists and of some practitioners of Wicca or modern paganism. A less extreme theory simply says that, especially in remote locations, Saxon and Celtic paganism survived long into the Christian era. Since so many feasts and rituals of the church duplicate pagan activities, it would be easy to keep the old religion while paying lip service to the new. For GMs, this might provide a handy group of opponents of the status quo if needed.

Treason against God is the concept that Satan, the great enemy, is actively recruiting agents on earth. This theory was developed (believers say discovered) about the end of the 13th century. In final form, it was the official basis for the great witchcraft persecutions of the Renaissance. This idea was uncommon in England at any time during the period covered in this book. It had begun to be used in witch trials on the continent. It is still widely accepted by fundamentalist Christians. For campaigns, it unites all the enemies of good under one banner to create a very nasty enemy.
William Shakespeare wrote a number of historical plays dealing with the lives of English kings; *Henry V* and *Richard III* are perhaps the best-known.

While Shakespeare’s historical plays are certainly entertaining, dramatic, lyrical, and full of great characters, historical accuracy can take a back seat at times. There are a number of reasons for this. First, Shakespeare wrote many of his historical plays during the reign of Elizabeth I, the last of the Tudor monarchs. Royal patronage was worth a great deal, and royal displeasure was extremely dangerous. Thus, his historical plays often make political points on behalf of the house of Tudor. After the confusion that followed the death of Henry VIII and the oppressive reign of Mary, Elizabeth needed to win the hearts and minds of the people and convince them that a Tudor monarchy was still a better proposition than what had gone before.

Richard III had been defeated by Elizabeth’s grandfather Henry VII, so to legitimate the Tudor seizure of power, Richard was portrayed as a complete monster. In reality, he probably did not have the famous hunchback and club foot – indeed, some sources show him as a capable athlete and deadly swordsman – but these were dramatic devices, external signs of the spiritual corruption within. Likewise, the peace-loving Richard II, who was deposed by a nobles’ revolt, is portrayed as a weak, incompetent whiner – a sharp and impressive contrast with the fiery Elizabeth.

Henry V, likewise, is shown as a brave and dashing warrior-king, winning a great battle and thwarting the imperial designs of an evil foreign monarch. Being a Lancastrian – a member of the house through which the Tudor claim to the throne was legitimized – it was politically expedient to portray him as a hero. The public at the time was intended to see a parallel with their own situation, for England was gearing up for a war with Spain. Laurence Olivier’s 1944 film version of *Henry V* was made for a similar purpose, but this time the enemy was Hitler’s Germany.
TIMELINE

This is a summary of significant events throughout the Middle Ages, and for several centuries earlier to give context. Events which do not directly affect England are in italics.

410: Rome tells Britain to look to its own defense; the end of Roman rule in Britain. Visigoths sack Rome.
429: St. Germanus is sent to Britain to combat the Pelagian heresy.
449: According to Bede, the first Angles, Saxons, and Jutes land in Britain; actually, by this date they had been arriving in one form or another for almost a century.
451: Attila the Hun invades Gaul.
470: A British force (led by Artorius Riothamus?) lands in Gaul to help against the Goths. It is almost annihilated.
481: Clovis, the greatest of the early Merovingian kings, comes to the throne of Gaul.
570: Mohammed born in Mecca.
597: St. Augustine arrives in Kent.
627: Northumbria accepts Christianity.
663: Synod of Whitby acknowledges Rome’s authority over the English Church; end of Celtic influence in the Church.
664: Pestilence strikes England; many clergy are killed, and in some areas the people turn back to pagan gods.
665: Essex accepts Christianity.
672: First synod of English church held at Hertford.
677: St. Wilfrid begins the process of converting the Saxon homeland of north Germany.
717: The Celtic church accepts the Roman date of Easter.
725: Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf written. Charles Martel fights Muslims invading Frankish lands from Spain; seizes Church lands to pay his soldiers.
731: Bede completes his History of the English Church and People.
768: Charlemagne succeeds to the Frankish throne.
793: First recorded Viking raid; Lindisfarne, Northumbrian coast.
794: Viking raid on monastery at Monkwearmouth, near modern Sunderland. Storm kills many raiders.
795: Viking raids on Scottish island monastery of Iona, Irish island of Lambay, Welsh coast.
800: Pope Leo III crowns Charlemagne Holy Roman Emperor on Christmas Day.
814: Death of Charlemagne; his empire extends from the Danube to the Pyrenees and from the North Sea to Rome, encompassing almost the entire western half of the old Roman Empire. Louis the Pious succeeds, allows defenses to run down.
835: Danes establish winter bases in Thames estuary, raiding England and France.
840: Death of Frankish king Louis the Pious. Frankish Empire begins to decline. Danes and Norwegians begin sweep across France.
866: Danes take York and begin colonizing northern England.
860s: Norwegians discover Iceland.
876: Danes attack Wessex from Cambridge. Alfred forced into hiding.

878: Battle of Edington. Alfred defeats Danes, who retreat to East Anglia and commence colonization. England/Danelaw border more or less secure from now on. 886: Alfred liberates London from the Danes.
888: Death of Charles the Fat leads to permanent division of Frankish Empire, roughly setting the frontiers of modern France and Germany.
889: Death of Alfred the Great.
911: Rollo created first Duke of Normandy by Charles the Simple.
975: Death of King Edgar of England breaks 25 years of peace.
979: Edgar’s son and successor Edward is murdered; Aethelred Unrede comes to the English throne.
980: Renewed Viking raids on England; they keep up throughout the decade.
982-5: Eric the Red explores Greenland.
992: Leif Ericsson explores Vinland.
994: Norwegian chief Olaf Tryggvason and Danish king Swein Forkbeard attack London with 100 ships; they are beaten off but plunder southeast England and are paid 16,000 pounds of silver to leave. Raids on English coast continue.
Much of his reign is marked by banditry and civil war with long after and at the other end of the country Harold Godwinson at the battle of Stamford bridge. Not adds Normandy to the English lands.

Knights of King Henry II.

by accompanying her husband, king of England.

Harefoot becomes king of England.

of England.

Addenda:

1002: Aethelred orders the massacre of all Danes in England.

1003: Swein Forkbeard launches attacks on England in reprisal for the massacre of Danes by Saxons.

1013: Swein Forkbeard invades England; London holds out, but Wessex is overrun. Aethelred flees to Duke Richard II of Normandy, his brother-in-law.

1014: Swein Forkbeard dies suddenly in England.

1015: Edmund Ironside seizes power in the Danelaw. In the resulting wars Aethelred dies, and Cnut the Great, Swein Forkbeard’s son, becomes king of all England. He tries to keep a hold on Norway and Denmark as well, coming closer than anyone else to unifying the Viking world.

1035: Cnut dies and his realm begins to disintegrate.

1037: After much wrangling, Cnut’s son Harald Harefoot becomes king of England.

1040: Harald Harefoot dies before the Danish king Hardacnut can attack. Hardacnut becomes king of England.


1064: Norway and Denmark make peace; Harald Hardrada turns his attention to England.

1066: Harald Hardrada attacks England and is killed by Harold Godwinson at the battle of Stamford bridge. Not long after and at the other end of the country, Harold Godwinson is killed at the battle of Hastings as Duke William the Bastard of Normandy conquers England.

1086: Domesday Book compiled.

1087: Death of William I; Robert Curthose gets Normandy, William Rufus gets England, Henry Beauclerc gets a few scattered estates.

1095: Pope Urban II calls for Christian warriors to liberate the Holy Land from the Infidel; First Crusade begins.

1099: End of First Crusade; Christian Kingdom of Jerusalem established.

1100: Death of William Rufus; Henry I becomes King of England.

1106: Henry I defeats and imprisons Robert Curthose; adds Normandy to the English lands.

1120: Knights Templar and Knights Hospitaler founded.

1135: Death of Henry I. King Stephen takes the throne. Much of his reign is marked by banditry and civil war with Henry’s widow Matilda.

1147-1149: Eleanor of Aquitaine scandalizes Europe by accompanying her husband, Louis of France, on the Second Crusade.

1154: Stephen dies. Matilda’s son Henry II takes the throne, founding the Plantagenet dynasty.

1170: Murder of Archbishop Thomas Becket by knights of King Henry II.

1173-4: Henry’s sons rebel, backed by the kings of Scotland and France.

1187-1192: Saladin retakes Jerusalem; Third Crusade fails to recapture the city.

1189: Death of Henry II; Richard “Lionheart” becomes King of England and goes on crusade; does not take Jerusalem, but negotiates a truce that allows access for pilgrims.

1192: Richard I is captured by the Duke of Austria while returning from the Crusade.

1194: Richard is ransomed, returns to England in February and is crowned a second time in March. In May, he leaves England for France.

1199: Death of Richard I at Chaluz; accession of King John.

1207-1208: Franciscan order founded.

1208-1229: Albigensian Crusade against Cathar heretics in southern France. French king strengthened by ruining southern nobles.

1209: Cambridge University founded.

1215: King John agrees to Magna Carta.

1216: King John dies and is succeeded by his son, Henry III, still a child.

1258: Barons’ Revolt in response to growing power of royal household.


1265: Simon de Montfort holds what is generally regarded as the first English parliament. Prince Edward defeats and kills de Montfort and restores King Henry.

1272: Death of Henry III; his son Edward was in Sicily, returning from crusade; England was so secure Edward waited two years to bother coming for his coronation.

1265: Marco Polo travels to the Far East.

1295: Edward I holds “Model Parliament”; the first full English parliament.

1305: Papacy moved to Avignon.

1307: Death of Edward I; accession of Edward II.

1312: Templars destroyed by Phillip IV of France and Pope Clement.

1314: Robert Bruce defeats Edward II at Bannockburn and insures Scottish independence.

1327: Edward II forced to abdicate and murdered; Queen Isabella and her lover Roger Mortimer rule in the name of the child, Edward III.

1330: Mortimer overthrown and executed; Edward III takes power for himself.

1333: Edward III defeats David Bruce at Halidon Hill and reconquers Scotland; Bruce exiled.

1337: Beginning of Hundred Years’ War; naval battle at Sluys won by England; David Bruce returns to Scotland and takes the throne while England is busy in France.

1346: England defeats France at Crecy.

1348-1350: Black Death ravages Europe.

1356: England defeats France at Poitiers; King John of France captured by the English and held for ransom.

1377: Death of Edward III and accession of his grandson, Richard II, still a child. End of Avignon Captivity; two Popes contend for power.

1380: Translation of Bible into English in progress.

1381: Peasants’ Revolt in England; Richard II promises reforms, but reneges when the peasant armies are dispersed.

1399: Henry IV takes the throne by force; Richard II deposed and eventually murdered.
1413: Death of Henry IV; his son succeeds as Henry V.
1415: Battle of Agincourt. Henry V inflicts massive casualties on a stronger but poorly led French army.
1420: Treaty of Troyes gives throne of France to Henry V and his heirs after death of Charles VI.
1428: Death of Henry V; succeeded by a child, Henry VI, son of a French princess, Catherine.
1429: Joan of Arc revitalizes the French in the war. Dauphin Charles (son of Charles VI), crowned as King of France at Rheims.
1431: Young Henry VI crowned in Paris to counter coronation of French Dauphin. Joan of Arc burned at Rouen.
1434: Normandy rebels against England.
1435: Conference at Arras; England loses Burgundian support for its claim to French throne. English holdings in France melt away over next 15 years.
   c. 1450: Invention of printing with moveable type.
1453: End of Hundred Years’ War, English rule vanishes from France, except for Calais.
1455-1461: Civil War between Yorkists and Lancastrians; Henry VI is several times captured and rescued; he is intermittently insane.
1461: Edward IV (Yorkist) proclaims himself king though Henry VI is still alive and free.
1464: Edward IV captures and imprisons Henry VI.
1470: Edward IV driven into exile and Henry VI restored.
1471: Edward IV returns, defeats and deposes (again) Henry VI; Henry dies of natural causes in prison.
1478: Spanish Inquisition begins.
1483: Edward IV dies; his brother Richard usurps the throne as Richard III; Edward’s sons disappear.
A 100-point character base is recommended for most medieval campaigns. For a romantic chivalric campaign or a cinematic campaign, the GM might allow characters to be built on 150 or even 200 points. Disadvantages and quirks should always be limited to 40 points and 5 points respectively.
Appearancen

Height and Weight

Medieval people were not necessarily shorter than modern folk. The important factor was diet. Town-dwellers had less access to fresh food, and serfs had less food of any type than the nobility.

Use the height and weight tables from the sidebar on p. B15 for noble characters. For town-dwellers, subtract 3 inches from height for a given ST. For rural serfs, subtract 1 inch.

Hair Color

In the Dark Ages, men normally wore their hair to shoulder length. The Normans introduced a “pudding-bowl” haircut. The back and sides of the head were shaven below the level of the top of the ears (it was cool and provided padding under a helmet). Men’s hair varied between these two extremes throughout the Middle Ages.

Women’s hair was always worn long, and could reach to the waist. In the Norman and later periods, women often wore cowls or elaborate headdresses. For almost the whole medieval period, a woman of the noble (or the merchant/artisan) class did not appear in public bareheaded.

The table for hair color in the Basic Set can be used for most characters, although the GM may prefer to use the following table instead, since it takes ethnic background into account. Roll 3d when using this table.

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Die roll</th>
<th>Hair Color</th>
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<tr>
<td>Celt</td>
<td>Saxon</td>
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<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>5-6</td>
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<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>7-10</td>
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<td>11</td>
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<td>12</td>
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<td>14-15</td>
<td>14-16</td>
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<td>16-17</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td>18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At age 40, gray will begin to mix with any color. The darker the color, the earlier it turns gray. Characters with Albinism automatically have white hair. Men have a 10% chance of losing their hair starting at age 30.

Eye Color

Eye color is largely related to hair color – the darker the hair, the darker the eyes. Saxons and Normans will tend to have blue eyes, while Celts may have blue, gray, hazel, or green eyes.

Clothing

Whole books have been written on medieval dress, so these notes can only serve as a rough guide.

Standard male dress consisted of tunic, undershirt, and breeches, with leather shoes or no footwear at all. “Pattens,” wooden platforms laced to the feet, were used as foul-weather foot gear. Knee-length or higher boots were used for riding. Headgear was usually a hood or cowl. Broad-brimmed straw or grass hats were used for sun protection; pilgrims used them frequently. Elaborate plumed and jeweled hats were popular for both men and women in the High Medieval period.

Female dress consisted of a shift with a heavy floor-length dress over it, secured at the waist by a belt. Some kind of hat, veil, or other headgear was also customary, especially when out of doors.

Underwear was minimal for both sexes; at most a diaper-like loincloth. Both sexes normally slept nude. The very wealthiest had robes to wear if forced to arise quickly.

Clothes were valuable and expensive. Frequently a much-patched garment was handed down to two or three generations of wearers in peasant or poor noble families. That’s one reason styles changed so slowly.

With minor variations, these garments remained in use throughout the Middle Ages. Styles and decoration changed, but the basic garments remained the same.
Most people had two names: a forename and a surname. The surname was not normally inherited until somewhere about the 13th or 14th centuries. Sometime around the 15th century, wives began taking their husband’s surname on marriage.

Forenames varied by period and ethnic background. Here are a few samples:

**Saxon Forenames**

Saxon forenames commonly had two elements, as follows. Letters in brackets are optional. Ignore combinations which are unpronounceable (these should be few) or ridiculous (unless you are playing a silly campaign). Not all combinations are historically correct, but most have the right “feel” to them, which is the important thing.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>First Part</th>
<th>Second Part (male)</th>
<th>Second Part (female)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>A(e)ld</td>
<td>gar</td>
<td>floed</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(e)lf</td>
<td>heah</td>
<td>ith</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(e)lh</td>
<td>here</td>
<td>hild</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A(e)thel</td>
<td>bald</td>
<td>(d)run</td>
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<td>w(e)ar(d)</td>
<td>ny</td>
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<tr>
<td>Berh</td>
<td>wulf</td>
<td></td>
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<td>Brih(t)</td>
<td>(d)red</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C(e)ad</td>
<td>stan</td>
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<td>frith</td>
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<tr>
<td>Eorp</td>
<td>gyth</td>
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<tr>
<td>God</td>
<td>rum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guth</td>
<td>ber(h)t</td>
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<tr>
<td>Har</td>
<td>gar</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Hwaet</td>
<td>win(e)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leo(f)</td>
<td>wiu</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Oft</td>
<td>for</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Ot(h)</td>
<td>mund</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Os(w)</td>
<td>(th)eof</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peht</td>
<td>had</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pleg</td>
<td>(f)erth</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ra(e)d</td>
<td>thin</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sig(e)</td>
<td>(th)er</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Si(hr)</td>
<td>(t)har</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tat(h)</td>
<td>wi(c)g</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Tost</td>
<td>mer</td>
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<tr>
<td>U(h)t</td>
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<td>Ul(f)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wal(th)</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wer</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wil</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wulf</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

**Norman Forenames**

Norman forenames include more that have survived to the present day, as well as others which have only fallen out of use in the last century or so. These include:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Male</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Aubrey</td>
<td>Anne/Anna</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>Blanche</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eustace</td>
<td>Catherine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geoffrey</td>
<td>Eleanor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gervase</td>
<td>Elizabeth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gilbert</td>
<td>Isabella</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Guy</td>
<td>Jane/Joan/Joanne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>Juliana</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hubert</td>
<td>Margaret/Margot</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John</td>
<td>Mary</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miles</td>
<td>Marion/Marianne</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>Philippa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Philip</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ralf/Ralph</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Robert</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Roger</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Simon</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephen</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Surnames**

A forename was usually sufficient to identify someone to his or her kindred and neighbors. But there could be several hundred Edgars in the kingdom of Wessex, for instance, and sometimes a surname was necessary to identify exactly which Edgar was involved in a matter. Surnames could have a number of origins.

**Home**

A common practice was to take the name of one’s home or birthplace as a surname – for instance, Edgar of Bingham. This worked provided the place wasn’t too big, but the name Edgar of London might apply to any of a hundred people, even in Saxon times. Normans used the French *de* instead of the English *of*. Later, the possessive was dropped, except among nobles, where it remained to indicate that they were lord of the place named.

**“Son of”**

 Saxons, like the later Vikings, often used the suffix *-son* after their father’s forename. This gives us names like Watson, Edmundson, and so on. Normans placed the word *fitz* (as in modern French *fils*) between their forename and their father’s forename. In time, the two-part surname fused into a single word, like Fitzwalter or Fitzgerald. The name Fitzroy indicated an illegitimate but acknowledged child of the king. In some cases, the father’s forename was used unchanged, like Thomas, or with a minor addition, like Matthews.
Trade

A trade or occupation could also be used as a surname, surviving today in names like Smith, Carter, Cooper, Fletcher, and Tanner. A Palmer was a pilgrim; anyone named Priest or Bishop or Parsons may have a clergyman (or simply the tenant of a clergyman) in his ancestry. Clerical celibacy did not become a rule for all priests until after 1100; acknowledged slips from that vow were never uncommon. The same applies to surnames like Duke and Earl.

Distinguishing Marks

Especially among the Saxons, nicknames derived from distinguishing characteristics or traits were often made into surnames. Some of these survive in slightly altered forms to the present day. For example, a family called Ball might have started with a Saxon nicknamed “the bald,” and a family called Read might have started with a red-headed Saxon or Celt nicknamed “the red.”

Other Characteristics

Personality could be a source of surnames. Aethelred Unrede (roughly No Counsel) was a king who continually did the wrong thing; Harald Hardrada (Hard Counsel) was a king who always preferred a violent solution. For kings and great nobles (and notorious outlaws) less-than-adulatory nicknames were for out-of-hearing jokes, or for the safely deceased.

Character Types

Many character types can be used in a medieval campaign. The types that players choose will depend to some extent on the campaign style and the historical/geographical background.

Entertainer

Wandering singers and tale-tellers were an important part of life in all periods of the Middle Ages: bards, gleemen, troubadours, minstrels. They should have at least one Musical Instrument skill, Singing, and possibly Bard and/or Poetry. Some may have Acrobatics, Juggling, or the arts of sleight of hand.

Entertainers were regarded with deep distaste by church and nobility. They were hard to control and carried gossip wherever they went. They were often accompanied by cutpurses, swindlers, and other criminals. Most were probably not averse to a little questionable profit themselves.

Bards and troubadours of high rank and skill were a feature of all periods. Lesser traveling entertainers had their best time in the late Norman and High Medieval periods. They made the circuits of fairs and tournaments. A large fair was beyond the power of local law for petty offenses. Even if the local nobility and royal officers had the men to police it, they could not afford to lose the fair if they alienated the itinerant merchants. Of course, really serious crimes – treason, heresy, perhaps murder – could not be ignored. But a fair is a good hideout for adventurers on the run.

There were no Gypsies in Medieval England; they came in with the Renaissance, after the period of this book.

Farmer/Herdsman/Fisherman

Through most of the Middle Ages, the vast majority (95% or more) of the population were direct producers of food. Most lived in small villages. The tiny surplus of food they produced made the rest of medieval culture possible.

In the Saxon period, most would be freemen, paying taxes in labor and kind. In the Norman and early High Medieval periods, they would mostly be serfs, paying feudal duty in labor and kind. In the later High Medieval period, they would again be mostly free. This made surprisingly little difference in daily life.

Almost all rural folk will have Area Knowledge extending for a few miles around their homes. Other noncombat skills might include Boating, Fishing, Naturalist, Survival (appropriate terrain), Tracking, and so on, according to the individual’s lifestyle. Many farmers supplemented their living by fishing and trapping where possible (see Forest Law, p. 78). Agronomy at above default is the most important skill for everyone. Men should know Carpentry and women Cooking; anyone without these skills is unusual.

Combat skills would vary with circumstance and time. Every Saxon freeman would have some skill in Spear and Axe, and wealthier individuals might have Broadsword and Shield. Bows were not common, but any Saxon or Celt could use a Sling.

Any farmer should be above default for an agricultural implement – scythe, pitchfork, bill, etc. – used as a weapon. Saxons should all know Knife; it was their national weapon.

In the early Norman period, skills for a freeman should still be like those of the earlier periods. Toward the end and on into the High Medieval period, every freeman should have some skill with the bow (practice was both customary and legally required). The most common weapon (after the ubiquitous knife) was the quarterstaff; in the 14th century it figured in more English homicides than all other weapons combined.
These were an insular and often xenophobic people. They were ready to distrust, cheat, and kill any stranger. Stranger equals enemy or tax collector (a small difference); strangers have no one to avenge them. They were equally likely to welcome any teller of tales, singer of songs, or simply foreign curiosity, if the mood took them.

**Forest People**

There were probably some Saxon folk who made a profession of hunting and trapping; there was always a market for hides, furs, and meat. The forests were big and little regulated. Appropriate skills would be the same as for hunters and trappers in any culture: Tracking, Survival, Botany, and Cooking.

With the coming of the Normans and their savage forest laws (see p. 78), forest living became a much more limited lifestyle, but it is still useful for adventurers.

Foresters live full-time in the woods, and pursue poachers and outlaws. Robin Hood’s most persistent enemies (and some of his best recruits) were foresters. In addition to the usual outdoor skills, they should be good with Bow or Crossbow, Knife and possibly Broadsword, Axe, Shield, or Quarterstaff. They work hard and often sleep cold, but they usually eat well.

Charcoal-burners glean the forest for dead wood and burn it to charcoal in pits. This gives them leave to be in the forest and to be in possession of tools – axe, bill, spade – that are readily adaptable to fighting. They may see and know much that occurs out of sight of respectable folk. They are also likely to be close-mouthed about it, but rightly approached or bribed they can be valuable allies, and they make excellent cover identities.

**Itinerant Craftsman**

Another exception to the rule of stay-at-home were those craftsmen who had to travel to work. Any great building project involved stonemasons, carpenters, metal and glass workers; they might travel in companies, but were also known to make their individual way to any new site. Much can happen to a wandering craftsman, and the craftsman’s guise is good cover for a traveler with other motives.

Tinkers were a familiar sight on all the roads in late Norman and High Medieval times. A tinker is a repairer of household tools and vessels. Seldom does one village have enough work to support a full-time tinker, but every village needs one occasionally. Tinkers are familiar figures in legend (the Robin Hood ballads, for instance). They have a reputation for brawling, lechery, and drunkenness, but this may simply mean that they are strangers everywhere and thus suspect everywhere.

**Noble**

Saxon nobles were powerful local leaders, offering protection in exchange for loyalty and service. The kings were theoretically hereditary, but most were succeeded by their brothers rather than sons. The nobles wanted a fighting man on the throne, and few Saxon kings lived to see their sons grown.

Under the Normans, kings were hereditary and nobles were the sole authority in their own domains. They were called upon to serve the king in time of war, but otherwise their chief duty was to protect their people from outlaws and the like.
Through the High Medieval period, there was a growing tendency for major noble houses to involve themselves in elaborate political intrigues, with an eye on the throne.

As the king’s household and ruling apparatus expanded, more and more individuals were employed full-time in administrative, political, and diplomatic tasks. A character of this type will nearly always have Status +2 or higher, and an array of skills including Literacy, Latin, French in the Norman period, Politics, and Diplomacy. Most will be nobles – or at least knights – and depending on period they may also have Riding and weapon skills dictated by their rank.

**Priest/Monk**

The Dark Ages were hard times for the Christian clergy. Cut off from Rome, the Church survived in the Celtic lands of Wales and Ireland, and missionaries were sent constantly to the various petty kings. Some were converted, some not. When Rome reestablished contact with England by sending St. Augustine to Kent in 597, the process of converting the Saxons began to make real headway – and then the pagan Danes conquered the northern half of the country in the ninth century and the process had to begin again.

Things were much easier after this, however. The clergy was given great respect and steadily increased its wealth through donations and gifts of land. Through much of the Middle Ages the Church levied its own tax on the people, great and small – a “tithe” (one-tenth) on their total wealth. There was always conflict between royal power and church power. Archbishops were exiled, and one was murdered. Kings were excommunicated. At least once the whole kingdom was under the ban (no religious rites, including burial and baptism, could be performed). But to the end of the Middle Ages, there was a united church in England.

**Slave**

Slavery was always legal, and always practiced to some extent in the Middle Ages. In the Dark Ages it had been common; the Celts and pagan Saxons all practiced slavery. The Christian Saxons had fewer slaves; the Vikings were slave dealers on a continental scale, and operated great slave markets at York and Dublin. Any Englishman who had ventured to the Slavic or Islamic frontiers might well acquire slaves and the habit of keeping them. But in the Norman and High Medieval periods, slaves were culturally and economically insignificant in England. Serfs provided the farm labor, and the complex customs of service provided the domestic labor, that in other cultures was performed by slaves.

See sidebar, p. B193, for general rules on slavery and slaves. After the Norman Conquest, there is only a small chance that any random hireling would be a slave.

**Townsmen**

The Roman towns of Britain fell into almost total disuse during the Dark Ages. Towns began to grow again after Christianity was reintroduced, and trade and industry developed throughout the Middle Ages. Tradesmen and craftsmen banded together in guilds and acquired some political power. Walled towns, with their own free fighting-men on the walls, could sometimes defy noble or even royal power. More often, their goodwill was worth noble or royal favors. There were many reasons to move from farm to town; one in particular could be overwhelming. In many towns, a serf who could live uncaught for a year and a day became free.

The bulk of the urban population were craftsmen and/or tradesmen. The craftsman made his living by making things, and the tradesman made his living by selling them; the activities were often combined. After the mid-13th century, town activity was fueled by the wool trade. Wool was to medieval England what oil was to 20th-century Arabia; it made a backward wasteland into a world economic power. England was at the pivot of the great triangular trade: English wool for Flemish cloth, Flemish cloth for Gascon wine, Gascon wine for English wool.

Appropriate craft skills include Armoury, Blacksmith, Carpentry, Weaving, Leatherworking, Pottery, Shipbuilding, and Woodworking. Trade skills might include Merchant, Fast-Talk, one or more foreign languages (Anglo-Saxon, Welsh, Gaelic, Flemish, French, German), Literacy, and Accounting.
In the Middle Ages, the warrior was more likely to be in the service of a hereditary noble than of a self-promoted leader. Natural leaders without social status were likely to be bandits.

Professional warriors were on the fringe of medieval society. Most knights were part-time warriors and full-time landlords and administrators. But there are always some who prefer fighting to peaceful work, and some who see war as the high road to power. As a cash economy returned in the later Norman and High Medieval periods, there were more mercenaries. Kings tended to favor mercenaries over their own subjects, since mercenaries were more interested in money than politics. Noble younger sons, trained for war then denied family lands; free farmers, tired of grinding labor; outlaws and outsiders, from man-slaying psychopaths to simple free spirits – there were always recruits for the mercenary companies, despite clerical distaste that occasionally went as far as mass excommunication. There were English soldiers with the free companies who held the pope and his court to ransom at Avignon in 1360.

Chapter 4 gives “weapon sets” for various warrior types, depending on place, status, and period. Veterans should have Brawling skill, and knights need Riding (Horse). Most would have a Duty to a lord. Seasoned warriors might have an Appearance disadvantage due to battle scars, and perhaps some lasting wounds like One Eye or One Arm.

Warriors with Status 1 or higher should have “noble” skills such as Falconry, Savoir-Faire, Leadership, and Tactics. Any who have seen service abroad may have a smattering of other languages. In Norman and High Medieval times, the lingua franca of soldiers was French; it was also the normal language of the English nobility. Not until the 14th century was it common for nobles to speak English, much less read and write it.

This section develops the advantages, disadvantages and skills given in the Basic Set and Compendium I, with notes on special applications to a medieval campaign.

Advantages

Allies

Any character can have Allies from his family. Frequency of appearance depends on how close to home the character is. A character could use up all his points on family very easily if the player wanted to model medieval family ties accurately. To prevent this, the GM might set a limit of 2-3 Allies, or 200 points for building Allies. Alternatively, the GM might require the character to have kindred Dependents of equal value to kindred Allies.

For a Saxon or Norman warrior, Allies will probably be other warriors following the same lord. The same goes for Norman knights. Anyone in holy orders (see Clerical Investment above) will probably have allies from their own order. Characters of Status +4 or better will have Allies who are knights and lesser nobles. Tradesmen and craftsmen who are guild members will have fellow guild members as Allies. Allies who help the character out of feudal duty may be unwilling (see pp. C19-20).

Clerical Investment

The only openly followed religion in medieval England was Roman Catholicism. Investment as a priest costs 5 or 10 points as described on p. B19. Note that nuns and most monks are not ordained priests and do not require Clerical Investment; they cannot perform exorcisms, say mass, or perform weddings. They get a +1 reaction bonus, balanced by a Vow of obedience that gives them a duty to their order. Among holy orders (Knights Templar, Franciscans, Benedictines, etc.) there is a further +1 reaction bonus when dealing with a member of the same order.

Legal Enforcement Powers

Any noble of Status +3 or higher has the power to detain, charge, try, and sentence, even to death, any non-noble; therefore, anyone of Status +3 or higher must purchase 15 points of Legal Enforcement Power.

Literacy

Literacy is uncommon, and is a 10-point advantage. Many clerks who can write Latin cannot write their native tongue.
Magical Aptitude see p. B21

Any adult who has this advantage must also take a 10-point Social Stigma (Known Sorcerer). If he is also a heretic, the total cost of disadvantages is 30 points (see below).

Military Rank see p. B22

There was no standing military, so most military ranks were purely temporary. Within a castle garrison, a mercenary company, or a militant holy order, permanent ranks up to Military Rank 4 are possible. Since this rank applies only within the limited organization, does not carry over into civil life or even any other military situation, and can be removed at the whim of any superior, cost is only 2 points per level. Higher officers were appointed directly by the king or noble who organized a force for a particular campaign, and their appointment was valid only for that campaign.

Patron see p. B24

In most periods, a Patron will be the character’s liege lord. For a character with the Clerical Investment advantage, the GM might require a Patron of at least 15 points, taking the form of the character’s order or even the Church as a whole. For tradesmen or craftsmen in a High Medieval, a guild would function as a patron.

Semi-Literacy see pp. CI29, CI94

Semi-literacy costs 5 points in the Middle Ages.

DISADVANTAGES

Some of the disadvantages listed in the Basic Set need changes or clarification for a medieval campaign. These are noted below. The value of a disadvantage is not changed unless stated here.

Addiction see p. B30

The only addictive substance available through most of the Middle Ages was alcohol. Merchants and Crusaders might have come into contact with hashish or even opium, but in most of Christendom these substances were just about impossible to obtain.

Beer, wine, and mead were the most common sources of alcohol in the Middle Ages – brandy was invented late in the Norman period and did not become common through most of Europe until the middle of the High Medieval. There is some debate about when the Celtic fringe discovered whiskey, but there are no literary references to it in medieval sources.

Code of Honor see p. B31

The Chivalric Code of Honor was more apparent in stories than in real life. Not all knights are required to take this disadvantage, and it is quite acceptable for a knight to take a less demanding Code of Honor, such as the Pirate’s or Gentleman’s Code covered in the Basic Set. Of course, the Chivalric Code of Honor should be taken by all characters of Status +2 or more in a romantic-chivalric campaign. At the GM’s option, this disadvantage need not count against the -40 point maximum in such campaigns.

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The Saxon Code of Honor was much stronger, and a man who had sworn allegiance to a leader was expected to put the leader’s interests above his own, and to fight to the death in his leader’s defense. It was a great disgrace (worth a -2 reaction penalty) to survive one’s lord in battle. This Code of Honor is worth -10 points.

Dependants see p. B38

As well as family, a character could have dependents in the form of servants, apprentices, junior squires, and tenants. Although feudal duty was often one-sided, a lord was bound to keep the peace in his lands and look after the welfare of his peasants.

Disciplines of Faith see p. CI89

Asceticism was not widespread in Medieval England, although the Celtic church did feature hermits and ascetic monks. The literature of High Chivalry, on the other hand, is full of mysterious hermits tending tiny chapels deep in forests and in other forbidding locations. In these stories, hermits were often granted visions and divine insights that were not available to ordinary mortals.

Iconism, while not a formal doctrine, was certainly a factor in the Middle Ages. Pilgrims traveled between religious establishments seeking miracles – or just a state of grace – from touching or being in the presence of the bones of saints and other holy relics. Religious houses themselves – especially cathedrals and abbeys – often went to some lengths to acquire relics, partly out of a spirit of iconism and partly because a good set of relics kept the pilgrims – and their offerings – pouring in. A whole class of confidence tricksters – many disguised as priests or friars – preyed on gullible pilgrims, selling fake relics made from pigs’ bones and similar materials.

Monasticism was a major feature of the Middle Ages, and reached its zenith in the High Middle Ages. Medieval monasticism is described in more detail in Chapters 5 and 8. The Franciscan friars were an exception among monastic orders in that they were not sequestered, but traveled in the secular world.

Mysticism was more common in the tales of High Chivalry than it was in real life, and often went hand in hand with asceticism. In the rigidly orthodox religious thinking of the Middle Ages, mysticism was dangerously close to heresy; who could tell whether a revelation came from God or the Devil?

Ritualism was a part of medieval monasticism, but was not a pursuit in itself.

Duty see p. B39

The whole of medieval society was founded on duty. In the pyramid of feudal society, peasants owed duty to their lords, lords owed duty to barons, barons owed duty to the king, and everyone owed duty to the Church.
**Enemies** see p. B39

Depending on the campaign, enemies might include whole races such as Celts or Saxons, religious factions such as rival orders, political enemies, and even outlaws (or sheriffs!).

**Excommunicated** see p. CI78

Excommunication was the Church’s ultimate sanction during the Middle Ages. It could be leveled against individuals or groups. Heretics were routinely excommunicated, and those who failed to treat the church with due respect — robbing religious houses, assaulting the clergy, or failing to observe papal decrees — risked the same penalty. It was not unknown for kings or entire kingdoms to be excommunicated from time to time.

There were two levels of excommunication in the Middle Ages. The lesser form excluded a person from receiving the sacraments of communion and Christian burial. The greater form further banned the excommunicate from associating with fellow Christians in any way. The lesser form of excommunication costs -5/-10 points as in *Compendium I*; this cost is doubled for the greater form.

**Fanaticism** see p. B33

Possible objects of fanatical devotion could include Christianity, the Social Order, the law, or one’s lord, king, or country.

**Illiteracy** see p. B33

In a medieval campaign, Illiteracy the norm, worth 0 points.

**Innumeracy** see p. CI91

In a medieval campaign, Innumeracy is a quirk.

**Intolerance (Religious)** see p. CI91

Religious intolerance was the norm in the Middle Ages. At most, this is a quirk. At the GM’s option, religious *tolerance* might become a -5 or -10-point disadvantage in some times and places: those who defended or consorted with heretics and infidels — or even failed to condemn them — were at best deceived by the Powers of Darkness, and might even be in league with them!

**Leper** -30 or -40 Points

Leprosy (see p. 34) was a greatly feared disease in the Middle Ages, up to around 1400. Leprosy gives a -20-point Social Stigma (p. B27), plus Ugly (-10 points) or Hideous Appearance (-20 points), according to how advanced the disease is (p. B15). In addition, a character with leprosy cannot spend points to increase DX — this reflects the disease’s degenerative effects on the victim’s nervous system and extremities.

**Phobia** see p. B35

Fear of dirt is not appropriate for a medieval campaign, unless it is set in the High Middle Ages *and* the character is of high birth. Fear of magic is very common throughout the Middle Ages, so its value is halved in a historical campaign (see p. 105).

**Primitive** see p. B26

In the Dark Ages, Picts were considered primitive; later in the Middle Ages, the same applied to the Scots and Irish. Vikings were regarded as barbaric, but not primitive; Saracens were more technologically advanced than Europeans.

**Social Stigma** see p. B27

The worst Social Stigma is *heretic*. This is a -20-point disadvantage in most times and places. A heretic is subject to torture and death, both at the hands of the authorities and from outraged mobs. It is death for his devotion to be known, and death for his kin and friends if anyone suspects that they are also tainted. Only his fellow heretics can know, and any one of them is the potential Judas who can doom them all.

Nearly as bad is Wolf’s Head, or outlaw. This is a -15-point disadvantage. A Wolf’s Head is beyond the law. To kill him is not murder, to take his possessions is not robbery. To knowingly aid him, give him shelter or sustenance — or simply not to help in hunting him down — is a crime. A known Wolf’s Head gets a -5 reaction from all noncriminals and -3 from lesser criminals; he is dangerous to have around.

Throughout the Middle Ages, *women* were regarded as chattels, belonging to their father before marriage and to their husband afterwards. This is a -10-point disadvantage.

**Wolf’s Head is beyond the law.**

**To kill him is not murder.**

In the Norman period — especially early in the period — characters of Saxon descent were regarded as second-class citizens. This is a -5-point disadvantage.

To be *foreign* brought a -5 or -10-point Social Stigma at most times in the Middle Ages, and could be worse depending on events. In time of war with Scotland or France, for example, any Scot or Frenchman who was not an ambassador and under the protection of the Crown (*and* escorted by armed men) risked being killed out of hand. Even English characters were (and sometimes still are!) regarded as foreign if they stray too far from their home area; this is a -5-point Social Stigma under most circumstances, and -15 during times of civil war, when *stranger* and *spy* were regarded as synonyms.

Jews (see p. 42) were rare in Saxon England, but in the Norman and later periods they began to settle in larger English towns, wherever there was money to be made from trade. Throughout the Middle Ages, Jewish characters suffer a -10-point Social Stigma, as a minority group. In a period of high anti-Semitic sentiment (such as the time of the Crusades, when any infidel was fair game and Jews were closer to hand than Saracens), this disadvantage could increase to -15 or even -20 points.
**Homosexuality** was a crime throughout the Middle Ages, and male homosexuals faced penalties that ranged, according to time and place, from seven years’ penance to death by burning. Homosexuality is at least a -10-point Social Stigma for a male character at any time in the Middle Ages. This is halved for female characters – lesbianism was taken far less seriously.

**Tourette’s Syndrome**  
see p. CI85

Throughout the Middle Ages, an affliction of this nature is most likely to be interpreted as evidence of bewitchment or demonic possession. At the GM’s option, the cost of this disadvantage may be raised to -20 points or higher.

**Uneducated**  
see p. CI79

From the Norman period on, members of the peasantry all have this disadvantage. It may be bought off in the normal way.

**Unnatural Feature**  
see p. CI85

In the Middle Ages, any unnatural feature will be viewed with fear and suspicion – either as evidence of monstrous or demonic tendencies, or as a sign of God’s punishment for some past sin. Either way, characters with this disadvantage suffer a penalty to reaction rolls, ranging from -2 to -5 depending on the exact nature and severity of the feature. The cost of this disadvantage is -5 points per reaction penalty point. Horns, hooves, and a pointed tail would be worth at least -25 points each!

**Vow**  
see p. B35

Like the Chivalric Code of Honor, this disadvantage is particularly appropriate for romantic and cinematic campaigns. It is also appropriate to other types of medieval campaign, however – Crusaders vowed to rid the Holy Land of infidels or die in the attempt, knights might well vow to avenge a wrong to themselves or their lord or family, nobles might vow to found a monastery in exchange for Church support in some political matter, and so on. Characters in romantic-chivalric and cinematic campaigns might be prone to Compulsive Vowing (p. CI88) instead.

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**SKILLS**

**Botany**  
see p. B60

This skill includes a working knowledge of herbs and their properties. If the skilled character also has First Aid, it is possible to prepare herbal remedies for minor ailments.

**Calligraphy**  
see p. B47

**Court Hand**, a specialized form of calligraphy, is appropriate for clerks and other officials from the start of the High Middle Ages, and is necessary to read court documents as well as write them. When used for reading, Court Hand defaults to Literature-2; when used for writing, it defaults to Calligraphy-1, Artist-1, or Literature-2.

**Craft Skills**

A character with a Craftsman background will always have the appropriate craft skill. There is not space to describe every possible craft skill here, but most are Physical/Average, defaulting to DX-4. A selection of appropriate craft skills may be found in the *Basic Set* and *Compendium I*.

**Heraldry**  
see p. B58

Heraldry was not formalized until the 12th century. In England, families do not have arms; every achievement of arms is the exclusive property of a single person. His children can use the arms if they are differed, or marked with a distinctive design to distinguish them from his.

**NEW SKILL**

**Illumination (Physical/Average)**  
Defaults to Artist-2 or DX-5

This is the ability to decorate written text with miniature paintings and pictures.
Economics, Jobs, and Wealth

Standard starting wealth for a medieval character is $1,000. This includes all possessions, possibly including land, livestock, and buildings. No character who is not a true wanderer (a bandit, outcast, etc.) should spend more than 20% of his wealth on movable goods (not including a cart, steed, livestock, etc.).

Money

Throughout most of the Middle Ages, money meant silver. Silver coins were minted in most medieval kingdoms, and conversion between currencies was by weight. Most merchants would accept a foreign silver coin, but would weigh it carefully to determine its value, and then subtract a small percentage for their trouble. In theory, the king’s image or symbol on a coin was a guarantee of its weight or value, but it was still common practice to weigh coins to make sure. The pound was the value of a pound of silver.

Gold was only rarely used as money, except to settle debts between kingdoms – it was mainly made into jewelry and other lavish items for personal use or gifts. When a debt was paid in gold, though, the weight was more important than the form the metal took.

In rural areas – and in many towns for much of the Middle Ages – the system of barter was alive and well, and debts could be settled in kind rather than in cash.

Coinage

The Middle Ages in England saw a bewildering array of coins and units of currency. For ease of play, it is recommended that GMs and players stick to the GURPS $ convention when handling money. But for the sake of atmosphere, here are a few medieval English coins and their approximate values:

Farthing: a copper or bronze coin, worth one-quarter of a penny, used up to the 20th century.

Penny: a silver coin through most of the Middle Ages, equivalent to 1 GURPS $ for game purposes. There were 12 pence in a shilling.

Groat: a silver coin, worth four pence, used from the 14th-17th centuries.

Shilling: a silver coin in the Middle Ages, worth 12 pence. There were 20 shillings in a pound in most periods.

Crown: in England, a coin worth 5 shillings, normally of silver. Some European nations issued gold crowns from time to time, but these were not of the same value.

Pound: originally the value of a pound of silver, the value of a pound has diminished over time.

The monarch’s head on a coin was the guarantee of its value, but some monarchs are known to have debased the currency (i.e. added base metal to the silver, so that a coin’s metal value was less than its face value), and the real value of money fluctuated.

Goods and Prices

The prices given in the Basic Set are appropriate for most game purposes. A few specific items are listed here. Enterprising GMs might compile their own price lists according to period and locality, working from historical sources.

Clothing

Note: Prices are for basic clothing; richly decorated garments can be 10 to 200 times the cost given here.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Breeches, wool</td>
<td>$5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breeches, linen</td>
<td>$8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Breeches, leather</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boots</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shoes</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunic, wool</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tunic, brocade</td>
<td>$20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloak, wool</td>
<td>$8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloak, fine cloth</td>
<td>$20+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cloak, fur</td>
<td>$100+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undershirt, linen</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shift, linen</td>
<td>$7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress, linen</td>
<td>$12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dress, cloth</td>
<td>$25+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hat, wool</td>
<td>$2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hat, leather</td>
<td>$4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Weapons and Armor

Availability and price of certain items varied according to period. Weapons and armor are discussed in Chapter 4.

Food

The medieval diet would seem rather uninspired to most moderns. The staple was a coarse bread made from maslin, a mixture of rye and wheat flour. Most households added a companaticum (literally, with bread), stew from a pot perpetually simmering on the hearth. The stew was anything that could be boiled and eaten, including any leftovers from another meal. There were usually two meals a day; bread and beer (wine for the nobility) as a first-light breakfast; bread, stew, and beer (or wine) for near-dark supper.

For the Celts, Saxons, and Vikings, the principal meats, besides game, were beef and pork. In the later medieval period, the common English meat was mutton. Almost every household kept a few chickens, both for meat and for eggs.
Fish was another staple. The church had many meatless holidays (besides every Friday) and a common vow was to give up meat. Fresh fish was available sometimes, but the staple was salted fish. Oily herring had lots of food value, but were hard to preserve and often went bad in the barrel. “Spoiled fish” was a medieval proverb for such things as questionable deals and suspect treaties; the stench was appalling. Stockfish, salted and dried, was the longest lasting food, but took some preparation. One recipe, for 12-year-old stockfish, involves pounding it to shreds with a hammer and soaking it for two days in several changes of water.

The other common “portable meats” were salt beef or pork, smoked bacon and ham, and sausage. Most livestock was slaughtered in the fall, keeping only plow teams and minimum breeding stock through the winter. Fall is a good time to gorge and stock up on preserved meats. It is the best time to look for handouts or a meal for sale.

Broad beans, sweet peas, field peas, and chick peas were the principal legumes. They were vital to both diet and agriculture; legumes and grain together give complete amino acids, vital to human nutrition, that neither gives alone. Legumes put back into the soil nitrogen that grain cultivation takes out. Pease pudding was a staple; this was chopped legumes, steamed in a cloth in the stewpot. Pea and bean flour was often added to the maslin for bread.

Cabbage and onions were major items of diet; turnips and beets the common root crops. All went into the stew. Raw onions, bread, and cheese were the most common “sack lunch” for the laborer, hunter, or soldier.

Dessert might mean pastries of wheat flour, flavored with honey. For the poor it was more likely to be frumenty. This was wheat grains soaked in warm water for 24 hours. It was eaten cold, with milk and honey. It was also used as a thickener for stew.

Fruits included several kinds of berries, apples, and pears. The most common nuts were hazelnuts; acorns and chestnuts were also available. Monasteries and large estates kept the only orchards of any size, but there were many more-or-less wild fruit and nut trees.

Some things were simply not found in the medieval diet. Maize, potatoes, tomatoes, peppers, beans (except broad beans), squash, okra, spinach, turkey, tea, coffee – these all came to Europe after the 15th century. Carrots may have been available; the evidence is contradictory.

Some things were extremely rare. Black pepper, cinnamon, nutmeg, oranges, sugar, lemons – all existed, but were uncommon and expensive luxuries.

The principal drinks were beer (or ale), mead, milk, and wine. Beer was unhopped and had much more solid content than modern beers. Mead is fermented honey; it was a Saxon and Viking favorite but common all through the Middle Ages. Grape wine was almost all imported and rather expensive, but anything with sugar will ferment; apple wine, pear wine, berry wines, even dandelion wine were brewed and drunk.

Snacks (bread, cheese, onions, etc.) cost $1 or less for one meal for one person. The makings of a meal, bread and stew, are $2 per person.

In towns, vendors of prepared food were common; fuel and ingredients are cheaper in bulk. A simple prepared meal is $3; a banquet can go as high as the payer’s purse will permit. In villages “eating out” is effectively unknown; everyone is expected to eat at home or go hungry.

Beer costs around $50 per barrel (25 gallons); mead is $100 for a keg (4 gallons). Wine costs as much as a merchant can get for it – at least $100 for a 4-gallon keg.

Prices are town prices, where there is a cash (or established barter) economy and a surplus available. Any attempt to purchase food in a village or at a manor is an adventure in itself. The GM is the only authority on costs and availability. The surplus is limited, and money has small nourishment in starving times.

Lodging

Lodging for hire was a development of late Norman times. Before that, some monasteries and nunneries offered accommodation to travelers, asking a donation in return. The few travelers were either on official business or were traders or pilgrims. Officials normally carried letters from their lord requesting lodging and assistance from allied nobles, and traders and pilgrims tended to travel in groups for protection and set up camp along the way.

Inns first appeared along main roads. By the High Medieval period, even little-traveled routes might have inns offering board and lodging for $1 per night, but they could often be dens of thieves. A traveler with no place to stay obviously had no friends in the area, and was in a vulnerable position. Inns on better-traveled routes are more reliable; they depend on repeat custom. They are also more expensive ($2 and up per night). Few innkeepers will extend any credit, though the better-natured might give a handout at the kitchen or trade lodging for hard labor. Even the best inns will turn a blind eye to any illicit activities of their regular patrons, as long as they happen outside the innyard.

Livestock

Farmers in any time or place will cheerfully tell you that a head of livestock is worth whatever the seller can get for it. There are no fixed prices, since so much depends on age, sex, breeding condition, meat weight, general health, and other factors. Prices below can be treated as low to average, but they can increase up to 10 times for fine animals of good pedigree, proven fertility and health, and so on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Animal</th>
<th>Price</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dog</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heifer</td>
<td>$200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Milking Cow</td>
<td>$250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ox or Bull</td>
<td>$400</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Draft Horse</td>
<td>$500</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Riding Horse</td>
<td>$750</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawk</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ewe</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ram</td>
<td>$250</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Goat</td>
<td>$150</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sow</td>
<td>$200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boar</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
**Miscellaneous Goods**

The range of odds and ends one can buy or otherwise acquire is almost endless. Here are a few examples, from which the GM should be able to improvise suitable prices for other goods. Again, high quality, gold inlays, and the like can increase an item’s price by 10 times or more.

Glass was a rare and costly item until well into the High Medieval period. Its principal use in England was stained-glass windows for churches; the first were installed sometime in the late 10th century. Vessels of glass should be about as costly as vessels of gold until about the beginning of the 14th century. Glass beads were expensive jewelry for most of the period. Most glass was imported from the Byzantine Empire or Venice.

Gemstones were not faceted in the Middle Ages. The softer stones were carved or cut cabochon, with a rounded profile, or made into beads. Many hard stones were simply polished on the natural surfaces. Diamonds were held to be uncuttable (except by themselves) and unbreakable.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Item</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Chess set</td>
<td>$30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Brooch, etc.</td>
<td>$50+</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bone comb</td>
<td>$1 or less</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small knife</td>
<td>$1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small casket (6” x 4”)</td>
<td>$5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sea chest (2-3 cf)</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Door lock</td>
<td>$5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ox-cart</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat (20’)</td>
<td>$300</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boat/Ship (50’)</td>
<td>$2,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ship (75’)</td>
<td>$3,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pruning hook</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pitchfork</td>
<td>$10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grain flail</td>
<td>$25</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Social Status**

Social status varies according to period and locality. Wealth, or the lack of it, can bump a character up or down one level, as could reputation. Use the following table:

**Social Status Table**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level</th>
<th>Cost</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>7 King of All England</td>
<td>$15,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6 Minor king, powerful baron, archbishop</td>
<td>$8,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5 Baron, royal advisor, bishop</td>
<td>$4,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4 Lesser noble, landed knight, sheriff</td>
<td>$1,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 Landless knight, rich merchant, guild master</td>
<td>$600</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2 Priest/monk, village elder, reeve</td>
<td>$200</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 Freehold farmer, craftsman</td>
<td>$100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0 Freeman</td>
<td>$80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-1 Tenant farmer, urban poor</td>
<td>$50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-2 Poor peasant</td>
<td>$20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-3 Serf, beggar, slave</td>
<td>$15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-4 Wolf’s head, traitor, leper</td>
<td>$0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Noble Titles**

Noble titles under the Saxons and Vikings were imprecise. Earl (Jarl) was really the only one of significance; it simply meant a man of recognized power and authority over many other men. Titles became increasingly formalized through the Middle Ages.

“Baron” was never an English title; “the baronage” refers collectively to the powerful nobles of Norman England.

Although it forms the root of the word “county,” Count was never an English title. Earl is the comparable rank, and an Earl’s lady is a Countess.

Duke has the highest precedence of English medieval titles; the kings were Dukes of Normandy, and English Dukedoms were usually restricted to members of the royal family. A Duke’s lady is a Duchess.

The most common title was simply Lord (or Lady), applied to almost any noble with a landed estate and to the children of great nobles.

Such titles as Viscount, Marquis, and Baronet are post-medieval.

**Cost of Living**

Yearly cost of living varies with Status, and also according to the number of followers and dependents. A Patron, such as a lord, counts as an employer for a member of the lord’s household, and will look after living expenses, as well as giving gifts from time to time in recognition of outstanding service. The same rules apply to a PC who has followers – if they become dissatisfied with his leadership, they may seek another patron.

Base figures for cost of living are given above. A leader must pay the total costs of living of all his followers, and be able to provide them with gifts into the bargain. This is in addition to the cost of living shown for his status, which is purely for himself and his immediate family.

**Social Stigmas**

Women were not highly regarded in medieval society, and in some periods they were actually considered chattels. Marriage was used to form alliances, and the wishes of the two people involved were rarely considered. An unmarried female character of Status 3+ and marriageable age suffers a -10-point Social Stigma, which can increase if she insists on thinking and acting independently. A widow – especially in a noble house – has greater freedom, and gains no further penalty for taking action in her own right. Married female characters suffer no Social Stigma, and normally have the same Status as their husbands. Medieval history is full of strong and resourceful women who influenced history through their husbands – and sometimes through their own power, derived from the lands they brought into the marriage-alliance.

Foreigners generally suffer a -5-point Social Stigma, although this may increase if relations with the foreigner’s homeland are strained. A -10-point Social Stigma is appropriate for nationals of enemy countries, as well as Saracens, Moors, and other infidels. Jews suffer a -10-point Social Stigma when dealing with Christians. See also Wolf’s Head and Heretic (p. 58).
Most jobs were a way of life, leaving very little free time, and duty limited nearly everyone’s freedom of action. Tenant farmers could not leave the land without their lord’s permission, and that was very rarely granted. Urban craftsmen and traders could travel more widely, but apprentices were generally tied to their masters for many years, and by the time they reached journeyman status they often had families to feed. A Patron is an important advantage in a medieval campaign, offering an acceptable means of introduction to adventures. Those who wandered where they wanted and acknowledged no duty or master were regarded as bandits.

**Finding a Job**

In most cases – especially in the Norman and later periods – people are born into a profession or apprenticed in childhood. Anyone wanting to find work will be treated with some suspicion – has he run away from a master elsewhere, or been thrown out of some previous employment? Introductions are all-important for gaining trust and employment.

Getting a position in a noble household also depends on making a good impression. It helps a great deal if you know someone who is already in the household, and can speak on your behalf – preferably a relative of yours, since family ties will also make him responsible to the lord for your good behavior.

Finding work as a craftsman can consist of traveling around until you find a place that needs your particular skills. One who wants to set up in a place where there is already an established worker in his craft might challenge the resident craftsman to a quick Contest of Skills (with the newcomer at -3 owing to local favoritism). If the resident wins, the newcomer is not welcome. If the newcomer wins, the resident might offer him some inducement to go away. If the victory is particularly crushing, the resident craftsman might leave himself – although he might swear revenge for the shame he has suffered, becoming an Enemy of the newcomer.

In a city, the picture changes somewhat. There are plenty of craftsmen, and a large enough market to sustain most of them reasonably well. By the High Medieval period, trade and craft guilds (see p. 32) started to form in many cities, and a newcomer might have to prove his competence to guild officials before being allowed to practice in a city – or they might be protective of their existing members and refuse to allow outsiders in.

**Critical Failure Key**

If there are two entries separated by a slash, use the second result only when a natural 18 is rolled.

“LJ” stands for Lost Job – the character is thrown out and must find alternative employment. The “d” indicates dice of damage – the character was injured in an accident, fight or whatever. The “i” indicates a month’s income lost; “-2i” means that the character loses 2 months’ income through being fined, having to replace broken equipment, losing working time due to injury, etc.

On some occasions, where a poor roll indicates serious injury or great loss of earnings, the GM may choose to play the episode out in order to give the character a fighting chance.

**Job Table**

The Table on p. B194 is quite appropriate for High Medieval and later settings; a few additions are listed below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Job, (Required Skills), Monthly Income</th>
<th>Success Roll</th>
<th>Critical Failure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Poor Jobs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Beggar (no qualifications), $25</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peddler (Merchant 11+), $35</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>-1i/-1i, 2d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Porter (ST 12+), $20</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>-1i/-1i, 2d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Serf (no qualifications), $0 (living expenses)</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>2d/4d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Struggling Jobs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Apprentice (Craft Skill 10+), $0 (living expenses)</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>2d/4d or LJ</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bandit (Survival 11+, one Weapon Skill 10+), $35</td>
<td>best PR</td>
<td>3d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hunter/Trapper (Survival 11+, Tracking 11+), $70</td>
<td>best PR</td>
<td>2d/3d, -1i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hedge-wizard/Wisewoman (Magery or Fast-Talk 13+), $30</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>-1i/-3i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average Jobs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craftsman (Craft Skill 13+), $90</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>-1i/-2i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cook (Cooking 12+), $70</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>1d/3d</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fisherman (Fishing 11+), $100</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>1d/3d, -2i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Comfortable Jobs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Merchant (Merchant 13+), $385</td>
<td>PR</td>
<td>-1i/2d, -1i</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Wealthy Jobs</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lord (Savoir-Faire 14+, Politics 13+), $1,000</td>
<td>worst PR</td>
<td>-2i</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
This chapter explores a few of the most characteristic locations of the Middle Ages, with plans, historical notes, and adventure seeds.
CASTLES

More than any other building type – and more than any other artifact except possibly plate armor – the castle stands as an icon for the Middle Ages. A medieval epic movie without at least one castle is like a western without horses or Stetsons.

The castle was essentially a fortified dwelling, intended to house the lord and his family and retainers in safety while having the military function of a fort in keeping the peace (and acting as a symbol of the lord’s power!) in the area. Castles built by the king were primarily military, but still needed to house their garrisons and the official – normally a noble – in charge of the area they commanded.

Like just about everything else, the castle went through enormous changes during the Middle Ages. In fact, castles only really existed in England in the last half of the Middle Ages, coming from France along with the Normans.

CASTLE DEVELOPMENT

The first castle type in Britain was the Norman motte and bailey. This consisted of a steep, circular earthen mound (or motte) with a simple stone and timber keep on the top. A wooden palisade fence surrounds the motte and a small area at the foot of the mound which is called the bailey. The plan of the whole thing looks something like a keyhole, and can be found at the heart of many of Britain’s later, more developed castles.

High Medieval castles involved more stone, and many adopted a square plan. The keep remained at the heart of the castle, becoming square rather than circular, and was surrounded by a curtain wall with towers at strategic points such as corners and gates. As the period went on, the design of stone castles became ever more elaborate, with gateways in particular being developed into complex killing zones. Most castles were surrounded by a moat and entered by means of a drawbridge, but through most of the Middle Ages dry moats were more common than flooded moats.

ANATOMY OF A CASTLE

The Keep

At the heart of a castle was the keep, or Great Tower. The lord and his family lived in the keep, and it served as a last line of defense if the castle walls should be breached. The keep could be built into the castle wall (normally at its most defensible point, such as on top of steep rocks), or it could be entirely contained within the castle; much depended on the lie of the land. The keep was a stone tower, square in the Norman period and round later on – as well as providing occasional cover for attackers, corners were the weakest point of a stone structure; round towers were much more stable.

The keep normally had a single entrance. This was commonly at the second-floor level, reached either by narrow stone steps that were easily defended, or by wooden steps and walkways that could be destroyed to hamper attackers.

Another name for a keep was donjon, which is the ancestor of the word dungeon. This reflects another important function of the keep, as a secure place to hold important prisoners (to say nothing of political rivals and troublesome relatives). The Tower of London was the last home of many prisoners of the king, immediately prior to their execution.

The Bailey

The area enclosed within the castle walls was called the bailey, or castle ward. In time of peace, this area housed the kitchens (away from the keep to avoid accidental fires turning disastrous!), stables, mews (accommodation for the lord’s falcons and falconers), and other service areas.

In wartime, the bailey was where the locals would take refuge with their flocks. This was partly a means for the lord to discharge his feudal duty of protection, and partly an excellent motivation for the refugees to help defend the castle – any attacker would have to cut through the peasants crowding the bailey in order to reach the keep! Unless the surrounding walls and towers were first cleared of defenders, attacking forces who broke through into a bailey could also find themselves caught in a murderous crossfire.

Norman baileys were fairly simple enclosures, but through the Middle Ages they developed in complexity, according to the lay of the land and the resources of their owner. The provision of inner, outer, and in some cases, middle baileys allowed defenders to fall back in stages, so that no one defeat would cause the whole castle to fall.

Walls

The walls surrounding a castle bailey were known as curtain walls, perhaps because they were strung between towers. Stables, kitchens, and other ancillary structures were commonly built lean-to fashion against the walls, and walkways ran along the wall-tops from one tower to another. Some walls were strengthened with hoards; these were covered wooden galleries built out from the wall-top (the socket-holes for the large horizontal timbers that supported them can still be seen in many castles), which allowed defenders to drop things on attackers at the base of the wall.

Towers

Towers strengthened the curtain wall wherever necessary. As mentioned above, a corner was an architectural and defensive weak point, so it was common to place a circular tower (or a semicircular half-tower) on a corner; they were also spaced out along long stretches of wall, to ensure that maximum defensive firepower could be brought to bear at any point. They jutted out from the wall, allowing a crossfire zone to be set up along the base of the wall between them. Most towers had three or more floors, each well-equipped with arrow slits.
Arrow slits limited the angle of fire available to defending archers (although they were invariably placed to minimize the problem), but provided more than 95% cover from attacking fire. Anyone shooting at an archer behind an arrow-slit faces a penalty of at least -7 to hit – unless they are using a weapon powerful enough to destroy the intervening stone!

Towers were often fitted with narrow spiral staircases. These were more than just a convenient way of getting up and down. Most spiral staircases run clockwise up the tower; this ensures that a right-handed attacker must climb the stairs with his shielded left side to the fore, whereas the defender, fighting down the stairs, had enough space to swing his sword.

**Barbicans**

The weakest point of a castle was the gateway. A barbican extended outward from the gateway, usually containing an outer gate, or at least a portcullis. Once the attackers had breached the outer gate or portcullis, they were effectively surrounded by defenders within the barbican as they assaulted the inner gate. Many castle gateways were equipped with murder holes: small holes in the underside of the gateway arch, through which defenders could fire arrows or pour boiling water, boiling oil, or molten lead onto attackers.

**Chapels**

Every castle of any size had its own chapel. This was normally housed within the keep, often on a lower floor (with the crypt, where family members were entombed, on the lowest level of all). Larger castles in later periods could have a chapel in the castle ward, either built up against the wall like other ancillary buildings, or a small, free-standing church in its own right.

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**Manors**

The minor nobility – squires and those lesser knights who could not maintain a castle – lived in manor houses. The term manor was applied interchangeably to the manor house itself and to the estate that served it.

Depending on time and place, a manor might be fortified, or it might not. The manor was essentially a large house – sometimes with its own chapel – which acted as the residence of the local landowner and the place where the manor court convened to hear complaints and pass legal judgment. Arranged around the manor – often, though not always, within an enclosure wall or stockade – were the kitchens, stables, barns, smithy, and other outbuildings belonging to the manor.

**Anatomy of a Manor**

**The Manor House**

The Norman French word manoir, from which the English word manor is derived, originally meant simply a residence. It came to mean the residence, and villagers up to the 20th century would speak of “the big house” or simply “the house” when speaking of the local landowner’s residence.

In its simplest form, a manor house would consist of the lord’s hall, which was used for entertaining and for holding the manor court, and a number of private apartments. The hall occupied the bulk of the ground floor, and the apartments were generally on the upper floor.

Earlier manors were of timber construction, with varying proportions of wattle-and-daub (a construction material of woven twigs covered with plaster). As the Norman period progresses, stone replaced timber as the primary building material of the wealthy. Many manor houses developed in size and complexity as the Middle Ages progressed; after the Middle Ages, those belonging to the higher nobility developed into England’s great stately homes.

**The Manor Yard**

Marked by a wall or stockade, the manor yard contained the manor house itself and a number of outbuildings, including stables and barns, grain storage, kitchens, and often a smithy.

Larger manors might have a chapel, either attached to the manor house or standing apart in the manor yard; in smaller manors, the lord’s family would have used the parish church, which normally stood near the manor but outside the manor yard.

**The Home Farm**

The home farm belonged to the lord of the manor, and it was here that the villeins (see p. 19) fulfilled their labor obligations. The produce of these lands belonged exclusively to the lord, and any surplus might be sold for cash. The name “Home Farm” can still be seen in many parts of England.

The use of names like “The Red Lion” for village pubs is a memory of the days when the lord’s coat of arms hung outside.

**Villages**

Some manors had more than one village, and some villages had more than one manor, but the relationship between the two was vital, for without the village the manor could not survive. Villages are covered in more detail later in this chapter.
The Adulterine Castle

An adulterine castle is one that has been constructed without the permission of the king. The circumstances could vary widely, and so could the means of dealing with it.

At the lower end of the scale, a local landowner might have built an addition to his manor house that could be construed as fortified. The question of what counts as a fortification and what does not is one whose answer varied widely according to the time and the political situation; as a general rule, crenelations (the gap-toothed looking style of battlements) were regarded as the irrefutable test. However, at least some cathedrals and even parish churches featured decorative crenelations, and a landowner who builds a sturdy-looking stone façade with a decorated top onto his manor house could be accused of adulterine fortification by jealous or hostile neighbors.

Less debatable is the case where a powerful feudal magnate builds a massive stone fortress in clear defiance of the king. For example, a baron who has lost a bout of political wrangling at court might retire muttering to his lands, and build a castle at a strategic defensive location, while he begins secret discussions with other nobles who have grievances against the king. Or, if less politically inclined, he might simply place the castle at an important road junction or river bridge and set himself up as a robber baron, extorting money from all who seek to pass by.

Depending on the exact situation and the desired tone of the adventure, a group of PCs might become involved in a number of ways. They might be appointed by the king (or more likely, by the king’s sheriff) to examine the disputed building and render judgment on whether it violates the law. They might be asked to scout the defenses, or infiltrate the castle and find out what its owner’s plans are. For an action-heavy adventure, they might be hired to carry out a commando-style raid and neutralize the castle before the king’s troops arrive to bring its owner to account.

The castle’s owner will probably expecting trouble. Even if this is an innocent case of home improvement and jealous neighbors, the owner will have had some intimation of impending trouble – accusations in the shire court, local gossip, and so forth – unless he is a staggeringly naïve character designed for comic effect. If he knows he is in the wrong, he might try a variety of approaches, from bribing the PCs to making sure they don’t live to make their report.

A common historical resolution to this kind of situation was that the castle’s owner was granted a retrospective right to build it, in exchange for a sizeble cash payment to the king. The PCs might find themselves shuttling back and forth as negotiators, watching their expenses mount up as the bargaining drags on and on. Kings could be free with promises of reward and support, but remarkably reluctant when it came to actually paying up. Alternatively, the local peasants might find themselves even more ruinously overtaxed to raise the needed money, or more subtle means might be employed – for example, the castle’s owner might be conducting highway robberies to raise the cash, blaming them on a notorious group of outlaws, and justifying the castle’s existence by the need to suppress these outlaws – who may be his own men, or who may not even exist.

The Royal Castle

Flipping the coin, the PCs might be charged with constructing a royal castle in hostile territory – newly conquered land in Wales or Ireland or the Scottish border, for example, or the heartland of a noble family suspected of fomenting rebellion. The PCs will be furnished with all the necessary royal warrants and – perhaps – some money, and told to get on with it.

While masons can be hired in for the project (and the GM can decide whether or not they have Illuminated motives of their own), the local population is expected to provide all the unskilled labor required, and to provide food and shelter for the castle builders throughout the project. The PCs can expect to hear all kinds of excuses, from impending harvests to sick and dying mothers, as the locals – quite possibly at the behest of their lord – try to get out of their castle-building duties. There may be acts of sabotage, masons crushed by falling stone blocks, even attempts on the lives of the PCs themselves. In lands that are newly under English rule, there may be outright rebellion, forcing the PCs to organize the workers in a Seven Samurai-style defense of the incomplete fortification until a relief force can arrive.
**Amenities**

In the Norman period, any amenities within a village, such as water mills, smithies, brew-houses - and indeed, any specialist services - belonged to the lord. The villagers had to pay to have their grain ground in the lord’s mill, and the lord could set the prices for this service as he chose. Under a bad lord or a cash-strapped one, this could amount to extortion.

The village tavern was often owned by the lord, and supplied by his brew-house; the use of heraldic names like the Red Lion for many village pubs is a memory of the days when the lord’s coat of arms hung outside.

**Lands and Economics**

Like castles and abbeys, manors were each supported by one or more villages. Villeins living on the manor estate paid rent in labor duties and from their own produce (see Feudal Classes, p. 19). The productivity of land varied tremendously throughout the Middle Ages (see Population and Agriculture, p. 24), but as a rule of thumb, the income from a feudal estate can be treated as roughly 2 GURPS $ per acre per month (see pp. PYi68-71). Through most of the Middle Ages, this income took the form of produce and labor rather than cash. In bad years, income could be reduced almost to zero by plague or crop failure.

**Manor Life**

Life in the manor revolved around agriculture, and moved with the pace of the seasons. The administration of the manor estate took a lot of time, and was normally in the hands of a steward, or estate manager. Though nominally a servant, the steward of an estate had great prestige and power, much like the butler of a well-to-do Victorian household. The steward made sure that the villeins performed their obligations, both in labor and in produce, and organized the collection, storage – and, where surpluses existed, the sale – of livestock and produce.

An important part of the manor’s routine was the manor court, where the lord heard disputes and complaints from the villeins under the manor’s jurisdiction. The right to dispense justice – and levy fines – was an important feudal entitlement.

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**Munsteries**

Nunneries were favorite places to put away unmarried daughters and troublesome wives.

The medieval monastery or convent was a complete, self-contained community, where – in theory – members of the order could live their lives away from the earthly distractions and temptations of the rest of the world. The abbots and abbesses who headed the monasteries were feudal landlords in their own right, with lands to administer and other matters to pursue on the monastery’s behalf. Like bishops, they could sometimes be drawn into politics. Many influential figures – kings, lords, and especially widowed queens – retired to monastic houses, and at times of unrest these could become places of intrigue. Nunneries were also favorite places to put away unmarried daughters and troublesome wives.

There were many monastic orders in the Middle Ages, each with its own philosophy, regulations, and areas of special interest. Some monasteries became renowned as centers of learning, while others were famous for healing, or for more worldly accomplishments like brewing and winemaking.
A Murder Mystery

The manor houses of the Middle Ages were the direct ancestors of the stately homes and country houses of later centuries. To generations of mystery fans, the great houses of late 19th and early 20th-century England have become the setting of choice where jealousy, greed, and revenge manifest themselves in elaborate schemes and refined murders. As fans of Ellis Peters’ sleuthing monk Brother Cadfael know, a medieval manor house has all the necessary elements to make for a satisfying murder mystery.

Tradition requires that the PCs should be friendly – but somewhat casual – acquaintances of the homeowners. An introduction by mutual friends is sufficient, especially if the mutual friends invite the PCs to join them on a visit. Someone turns up dead a day or two after their arrival, and either everyone has a powerful reason to wish the victim dead, or everyone was utterly devoted and is clearly devastated by the loss. Either way, the killer must be unmasked and delivered to justice.

The murder itself should neatly carried out with poison or at most a dagger – even in the Middle Ages, a battleaxe to the back of the skull lacks the finesse essential to a country house murder. An exception can be made, of course, if the GM is aiming for a “Jabberwocky meets Agatha Christie” style parody, in which case one might almost say the messier the better. Just so long as there is something of the deceased left to identify.

The next step is to assemble the cast of suspects, concoct a suitably complex and unlikely motive and method for the murder, and throw in at least one bucket of red herrings. The spouse of the deceased could be motivated by revenge for infidelity, or some wrong done to family. Older sons might be impatient to inherit the lands and title, while younger sons might be eager to move up a few places in line. Daughters could resort to murder in the face of a forced marriage or the threat of dismissal to a nunnery – or they might want to remove parental opposition to an unsuitable love-match. Servants might repay the victim’s bad treatment of themselves or those close to them. Almost anyone could be a paid assassin in the employ of an enemy or political rival, and absolutely anyone could be not who they seem. This last could be taken to extremes in a silly campaign: “And the killer is – Daisy!” “That is where you are mistaken, Sir Miles – I am not Daisy, but Black Rupert Ffoulkes! My sheep-impersonating skills will serve the Duke of Brabant again!”

The Debatable Lands

A dispute has arisen over the ownership of a village. A neighbor – especially one who has just inherited the next estate – claims that his ancestor, not the ancestor of the present owner, was given the village by William I after the Norman conquest. Or, the local abbot or bishop produces a will apparently signed by the owner’s father, bequeathing the village to the cathedral or monastery and asking for masses to be said for his soul.

To add urgency to the situation, perhaps the village has suddenly become more valuable. Lead or tin might have been discovered in nearby hills (gold or silver would attract the attention of the king, and probably not benefit the local landowner at all), or it might be in a strategic position, stimulating the growth of a busy market which promises rich tolls for the landowner. This adventure could be as simple as seeking out an ancient document, or authenticating (or disproving) one that has been produced. Alternatively, it could drag on through the shire court, be appealed to the king, and involve the PCs following the court around the country trying to gain an audience and a royal judgment. Some real-life cases like this took years – and wiped out fortunes – before they were resolved. Some became a test of determination and resources rather than legal right, as rivals put delay after delay in the litigants’ way.

Anatomy of a Monastery

The Abbey

The church attached to a monastery was called an abbey rather than a church or a cathedral. In the earlier High Middle Ages, the abbeys of some wealthy monasteries rivaled the great cathedrals in size and splendor.

Chapter House

A chapter house was an optional element of both abbeys and cathedrals. At its simplest, a chapter house was a side room off the church, where the abbot or bishop would hold meetings with ranking members of the abbey or cathedral community, which was known as the chapter. Some chapter houses – notably the one at Wells Cathedral – grew into ornate and impressive chambers.

Dormitory

The dormitory provided sleeping-quarters for the members of the monastery. Depending upon the time and place (and the rules of the particular order), a dormitory could be one or more large rooms with numbers of beds, or a series of cells linked by a corridor, or some combination of the two. The later in the Middle Ages and the higher a monk or nun’s rank, the more likely they were to have a cell of their own.
Refectory

The refectory was the dining area. Most were equipped with a small, plain pulpit, from which one of the community would read from the Scriptures while the others ate. Apart from this, meals were conducted in strict silence. The abbot and senior monks would eat at the High Table, which was set at the top end of the hall and sometimes, as its name suggested, placed on a raised dais. The rest of the community ate at large tables, seated on plain wooden benches.

Kitchen and Cellar

Unlike castles, the kitchens of a monastery were most often part of the whole structure. This may be because monasteries were often built entirely of stone, which gave them some degree of protection from fire. It may also be to maintain the structure of the monastery as an enclosed world, arranged round the cloister; this would have been lost if the kitchens had been a separate building, set apart from the rest of the monastery.

Although the word cellar has come to mean a storage area below ground, the cellars of monasteries and other large medieval buildings were not necessarily below ground. Another word for cellar was buttery; the name comes from the butts or kegs of food and drink that were stored there, rather than from any connection with butter (although butter would have been among the things stored in a buttery).

Infirmary

Some monastic orders became renowned for their knowledge of medicine, but every monastery had its own infirmary, for isolating and treating those of the community who fell ill. The infirmary was usually a separate building, joined to the monastery by a corridor or covered passage. An infirmary often had its own cellar and chapel, so that the sick could eat and worship without fear of spreading any disease to the well.

Cemetery

Each monastery and convent had its own cemetery, for the burial of those of the monastic community. Lay benefactors of the monastery might also be buried there at their own request, though most were happier being buried alongside their families and bequeathing money to the monastery in exchange for masses being said for their souls. A monastic cemetery could be a place of intrigue: deadly secrets might lie buried there; in a fantastic campaign, it might be haunted by some unquiet souls. And it was whispered at the time of the Reformation that every nunnery in England had a secret cemetery in unconsecrated ground, where lay buried the unfortunate children of nuns who had fallen into temptation, murdered at birth to prevent scandal and buried unbaptized.

Abbot’s House

Like bishops, abbots and abbesses live in some style in a house apart from the rest of the monastery or convent. It was from here, rather than from the chapter house, that an abbot would deal with matters concerning the monastery’s lands, and perform the other activities associated with feudal lordship.

Orchards, Fish Pond, Dove Cotes, Beehives

As well as the produce of their lands, monasteries relied on food sources within their own confines. Orchards provided them with fresh fruit, ponds were stocked with

THE RULE OF ST. BENEDICT

St. Benedict (c. 480-c. 543) gave his name to the Benedictine order of monks, and his Rule (actually an extensive set of rules for monastic living) forms the basis of many other orders beside Benedictines.

The Benedictine rule laid down that monks should live together in a monastery, removed from the uncleanliness and temptation of the outside world. Each monastery should have an abbot at its head, who is elected by the monks, and who has the same authority over them as a bishop would have over the lay people in his see. The abbot is in charge of all day-to-day affairs, but must seek counsel of the monks over major decisions.

The monks themselves must live a life of poverty, chastity, and obedience to the order, and must exhibit all the Christian virtues: charity, honesty, humility, forgiveness, and so on. They are allowed no personal possessions, and letters and packages which arrive at a monastery addressed to one of the monks are taken to the abbot, who decides what will be done with them. The monks have two sets of clothing – one worn, one being washed – including a robe, shoes and stockings, and a cowl. Clothing is to be plain, the cheapest that can be obtained by the monastery.

The monk’s day is divided between services (nine a day, with the first before dawn and the second at dawn), prayer, work, and study. All duties are shared, and a monk is expected to take turns at kitchen work, work in the fields, and so on, as far as his strength, health, and age will allow. Those monks who have a craft or other skill are to practice it humbly in the service of the monastery, and the abbot has the right to ordain monks as priests, to conduct services in the monastery.

Travel outside the monastery is discouraged, but the Rule of St. Benedict does allow that sometimes it may be necessary. When a monk returns from a journey outside the monastery, he is to present himself to the abbot and ask forgiveness for all the sins and faults that he may have committed or acquired in the outside world. He is strictly forbidden to speak of what he has seen and experienced outside the monastery to any of his brethren.
fish (which substituted for meat on Fridays and some feast days), squabs (young pigeons) were an important source of protein, and during the Middle Ages, honey was the only sweetener. Sugar first reached England in the Tudor period, which is why Queen Elizabeth I had wooden teeth. But that’s another story.

**Guest House**

Hospitality was regarded as a Christian duty, and many monasteries and convents – especially those near major roads – had guest houses where travelers could be accommodated. The guest house and stables were a little apart from the monastery itself, so that the monastic community would not become too worldly through excessive contact with outsiders. High-ranking visitors, especially ecclesiastics, would be accommodated in the abbot’s house; humbler traveling monks and priests might be put up in the dormitory.

**Almonry**

Another Christian duty was charity, and this function was served by the almonry. From here, monks would dispense food and other alms to the poor. Like the guest house, the almonry was often set apart from the other buildings.

**The Secular Community**

A monastery lived off the lands it owned, which were worked by “lay brethren” – the term means merely that their lord was an abbot rather than a baron. It was entirely self-sufficient in all everyday matters, and craftsmen who decided to retire to a monastery could find themselves plying their trade for many more years.

**Monastic Life**

Upon entering a monastic order, a novice commonly renounced all ties to the outside world – from now on, the order was lord and family. There followed a period of training and instruction before the novice was accepted as a full member of the order. At all times, unquestioning loyalty and obedience was demanded by the superiors of the order, and the lowest and youngest could find themselves destined for years of cleaning floors and latrines before reaching the life of study and contemplation which they might have expected.

While there are many tales of the luxury and idleness of monks and nuns around the time of the Reformation, these are largely propaganda; the regime of monastic life was as hard as on many farms and in many town workshops. The monks normally rose a little before dawn for prayers, and were often at Mass late into the night; in addition to the normal work of maintaining the community, all had to attend several services during the day. Especially in the High Medieval period, many took to “mortifying the flesh” – they sought physical discomfort to free their minds and spirits to concentrate on thoughts of God – living in Spartan cells, wearing hair shirts, fasting, and so on. Though many may have seen monastic life as an easy option, its demands were considerable.

Some orders, such as the Franciscans, did not maintain large monasteries, but sent their members out into the world. Vowed to poverty, and living off the charity of the people through whose lands they passed, these friars were less distant figures than the monks of the closed orders. Their poverty brought them close to the common people, yet their status as religious personages meant that lords would usually hear them. This made them ideal candidates as popular champions in song and story. It is no accident that one of Robin Hood’s Merry Men was a friar.
Holy Relics

In the High Middle Ages, monasteries drew a significant proportion of their income from the donations of pilgrims, and nothing put a place on the pilgrimage map like holy relics. It has been said – only partly in jest – that the cathedrals and monasteries of medieval Europe boasted enough splinters from the True Cross to put together a decent-sized forest, and the bones of saints were particularly sought after.

Pilgrims came to pray over holy relics in the hope of being granted a miracle, and great claims were made for the efficacy of some saints’ remains. Of course, there was always the question of authenticity, but the Church maintained that faith was everything – in fact, the High Middle Ages are sometimes called the Age of Faith – and the line between skepticism and heresy was a fine one, especially when an annual fortune in pilgrims’ donations was at stake.

Saint Edgar of Hamondsey was a local saint of the Saxon period, who converted the local king from his pagan ways in the 5th century. According to his biography, he was later captured by a neighboring pagan Saxon king and put to death. Among other miracles, the ropes with which his captors sought to bind him loosened and fell to the floor of their own accord, and he uttered a blistering diatribe against the heathens after his head had been cut off. His relics now reside in a monastery that bears his name, and in the cathedral of the county town, which is also dedicated to him. Both places are trying to establish themselves as sites of pilgrimage, and making the most of the relics in their possession. The problem is that they are barely 10 miles apart, and so they find themselves in direct competition.

St. Edgar’s Abbey proudly displays a gilded coffin that is said to contain the body of its namesake, while the cathedral claims to have his bones in a small jeweled chest. Up until now, each has been content with having a part of the saint and not worried overmuch about the claims of its rival; however, pilgrimage is becoming both a national craze and a lucrative business, and tensions are beginning to mount. The abbot and the bishop are both claiming to have had visions in which St. Edgar appeared to them, expressing the desire that his remains should be united. In the abbot’s vision, Edgar named the abbey as his preferred resting-place, while in the bishop’s, he expressed the desire to lie beneath the nave of the cathedral, in front of the high altar.

The PCs can become involved on one side or the other of this dispute if they have connections to either the abbey or the cathedral, or they might be appointed by the archbishop to look into the case. Alternatively, they might be in the employ of some temporal magnate – a local earl or duke, or perhaps the county sheriff – who has been drawn into the dispute because of a vested interest, or because the dispute has led to near-riots at local markets and fairs where opposing factions have met, and the peace is threatened. In a higher-powered campaign, the PCs might even be members of a Papal commission sent out to settle the matter.

The provisions of canon law seem to offer no resolution. Both institutions have had the saint’s relics for as far as their records go back, and both were founded in the same year, so that neither has a prior claim. In terms of the miracles that have been imputed to the relics in each place, neither has a clear advantage. The matter of the conflicting visions is another stalemate.

Faced with this impasse, incidents that would previously have been regarded as fortunate but trivial are now being hailed as miracles, and St. Edgar is being credited with curing warts, dispelling an infestation of grasshoppers, and guiding lost children safely home, among other things. His fame is spreading outside the local area, but neither the abbey nor the cathedral can boast a clear majority of miraculous events.

Both the abbot and the bishop – as well as a few members of their respective flocks – have been favored with further visitations from the saint, each more insistent than the last and each showing his clear preference for the institution to which the individual visitee was connected.

It could be that one or both sides have started giving the will of God a little earthly assistance. The abbey boasts the most complete account of Edgar’s life in existence, and a few of the more scholarly monks are poring over the manuscript in search of anything that might strengthen their case. In the town, a rumor has sprung up to the effect that the relics in the abbey are no more than the bones of a pig, used to hoax generations of the faithful. While this rumor cannot be traced back to the bishop, he has made no move to dispel it, or to calm the increasing hostility that the townspeople are showing toward the monks of the abbey and the villeins from their estates.

Most recently, a group of monks on their way to the market were beaten and robbed. The sheriff’s men are looking for outlaws, but the monks are convinced that the robbers were townsmen and the motive was more than simple robbery.

Things can escalate from here in various ways. A local feud can break out between the town and the abbey estates, with brawls in the market, accusations of discrimination and malpractice, and the deliberate spoiling of goods. The abbey or cathedral might be broken into, and the relics stolen; suspicion will inevitably fall upon the opposing faction. Worse, both reliquaries might sacrilegiously be opened, showing that the saint appears to have had two heads and at least three legs. An attempt might be made to burn down the cathedral or the abbey, with help from the opposing faction suspiciously on hand to help convey the saint’s bones to safety.
Although they are regarded as one of the essential ingredients of Roman civilization, Britain’s towns did not survive the collapse of Roman authority. Most fell into ruin and disrepair, and many were abandoned altogether. By the Christian Saxon period, towns had begun to recover. In the Norman period some received royal charters enabling them to make their own bylaws, have courts, and rule themselves in internal matters.

Only the king could grant the right to build town walls.

Medieval towns were built mainly of timber, though some were defended by stone walls with guarded gates. Many were commanded by a castle, which housed the town’s lord. Towns traded for what they needed rather than growing it, and offered a range of goods and services in return. Thus, most towns grew up as trading centers at junctions of routes. Most of the population were craftspeople or traders, and it was in the towns that the merchants made their money and built their power. Many towns, especially later in the Middle Ages, were effectively run by the guilds which governed the most important crafts and trades in the area. It was this growing mercantile and guild power that led to the eventual collapse of feudalism.

Heresy

Something disturbing is afoot in a monastery or convent. The members of the order claim that one of their number has been touched by God, and become a prophet with a new message for the world. The order has renounced its ties to the Church, and ignored a summons to appear before the archbishop.

The new message being spread by the heretics is one of universal peace and brotherhood, and – most worryingly to both the spiritual and temporal authorities – it condemns wealth and luxury, especially in the priesthood. Converts to the new cult give away all their possessions, and live a communal life where everything is shared. The peasants on the monastery’s estates have been quick to embrace the words of the new prophet, especially as it means an end to taxes and feudal duty.

These dangerous ideas are spreading through the countryside, and a couple of noble houses have been sacked by armed bands claiming to be followers of the new prophet. The barons are talking of putting down this revolt by force, and the Church authorities are using words like heresy and crusade. An event like this never happened in England, but the Albigensian Crusade in France saw the devastation of large tracts of the country and the loss of countless lives in what amounted to a small civil war.

The truth could take many forms, according to the style of the campaign and the whim of the GM. The new prophet might be genuine, or at least sincere, forcing the PCs to face the moral dilemma that the Church authorities have ducked with their accusations of heresy: what would Christ think of the luxury and political ambitions of some Church officials? On the other hand, he might be a simple-minded religious hysterical, perhaps being manipulated by political interests behind the scenes. Or the prophet might be motivated by profit, seeming to lead a life of devout poverty but secretly stockpiling confiscated wealth. Demonic possession might be behind it all – as the Church authorities will undoubtedly charge at some point – with the Powers of Darkness.
Town Development

Roman towns were largely abandoned during the Dark Ages. There were some exceptions – most notably London and York – but the pagan Saxons were uncomfortable with the imposing Roman structures, and town life had never been part of their culture. As the Middle Ages progressed and towns became re-established, many of the old Roman sites came back into use. This was due to the advantages of the individual site rather than to any desire for continuity of settlement; some Roman towns, such as Silchester and Wroxeter, were never reoccupied. Any town whose name ends in -chester, -caster, -ceter, or -xeter (for example, Manchester, Lancaster, Gloucester and Exeter) was built on Roman foundations; the place-name ending is a corruption of the Latin castra, meaning a fort or military encampment.

Early Saxon towns grew up as trading centers, where lines of communication met. Bridging and fording points of rivers were especially good sites – as well as offering a ready water-supply for the town, they gave easy access. Roads were rough and often dangerous (see p. 77) and river boats were the easiest way to transport most goods. The place-name ending -wich, as in Ipswich and Norwich, indicates that a town started as a trading center on a navigable river.

The growth of towns could also be stimulated by the presence of a socioeconomic focus such as a monastery (as in Bath) or a major royal estate (such as Windsor).

Viking attacks offered a further stimulus to the development of towns, during and after the reign of Alfred the Great in the late ninth century. The first fortified burghs or boroughs were established at this time.

Boroughs

A borough was a fortified town. Initially these were established by the King, who issued the inhabitants of a town a charter permitting them to build fortifications. Only the king could grant communities and individuals the right to construct fortifications such as castles and town walls. Adulterine walls or castles, built without the king’s charter, were illegal, and depending on the political climate the king could have them torn down or (more commonly) levy a heavy fine upon their owners (see p. 67).

The burghers answered directly to the king, rather than through the normal feudal chain of command. As well as giving the king additional sources of income through the taxes they paid, boroughs also offered the king a way of placing strongholds in the lands of the great barons, which were loyal to him personally. Boroughs could also be established by nobles, but only if they themselves obtained the king’s charter to do so.

Markets

The king profited from the town’s markets, both through taxes and through trade. In many towns, the king’s
agents, or reeves, had the right of pre-emption, which gave them first pick of all the goods at a market.

Many special arrangements were made between kings and individual towns from time to time. Commonly sought was the right to hold a court of pie powder (a corruption of the French pied pouderé, meaning "dusty foot") at a market. This special market court heard trading disputes and rendered judgment immediately, allowing cases to be settled before wandering traders could leave town. Other arrangements might be the remission of taxes on certain goods, or the right for the town itself to levy taxes for the maintenance of its walls and other amenities. The overwhelming majority of these special rights were granted in exchange for cash payments from the town to the king.

**Administration**

Monthly meetings of the shire court came to be held in the larger towns, and they began to function as county towns, or capitals of the shire in which they were situated. Hence, Nottingham became the administrative center of Nottinghamshire, Gloucester of Gloucestershire, and so on.

The county town became the seat of the county sheriff (shire-reeve), who was the king’s deputy in the shire. William I built royal castles in almost every county town, as a precaution against rebellion, and also settled Frenchmen in many towns to avoid their becoming centers for Saxon plotting. These French communities were not taxed (or at least, not as heavily as their Saxon neighbors), and were understandably loyal to the king. Not only did they owe him their financial privileges, but they must also have looked to him for protection against the jealousy and prejudice of the local Saxon community. Edward I repeated this process in Wales, where the towns were essentially fortified garrisons of English, French, and Flemish traders dotted around the Welsh countryside.

Unlike the rural serfs who were tied to the land and could be bought and sold by their lords, townsmen were free, paying taxes directly to the king. A serf who could escape to a town and live unchallenged within its walls for a year and a day was considered to have won his freedom. The leading men of London and other major towns came to be recognized as having the rank of barons (i.e. nobles) within their own jurisdiction, and the mayors of London and some other cities still have the title of Lord Mayor.

**Moneyers and Money**

Another source of royal income in towns was from the moneyers, who purchased coin-dies from the king and used them to manufacture coins. A small town would have one moneyer; larger towns might have three, and by the time of the Norman conquest, London had as many as eight. The value of coins lay in the weight and purity of the silver of which they were made. A silver penny contained 1/15th of an ounce of silver, so 240 pennies made a pound – literally, a pound of silver.

Moneyers were tightly controlled to protect the value of the currency. The Saxon king Athelstan decreed that one who issued debased coins, or impure silver, should lose a hand and have it nailed above the smithy of his mint as a warning to others. Later, Henry I collected all the moneyers in the kingdom together in Winchester at Christmas 1125, and, to express his displeasure at the increasing sloppiness of their work, had them castrated and deprived of their right hands, one by one. The process took several days.

Coins could also be clipped or shaved, taking a little metal from each one and turning, say, 20 pennies into 21. Money was tested annually by the king, and seriously underweight money was bored through and handed over to the king, who presumably had it re-coined at full weight. According to a decree of king John in 1205, money that lacked more than two shillings and six pence in the pound – in other words, any coins more than 12.5% underweight – was regarded as invalid.

**Anatomy of a Town**

The earliest Saxon towns were little more than villages surrounded by a palisade wall or other fortification. They were made up of large plots – essentially farms, sharing common grazing land outside the walls. As time progressed and towns became more self-supporting from trade and crafts, plots became smaller.

Initially, the weekly market – supplemented by larger fairs on certain feast days – was the heart of a town’s economy. As time went on and towns grew, craftsmen were increasingly attracted to the towns, where the market offered them access to a large customer base. In larger towns, streets or entire districts might be devoted to a single craft of trade; Lombard Street in London (named for the tribe who practically founded Europe’s banking system) remains at the heart of the city’s financial district, while the Shambles in York was home to over 20 butchers as late as the 19th century.

Landowning nobles found it increasingly advantageous to maintain town houses, from which they could take advantage of town markets to sell the surplus produce of their estates and buy whatever good and services that could not be provided for by feudal privilege. Barons and bishops often owned multiple houses in a town.

As towns grew in size, they paid for their economic advantages by increased vulnerability to famine, disease, and fire. In times of famine, the countryside might not produce enough to feed itself, let alone send surpluses to the towns (see p. 24). Burial evidence from the Middle Ages shows that townspeople were smaller on average than their rural counterparts, and most scholars ascribe this purely to their poorer diet. Disease spread quickly in towns, where people were packed together with minimal (if any) sanitation, and in plague years (see p. 34) the population could be decimated. Fire spread quickly among closely packed wooden buildings; London was mostly built of timber as late as 1666 – well after the period covered by this book – when it was devastated by the Great Fire.

By the end of the 12th century, almost all the major towns – those that grew into the cities of later centuries – had overflowed their walls and expanded into suburbs.
A guild (or gild, as they were known in the Middle Ages) was originally a group of people who organized themselves for mutual benefit. The first guilds were the Saxon cnihtena gild or Knights’ Guilds, which existed only in the largest towns and are thought to have been made up of the servants of those barons and bishops who maintained houses in a town.

The real start of the medieval guild system, though, came with the foundation of gilds merchant during the later Saxon and early Norman period. The gilds merchant were organizations of traders who sought to regulate trade in their town, and ensure that local traders received preferential treatment over outsiders.

The original Freemasons were a guild.

In Leicester, where the wool trade formed the basis of the local economy (as it did throughout much of medieval England), the gild merchant ruled that only guildsmen could buy and sell wool wholesale to whom they pleased. They could not sell retail to “strangers” (traders from other towns), and strangers who brought wool to Leicester could sell only to guildsmen. Guildsmen were exempt from certain taxes and tolls, and ancillary workers in the town, such as wool washers and packers, could work only for gild members.

In exchange for their privileges, guildsmen paid a membership fee, and subjected themselves to the gild laws and customs. The gild had its own court where complaints and disputes were heard, and it was at meetings of the gild – commonly accompanied by formal feasts – that elections to gild positions were held. In many cases, the gild merchant became the effective governing body of the town, since its members were the most wealthy and influential townsmen.

Soon after the Norman conquest, people following particular trades began to form themselves into guilds, in towns where they were sufficiently numerous to make organizing worthwhile.

In theory, the king’s consent was required before any guild could lawfully be established. Each guild paid the king an annual fee in exchange for the right to meet. In practice, many guilds overlooked this formality. As early as 1180, Henry II made a serious effort to identify “adulterine” guilds – those without a royal warrant – and fine them. Some paid, some did not. In London, Henry uncovered no fewer than 19 unlicensed guilds.

As well as organizing and regulating their own particular trade, guilds offered mutual support for their members – burial costs, pensions for widows and orphans, and so on. This was an important benefit in an age when few people lived beyond their 40s and state welfare was an unknown concept.

Some guilds also dabbled in politics. As mentioned above, the gild merchant was often recognized as a town’s ruling body, since every townsman of any consequence was almost certain to be a member. Fans of Illuminated campaigns, in particular, should remember that the original Freemasons were exactly such a guild, although they were not tied to a particular town and operated across Europe. A major reason for this was that no town, however large, was likely to provide permanent employment for stonemasons, so they tended to travel from one great building project – cathedral, castle, palace – to another as they were needed.
THE COUNTRYSIDE

FARMES

The bulk of the Saxon population of England were farmers, and farmsteads were normally run by an extended family, as is the case in most societies and periods of history. Building styles varied enormously from the seventh century to the 15th, but a farm normally consisted of a group of buildings clustered together, often around a yard, and situated roughly at the center of the farm’s land. In early periods animals and humans shared the same accommodation, but pens and barns are normally the first buildings to be built after the farmhouse itself. Saxon buildings were of timber, wattle, and daub, and tended to be open inside — the many-roomed Roman remains struck the Saxons as labyrinthine and threatening.

VILLAGES

Medieval villages have been the subject of extensive study in England, where many were abandoned during the later High Middle Ages and have lain undisturbed ever since. For the most part, they are collections of very small timber cottages, each with a small rectangular plot for raising vegetables. On the outskirts of the village are common fields, rotated between grain, vegetables, and pasture. Each family has the produce of strips of land in the common fields. The village as a whole provides the plows and teams, and the manpower, to work the fields. In addition to working these fields for their own support, the villagers will normally owe their liege lord the duty of working his fields.

Larger villages may have a church, but it is not until the very end of the Middle Ages that every village has a church, an inn, and a smithy. For most of the period, villages do not support specialists — everyone farms. The first specialists to set up in villages, toward the end of the Norman period, are the blacksmith (often also farrier, horseleech, and emergency surgeon), the miller (often also a baker), and the harnessmaker.

ROADS, RIVERS, AND TRAVEL

Medieval roads were mostly muddy, rutted tracks. With the exception of the few great Roman roads, they were not paved. Most traffic was on foot or horseback. Carts were used for transporting goods, but moved slowly — especially in winter, when the roads could become almost impassable quagmires. On a good day, a cart could move about 12 miles. Rivers provided a much quicker and easier means of moving bulk goods, and this is one reason why many major towns were situated on navigable rivers. Even then, the pace was slow — about 25 miles a day under good conditions.

The highways were under the king’s peace — in other words, those who broke the peace or committed other crimes on the highway answered to the king rather than to local authorities. It was the shire, however, that was responsible for the upkeep of roads, and in particular for the construction and maintenance of river bridges. Tolls were charged for crossing many bridges — in 1221, an abbot in Shropshire was charging a penny for each cart that crossed his bridge, and a half-penny for other travelers. A complaint was made that the abbot had been charging the toll for 20 years, and had made no repairs to the bridge in that time; this was far from an isolated case.

FORESTS AND OUTLAWS

Much of the land was forested in the Middle Ages. Starting with William I, the Norman kings were nearly all avid hunters. The forests and the beasts that lived therein were regarded as the property of the king. The law of the realm did not apply in the forests, which instead were governed by “forest law” (see box, p. 78) — an arbitrary and often extremely severe body of legislation that caused great friction between the Saxons and their new Norman rulers.

Not all of the forest land in England was the dense woodland normally called to mind by the word “forest.” Marshes, moorland, high fells — in fact, any land that was not cultivated and where there were birds or beasts to be hunted — all came under the definition of forest.
Forest Law

In this phrase, “forest” had a specific meaning: those areas declared to be royal hunting domain. Freeholders, villages, even manors might be located inside the forest, but all the game and trees were royal property. Forest courts, which met only four times a year, judged all offenses against forest law. The most common were poaching game and cutting living wood. The forest courts could (and usually did) impose such sentences as death, mutilation (especially castration and the loss of a hand, foot, or both), and outlawry on poachers. The warders of the forest were royal officers, subject to no local authority. If they chose to bring in poachers dead instead of alive, they were not likely to suffer for it. Still, to a population always hungry and often desperate for timber and firewood, the forests were a temptation. They were large and the warders were few; getting caught was not inevitable. One reason for the popularity of the peasant stew pot may have been that royal venison looks a lot like legal mutton when stewed.

The favorite beasts of the chase were deer – and until they effectively became extinct in the mid-13th century, wild boar. Just as the forests were owned by the king, so too were the beasts they contained, and poaching was regarded as a serious offense. Some individuals were granted the right to hunt creatures that were regarded as harmful, such as wolves, foxes, wild cats, hares, badgers, and even squirrels. These privileges were called rights of warren, and since many grants of such rights do not mention specific creatures, it seems that a right of warren allowed its recipient to hunt any and all of these animals.

Most dangerous predators had already been wiped out by the Dark Ages. Bears were extinct in the British Isles by Roman times, and the European wild cat is only slightly larger than a domestic cat. Wolves were an occasional problem up until the 13th century, but were not sufficiently numerous to be much more than a nuisance. In 1210, king John gave 15 shillings to two huntsmen who had killed three wolves – a sizeable sum at that time, from which some scholars have concluded that it did not have to be paid for handling people could become a Robin Hood-style hero.

outlaws went abroad to find work as mercenaries, hoping to win enough booty to buy a royal pardon or simply start a new life. For those who chose to stay in England, the forest provided a degree of refuge they could not expect in the towns and villages, where any who aided them – or indeed, any who failed to kill them – could be subjected to fines and other penalties. If they could avoid the king’s foresters, outlaws could make a comfortable living – by medieval standards – poaching deer, rabbits, and other game.

Avoiding the king’s foresters was a great deal easier than it might appear. Although they shrank appreciably during the course of the Middle Ages, the forests were still large enough to hide a body of people from all but the most determined search. The king’s foresters were far from incorruptible, and most could readily be bought off – some of them already made a practice of robbing travelers in the forest. Foresters and locals would be unwilling to spend much effort in hunting down an outlaw band with sufficient numbers – or a sufficiently fearsome reputation. And although the policy of robbing the rich to feed the poor was not as common in real life as it is in stories and movies, it offered the outlaws a number of significant advantages.

In the first place, it made more sense to rob the rich, because they had something worth stealing. The forests could contain entire villages, and the villeins who lived in and around the royal forests were often the poorest of the poor. They had to suffer the often extortionate fines and fees prescribed by the forest law, as well as the usual feudal taxes and impositions that were the lot of villeins everywhere. Outlaws who shared the occasional haunch of venison or stolen cask of ale with these people could become popular, both through their low-cost generosity and by daring to thumb their noses at the hated forest law and those who enforced it. Forest villagers would not be inclined to betray anyone to the authorities at the best of times; they would be even less inclined to do so when this would cut off a supplemental source of food. An outlaw with a knack for handling people could become a Robin Hood-style hero with little effort.
Combat was at the center of English society throughout the Middle Ages. Court cases were settled by combat. Inheritances were won or lost on the field of battle. Not only kings but any nobleman could maintain armed forces and fight for power, wealth, and prestige. Common folk slaughtered with as much abandon as their betters; with the development of the longbow, they frequently slaughtered their betters. Battle was the road to glory, honor and riches. If it was also a road to death, so was every other!
The principal sword for all of the Middle Ages was, in game terms, a broadsword. It was two to a little over three feet long, with a straight blade, sharpened to (or almost to) the guard on both edges. It weighed from one to three pounds and had a simple cross-guard and a one-hand grip, with a pommel heavy enough to balance the blade. Mounted fighters usually favored a slightly longer blade than infantry. By the eighth century, the development of the pattern-welding technique created the finest blade Europe had ever seen – but not all swords were of this high quality. A pattern-welded sword is very fine in GURPS terms (see Weapon Quality, p. B74), costs at least 20 times the normal broadsword price, and are not always available (GM’s decision). One source of fine pattern-welded swords was the graves of famous heroes; to get such a blade may be a quest in itself. (Given care, a very fine steel blade can have a long life; at least one eighth-century blade can be seen reset in a 16th-century hilt.) Before 1000 (an arbitrary date for gaming purposes; the change was actually gradual over the centuries) metallurgy was developed enough to permit only two grades of sword, very fine and cheap (see p. B74 for prices).

Unfortunately, metallurgy was well-enough developed to fake the characteristic blade markings of a pattern-welded sword. Use a Quick Contest of Skills between the buyer and the maker of the blade to determine if it is genuine pattern-welded or a clever fake. Of course, trying the blade can be a final test; if it breaks, bends, or dulls after a few cuts, it is a fake. The seller may not favor such a trial.

After 1000 the full range of sword quality from p. B74 was available (and pattern-welding was not worth the time and trouble).

Other Swords

Different forms of sword were developed for special purposes.

Shortswords (or long knives – the difference is terminology, not use or game stats) were common as a second weapon for spearmen, axemen, and even knights. They were two feet long or less, about one pound in weight, and had a blade and hilt much like a broadsword.

The estoc was a narrow stabbing sword, three to four feet long and weighing about two pounds. The blade was round, square, or triangular in cross-section, with no sharpened edges, designed to force a way through the links of chain mail. An estoc normally is used for thrusting attacks (thr+2) with impaling damage; a swinging blow from an estoc is a light club blow (sw+1, crushing damage).

Ladies were beheaded with a sword rather than an axe; delicacy was a chivalric virtue.
AXE

Among the Saxons and Vikings, the axe was a common weapon. The weapon and the farm tool were not very different. An axe primarily for cutting wood was likely to have a broader but shorter blade to make the best cut in a tree. An axe primarily for fighting was likely to have a blade longer from haft to edge, but narrower across the edge, to punch through armor and reach deep to the vitals.

Two-handed battle-axes and axes with wide and elaborate heads are usually late developments, for show rather than use. Double-edged axes seem to have been unknown in the European middle ages, but a hammer or spike behind the blade was common in the High Medieval period.

ANTI-ARMOR WEAPONS

As armor became more common and tougher, more thought went into weapons which minimized the benefit or armor. These included armor-piercing weapons like the military pick and crushing weapons like the mace, warhammer, flail, and morning star.

While chain mail could turn a sword blow, it offered little protection against a crushing weapon; a heavy crushing blow against plate armor might bend the metal inward to crush the body within. A pointed weapon concentrated all its force into a small area, and might be able to punch through plate armor or find its way into one of the gaps between the plates.

Flail weapons were tricky to use but greatly feared, as they could attack over or around a shield. The largest was the late-medieval Galloway flail, a terrible weapon of three two-foot iron bars on a four- or five-foot handle, which could reputedly wrap around a man’s chest and crush him through any kind of armor. Treat the Galloway flail as a three-part staff (p. CII25) with a reach of 2-3.

SPEARS, LANCES, AND PIKES

The throwing spear was popular all through the Saxon period, but except for light cavalry went out of use in Norman times. The head was long and slim – capable of forcing through the links of chain mail – with a socket to take the wooden shaft and an iron peg to secure it in place.

The fighting spear was a rare primary weapon among Saxons and Britons, but was still used by the Irish, having been a traditional Celtic weapon since the Iron Age. It had the advantage of cheapness as well as reach, since it used less metal than a sword. However, it was unwieldy in close combat.

Boar-spears, used in hunting other dangerous game as well, had a broad blade to cause maximum muscle damage with a cross-bar behind the blade to stop an enraged animal from climbing up the spear shaft to get at its attacker. In any combat, the cross-bar will stop the blade from going in too deeply and make it easier to recover for another stroke. The pennant on a lance has the same function.

There were three ways to use the spear from horseback. Throwing spears were common armament for light cavalry all through the Middle Ages. See p. B137, Using Ranged Weapons From Horseback.
Thrusting spears, used overhand, had been common for horsemen since riding began. Use the rider’s strength, not the horse’s, to assess damage. This is the only feasible way to use a spear without stirrups, or if the horse is standing still or walking slowly (one yard per second or less). This was the usual way Saxon horsemen used a spear. The GM may require a Riding roll to use a spear from horseback. In general, the higher the rider’s skill, the fewer times a die roll is necessary to prove it. Novices have trouble hanging on to the horse at a walk; practiced riders stay on without conscious effort. See also kama, p. CI132.

The true lance, couched under the arm and utilizing all the momentum of horse and rider for damage, is dependent on the development of proper saddles, bits, bridles, and stirrups, and the breeding of powerful horses. In Europe, the technique seems to have developed around the beginning of the ninth century; it reached England about the middle of the 11th. The Normans were still in transition from thrusting spear to lance at the time of the Conquest in 1066.

For most of the Middle Ages, the lance remained recognizable a spear. The difference was mostly in length, and that was a slow development. The Norman “lances” at Hastings were still about man-length plus a foot or so, with a weight of 3 to 5 pounds. Two centuries later, the common lance was about two man-lengths (10 or 12 feet) and weighed 6 to 10 pounds. It was still a straight shaft with a steel head. After about 1300 came development of the familiar knightly lance: tapered, with a definite hand-grip and handguard (vamplate). There were both lances for war and blunted lances for sporting jousts. Jousting lances were often deliberately weakened to make them break easily; “to break a lance” was the accepted phrase for a friendly contest at arms.

In the High Medieval period the pike became a common infantry weapon. This is a very long spear, 12 to 20 feet, and is almost impossibly awkward in individual combat. In a well-drilled formation it is a terrifying weapon, especially if supported by other arms. It was not used to any great extent in England until after the medieval period, but veterans of the foreign wars might be familiar with it. Scots and French. A bill has an overall length of about 6 feet and weighs about 8 pounds; use the stats for the glaive on p. B207. The hook on the blade can be used to tug an opponent off his feet . . . or his horse. Use a Quick Contest between the weapon skill of the billman and his opponent’s Dodge to see if the hook engages, a contest of ST to see who pulls whom. The hook is a sharpened blade; it cuts as it is pulling. Damage is cutting damage as if it were a thrust; the attack is a sort of thrust in reverse.

For more varieties of polearms, refer to the weapons table on p. LT108 and the customization rules on p. LT110.

**BOW**

The design of the longbow remained largely unchanged from the Neolithic period, around 1400 B.C., right up to the introduction of firearms. Five to six feet long, it had sufficient range and power to pose a threat to armored knights throughout the Middle Ages. The English and Welsh were especially proficient in the use of the longbow, which was used for hunting as well as warfare. Massed longbows won many battles for England, especially against France, and more than one king passed laws requiring all free men in certain shires to practice with the longbow for so many hours per month or pay a fine.

The secret of the English longbow was not in the weapon, but in the archers. No other king in Europe could command so many men who had trained from childhood with the bow. The weight of draw – and thus, range and power – that an archer can use depends on such training. The longbow was not as easy to shoot accurately as the crossbow; longbow victories were won by high volume, not precision shooting.

Strength was a great factor in using the longbow; the greater the draw weight on the bow, the more energy it imparted to the arrow. A character who lacks the strength to use a particular bow effectively is subject to the penalties on p. LT113.

**Arrows**

Three types of arrow head were common for the longbow. The standard arrow (the one presented on p. B207) is the broadhead, a general-purpose head for hunting and war. It cuts large wound channels and penetrates well in meat. The bodkin point has a narrow head, little bigger than the shaft. DR of armor is -2 against a bodkin point; wounding damage done by the arrow is also -2, although GMs with GURPS Low-Tech may wish to use the rules on p. LT113 instead. Blunts are for target practice and small game; they might also conceivably be used to stun and take a prisoner. They do crushing damage. Flaming arrows (p. LT113), used occasionally in sieges, were invariably crudely adapted broadheads.
A longbow arrow is about 26” to 30” long; there are about 8 arrows to the pound. Arrows are relatively fragile. They are long and thin, and the heads, fletching, and nocks can all be damaged if they are not handled correctly. GMs can penalize accuracy, range, and damage of mishandled arrows.

Crossbow

The crossbow was introduced to Europe in the 10th century. Crossbows have many cocking systems, from simply pulling the string by hand to elaborate rack-and-pinion systems. The heavier the draw weight of the bow, the more elaborate the system.

Once the string is back, it is released by pressing the trigger; the bow can be cocked and loaded and carried at the ready, which is near-impossible with a longbow.

However, the crossbow was never such an effective weapon as the longbow. The various methods of drawing and cocking the bow slowed down the rate of fire dramatically, and the longbow had far superior armor penetration – indeed, nothing until the invention of the rifle could rival it on that score. One advantage the crossbow had was that it was easier to use and required less training – so leaders who could afford them could arm just about any level of troops with crossbows, and expect them to be reasonably effective. Another advantage was that the power of the shot did not depend directly upon the strength of the crossbowman – although this was a trade-off against reload time (see p. B114).

Bolts

It is correct to call the missile from a crossbow an arrow, but the more usual term is bolt. The most common head (as on p. B207) is the quarrel, square in cross-section, which is both good against armor and makes an extensive wound channel.

Crossbow bolts are shorter (about 12 inches) but more massive than arrows for longbows. They will stand more abuse with no degradation to range and accuracy.

Handguns

Handguns started out as a smaller version of the culverin (see p. 91), mounted on the end of a stout pole. The butt-end of the pole was braced against the ground, and the gun was supported by a forked rest or simply held in the hand. Smaller handguns may have been held under the arm, although this would have added recoil to their already considerable inaccuracy. During the early 15th century, the pole became shorter and gradually developed into a stock like those of modern rifles and shotguns; an intermediate form had a perpendicular handle jutting down from the pole about halfway along, and could presumably have been fired from over the shoulder, something like a bazooka.

Early handguns were noisy, inaccurate, and often more dangerous to their wielder than to the enemy. Initially their noise had an effect on enemy morale, but once this was reduced by experience, they were not ideal weapons.

Two key developments took place in the 15th century which would pave the way for the dominance of firearms on post-medieval battlefields. Around the middle of the century, a marked improvement in the quality of gunpowder made lead bullets more effective. The serpentine or S-shaped matchlock appeared toward the end of the Hundred Years’ War (although some evidence suggests that it had been developed in eastern Europe as early as 1419). This held the smoldering cord that was used to fire the gun and automatically lined it up with the touch-hole.

Early handguns were often more dangerous to their wielder than to the enemy.

Just as the crossbow had replaced the longbow because it required less training to use, so the handgun began to replace the crossbow – although this process was not complete until well into the Renaissance. As well as being easier to use than a crossbow, a handgun was also cheaper to produce, more robust, and mechanically simpler; the only real concern was keeping one’s powder dry.

A handgun should be treated as a cannon-lock (p. B209), except that it has an Acc of 0 and a weight of 20-25 lbs. Rate of fire was probably less than the 1/60 given for the cannon-lock; however, experimental data is scant and contradictory. At the GM’s option, RoF can be as rapid as 1/60 or as slow as 1/180.
IMPROVISED WEAPONS

The rank and file of nearly all medieval armies was drawn from the land. Many, lacking weapons, made use of agricultural implements – pitchforks, grain-flails, long-handled pruning knives, and the like. Some of these implements developed into complex polearms by the Renaissance, but in the Middle Ages peasant levies (and rebels) could be armed with whatever came to hand.

ARMOR

The coverage of armor in the following section is limited, but should be sufficient for most roleplaying purposes. GMs who like to get technical about these things are referred to pp. LT114-117.

HELMET

The helmet of the Saxon period was a cap of leather or metal. Some were conical and others were more rounded. The main structure was a set of iron ribs from the rim to the crown; the spaces between could be filled with thinner sheet-iron or with hardened leather.

In the Norman period, nasal-guards became a standard addition; these were frequently used by the Vikings from whom the Normans were descended. An alternative – or addition – to the helmet in Norman times was the coif or hood of chain mail, which also protected the neck, shoulders, and throat. Great helms, enclosing the whole head with just a slit for a visor, developed around the 14th century. The most elaborate helmets – and the type most often seen in movies – were designed for jousting and first appeared in the 15th and 16th centuries. Military helmets in this period were usually caps toughened with a front-to-back ridge of metal, and sometimes fitted with hinged neck-guards and visors.

BODY ARMOR

Chain mail came into increasing use during the Saxon period, but was not widespread until Norman times, when a sleeved chainmail coat reaching to the knees was a standard part of a knight’s equipment. By the 13th century, chainmail leggings were also in use, and as the century progressed pieces of whalebone, wax-hardened leather (cuir bouilli), and metal plates were used to reinforce mail.

Plate armor was used increasingly from the 14th century onward. By the 16th century, magnificent suits of ceremonial and jousting armor were being made for European monarchs, with ever-increasing technological sophistication.

PLATE ARMOR

Plate armor developed in complexity and sophistication throughout the Middle Ages. Most plate armor consisted of a number of pieces and left numerous gaps that had to be protected by mail.

Helmet: This could have several names, according to its design. The sallet was a light helmet, sometimes fitted with a visor and a neck-guard. The basinet (whose name may mean “small basin”) was a light, round helmet. The great helm, used mostly in tourneys, covered the whole face and neck except for tiny vision slits.

Neck and Throat: Mail coifs protected head and neck (and sometimes shoulders) together. The throat could be protected by a plate gorget, or later by a bevor, which extended upward over the chin to fit beneath the helmet’s visor.

Shoulders: Plate shoulder-pieces were called pauldrons.

Torso: Breast and back-plates could be called a cuirass, or the term could apply to the breastplate alone. Later breastplates had elaborate, flexible riveted skirts to protect the groin.

Arms: The vambrace or lower cannon protected the forearm, and the upper cannon covered the upper arm. The elbow joint was protected by a shaped plate called a couter.

Hands: Gauntlets started out as mail mittens with plates fixed to the back of the hand for added protection. This developed into a single plate, covering the back of the hand from the wrist to the first joint of the fingers, often extending back along the forearm to overlap with the vambrace. Individual articulated fingers were a 15th-century development. Plate gauntlets normally covered only the back of the hand, with a mail mitten or a heavy leather glove underneath.

Legs: Leg armor consists of the cuisse which covers the thigh, the greave which covers the lower leg, and the poleyn which covers the knee joint. In later armors, the cuisse could extend up to the hip via a series of flexible riveted plates, and sometimes the same arrangement was used for the poleyn, turning the leg armor into a single articulated piece.

The cuisse and poleyn normally covered only the front of the leg, being attached by leather straps; the greave could cover the front and sides, with a slit at the back to make it easier to put on. The sabaton, covering the top of the foot in the same way as a gauntlet covers the back of the hand, was a fairly late development.

The terms for pieces of armor are almost all French in origin; even after the end of the Norman period, French remained the language of chivalry.
**Shield**

The Saxon shield was circular, about 3 feet across. It was made of light wooden boards nailed to an iron handle. The user gripped this handle in the center, and his knuckles were protected by an iron boss. The shield might be faced with hide or fitted with a metal rim, but the emphasis was on lightness, so that it could move quickly to deflect an incoming blow or missile. There are some references to the shield-boss being used as an improvised mailed fist after the wood of the shield was hacked from around it – see below.

Norman shields were longer, to cover more of the body, and “kite” shaped – broad at the top and narrower at the bottom. By the 13th century the “heater” shape had developed – the classic coat-of-arms shield shape, with a straight top and a rounded or pointed bottom. Later cavalry shields included a notch on the top left side, to serve as a lance-rest.

**Fighting with Shields**

The shield was a blocking weapon. Combatants tried to avoid parrying with the sword, since this would spoil the edge and might even risk the blade breaking. It was safest to take the force of a blow on the flat of the shield, trying to turn the blow away with a small motion of the shield-arm. A riskier tactic was to take a blow on the shield-rim, if the shield had a metal rim; this might blunt or break the opponent’s sword, but on the other hand it could allow him to split the shield and perhaps injure the shield-arm. If the opponent’s sword jammed in your shield, you could try to jerk it out of his hand with a quick twist of the shield; if you were lucky, the blade might even break.

The Saxon shield counts as small (p. B120), the kite as large, and the heater as medium. To take a sword-blow on your shield-rim, you must roll a critical success while using a Block active defense with the shield. Then roll for damage as if the attack had hit; the result is the amount of damage suffered by both the shield and the sword. Even if this is normally enough to penetrate the shield (see p. B120) you are not harmed; your critical success means that you have caught the blow expertly and are in no danger. Note that this may only be done if your shield has a rim; if not, the shield is penetrated as normal.

Any time a blow from a cutting or impaling weapon penetrates a shield, the weapon has a chance of jamming and being twisted out of its user’s hands. Roll a Quick Contest of Skills, the defender’s Shield against the attacker’s Broadsword (or whatever weapon is used). If the defender succeeds and the attacker fails, the defender must make a weapon skill roll or lose his grip on the weapon.

Shields suffered in combat, and it is recommended that GMs use the optional shield damage rule (p. B120) as standard. The Saxon shield was designed to be used as a mailed fist after the wood had been hacked away from the iron shield-boss. Treat this as brass knuckles (see Weapons For Close Combat, p. B112).

**Horse Armor**

Barding, or horse armor, was not widely used in battle. A chamfron to protect a horse’s head was the only horse armor used to any extent in the Middle Ages. More elaborate horse armor was produced for tournaments and ceremonial use, but this was at the very end of the Middle Ages and the beginning of the Renaissance.
The following are typical sets of equipment for fighting men of the different medieval periods. Players can use them as a guideline when equipping their characters, and the GM can use them as a quick way of equipping encountered NPCs.

**Saxon Fyrdman or Housecarl:** axe or sword, 1-3 spears, knife, Saxon round shield, sleeved knee-length leather jacket (covers areas 6, 8-11, 17-18), leather or pot helm (covers areas 3-4). Fyrdmen are generally less well-equipped than housecarls, though there can be considerable overlap; the main difference was in fighting skill and experience.

**Saxon Thane:** sword, 1-3 spears, knife, Saxon round shield, mail coat (covers areas 9-11, 17-18), pot helm (covers areas 3-4).

**Early Norman Knight:** sword, knife, Norman kite shield, sleeved knee-length chainmail coat (covers areas 6, 8-11, 17-18), pot helm with nasal (covers areas 3-4, plus 5 at the GM’s discretion). Mounted knights also have spear.

**Crusader Knight:** sword, knife, medium heater shield, sleeved knee-length chainmail coat with coif and gauntlets (covers areas 3-4, 6-11, 17,18), chainmail leggings (covers areas 12-16), sometimes pot helm (covers areas 3-4) or great helm (covers areas 3-5). Mounted knights will have small heater shield and may have lance.

**High Medieval Knight:** hand weapon (sword, mace, warhammer, military pick, morning star), knife, medium heater shield, chainmail coat and leggings (covers areas 6, 8-16), light plate gauntlets, breast-and-back, vambraces, cuisses, and greaves (covers areas 6-18), great helm (covers areas 3-5). Mounted knights will have a small heater shield and may have lance.

**Man-at-arms (Norman to High Medieval):** spear or pike, perhaps sword, knife, kite, or medium heater shield, sleeved knee-length leather or chainmail coat (covers areas 6, 8-11, 17-18), pot helm (covers areas 3-4).

**Archer/Crossbowman (any period):** longbow or crossbow, knife or short sword, normal clothing. In later periods, cloth or leather armor and cap (covers areas 3-4, 7-11, 17-18). Optionally, an archer’s leather arm-bracer gives off-hand arm (area 6) DR1, but does not affect PD.

**Handgunner (later High Middle Ages):** handgun, knife or short sword, cloth or leather armor and cap (covers areas 3-4, 7-11, 17-18).

**Pikeman (later High Middle Ages):** pike, knife, or short sword, cloth or leather armor (covers areas 7-11, 17-18), and pot helm (covers areas 3-4).

**Peasant Levy (Norman and later):** spear, axe, grain flail, pitchfork, pruning hook, or other agricultural implement; armor will be at most a leather cap and jacket (covers areas 3-4, 7-11, 17-18).

**Revolting Peasant (any period):** axe or agricultural implement, knife, peasant rags. Successful revolting peasants may have better weapons and scraps of leather, cloth, and sometimes even metal armor, looted from past battlefields.

**Clerics and Cudgels**

In more than one generic fantasy game there is a prohibition against priestly characters using edged weapons. This seems to arise entirely from one report of the Battle of Hastings, where Bishop Odo of Bayeux, Duke William’s brother-in-law, is said to have fought with a club or mace, being forbidden by his calling to shed blood.

While violence on consecrated ground was forbidden by the laws of sanctuary, the use of any kind of weapon at need was not forbidden to priests and monks. Some orders of knighthood, like the Templars, were founded as religious orders, and some monastic orders, like the Kirtall Friars of whom the legendary Friar Tuck is said to be a member, routinely carried arms.

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**Armies and Tactics**

**Saxon Armies**

Anglo-Saxon armies consisted almost entirely of foot-soldiers armed with spear, sword, and shield. Horses were used by those who could afford them, but mostly for mobility; the bulk of fighting was done on foot. Bows were used for hunting, but it was not until the High Middle Ages that massed archers played a significant role in warfare.

Battles were unsophisticated affairs for the most part. After the initial charge, the battle would most often break up into a series of individual combats and small skirmishes. The shield wall was a common defensive tactic; it consisted of the men in the front rank overlapping their shields, but was not as organized as the Roman *testudo* (tortoise) shield wall. Spears were used for thrusting over, around, and between shields in the first contact, then swords were drawn for close fighting. An iron shield-boss could be used like a mailed fist or a set of brass knuckles once the light wood had been hacked from around it.

The Saxons – especially early in the period – took a heroic approach to battle. Single combats between lords often decided the outcome of a battle, and a warrior whose lord was slain was expected to fight to the death over his fallen body; it was considered a great disgrace to outlive one’s lord in battle.
Norman Armies

Norman armies consisted mostly of lightly armored men-at-arms, of which a small proportion were archers. Foot knights provided the officer class. Cavalry consisted of mounted knights with mail coat, lance, sword, and shield. Their use of stirrups meant that they could charge with the lance, which was an iron-tipped wooden spear rather than the jousting lance of the High Middle Ages. It was not couched (held under the arm) for a charge, but was used to thrust overarm. As with Saxon armies, battles tended to degenerate into a succession of skirmishes after the first charge.

High Medieval Armies

Warfare evolved considerably through the High Middle Ages. Early in the period the heavy cavalry of the armored knights dominated the battlefield. War was considered – in some quarters at least – to be the sport of gentlemen, and the large numbers of feudal levies that accompanied a typical medieval army were thought to be expendable and unreliable. In chivalric romances, knights continued to rule the battlefield; in the real world, though, the tide had turned.

The English discovered the value of massed archers the hard way, during their campaigns in Wales. The longbow was not a precision weapon, but a body of archers could lay down a curtain of fire that could devastate even armored knights. At the Battle of Agincourt in 1415, English and Welsh archers accounted, in large part, for the destruction of the cream of French chivalry, though their role in the battle may have been overemphasized. Good use of the battlefield was at least as important a factor in the English victory. In the later High Middle Ages, the crossbow came into limited use but did not replace the longbow. Although it had less armor penetration and a lower fire rate than the longbow, it required less training.

The second great development that took place in the High Middle Ages was the massed pike block. The principle of a hedge of long spears had been established centuries earlier by the Macedonian phalanx formation of Alexander the Great, but it was rediscovered as a countermeasure to medieval heavy cavalry. A disciplined unit of men, formed several ranks deep and with all pikes to the fore, was almost invulnerable to a cavalry charge so long as they held their ground. The use of pikes and other polearms developed throughout the High Middle Ages, especially in Europe, where a bewildering array of specialized polearms developed during the early Renaissance.

The High Middle Ages also saw the first use of firearms on the battlefield, although like crossbows, early firearms were less effective than other contemporary weapons. Both handgunners and crossbowmen had to be deployed in large numbers to be effective. Because of their slow fire rate and vulnerability when reloading, they were often equipped with oversized shields called pavises, which they could stand on the ground to protect them while they reloaded.

A High Medieval battle was a more static and formal affair than before. Although it was not such a refined affair of move and countermove as warfare was to become by the Napoleonic era, the importance of ground was paramount.
Feudal armies are mentioned briefly in the mass combat rules in *GURPS Compendium II* (p. CII114). This section covers medieval troop types in more detail.

**Saxon Troops**
Saxon armies are TL2. Troop types are as follows:

*Fyrdmen*: Light infantry with light or no armor, armed with axe or sword, spear, and shield. Base TS is 3, maximum troop quality is Average.

*Housecarls*: Medium infantry with some armor, armed with sword, spear, and shield. Base TS is 4, troop quality ranges from Seasoned to Elite.

*Thanes*: Thanes were usually commanders, though a king’s bodyguard might be composed entirely of thanes. Medium infantry with medium armor, armed with sword and shield. Base TS is 4, troop quality is Veteran or Elite.

*Cavalry*: Saxon armies used horses for mobility, but mostly fought on foot. Horses were light, and ridden without stirrups.

*Ranged Weapons*: Slings, javelins, and longbows were used by the Saxons, but they were not especially common. Fighting was most often hand-to-hand.

**Norman Troops**
Norman armies are TL3. Troop types are as follows:

*Feudal Levy*: Irregular light infantry with little or no armor, spear or agricultural implement used as an improvised weapon. Some feudal levies could also use slings and bows. Base TS is 1, troop quality is Raw or Green.

*Men-at-Arms/Mercenaries*: Medium infantry with leather armor and some mail, spear, sword, and large kite shield. Base TS is 3, troop quality is Average or better.

*Foot Knights*: Heavy infantry with chain mail, sword, and large kite shield. Base TS is 4, troop quality is Average or better.

*Mounted Knights*: Heavy cavalry with chain mail, sword, light lance, and shield, mounted on medium horse with stirrups. Base TS is 5, troop quality is Green or better.

*Siege Weapons*: Norman armies could use small and large siege engines (see p. CII115).

**High Medieval Troops**
The High Middle Ages saw a gradual transition from TL3 to TL4. Situated on the fringes of Europe, England lagged behind countries such as Italy; despite the use of early gunpowder weapons, High Medieval armies are best treated as TL3.

*Rabble/Revolting Peasants*: Irregular light infantry with little or no equipment. Base TS is 1, troop quality is Raw or Green.

*Men-at-Arms*: Medium infantry with leather armor and some mail, spear, knife or shortsword, and shield. Base TS is 3, troop quality is Average or better.

*Yeoman Archers*: Light infantry with leather armor, shortsword, and longbow. Base TS is 5, troop quality is Average to Veteran.

*Crosbowmen*: Light infantry with leather armor, shortsword, and crossbow. Because the crossbow was a less effective weapon than the longbow (see p. 82), its TS bonus is treated here as +2 rather than the +3 given on p. CII115. Base TS is 5, troop quality is Green or better.

*Handgunners*: Light infantry with leather armor, shortsword, and handgun. Early handguns are crude and ineffective weapons (see p. 83) and are given a TS bonus of +2 instead of the +TL on p. CII115. This bonus is negated by wet weather, as gunpowder becomes unusable. Base TS is 5, troop quality is Green or better.

*Pikemen*: Medium infantry with leather and mail armor, pike, and short sword. Pikemen gain a +2 strategy modifier when charged by cavalry. Base TS is 4, troop quality is Green or better.

*Knights*: Heavy cavalry with a mixture of chain and plate armor, heavy lance, sword (or other hand weapon), and shield, mounted on heavy horses with stirrups. Base TS is 8, troop quality is Seasoned or better.

*Siege Weapons*: High Medieval armies could use small and large siege engines and light artillery (p. CII115).
The word siege is derived from a medieval French word meaning, literally, “to sit down.” Although they could involve the use of heavy weapons to breach the walls of a town or castle, a siege was essentially a waiting game. The besieging army surrounded the town, letting no one in or out, and waited until the town ran out of food and was starved into submission. There are numerous stories of besieged townsfolk eating dogs, cats, and even rats while they waited for a friendly force to come and raise the siege.

Of course, there were frequent occasions when one side or the other needed to bring things to a speedier conclusion. An approaching relief force could threaten to trap the besiegers, or reinforcements might give the besiegers enough manpower to take a town by storm. The approach of winter might force the besiegers to withdraw, wasting all the time and resources they had put into the siege.

Besieged townsfolk ate dogs, cats, and even rats.

The besieger could use siege machines to breach the walls or break down the gates, and allow storming parties to break into the town. However, the art of fortification had reached such a level of sophistication by the late Norman period that attackers were almost always at a disadvantage, even against starving and exhausted defenders. Attackers risked heavy casualties, and while it was undoubtedly heroic, storming a town was far from certain of success.

Sustained bombardment could destroy enough of the walls to render the town indefensible and force the defenders to surrender, but this took time. In the later part of the High Middle Ages, siege weapons were vulnerable to counter-fire from cannon mounted on towers and parapets, and highly motivated defenders – as most were, facing the prospect of slaughter and pillage – could patch walls by night that had been damaged by day.

Medieval towns were insanitary places at the best of times, and in time of siege conditions worsened rapidly. Often it was only a matter of time before disease from spoiled food or tainted drinking water added to the defenders’ woes. Attackers could hasten this process by using their catapults to throw the rotting carcasses of dead livestock over the walls; for an added impact on morale, besiegers could use the corpses of their enemies’ dead. Conditions inside a siege camp could be worse under lax commanders or if they were surrounded by a counter-siege.

Defenders in a siege had options, too. A well-mounted sally could break through the siege lines and ravage the besiegers’ rear. As already mentioned, counterfire from the walls could put siege artillery out of commission, and so could daring raids under cover of darkness. Attackers could be kept a comfortable distance from the walls by bow and crossbow fire; rocks and boiling water (boiling oil was hotter, but less easy to come by) could deal with ladder-parties attempting an escalade against the walls and sappers trying to undermine them, unless they were protected by a sow (see below). Long forked poles were used to push ladder-tops away from the walls and send them (and the troops climbing them) crashing to the ground.

Water was the defenders’ most valuable resource in a siege. A town that had one or more wells within the walls could hold out much longer than one that was forced to rely on rainwater or whatever could be smuggled in from outside. However, it was not unknown for enemy agents within a town to poison the water supply.

Siege Weapons

In the High Medieval and later periods, a variety of weapons were developed (or rediscovered from classical sources) for use in sieges. See the rules for catapults on p. C138. They are all crew-served weapons that take considerable time to emplace and are not accurate enough to shoot at an individual human target; consider them just among the random hazards of war. They are not very good for launching people over walls either; a natural 18 is a success, with 3d damage from the launching plus the damage for a 100-yard fall; any other result is ignominious death.

Most siege machinery was transported just as metal and rope. Work crews at the site found timber and put the machines together. The most important siege weapons were manpower and time.

Pre-gunpowder artillery was of three basic types: tension, torsion, and counterweight.
**Tension Artillery**

Tension artillery is simply a bigger crossbow. The ballista fired a spear-sized dart, but was less popular in the Middle Ages than it had been in Roman times. Some kinds of mangonel were crossbow-shaped; instead of firing a dart, the string snapped against an arm, which fired a rock from a sling. Game stats for the ballista and mangonel may be found on p. LT113.

**Torsion Artillery**

Torsion artillery uses the elasticity of a skein of woven rope for power; the rope was twisted using a lever and ratchet system, storing energy which snapped up the throwing arm when the weapon was fired. The most common torsion weapon was the onager, which, like the ballista, traced its ancestry back to classical times. Most onagers were comparable in size and damage to the mangonel (p. LT113). Confusingly, the term mangonel is sometimes applied to this kind of device, although there is some academic debate about the accuracy of doing so.

**Counterweight Artillery**

Counterweight artillery – in particular the trebuchet – was the superweapon of the Middle Ages; no other weapon could throw such a heavy load or fire over such a range. The trebuchet consists of a long pivoting arm mounted on a frame. At one end of the arm is a heavy counterweight, usually a box or basket of rocks; at the other end is a hook and sling which holds the shot. The counterweight is winched up until the other end of the arm is close to the ground; the sling is placed on the ground close to the fulcrum of the machine, and the shot is rolled into it. When the trebuchet is fired, the counterweight drops and the arm snaps up, but it is the whiplash effect of the sling which provides the shot with most of its momentum. A reconstructed trebuchet has fired cows, pianos, and even small cars over considerable distances.

In French, the trebuchet was sometimes called by the name *mangonneau*, or mangonel; although the word originally referred to just about any kind of pre-gunpowder siege artillery, by the 19th century it had come to be applied exclusively to smaller rock-throwers using torsion or tension. Modern scholars debate the accuracy of this.

Smaller than the trebuchet was the perrier. It worked on the same principle, but instead of a falling counterweight it was powered by a crew – sometimes of eight or more – pulling together on ropes attached to the end of the throwing arm. It must have required considerable coordination to fire effectively.

Rules and stats for trebuchets are given on p. CI39 and pp. LT96 and 113. A perrier is treated as a small trebuchet.

**Gunpowder Artillery**

Gunpowder was first used for fireworks in China around the middle of the 11th century. How the formula reached Europe is not recorded – independent invention and transmission via Moslem traders are both popular theories – but by 1268 the English scientist and mystic Roger Bacon was experimenting with gunpowder. Gunpowder weapons began to appear on European battlefields in the first half of the 14th century; the English reportedly used "crakys of war" in Scotland in 1327, and French naval raiders used simple guns firing iron bolts against the English port of Southampton in 1338.
The earliest cannon – called pot-de-fer or iron pot in French – was a single-piece metal casting shaped like a vase, with a narrow neck and bulging end. The firer ignited the gunpowder by thrusting a hot wire or coal through a touch-hole that was drilled into the body of the weapon towards the back. These guns are often shown firing ballista-like bolts with iron points and fins – it is likely the some kind of wadding was attached to the shaft of the bolt, so that the ignition gases did not simply escape around the sides of the shaft. Treat the pot-de-fer as an early ballista for game stats (p. LT113).

The term bombard came to be applied to a broad range of gunpowder artillery, from simple, flowerpot-shaped devices (later known as mortars) that fired stone or iron balls to longer guns that became the ancestors of swashbuckler-era cannon. These were normally mounted on stout wooden fittings, roped and staked into the ground to minimize recoil; levers and wooden wedges were the most common means of changing elevation. Wheeled gun carriages did not appear until late in the 15th century, and gunpowder weapons were often protected from counterfire by wooden sheds or shields called pavises, which could be moved or raised when the weapon fired and replaced to protect the crew while they went through the lengthy process of reloading.

Initially made of iron, early bombards were prone to exploding as the strain of repeated firings told on the barrel. Bronze was more expensive but safer, and by the latter part of the 15th century, bronze became the standard metal for gun barrels.

Smaller than the bombard was the culverin; as a rule of thumb, a bombard fired a shot the size of a human head or larger, while a culverin fired a shot about the size of a human fist. Culverins were also mounted on cumbersome frames, but had a higher rate of fire because of their breech-loading construction. This allowed charges to be pre-loaded in combustion chambers shaped like a beer-mug, which could be prepared in advance and switched out once fired. Bombards, which could fire around twice an hour, were too big for this system to be practical.

The smaller guns – including early handguns (see p. 83) – were usable in open-field battles as well as sieges. While bombards could be loaded with shot, stones and other scatter-type ammunition, they were normally deployed against fortifications and used stone or iron balls.

The Artillery Table on p. LT113 includes small (9") and large (18") bombards. A culverin is treated as a small bombard with Damage 4d, RoF 1/60, WPS 2.

### Rams and Sapping

Rams include the battering-ram (see p. CI38), the pick, and the screw. All are of very similar construction; the pick has a narrow point to concentrate its force, and the screw has a square or (rarely) spiral-cut head which is twisted during use, to give a primitive hammer-drill effect. Most were covered by a “sow” – a wheeled shed covered in uncured hides to protect the crew from boiling oil and other missiles dropped from the ramps.

Later in the 14th and 15th centuries, sappers would move to a wall under cover of a sow, pry out stones or otherwise create small hollows at the base, and pack them with gunpowder to blow out the foundation. Since the defenders could be using fire arrows and dropping burning oil, this was a dangerous mission!

### Siege Towers

Siege tower, or belfries, are more common in movies than in the real Middle Ages, but they were certainly used on some occasions. Mounting an escalade (putting attackers on the battlements by having them run up to the walls carrying ladders and climb as fast as they could) was an almost suicidal proposition against even a light defense, and the only hope of success was to overwhelm the defenders by weight of numbers.

A siege tower offered more protection and quicker deployment; like a sow, it was built of wood and covered with green or uncured hides to protect against arrows and fire. Inside, the tower consisted of a number of floors linked by ladders, and often a wooden drawbridge across which attackers could charge onto the battlements. Mounted on massive wooden wheels, they were cumbersome to maneuver and almost useless on rough ground.

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**Trial by Combat**

Like trial by ordeal (see. p. 12), trial by combat was used to settle cases as a last resort, and its use was largely restricted to the knightly classes, who had training in arms. Most common in the Norman period, trial by combat died out over the course of the Middle Ages – although some of the laws that governed it remained on the books until well into the 19th century!

Although some elaborate and quite bizarre forms of judicial duels grew up during the later Middle Ages in continental Europe – particularly in Germany – English trials by combat were very straightforward affairs. Nobles used the lance, sword, dagger, and axe, while commoners used quarterstaves or sandbags.

Clergy and older nobles could appoint a champion to fight for them. The loser of a trial by combat normally paid a fine in addition to relinquishing his claim, especially in cases involving property. Since both sides would have been required to swear to the rightness of their claim before the trial by combat proceeded, the loser could be regarded as guilty of perjury. In important cases where champions were employed, the losing champion could forfeit a hand – presumably to make him less likely to throw the fight in exchange for a bribe. In some cases, each champion drew a folded slip of paper bearing the name of one of the litigants before the combat, and only when the combat was over were the papers examined to discover who had won.

If a trial by combat occurs during the course of a campaign – and especially if one or more PCs are involved – it is recommended that the GM make full use of the rules to play the combat out in detail. It should be a focal point of the gaming session, rather than just another fight.
There are three ways to run magic in a GURPS Middle Ages campaign: omit it completely (a historic campaign), allow limited magic and divine action (a fantastic campaign), or allow unlimited magic and free divine action (a mythic campaign).

For a historic campaign, there’s no need to worry about this chapter at all – although superstitious characters might still believe in magic, it doesn’t really exist.

**Spellcasters**

Through most of the Middle Ages, magic was hated and feared, and suspected magicians were persecuted as heretics and witches. The GM must decide whether to keep this “historical” attitude in a fantastic or mythic campaign. Most GMs will probably prefer to have magic accepted in proportion to its frequency: the more common magic and spellcasters are, the more they are accepted. But playing a full-magic campaign where spellcasters are hunted and persecuted could offer a new and interesting range of challenges.

**Spellcasting Types**

The types of spellcaster which may be encountered depend on the period, the place, and the amount of magic in the campaign as a whole.

**Wild Talent**

In a campaign where magic is common, it might be reasonable to assume that the potential for magical talent is present in everyone, to a greater or lesser degree. A wild talent is an ability which is only partially mastered and which has not yet been shaped or controlled by any training. Almost any talent can manifest itself in this way.

**Academic Magician**

These characters are sorcerers and enchanters, and it is from this class of spellcaster that court magicians are commonly drawn. They develop their magical skills by study and practice, and may band together into secret societies. Academic magicians are nearly always in touch with others of their kind, exchanging information and knowledge. They can be good or evil, and their societies are accordingly more or less secret.

**Witch and Warlock**

These spellcasters get their magical powers by currying the favor of demons and other magical beings, rather than through study or tradition. The religious basis of these magicians may be in Celtic or Saxon paganism, actual Satanism, or some blend of beliefs. Their powers are often modest, although when they work together in a coven they may be able to cast more powerful spells. Depending on the power behind a coven and the GM’s preference, these magicians may be completely evil, good but misled, or the guardians of an ancient tradition which can be used for good or ill.

**Rural Spellcaster**

Hedge-wizards and wise women are fitted to just about any period, but are nearly always found in a rural setting. They would need some special reason to be present in a town, although this is not impossible; in a town they would behave more like herbal doctors, and their magical powers would only be known to a trusted few. The extent of these magical powers increases in proportion to the magic level of the campaign. Training generally takes the form of traditional lore handed down from old teacher to apprentice. Though it is a little anachronistic, titles like “Mother” or “Goody” might be applied to wise women.

**Priest and Saint**

Especially in the Dark Ages and early Saxon period, there are many reports of saints and missionaries working miracles. Some of these miracles are demonstrations of divine power which lead to the conversion of pagan kingdoms, while others protect the missionaries and punish those who would do them harm.

The GM must decide whether to allow priest characters to have magical abilities as a matter of routine; much of this will depend on the overall level of magic in the campaign. Instead of allowing priests to learn spells in the same way as magicians, the GM might let a holy man pray for a miracle when one is desired. This might be reduced to a die roll, or the GM might simply decide whether or not a miracle is granted based on the character’s piety and other relevant factors. The precise form which the miracle takes should be decided by the GM – the righteous should not pray for a pillar of flame to strike the pagan city, just that God might punish the infidels.
Training

Obtaining magical training is always difficult – just how difficult depends on a number of factors. The magic level of the campaign is the main concern, but the GM should also consider where the would-be apprentice is and what kind of training he is after.

In a rural area, for instance, it might be possible to find a local hedge-wizard or wise woman, but the spells such individuals can teach might not be of much use to an adventurer.

Sorcerers know more powerful magics, but these people are rare, secretive, and often evil. Many sorcerers, especially later in the Middle Ages, were members of highly structured organizations – cabals and secret orders – and to obtain training one had to become an apprentice and join the society. This involved duties to the society and its other members – perhaps giving a Patron or Allies, but canceling out these advantages with disadvantages like Duty. Knowledge is given out very sparingly, and carries a high cost in service to the society or master. Unfortunates who discover the existence of such a secret society, but are not accepted as members, might find themselves with a powerful Enemy. Even if a town-based sorcerer is free of any links to secret societies and well-disposed toward the world in general, he will still be secretive – neighbors would not like to learn that they live next to a wizard, and would probably blame him for every trifling mishap in the neighborhood.

Witchcraft is one of the most dangerous forms of magic to learn. Outsiders are not welcomed by covens, who recruit by inheritance or – on the rare occasions when this still leaves them short-handed – from people who have been known to them for most of their lives. Strangers are not welcome; those who discover a coven’s existence are almost certainly hunted down and killed. Initiation into a coven is often a traumatic affair, involving sacrifices of one’s own blood, powerful oaths binding the individual to the coven (and the coven’s supernatural patron), and placing one’s life entirely in their hands. This can sometimes lead to a coven member being offered up as a human sacrifice. Those demons and other entities which patronize covens hand out very little in the way of actual power, and always demand a high price in blood and souls.

In very remote areas, PCs might encounter spellcasting nonhumans, but a pupil has to overcome a lot of racial distrust in order to obtain tutoring. Some dragons can be powerful enchanters, but who in his right mind would trust such a creature to teach him and not eat him?

Spells

Most of the spells listed in the GURPS Basic Set are appropriate to a Middle Ages campaign. Perhaps more important is the question of which types of spellcaster use which types of spells. Unrestricted use of magic by all spellcasters erodes the flavor of the setting; tailoring spell use to character type can help capture the “feel” of magic in the Middle Ages very well.

Sorcerers

Sorcerers are the most powerful mortal spellcasters in medieval lore, and can have free access to just about any spell which is in keeping with the setting. They are nearly always evil, and their main function in stories is to present a showy, terrifying enemy who destroys minor characters in various spectacular ways before being overcome by the old-fashioned strength, courage, and faith (and magical amulets, saints’ bones, blessings, etc.) of the hero. Showy elemental magic is a favorite, as well as powerful illusions and Mind Control magic.

Witches and Warlocks

The spells available to these characters depend on their precise nature within the campaign. Wholly evil witches have spells for doing harm, but avoid the showier Elemental spells. They use Communication and Empathy spells to impress and awe the locals, and may have some Animal spells as well. Some may have some weather-related Elemental spells, as well as Making and Breaking spells and Mind Control spells like Fear. The most powerful may be able to Summon their patron demon or lesser beings.
**RURAL SPELLCASTERS**

The hedge-wizard and wise woman will know basic spells from a wide range of categories, and their spell use reflects their social function – a little bit of healing, a little bit of fertility magic, and a little bit of animal magic, as well as some lesser spells of other types. Communication and Empathy spells like Sense Emotion and Persuasion can help them impress the locals and solve some of the problems that are taken to them. Lesser Elemental spells of the Find, Shape, and Purify type are appropriate, as are weather-related spells. Some hedge-wizards also use Making and Breaking spells. When choosing spells for a hedge-wizard or wise woman, bear in mind the needs of the community they serve.

**PRIESTS**

If priests may learn spells in the campaign, most of these spells deal with protection and healing. Some wandering priests and hermits have Animal spells (especially in a romantic-chivalric setting), and many may have Communication and Empathy spells which enable them to look into someone’s heart and judge whether or not they are truthful, worthy, or whatever. Purify Air, Purify Water, and Create Water are appropriate, as are Healing spells and those Mind Control spells which have a positive effect on their recipient. Other Mind Control spells might be used defensively, as a nonviolent means of dealing with aggression.

**NONHUMAN SPELLCASTERS**

Some older, wiser monsters can also use magic; elves, hags, and some dragons can be powerful wizards. When dealing with monstrous spellcasters, the GM should bear in mind their racial character and inclinations as well as individual personality and motivations.

**ENCHANTMENT SPELLS**

Magical items are very rare in medieval lore, and most are created by divine miracles rather than mortal magic. Restricting Enchantment magic to just a few of the most powerful NPC sorcerers (whom the PCs will probably never meet!) is a good way of controlling any magical weapon proliferation in the campaign.

Rural spellcasters and sorcerers might have a limited range of Enchantment spells. They might be able to use Enchant and Staff, for instance, and rural spellcasters might be able to use Create Talisman & Amulet (see p. G38), or use the rules for amulets in *GURPS Magic Items 1*.

**THE EVIL EYE**

This was one of the most-feared magical attacks, and more charms were made to protect against the Evil Eye than anything else. It was commonly believed that a glance from a witch (or, sometimes, from an animal belonging to a witch) was sufficient to put a curse on someone.

In game terms, the Evil Eye is any hostile spell which the caster knows so well that he (or, more often, she) can cast it without concentration.

Appropriate spells from the *Basic Set* are Fear, Foolishness, and Daze. Some from *GURPS Magic* are aggressive Body Control spells (except Deathtouch) and the Meta-Spell Curse.

**SCROLLS AND WRITTEN CHARMS**

This type of written magic is normally prepared in advance, and takes longer than rune magic. The Scroll spell (p. B160) covers the “classic” spell scroll as used by most generic fantasy, but there is another type which GMs and players may find interesting.

**HELLENISTIC CHARMS**

The Hellenistic tradition of magic, which formed the basis of most alchemy and sorcery in medieval Europe, ultimately came from Egypt. There was a long-standing practice of putting spells and charms on small slips of papyrus (no more than 3” by 1” in most cases). These did not operate like spell scrolls, but were activated by contact with human flesh and targeted on the first person who touched them after their creator. The charm from M.R. James’ short story “Casting the Runes” (filmed as *Night of the Demon*) is of this type.

Charms of this kind can be made by using the Scroll spell (at the GM’s option, it might be a separate spell of very similar nature), and can be read to determine their nature. They are normally written in a cursive form of Egyptian hieroglyphs, which might require an appropriate skill roll to execute properly. A skill roll will certainly be required to read them.
Some charms take effect instantly, affecting the first person to touch them after their creator. Others take effect after a certain period of time, which may or may not be apparent from reading them. As in *Casting the Runes*, a situation involving this type of charm can rapidly turn into something like playing pass-the-parcel with a ticking bomb. Yet another type – especially those to do with protection and healing – operate as an always-on item while in contact with the first person to touch them after their creator. Being held in the hand or slipped inside the clothing both count as contact for these purposes. When contact is lost, or after a certain length of time, or after operating on a certain number of occasions, the charm becomes useless.

**Scripture**

Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture. Although it is not written magic in the strict sense, there are many examples in folklore of the use of Holy Scripture.

**Magic Items**

Magic items are far rarer in medieval stories (with the possible exception of the later romantic-chivalric literature) than they are in most fantasy roleplaying games. They are almost never found simply lying around with no explanation of where they came from and how they came to be magical. Almost every item has a story behind it; if the GM bears this in mind it can help control magic item proliferation in a fantastic campaign.

**Adapting Magic Items Medievally**

Most of the items in the *GURPS Magic Items* books are suitable for use in fantastic medieval campaigns, since most have been designed with medieval-based generic fantasy or the medieval-based world of Yrth in mind. However, not all items are appropriate for every setting or campaign style. Here are a few notes.

Demon Armor can land its wearer in deep trouble with the Christian authorities through most of the Middle Ages. Those with this kind of armor are advised to find a remote area and stay there. Alternatively, an NPC who has Demon Armor might become the object (or victim) of a quest or small crusade. Well-dressed Black Knights in high-magic campaigns wouldn’t be seen dead in anything else, and some interesting moral dilemmas can be set up in the minds of devoutly Christian characters if they discover that the man inside the armor is basically good.

Dwarven and Elven armors will be fantastically rare in a medieval campaign, regardless of the level of magic. They will also be made only to fit members of the race who made them. Any character of another race who possesses Dwarven or Elven armor can expect trouble from every member of that race who hears about him, unless the character is recognized as a great hero and friend to the race in question and the armor was specially made as a gift of gratitude.

Items of enchanted clothing should be used with great care, as many of them are not appropriate to a serious medieval campaign (silly campaigns are another matter). Those most suited to medieval campaigns are veils, purses, capes, and the like.

**Be careful about using flying brooms while anyone is looking.**

Cursed items appear in many medieval stories, especially as metaphors for greed causing a person’s downfall. Again, the GM must decide which items are suited to the campaign. The Chivalric Talisman might be much sought-after in some campaigns, since it effectively helps keep a quester firmly on the path of chivalry. If Lancelot had had one of these to guide his moral judgement, he might have found the Grail instead of Galahad!

Healing items, again, are at the GM’s option, but most of them are not out of place in any medieval campaign – the GM need only worry about the magic level of the campaign. The Alicorn is especially suited to high-magic chivalric campaigns.

Magical jewelry is comparatively common in medieval tales, and almost anything is suitable, given a sufficient magic level in the campaign. Anachronisms, like Chronos’ Watches, should be avoided unless the campaign is silly enough to stand them.

Wizardly tools should be used with care. They make interesting scenery for an NPC wizard’s workshop, but PC spellcasters will almost certainly make a habit of trash such places for their magical plunder if they think they can get away with it. Some powerful mages might have a single low-power item in their workshops, but wizards have to be Merlin-level or above to have more than a couple. Perhaps the best use of these items is as quest objects, with the player...
characters hired by an NPC wizard who is powerful enough to make sure they hand the thing over when they find it.

Much of the extra-legal equipment listed is rather too convenient and contrived to sit well in a campaign with a low or moderate magic level. The Beggar King’s Cloak would make a fine legendary item in a low-magic campaign. As always, the GM should decide what fits in the campaign and what doesn’t.

Most transportation items are appropriate for a medieval campaign, provided that care is paid to explaining their origins. The Chariots of Hell are very special items, and the notes above for Demon Armor apply equally to them. Flying carpets may have been brought back from the Crusades, and characters should be very careful about using flying brooms while anyone is looking.

Magical weaponry is by far the most common class of magic item in medieval lore, and by far the most common magical weapon is the sword. The notes on mundane weapons in Chapter 4 apply equally to magical weapons – they should suit the time and place.

Necromantic magic is very limited in most medieval settings, and seldom extends beyond the summoning and questioning of ghosts.

Powerstones are acceptable in medieval campaigns, and indeed necessary – more for their rules function than because of any historical or mythic accuracy, although some stories do feature magical gems with unspecified powers. Elixirs are suited to most medieval campaigns, especially those that feature alchemy – depending on the magic level, they could be anything from medieval snake oil to pure liquid power.

**Enchanted Items**

Obviously, those who have access to Enchantment magic are able to create magical items. This applies to NPCs as much as to PCs. If the GM wishes to avoid uncontrolled proliferation of magic items, he should pay close attention to the times and costs involved in Enchantment magic.

**Virtue by Association**

Some items – particularly weapons and armor – are not magical at their creation, but acquire magical powers by association if they were once owned and used by a mighty and legendary hero. Throughout the Middle Ages, charlatans sold swords which had allegedly belonged to Charlemagne; those who bought them often hoped that some of Charlemagne’s greatness would rub off on them.

The GM must decide how to handle this type of item, and whether or not a given example is magical at all. It could be that Charlemagne’s sword would have fairly standard Accuracy and Puissance enchantments, or it might affect its owner in a more subtle way, adding bonuses to Strategy, Diplomacy, and similar rolls.

**Miraculous Items**

Many magical items are divinely created, or at least touched by divinity. The Holy Grail is perhaps the best-known example (although it is debatable whether it is a magic item or simply a metaphor for Heaven), and the Sword in the Stone is another.

Most divinely created items would have a kind of aura of holiness. This would prevent any fey creatures from touching them (or in some cases, from approaching within 10 or 20 feet of them), and might have the same effect on other evil creatures, even evil humans. Otherwise, they can have various enchantments according to their role in the story.

Some might only be enchanted until their appointed task has been completed. Others might refuse to use their enchantments in situations which do not directly advance the appointed task. Many divinely created items will lose their enchantments if their owner strays from the path of righteousness; the enchantments may come back if their owner repents and atones, or it may be too late. In extreme cases, the items might crumble to dust or simply disappear if their owner falls from divine grace.

**Superstitions**

Folklore holds that certain everyday things can drive away or protect against some supernatural evils, just as Scripture or iron drives away feys. It is not clear whether these items are thought of as magical, but they can be interesting low-power charms for characters to collect. Superstitious individuals will believe in their efficacy even in a no-magic campaign; in a campaign with magic, they might be magical or they might not.

A sprig of the rowan (mountain ash) tree wrapped around with red thread was thought to be a sure protection against witchcraft. Churchyard mold, being nourished by the dead, was both a powerful spell component and a valuable charm against witchcraft and the Good Folk. Daisy
The Middle Ages saw an enormous amount of interaction between nations, both within Europe and outside it. Trade, politics, and wars in this period shaped the Europe we know today; from the Vikings in the north to the Moors in the south, from the Irish in the west to the Saracens in the east, there was an enormous world out there to be discovered. The notes in this chapter provide basic information; GMs who intend to involve foreign characters and locations on a regular basis will find other GURPS worldbooks useful. GURPS Celtic Myth, GURPS Vikings, GURPS Arabian Nights, and GURPS Russia are all recommended for GMs interested in those respective areas.
FRANKS AND FRENCH

LOCATION
At its height, the Frankish Empire occupied most of modern-day France and Germany, extending into the Low Countries and up to the southern fringes of Scandinavia. After the middle of the ninth century it began to decline, with increasing Norwegian inroads into France and the division of the Empire into eastern and western parts, roughly equivalent to Germany and France. In 911 the Norwegian presence was legitimized and turned into a defense against other Scandinavians by the creation of Rollo as first Duke of Normandy.

TYPICAL FRANKS
Like most of Christian Europe, the Franks were much the same as the Saxons in terms of technology, weapons, and social structure. The language was different – Old French rather than Old English – but Latin served as the common language of educated men throughout Christendom. The notes given earlier on Saxons apply to Franks as well.

SOCIETY
Frankish society was similar to that of the Saxons, but even more rigid. The Frankish Empire had reached its height under Charlemagne, and had been firmly fused into a single entity – with the result that individual nobles were less inclined than their Saxon counterparts to take action independent of their king. As elsewhere in Europe, church and state cooperated to make sure that everyone knew his place . . . and stuck to it.

THE MEDIEVAL FRENCH
The point at which Franks become Frenchmen is a matter of academic debate; for the purposes of a campaign based in England, assume that Saxons and Normans dealt with Franks, and Europeans of the High Medieval period dealt with Frenchmen.

Although medieval Englishmen and Frenchmen would have denied it hotly, there were very few differences between England and France in the High Medieval period. France entered this period a little before England, but its effects were much the same in both kingdoms. For much of the High Medieval period, French was the language of the court and ruling classes in England, and indeed England had extensive landholdings in France – some connected to the Duchy of Normandy, some brought by dynastic inheritance, and some acquired in war.

Medieval France had roughly the same range of character types as medieval England, but French knights often regarded themselves as more cultured and complete paragons of chivalry than their English counterparts, whom they considered to be bumpkins and ruffians. The English, for their part, regarded the French with mixed feelings: grudging envy for the cultural advantage of their closeness to the European mainstream and a measure of contempt for what, by English standards, was their over-delicacy and foppishness. These attitudes survive, little changed, to the present day.

CELTS

LOCATION
The Celts occupied Wales, Ireland, and Scotland. Like the Saxons and the Franks, they were Christian, but unlike them, their culture had no Roman influence and remained Celtic. This gave them several important differences from the rest of Christendom.

The Vikings established several strongholds in Scotland, Ireland, and the Isles, but they were apparently less successful – or less interested – in the other Celtic lands of Wales and the southwest. The Celtic fringe was an almost constant thorn in the side of the medieval English. Wales was conquered by Edward I after a number of costly failures, and the English fought inconclusive and bloody campaigns in Ireland from Norman times to the Tudors and beyond. The Scottish border was in constant motion, and cattle-raiding was the main pastime in the border lands through the Middle Ages and for centuries afterward. It was not until after the end of the Tudor dynasty that Scotland and England were united under one rule – and that was the rule of a Scottish king, James I of England and VI of Scotland.

TYPICAL CELTS

Warrior
Professional warriors were rare among the Celts, although generally people were more used to taking up arms – most adult and adolescent males had some basic fighting skill. The axe was not a widely used weapon in pre-Viking times; otherwise, equipment was similar to that of Saxons, but armor was very rare.

Farmer/Fisherman
The bulk of the population were subsistence farmers and fishermen, winning a living from land and sea in much the same way as their Scandinavian counterparts. Much of Ireland makes very fertile growing and grazing, and cattle were much more numerous than in the bleaker farmlands of Scandinavia. Sheep and goats grazed rougher country.
Monk

Irish monks converted Scotland and much of England to Christianity after the post-Roman lapse into paganism. They were similar to the monks of Saxon England, but better able to look after themselves in a harsh environment — many were hermits living on remote and inhospitable islands when they were discovered by the expanding Vikings. The Irish, in particular, were able seamen, having reached Iceland and several other places before the Norwegians; most were monks seeking ever more remote hermitages, and an Irish tradition credits St. Brendan with the discovery of America even before Leif Ericsson.

Society

Celtic society was less structured than that of the Saxons and Franks. Ireland was divided into a number of warring kingdoms that occasionally would be united under a strong ruler who would take the title of High King; Scotland was split into many small territories, but conflict was a little less frequent. Records of Wales before the English conquest are sketchy, but clan territories seem to have run along the many valleys, seldom crossing the mountains that divide them.

Kinship was of great importance, and feuds were common. The Church worked less in collusion with the state, as there was less of a state to work with, and the Celts generally respected a man more for his abilities than his position. Old enmities ran deep, and although these peoples would sometimes unite against a common foe, it was just as likely that they would remain divided and be defeated piecemeal. However, they were less easily conquered than most; the Norwegians had to fight almost continually to keep their foothold in Ireland, and English attempts to conquer both Scotland and Ireland failed consistently, from the Normans to the Tudors.

Picts

Location

The Picts are something of an enigma. The name is frequent in documents from the later Roman period onward. Picts are seldom described and what information there is on them seems to be fanciful — a southern scribe’s idea of northern “wild men.” No trace of the Pictish tradition survives, either in writing or in the form of oral tales — just some place-names with the element “Pit-” and a few pieces of carved stone in what is said to be the Pictish style. They may have been the original inhabitants of Scotland (the Scoti, a Celtic tribe, arrived from Ireland at the end of the Roman period, around 400 A.D.), and in the Viking period they seem to have occupied the eastern part of lowland Scotland, with a slight northward spread into the highlands.

Typical Picts

From what can be made of the scattered historical and archaeological evidence, the Picts were mostly subsistence farmers, working small fields and keeping livestock much like their Scandinavian counterparts. Roman and Saxon writers describe their warriors as fearsome, tattooed, half-naked savages, without going into much more detail. It seems likely that the spear was their main weapon, with swords used by the few individuals who could afford them.
Society

Pictish society is as much of a mystery as anything else about this people. They seem to have been reclusive or unwelcoming, for there are no travelers’ accounts of their lands and character as there are for other northern peoples including the Vikings. It seems likely that their farms were banded together into some kind of clan structure, but even that is guesswork.

Literary Picts

Since so little is known about the Picts, they have been a fine place for authors to spin out theories. They are handy for a GM who needs an exotic culture as a plot device. There are at least three fairly common “Picts” of fantasy and historical fiction.

The Little Dark People are supposedly the aborigines of Britain, displaced by Celtic, Roman, and Saxon invaders. They are small of stature, dark of skin, hair, and eyes, and strange of culture. They usually dwell in caves or underground houses. Celtophile and Saxophile writers make them uncivilizable dregs: snipers from ambush and destroyers of all order. Twentieth-century lovers of nature make them a symbol of the gentle hunter/gatherer in tune with the universe. They are crushed by the brutal power of iron-using tree murderers, a metaphor for the sickness of technology.

The Not-So-Little Dark People of, for instance, Robert E. Howard, are also aborigines. They don’t live in caves, and are hardly gentle. They are short, but stocky and strong, more powerful for their size than other peoples. Some versions are unregenerate barbarians, howling down for loot, rape, and arson. Other versions are noble savages. Recently, matriarchal protosocialists with a natural reverence for ecology have been popular.

The Not Much Different People seems the most likely kind of Pict. These are culturally much like the Celts around them. After all, Kenneth McAlpin united Scoti and Picts into one kingdom to found modern Scotland. They may have had slightly different customs, more tattooing possibly, but otherwise were just more tribesmen.

Vikings

Location

The Vikings originated in Scandinavia, and the borders of Norway, Sweden, and Denmark were established in roughly their present positions by the ninth century A.D. Able seafarers and explorers, they expanded to Iceland and Greenland in the west, and established a short-lived colony in Newfoundland. They also colonized most of the islands of the North Atlantic and North Sea, and settled in parts of Scotland and Ireland. After a period of raiding, they began to colonize northern England, and at its height they ruled a kingdom called the Danelaw which covered most of the northern half of England.

Typical Vikings

Warrior/Seafarer

This is the “classic” Viking of saga and chronicle. The Vikings raided, traded, and explored as the whim took them, and any Scandinavian who ventured abroad was able to take care of himself. Chainmail, scale, or splint armor was worn only by those who could afford it, but nearly everyone had a helmet (without horns!) and a round shield which was very similar to the Saxon shield. The axe was the most common hand weapon, but the sword was used by everyone who could afford it. Spears were used as secondary and missile weapons, and some Vikings also used longbows.

Jarl

Linguistically related to the Saxon eorl, jarl was the title of the Norse aristocracy. Every group of Vikings encountered abroad will be led by at least one jarl, and sometimes a loose alliance of several jarls. At home, they saw to the running of their lands in much the same way as Saxon nobles. Like pagan Saxons, the jarl had a retinue of warriors (called huscarls) who served as his bodyguard in war and his personal staff in peace. Jarls nearly always had armor of some kind, and all were armed with swords. Most huscarls were better-equipped than the bulk of Norse warriors. In addition to weapon skills, jarls would have military and political skills like Strategy, Tactics, Leadership, and Diplomacy – a far cry from the psychopathic hooligans portrayed by Saxon chroniclers!

Berserker

The term berserker was applied to any warrior who was outside the mainstream of Viking society, as well as to warriors who had the Berserk disadvantage. Bandits, pirates, and professional duellists are all referred to as berserkers by other Scandinavians.

A berserker has considerable skill with axe or sword and shield and possibly other close combat skills; ranged combat is not a high priority. He may have the Berserker disadvantage, or a combination like Bully, Bloodlust, and Overconfident. Professional duellists may also have Law skill, to help them manipulate intended victims into a situation where a duel is inevitable.

The term berserker has two possible derivations, according to scholars. One is “bare skinned,” reflecting the berserker’s scorning of armor, and the other is “bear skinned,” implying that their ferocity might come from some mystical animal affinity. Some were thought to be shapechangers, and in a fantasy campaign this might be the case.
The rural Scandinavians — who made up the vast majority of the population — made their living from the land and/or sea, using whatever resources were available. They would take up arms at need and formed the rank-and-file of Viking armies and raiding parties, but they were far from being full-time warriors.

Combat skills would include Brawling in most cases. Farmers might have Staff or Polearm (reflecting their use of fighting spears or agricultural implements as a main weapon), and possibly Sling. Hunters might have Bow. All rural types would have Area Knowledge extending for a few miles around their homes. Other noncombat skills might include Boating, Fishing, Naturalist, Survival (Mountains or Beach), Tracking, and so on, according to the individual’s lifestyle. Many farmers supplemented their living by fishing and trapping.

**Merchant/Seaman/Explorer**

In many ways, this character is closer than the warrior to most people’s idea of the “classic” Viking. As well as being able to handle a sword or axe and shield, this character has Seemanship and Navigation skills, and possibly Merchant and a second language (Anglo-Saxon, Frankish, Gaelic, Arabic, Slavonic) into the bargain.

**Skald**

The skald was a poet and minstrel. The Vikings prized cunning verses and turns of phrase very highly, and someone who could weave a clever and pleasing verse was always welcome in a jarl’s hall. Part of the skald’s job was to compose verses praising his patron and spreading his fame through the land, as well as composing the saga of his adventures.

The most important skills for a skald are Poetry and Bard. Other performance skills such as Singing and Musical Instrument are also appropriate, as are high-society skills like Savoir-Faire.

**Society**

Viking society was much looser than that of the medieval Christians, but very similar to that of the pagan Saxons. There were three social classes. At the top was the jarl class; next came the carls, or freemen; and at the bottom were thralls, or slaves, who were few in number. Scandinavian kings were drawn from the jarl class, but ruled by the consent of their peers and were first among equals, with nothing like the Divine Right of Kings which sprang up in Christendom.

Society was articulated through a series of assemblies. Each community or district had a thing (pronounced ting), at which law cases were heard and other business was transacted. Every free man was allowed to vote in this assembly. A level higher was the regional landthing, where some legislation was passed and at which appeals from the local things were heard. Iceland, which was effectively a fourth Viking homeland, had a national assembly called the althing and did without a king altogether.

The Vikings prized the virtues of strength, courage, and integrity, and had little time for authority which showed no respect to those it ruled. This trait brought them into conflict with Christians on more than one occasion.

Contact with the Muslim world was not always hostile. The Christians of the Mediterranean traded with Islam between Crusades, and the trade in silk and spices was one of the foundations of the legendary wealth of Venice. Ragusa (the modern Dubrovnik) also prospered — the word “argosy,” meaning a treasure-ship, is derived from the city’s medieval name.

**Typical Arabs**

**Trader**

Arab traders traveled far and wide, dealing in silks, spices, and other exotic goods, and buying slaves, furs, and similar northern produce from the Rus. Like nearly every Arab, most traders have some Theology skill relating to the teachings of Islam, and many are Fanatical. They also have trading skills, of course, as well as Literacy in Arabic. Many speak two or more languages; others hire interpreters. A trading expedition is accompanied by a number of guards (see Warrior below) as well as either boatmen or animal drivers, depending on whether the expedition travels by water or land.
Warrior

Warriors are armed with swords (scimitars in later years, but always curved), spears, and shields – shields are generally small and made of metal. Archers mainly used short composite bows. Helmets are bowl-shaped, often elaborated with aventails and chain throat-wards, and sometimes have metal spikes or slender plumes rising from the crown.

Assassins

Like the ninja of Japan, the hashshashin of Islam are more legend than fact. They are said to have been members of an extreme sect who took the drug hashish before attacking their enemies. Many tales are told of their insane bravery and the ferocity of their sudden attacks on Crusader camps. Not assassins in the modern sense of the word, they were more like shock troops and special forces. According to some stories, their sect promised them instant entry into Heaven if they died in battle with the Christians, and so they had no fear of death.

Assassin characters are likely to have very high weapon skills, as they devote their whole lives to preparing for martyrdom. Fanaticism is automatic, and many are addicted to hashish. Some may also have disadvantages like Berserk and Bloodlust. They also have a Reputation for ferocity and fearlessness.

Dervish

After assassins, dervishes are perhaps the best-known Muslim character types to modern western Christians. In fact, the dervishes were not warriors, but a sect of religious ascetics. They are best known for the whirling dances used by some dervishes to achieve a state of religious ecstasy. Like Muslims from all other walks of life, the dervishes took up arms to defend the Muslim shrines in the Holy Land.

Dervish characters will not be a high priority for dervishes, but disadvantages like Fanaticism, coupled with their Reputation (for holiness among Muslims, fearlessness among Christians), partly make up for this.

Dignitary

Arab dignitaries were individuals of enormous power, although few were as capricious or murderous as The Arabian Nights might have us believe. All would have been shrewd, cunning, and ruthless with competitors or incompetent underlings, however. Most had a blend of mercantile and political skills.

Priest (Imam)

Islamic priests commanded enormous respect and were highly educated, especially in the teachings of their religion. All were literate in their own language, and all had a very high level of Theology skill. Many were Fanatical in their devotion to Islam – indeed, this was expected of all the faithful. Some, more highly placed in the hierarchy, would have had political skills in addition to their religious ones.

Society

Arab society at this time was very rigidly structured, and the only law was the religious law of Islam. While there were various caliphs and other potentates, each with their own spheres of influence, every man was no more than the slave of Allah, and the duties of religion weighed equally on high and low alike. Arab expansion has as much – arguably more – to do with a missionary zeal to spread the Islamic faith as it has to do with the desire for trade, conquest, and riches. Strangely to Christian eyes, non-Muslims were regarded with tolerance and mild contempt rather than the outright hatred that the Church reserved for heathens and heretics – provided the greater good of Islam and Allah was served, there was no shame in dealing with infidels.

Byzantines

Constantinople was the capital of the Empire that modern scholars call Byzantine. In their own time, the “Byzantines” called themselves “Romans”; westerners called them “Greeks.” They were the Greek-speaking eastern portion of the old Roman empire. (Byzantium was the name of the Greek trading city on the site that Constantine the Great chose for his capital.) The city was situated on the eastern side of the narrow strait where the Black Sea flows into the Mediterranean (modern Istanbul, from Stamboul, the Turkish pronunciation of Constantinople). Originally the eastern capital when the Roman Empire divided in two, it became the sole survivor of Roman civilization when the Goths overran Italy and took Rome. Although the western Mediterranean stabilized over the following centuries, Constantinople still regarded itself as the heir to classical civilization and the center of the only true Christianity. It was the greatest focus of wealth, power, and learning of the early Middle Ages; the Vikings called the city “Miklagarth,” the Great Town.
The Empire had many enemies. During the Middle Ages, the most constant were the expanding Muslims. They poured north along the Mediterranean coast and rapidly stripped the Eastern Empire of its provinces. The city was besieged more than once. Soon, the call went out to all Christendom and the Crusades began, as Christians set out from Constantinople to reconquer the Holy Land from the forces of Islam — or, at least, to try. Unfortunately, the crusaders did not limit themselves to attacking Muslims; in 1204 they captured and sacked Constantinople and set up a Latin kingdom. This lasted only a generation, but the restored Constantinople was barely a shadow of an empire. It shrank to little more than the city itself. In 1453, Constantinople fell to the artillery and janissaries of Mohammed the Conqueror, and became the capital of the Ottoman Turks.

**Typical Byzantines**

**The Varangian Guard**

The Varangian Guard was an elite corps of Scandinavians who formed the Emperor’s bodyguard. They were recruited mainly from among the Rus — Swedish river-traders who gave their name to Russia — the term “Varangian” originally meant “merchant guarantor,” a clue to the nature of Constantinople’s first dealings with the Rus. The Varangians were armed and armored in Viking fashion — although body armor was far more common than elsewhere. They were an elite combat force, also available for the dirty work that the Emperor could not entrust to his own subjects. Harald Hardrada returned from the Varangian Guard around 1045 to claim the throne of Denmark. After Hastings, many Saxons fled England and joined the Varangian Guard.

**Military**

Other Byzantine forces included cavalrymen called *cataphracts*. Armed with sword, shield, lance (sometimes more than one), and plate-covered leather armor, and mounted on heavy horses with ground-length plate-covered leather coats, they were the most heavily armored troops seen in Europe before the advent of the medieval knight in the 14th century. Well-protected, they lacked mobility on the battlefield and had to be used wisely by their general.

Constantinople also had an efficient fleet, some of whose ships were equipped with Greek Fire — a napalm-like substance which could be pumped through nozzles at enemy shipping. Byzantine merchants traded under the fleet’s protection, and the city had considerable wealth through trade.

**Churchman**

Byzantine churchmen were very different from those the Vikings had encountered in western Europe. The wealth and power of the church manifested in gorgeous robes and accoutrements, and the Byzantine churchman was often a wily politician as well as (or instead of) a devoted priest, foreshadowing the worldly cunning which characterized the priests and princes of the Renaissance.

**Society**

On the outside, Constantinople was a city fighting for its life against the Arabs as they conquered its empire, assaulted its walls and shipping and tried to strangle its trade. Inside, the feeling was almost disturbingly different; it was the gilded and stately capital of a great and ancient empire, one of the two great strongholds of Christianity and the hub of a civilization that God would never allow to fall. So far, the fleet and the walls had defeated the Arabs, and many Byzantines believed that their city was invincible. Safe inside the walls, they carried on much the same life of social climbing and political skullduggery as the earlier Romans and later Renaissance princes.

**Germans**

**Location**

The area which would later become Germany consisted of a number of small states, most of which still survive as the *Lande* or provinces of modern Germany. In 962, Otto I was proclaimed Holy Roman Emperor (a title which Charlemagne had held before him) and a loose federation of states was born under the name of the Holy Roman Empire — a name which lasted until the time of Napoleon. At one time or another, every German-speaking part of Europe was ruled by the Empire, but its borders expanded and contracted as much as those of any other European country. The Empire played a major role in the Reformation in northern Europe.

Besides the Holy Roman Empire — and sometimes within it — there were several leagues and alliances of states. One of the best-known is the Hanseatic League, formed in 1358 by treaties among a number of north German cities (including Hamburg and Lübeck) for trade and mutual defense. In the southwest, various Swabian Leagues came and went, starting in 1331; the league of 1488-1534 saw the rise of Hapsburg authority under Maximilian I. The Hapsburg family ruled the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the outbreak of World War I; at its height it had ruled Spain and much of central Europe.

**Typical Germans**

Through most of the Middle Ages, the knights, nobles, craftsmen, and farmers of Germany were little different from their counterparts further west. The Saxons, Angles, and Jutes traveled to Britain from northern Germany and took their culture with them. In later periods, only minor differences in heraldry and language distinguished the Empire from the rest of Europe.
CHAPTER VII
CAMPAIGNS
**Campaign Styles**

A Middle Ages campaign can take many forms, ranging from mundane to highly magical and from bloodless to all-action. While no magic was involved in the real history of medieval England (at least, so far as academic historians are concerned!), the romantic-chivalric stories of Malory, Chretien de Troyes, and others were thick with sorcery and miracles. And while there were many wars during the Middle Ages, there was at least as much politicking, plotting, and skulduggery as fighting.

The various campaign styles may seem very different, but in fact all may be defined by reference to three variables. The first is the setting; this can be one of the historical periods, as defined in Chapter 1, or it can be inspired by romantic-chivalric literature, Hollywood epics, or plain silliness. The campaign opportunities offered by each setting are outlined below.

The amount of magic in a campaign governs whether it is historical, fantastic, or mythic. Finally, the amount of violence in the plotlines the GM chooses will govern the balance between thoughtful, bloodless roleplaying and all-out, blood-and-thunder action.

**Magic Level**

With no magic at all, the campaign becomes more or less historical. Monsters are absent or reveal themselves to be nonmagical. Everything has a rational explanation, even if it may not appear so to the superstitious.

With a moderate amount of magic, the campaign becomes fantastic. There are monsters, enchanters, and other supernatural creatures, but interaction between deities and mortals is infrequent and low-key.

Increasing the amount of magic further creates a mythic campaign, where divine action is open (but not always obvious) and PCs can interact with beings of awesome power, affecting the fate of gods and men as they do so.

This chapter treats campaigns in these three categories, although the divisions are not rigid. By fine-tuning the magic level – or by varying it from time to time and place to place – it is possible to produce a campaign which falls into more than one category, or which blends aspects of more than one style.

**Violence Level**

Like magic level, this is a sliding scale. A campaign with less violence can be described as a thoughtful campaign, while a campaign with more can be described as an action campaign. A thoughtful campaign places more emphasis on peaceful interaction, character play, and using the law and social conventions to achieve the PCs’ goals; an action campaign stresses combat skills and solving problems by main strength and force of arms.

**Thoughtful Historical Campaigns**

This can be one of the most challenging campaign styles, especially if the players like social interaction, problem solving, and skills like Fast-Talk. In a thoughtful historical campaign, the PCs face social dilemmas, malicious lawsuits, dirty politics, and bad weather. They have to solve problems using their wits, their skills, and their knowledge of the social system.

Prizes in this kind of campaign include powerful allies, personal prestige and influence, promotion up the social ladder, and perhaps even the crown. Sources of ideas include the history of the period itself, and some of the better historical novels and movies. The bibliography at the end of this book offers some starting points.

A campaign inspired by the “Brother Cadfael” murder mysteries (see Bibliography, p. 123) would be classified as thoughtful historical.

**Thoughtful Fantastic Campaigns**

This campaign involves similar themes to the thoughtful historic style, but problems are complicated by magical and supernatural factors. Monsters and nonhuman races come on the scene, with their own abilities and motivations; magic appears as a third force alongside the law and force of arms. Magical treasures and knowledge join wealth, power, and position among the prizes of this kind of campaign.

The thoughtful fantastic campaign can contain elements of supernatural horror as well as high fantasy. High fantasy tends to be heavily populated with monsters and well-supplied with magic, making both commonplace; horror, on the other hand, most commonly focuses on a single creature or paranormal ability, and plays it for maximum effect in a setting which is otherwise mundane. The rarer magic is, the more inexplicable and horrifying a supernatural creature becomes, and the rarer and more precious becomes the knowledge of how to deal with it. Players’ imaginations (and nerves) can be stretched to the limit if they must face a supernatural foe without magical knowledge or assistance.

Inspiration for this kind of campaign can come from a number of sources. The Anglo-Saxon heroic poem Beowulf features encounters with supernatural creatures, as do many of the later Arthurian stories. Folklore is also a worthwhile source. Dealing with ordinary folks rather than great heroes, the problems in folk tales are pitched at an every-
day level and their solutions can be both simple and complex at the same time. Folklore makes an ideal inspiration for a campaign where the PCs are young, inexperienced, and lacking in combat skills. Finally, modern horror novels sometimes feature creatures derived from folklore, and many have themes, situations, and creatures which can take on a whole new dimension when transferred back to the Middle Ages.

Campaigns inspired by movies such as Dragonheart or books such as The Mists of Avalon fall into the category of thoughtful fantastic.

Thoughtful Mythic Campaigns

This campaign style is one of the most challenging for both GM and players. The stakes have risen significantly, and the problems are more exacting. In the quest for the Holy Grail, entry to Heaven itself is the prize. Divine forces work both for and against the searchers, who have to struggle with their own mortal failings at the same time. Moral dilemmas abound, and situations which look obvious but turn out otherwise can stretch characters to the limit. Is it really a maiden whom the knight in black armor is keeping imprisoned? Or is it a terrible demon which has adopted the form of a maiden in order to persuade the heroes to free it?

Though thoughtful mythic campaigns can take place in almost any setting, they are particularly characteristic of the romantic-chivalric tradition (see p. 119). Campaigns inspired by movies such as Legend would be characterized as thoughtful mythic.

Action Historical Campaigns

This campaign style features wars, border skirmishes, and other kinds of conflict. As well as mountains of plunder and a fearsome reputation, the goals of this kind of campaign might be to carve out a new domain, conquer land from your neighbor, defeat the evil sheriff, regain Jerusalem from the infidels, or seize the throne of your homeland.

Ideas for an action historical campaign can come from a number of sources, including epic movies and some historical novels. Campaigns inspired by movies such as Braveheart would be classified as action historical.

Action Fantastic Campaigns

This campaign style is the closest in tone to the “standard” fantasy roleplaying campaign. There are places of mystery to be explored, princesses to be rescued, enchanter to be defeated, dragons to be slain, gold, silver, and magical treasures to be acquired, and so on.

This might be an appropriate campaign style to start with, especially if most of the players are only familiar with generic fantasy roleplaying settings. As the campaign progresses and the players become more familiar with the game world, the GM can swing the emphasis around as desired. Or the group can stick with the action fantastic campaign – it’s not far removed from many medieval tales, and it certainly can be fun!

The sources for an action fantastic campaign are pretty much the same as those for a thoughtful fantastic campaign – simply increase the ratio of violent to nonviolent events. Generic fantasy can also be plundered for ideas – it’s only fair, after all, since generic fantasy steals most of its ideas from the Middle Ages in the first place!
**Action Mythic Campaigns**

This campaign style can see the PCs taking part in titanic conflicts where the fate of Christendom itself hangs in the balance. Supernatural forces are very active, and are being marshaled behind the scenes by God, the Devil, Fate, or any combination. As with the thoughtful mythic campaign, the best source is the myths themselves. The more titanic the conflict, the grander the scale, the greater the challenge.

GMs can use these ideas as they stand, adapt them to their own preference, or simply treat them as examples of what a medieval campaign can offer.

**Saxon Campaigns**

This period is one of growing order, with struggles and negotiations between the Saxon kingdoms and increasing pressure from the Vikings. Action adventures could involve struggles between kingdoms, Viking raids, and the like, while thoughtful adventures could involve characters trying to win the crown of their own kingdom or hold a confederacy together against the Norse threat. At lower levels, there are themes like winning the favor and patronage of an influential lord, coping with malicious lawsuits, and so on.

**King of All England**

As the Saxon kingdoms of England establish themselves and become secure within their own borders, it is only natural that their rulers should begin to cast covetous eyes on their neighbors’ lands.

The race is on to become the first King of All England!

Having coined the name “England” (land of the Angles) for all the lands in Britain ruled by Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, and the name “English” to distinguish themselves from the indigenous Britons, they naturally think of themselves as a single people and their collective lands as potentially a single kingdom. Through political footwork, diplomacy, and force of arms, the race is on to become the first King of All England!

**Preparation**

A skim through Chapter 1, and the map of the Saxon Kingdoms on p. 7 should provide all the necessary background information. As always, the GM should prepare major NPCs in advance, but generic stats suffice for minor NPCs.

**Starting the Campaign**

The campaign starts in one of the Saxon kingdoms, which should be the home of all or most of the PCs. A lot depends on the social status of each character; nobles could be directly involved in moves to take over a neighboring kingdom, while lower-born characters only experience the effects.

**Main Themes**

These, too, depend on the social status of each character. Political wrangling is outside the control of a humble farmer, but war affects everyone. So do diplomatic initia-
Starting the Campaign

The campaign begins when missionaries first arrive in the campaign area. Depending on the GM’s whim (and the player’s input if their characters are Christians), the missionaries might have come from one of the Celtic nations, from mainland Europe, or from a neighboring Saxon kingdom which has already been converted.

Problems and Themes

A great deal depends on the tone that the GM has chosen for the campaign.

A straight historical campaign involves a lot of negotiation, preaching, and so on. Historical missionaries concentrated their efforts on royalty, depending on the newly converted king to enforce Christianity throughout his realm, but enterprising missionaries with strong powers of persuasion and oratory might travel the countryside trying to drum up a groundswell of Christianity.

A fantastic campaign can allow missionaries to work miracles (if their faith is strong enough), producing a close approximation to the biographies of the early British saints. In a mythic campaign, missionaries might be required to match their faith and powers against the pagan gods more directly.

Concluding the Campaign

For historical accuracy, the campaign is over when the king is baptized Christian. However, it can be extended in a number of ways. Further action might be needed against holdout pagan nobles who try to break away from the kingdom, and the missionaries might have trouble convincing the king to spend a small fortune on a church or monastery. Some rural Saxons might accept Christianity, but insist on observing their traditional religion as well, producing a heresy that Rome will insist on stamping out.

Beowulf – A Saxon Superhero

Beowulf was a Saxon hero with a loyal band of followers. He had many exploits – notably to help an allied Danish king.

The king, Hrothgar, had built a magnificent hall, which he called Heorot. But the monster Grendel was drawn to the hall by the sound of feasting and merriment. In the dead of night he entered the hall and killed 30 men, without waking the others. The next night Grendel came again, and killed many more. The hall stood abandoned for 12 years.

The story reached the ears of Beowulf, who set sail for Denmark with his followers. His father had been welcomed at the Danish court, and he undertook to slay the monster as an act of friendship.

At a welcome feast, Beowulf boasted of his previous deeds, including a seven-day swimming race which turned into a running battle with sea monsters. He was only a lad then, Beowulf modestly admitted, and if he had not worn his mail and taken his sword with him on this week-long dip, the monsters would surely have killed him.

In Heorot, Grendel killed several of Beowulf’s followers, but Beowulf woke and grappled the monster, seizing Grendel’s hands so that he could not use his terrible claws. The noise of the struggle woke Beowulf’s remaining followers, who found that their swords could not penetrate the monster’s hide. The two grappled until Beowulf tore the monster’s arm off, and Grendel fled into the marshes where he died. Beowulf hung Grendel’s severed arm from the rafters, and people came flooding back to the hall.

But Grendel’s mother – bigger, stronger, and uglier than her son – came to avenge his death. She killed one of the sleeping Danes and fled with Grendel’s severed arm. Beowulf went to the lake where Grendel’s mother lived.

Armed and armored, he dove to the bottom and fought her, fending off hordes of lesser monsters. They fought all the way to her hall on the lake-bed, where there was air to breathe and the aquatic lake-monsters could not follow. Beowulf’s sword could not cut her hide, and he threw it aside and grappled her to the floor.

Grendel’s mother threw him off, pinned him by sitting on his chest and drew a filthy dagger to stab him. The dagger turned on Beowulf’s mail-shirt, and he threw her off. He saw a huge sword hanging on the wall – made by giants, it was so massive that no ordinary man could wield it. But Beowulf’s strength was superhuman, and he cut off the she-monster’s head with a mighty blow. He took the head and the hilt of the sword – the monster’s blood had dissolved the fine steel blade – and swam back to the surface to announce his victory.
Saxon Adventures

The Fury of the Northmen

This adventure puts the party on the receiving end of a Viking raid. They must try to protect their homes, families, and livestock against the savage Norsemen.

Prelude

This phase of the adventure is optional, allowing time for preparation if desired. For action right from the start, the GM can skip to the next phase and assume that the Vikings attacked out of the blue.

The first intimation of the coming raid can be a single dragon-ship cruising along the coast, scouting out suitable targets – or perhaps a massive Viking fleet, en route to a rich target like a trading port. The alarm is raised by riders who hurry throughout the district, and there are perhaps two hours to prepare.

For the PCs, this time can mean a number of things. If their community is the intended target, they can try to mobilize their fellow citizens, distribute weapons (including improvised weapons like scythes and sledgehammers), and organize some kind of defense. If they live some distance from the target, they can grab their weapons, organize some people to come with them, and head for the target, praying that they reach it in time – and praying that they have read the Norsemen’s intent correctly, and are headed for the right target.

Paying Danegeld to one Viking does not prevent others from coming along.

Attack

At the site of the raid, one or more dragon-ships row in and beach through the surf. Viking warriors leap over the side, and the battle is on! The GM might focus on the PCs as they defend their own small area. Or the PCs might have a special task to perform separate from the action of the battle, such as reaching the Viking ships and firing them so that the raiders cannot escape.

Aftermath

The adventure is not over with the end of the raid; in many ways, it is only just beginning.

After the battle, there are fires to be put out, homes to be rebuilt, wounded to treat, and dead to bury. If the Vikings suffered heavy losses, they may return with a larger force – perhaps led by a jarl who has sworn revenge for a relative slain in the fighting. Captive Vikings may be held for ransom or as hostages against future attacks, and a very delicate series of negotiation may ensue as the Norsemen try to secure the return of their kinsmen. On the other hand, prisoners might try to escape, or their relatives might mount a rescue attempt.

Further contact with the Vikings may follow. They might demand a Danegeld to refrain from further raids, or they might want land to settle. Neither is a permanent solution, however. Paying Danegeld to one Viking chief does not prevent others from coming along and doing the same thing, especially once the word gets round that certain Saxons pay well for peace. Allowing Vikings to settle means uprooting at least some of the Saxon population – the Vikings do not settle for low-quality land – and coping with border disputes and differences in custom. The Vikings certainly do not submit to any Saxon ruler, but claim their lands as freely held and not subject to any Saxon laws – it is not long before they decide that they need more land, and begin expanding their boundaries.
Options and Complications

As outlined, this adventure is purely historical, but fantastic elements can give it a different dimension. During the prelude to the raid, the PCs might be sent to find a hedge-wizard or wise woman and request some kind of magical aid. This is not straightforward, since the spellcaster is reclusive, perhaps living in a remote and/or dangerous place, and may well be hostile to a Christian community after accusations of witchcraft and heresy. As well as speed, good navigation, and luck, the messengers must use Diplomacy and Fast-Talk to gain what they need.

Instead of finding something, the PCs might have to hide something so that the Vikings cannot take it. This might be a collection of holy relics from a church or monastery, the infant child of their lord, or a Viking hostage whom the raiders have sworn to rescue.

When the raiders arrive, there may be more to the situation than a simple battle to the last man. If the defenders can hold them for a few hours, the district’s lord will have time to reach the battle with his fyrdmen and wipe the raiders can be wiped out. Or the raiders might be looking for something in particular – a prisoner they want to rescue, or a Saxon upon whom they want to take revenge for some wrong or insult.

The New Church

This is a fantastic adventure, which can also be used in the Norman or High Medieval period in a remote area if desired. According to the GM’s whim, the adventure can be light and whimsical or it can be pure, unadulterated horror. Many similar stories can be found in folklore throughout northern Europe.

The premise of this adventure is that a church is being built where none stood before. The area is home to a community of fey creatures or similar beings, and this encroachment of Christianity upon their territory offends and angers them. They take steps to halt the construction of the church, in their own way.

Prelude

The adventure begins when the PCs hear that a new church is going to be built. When and how they find this out depends on who they are. Craftsmen might be brought in to work on it. Members of the Church or the nobility might become involved at an earlier stage. Farmers and other locals might know nothing until the materials and workers arrive on the site and work actually begins.

The place where the church is to be built has a bad reputation locally. Depending on the precise tone desired for the adventure, the site might be associated with disappearances. In a dark game, the mutilated bodies of travelers might have been found nearby from time to time. Local tradition mentions a settlement of the people under the hills somewhere nearby, with strange things happening to those who trespass.

Anyone who anticipates trouble probably tries to get the site moved. This takes some influence with the Church and/or the lord of the area to have any chance at all. It may require some time spent winning the trust of the locals and finding out about the incidents that are supposed to have taken place there. If the heroes start paying for information, the locals are more than happy to provide them with all the stories they could ever desire – when they run out of true or traditional stories, they begin to make new stories up – anything to keep the silver flowing their way. Within a few days, the strangers could get enough stories to fill a large book, featuring everything from goblins to dragons to the Devil himself.

A worker is found decapitated and horribly mutilated.

A careful approach is needed when trying to get the site moved, as well. Any mention of monsters or the supernatural to the Church authorities makes them absolutely determined that the Church must be built in the intended spot, so that the holy site will cleanse the area of the evil forces that haunt it. Secular authorities may be more inclined to listen to stories of monsters – especially in a moderate-to-high-magic campaign where the existence of monsters is beyond question.

Other arguments are more likely to prevail, however – boggy ground, difficulty in reaching the church from surrounding farms and settlements, and difficulty in getting materials and workers to the site are all likely to gain a sympathetic ear. Perhaps most persuasive of all is the argument that the surrounding area is so poor that it could never support the church, and its upkeep will be a constant expense to the lord who is building it.

Construction

In the Saxon period, the church is timber-built and rectangular. Later churches are made of stone and cruciform in plan. This alters the materials that must be found, and the craftsmen who are employed in construction.

Right from the start of construction, strange things happen at night while the workers are away. Stakes driven into the ground to mark out the plan of the church are found the next day in different positions, or torn out of the ground, or shattered into a thousand pieces by some incredible force. Walls built up during the day are torn down at night. Materials stockpiled by the site are destroyed or vanish altogether. The workers begin to mutter about this being an evil place and drift away.

If construction continues, the events become more extreme, and things may begin happening during the day. Some events may seem like accidents – workers may be injured or killed by falling walls, collapsing trenches, and disintegrating scaffolding. Others may be more sinister – for instance, a worker who momentarily goes out of sight of the other workers never returns, and is found later decapitated and horribly mutilated. If a lighter tone is preferred, all the food the workers bring with them is somehow spoiled, or the site is overrun by clouds of biting flies.
As events become more extreme, it becomes more and more difficult to persuade the workers to continue. Offers of extra pay hold them for a while, and armed guards keep them on the job for a while longer, but in the end the guards spend more time stopping the workers from leaving than protecting them. Clearly something must be done.

**Countermeasures**

Eventually, the authorities responsible for building the new church have to recognize that something is seriously wrong on the site. How they respond is up to the GM.

The Church might send a bishop to exorcise the site or bless it in some way. This brings matters to a head, as the consecration of the ground is the one thing that the area’s supernatural inhabitants have been trying to prevent. If the bishop is strong in faith and courage, he might succeed, although various strange and terrifying events take place while he is conducting his rituals. If the ground is blessed, consecrated, or exorcised, the supernatural creatures cannot enter the site or do anything to the workers. They may, however, continue to harry those who travel to and from the site through their lands.

The lord of the area might send soldiers – perhaps including player characters – and things come to a head if guards are posted to watch over the site at night. The supernatural residents may try to put the guards to sleep magically while they undo the day’s work, or they might attack them, or they might ignore them, calmly dismantling the church until challenged or attacked themselves. The situation might develop into a pitched battle, or it might become a nerve-wracking game of blind man’s bluff as the human guards try to deal with guerrilla attacks from a highly magical (and sometimes magically invisible) foe.

### Norman Campaigns

The Norman conquest of England presents many opportunities for action campaigns. As well as defending their homes against the invaders, Saxons could stage uprisings against the harsh Norman rule. Normans, of course, could bring the blessings of Norman order to the Saxon scum and put down rebellion. And everyone can go on the early Crusades.

Thoughtful campaigns could involve the delicate task of making and keeping peace between Normans and Saxons. A Saxon noble might be able to hold onto his lands and some of his influence this way, and many Norman lives will be spared if an area can be subdued by diplomacy rather than force of arms. Persuading Norman lords to respect and allow Saxon traditions and festivals in an area could be a demanding task for a less influential character, and many would want to gain a position in the local lord’s household and rise to favor and influence.

### Concluding the Adventure

The adventure ends when the work is abandoned, or when the supernatural creatures are defeated and the church is completed. If the building is being hindered by a single powerful creature, then the situation can be resolved by slaying that creature. If, on the other hand, a whole community of creatures is involved, things become more complex. Their strongholds are well hidden from human eyes, and it is almost impossible to wipe them all out. Deaths are avenged many times over, with elf-shot, magical attacks, and even plagues decimating the workers and their guards.

Negotiation is very difficult – especially if there have already been deaths on both sides – and almost nothing can induce the old ones to allow the building of a church on their land. They might demand humans as slaves, but the Church would never allow Christians to be taken to Faerie, which is seen as closely allied to the powers of Hell. And, faerie morality being what it is, there are no guarantees that they will keep their side of any bargain. Either the church has to be built somewhere else, or the Elder Folk have to be driven out of the area by blessings and exorcisms.

The most elegant solution to the whole situation is to conduct negotiations with the folk of the hills before building commences and persuade them to allow it. This is nearly impossible, and the Church authorities will never stand for it if they ever find out. The Good People will want something very special in return – such as the promise that they can take the next child to be born into the family of each human negotiator – and they will have to be convinced that they will hardly notice the loss of land to their realm, and that Christian activities in the church will not affect their nearby lands.

### Preparation

Chapter 1 of this book provides the GM with most of the necessary information for this campaign.

### Starting the Campaign

Traditionally, stories of this kind begin with a Great Wrong. The main theme of the story is the righting of this wrong, with various lesser wrongs providing side adventures and subplots. Ideally, the Great Wrong should be done to one or more of the heroes. Perhaps an evil Norman lord brings a false charge to get a Saxon PC declared an outlaw, and takes all his lands and possessions. Or perhaps the whole of the rebel’s family was wiped out by the invading...
Normans, and he – a child at the time – was smuggled away scant hours before the attack came.

Whatever the Great Wrong was, one or more of the PCs now has a grievance – and an enemy who is ensconced in a position of power, beyond the reach of the law.

**The Rest of the Gang**

As the PCs get used to the life of an outlaw, they have the opportunity to recruit followers (in addition to any Allies from character generation), and to cultivate contacts with other malcontents. These individuals have their own grievances and their own ideas, and sometimes one or more of them might go off on some hare-brained scheme of their own, get into all sorts of trouble, and either cause one of the PCs’ carefully laid plans to misfire or end up in the Sheriff’s dungeon in need of rescue.

Contacts with sympathetic non-outlaws in the town and countryside can be useful, but they are always poor folk, and it is tempting to turn the outlaws in for the reward money. From time to time, the Evil Sheriff might try to coerce known sympathizers into betraying the outlaws, normally by taking their loved ones prisoner. And imaginative villains use ruses and traps as well as force in order to capture the outlaws.

When the peasants realize that the strong arm of Norman rule is absent, tax-dodging and outright revolt can ensue.

Avoiding capture and sorting out the various lesser problems is a challenge in itself, but all the time the outlaws have to work toward the day when they will be able to bring down the foe. They might be trying to start a revolt, disgrace their enemy in front of the king, or even to gather evidence so that they can clear their names and then take their enemy to the law.

**Concluding the Campaign**

The campaign ends when the villain is brought down, the Great Wrong is righted, and justice is restored. This might be through the efforts of the PCs themselves, or it might be largely due to some fortuitous event, like King Richard returning from the Crusades. To extend the campaign, the PCs’ enemy might have powerful friends or kinsmen who will seek revenge, or the villain himself might survive his downfall and dedicate every waking hour to vengeance.

**A Year in the Country**

This campaign puts the PCs on the other side of the coin. As members of a Norman ruling household, they must keep the peace in their fief and help ensure that it runs smoothly and for the benefit of all.

**Preparation**

As well as a map of the campaign area showing woods, rivers, farms, and other resources, the GM will need to design the prominent NPCs of the household. The PCs’ Status and background help determine where they fit in the hierarchy of the household; they might be members of the lord’s family, part of the retinue, or even servants.

**Problems**

The problems that can face the heroes in this type of campaign are many, but most of them are at a fairly low level, and therefore suitable for inexperienced players and characters.

First and foremost, the fief has to make a certain amount of profit so that the lord can pay his dues to the king. Part of this comes from the excess produce of the lord’s lands and part from taxation of the populace. Taxation is resented at the best of times, and in a bad year when the crop yield is down, taxes may have to be increased to cover the shortfall. Unfortunately, in a bad year the people don’t have enough to cover the additional taxes, and things can get a little sticky. Push them too hard and you face a revolt, but if you’re too soft they’ll always cry poverty and you’ll never get any taxes at all.
In addition to paying feudal dues to the king, the lord has to cover the cost of raising and maintaining his retinue, castle, and lands. The peasants grumble about bearing this burden, of course, but they’re quick enough to demand action when there’s a problem with outlaws, marauding wolves, or anything else.

And the king can place demands on the ruler of a fief above and beyond the raising of taxes and feudal dues. The court must be entertained – the lord might be able to curry some favor with the king by lavish entertaining, and would certainly not want to incur the king’s displeasure by being mean-spirited about these things. But after the court has moved on and left the cellars bare, the members of the household have to worry about what’s going to feed them through the winter.

Besides a royal progress, the king might place a lord in a difficult position by demanding troops for a war or crusade. The lord rides off at the head of his troops, leaving the fief lacking in manpower both for defense and for peace keeping. Outlaws could terrorize the whole district with no one to stop them, and once the peasants realize that the strong arm of Norman rule is temporarily absent, tax-dodging, disloyalty, and sometimes outright revolt can ensue.

Ending the Campaign

This campaign does not have a formal end, although the GM can decide at the start that it will run for a year or some other finite time. But it can go on forever – or until rebellion or dirty politics brings down the lord’s house. In a protracted campaign, players can end up playing the descendants of their original characters.

JERUSALEM

This is mainly an action campaign, as the PCs head off to wrest the Holy Land from the infidel.

Preparation

An atlas – preferably a historical atlas – can provide a map of the Middle East which will be adequate for most purposes, and Chapter 1 should give the GM most of the necessary background information. The GM may also find GURPS Arabian Nights useful.

Starting the Campaign

There are various ways to begin a campaign based on the Crusades. The campaign could start with the PCs in England, hearing of the Papal decree which calls for the Crusade, or it could start with them arriving in the Holy Land. It could even start with one or more of them in prison and facing certain death – for no matter what a man’s crime, he was instantly pardoned when he put the crusaders’ red cross on his clothing.

Other would-be crusaders might be facing disgrace or angry creditors at home, and might decide that a trip abroad might make an agreeable change. Fabulous tales are told about the splendor and riches of the East, and if they can just manage to stay alive and bring some loot back with them, all their problems might be solved.

The Journey

If the campaign opens with the PCs already in the Holy Land, this section can be dispensed with. If it is played out in full, though, the players will realize that actually fighting the Saracens was only a tiny part of a crusader’s problems! On the way to various Crusades, thousands of people died from disease, accidents, hostile terrain, and local bandits. Even royalty was not immune – King Richard the Lion-Heart of England was captured while returning from the Crusades and imprisoned for several years.

The Holy Land

The Holy Land is quite unlike anything the PCs have ever seen. Apart from anything else, it’s hot – especially when you’re in full mail with a leather gambeson and other clothing underneath! The GM should play the heat, dust, and flies for all they’re worth – and don’t forget the effects of drinking strange water and eating strange food!

Crusaders are a mixed bunch, as the PCs have the chance to find out. Perhaps they are relishing the thought of rubbing shoulders with the finest knights in Christendom. If so, they are in for something of a shock, as they discover that a good number of the Crusaders are condemned criminals, outlaws in their own countries, robber barons motivated only by the lust for gold, and outright psychopaths who will do anything for a good fight. Not exactly the flower of Christendom.

Some of the Crusaders are outlaws, robber barons, and outright psychopaths.

Command of the Crusade is a diplomatic minefield, as well – there are nobles, monarchs, and princes from nearly every country in Europe, and none of them is prepared to take orders from a foreigner. Producing a coordinated strategy is going to be a challenge – one that might be relished by some players.

While a lot of the action against the Saracens might take the form of mass combat, there are various opportunities for smaller-scale actions more suited to roleplaying games. These can include rescue missions, commando-style raids, and attacks on minor Saracen strongholds.

Ending the Campaign

The campaign might end in triumph with the liberation of Jerusalem, or it might be extended to cover the journey home, laden with riches (perhaps!) which draw the covetous attention of every bandit and robber baron on the PCs’ route. For even more fun, the GM might recall that many returning Crusaders were accused of witchcraft, “corrupted” by their dealings with the infidel.
Wolf's Head

This adventure sees the PCs as classic outlaws – cast out through no fault of their own, they must somehow survive outside society and try to redress the wrongs they have suffered.

Prelude

Ideally, one or more of the characters should be in a fairly privileged position, but of Saxon birth. Remaining characters might be servants, retainers, friends, and relatives. The first phase of the adventure gives the characters a chance to get used to their position and relationships – making their downfall the more painful when it happens. It also allows the GM to establish relationships with the major NPCs: the evil sheriff and his minions, the jealous neighboring baron, and so on.

This phase could consist of a series of more-or-less inconsequential incidents, leading up to the events of the next phase. The noble character might have to defend one of his retainers against unjust accusations from an evil NPC, strive to gain his inheritance in the teeth of Norman opposition, and so on.

Downfall

This is the beginning of the adventure proper. One of more of the enemies established in the previous phase manages to engineer some situation which results in the outlawing of the group.

There are various ways to do this. The noble character might be declared a traitor (or better yet, his dead father, who can’t answer), or accused of some crime and brought to face a rigged court of Norman nobles. If the GM wants to prolong this phase, the characters’ enemies could commit various crimes and atrocities in the area, but leaving clues which point to the characters.

The trial is an optional sequence. Some may flee rather than face trial, and they are outlawed automatically. While blatantly rigged, the trial will provide an opportunity for intense roleplaying and allow characters to experience Norman justice (see Chapter 1) first-hand. The defendants have no chance of winning; they are condemned to death and hauled off to the sheriff’s dungeons to await execution. Then, their friends on the outside (PCs, NPCs, or a mixture) can work on a rescue which results in the whole group being declared outlaws.

Survival

Having escaped, the fugitives must face immediate problems of survival before they can plan their revenge. Their enemies will be organizing manhunts, and many friends will be afraid to help them – there are heavy penalties for giving aid to an outlaw.

They must find a safe place, whether it be deep in the forest or hidden in the town by loyal friends. They must find a way to feed themselves – by poaching the king’s deer, stealing from farms, or gaining the aid of friendly peasants.
Robbing the rich to give to the poor may prove to be a very practical idea – the establishment is already against them, and they need as much goodwill among the common people as they can get. Turning their plight into a popular cause might overcome people’s fear of helping and allow the outlaws to harness popular resentment at the harshness of Norman rule for their own ends.

Revenge

The final phase sees the outlaws planning and executing their revenge. This might be anything from storming the castle with an army of peasants to bringing King Richard back from the Crusades to restore justice. The GM should allow the players to make their own plans, and assess the results.

On the whole, NPCs spend more time reacting to the PCs’ actions than initiating actions of their own, but this does not mean that they are passive. Soldiers are still sent out, traps set, peasants tortured for information, and guards doubled.

Key NPCs might anticipate PC plans and move to thwart them in advance, but the GM must be very careful about this. As referee, the GM knows everything about the PCs’ plans, but this knowledge must not be passed on to NPCs, no matter how tempting. At the other extreme, though, NPCs must not become completely passive and stupid because the GM is afraid to let them think for themselves. This is a delicate balancing act, and the GM should take into account the personality and skills of the NPC in question, and not be afraid to roll dice for the NPC to determine what the NPC thinks the PCs will do next. This is also a situation in which an “Adversary” player can be useful.

Conclusion

The adventure ends when the heroes have cleared their names, received the king’s pardon, and avenged themselves on their enemies. Or, if they are less successful, when they have all been captured and executed. Truth and justice did not always prevail in Norman England, and (depending on the tone of the campaign) the GM should not be afraid to show the players exactly how tough the life of an outlaw could be.

Options and Complications

GMs interested in an extended outlaw campaign should see various Robin Hood movies and TV shows that have included supernatural elements from time to time, and adding magic and/or nonhuman races to the adventure can present a whole new set of challenges. For instance, if the evil sheriff is employing scryers to discover the location of the outlaws’ base, staying out of his clutches becomes a great deal more difficult – as does mounting surprise attacks. Magical or even divine aid makes the outlaws’ life easier and their victory more certain.

HIGH MEDIEVAL CAMPAIGNS

In this period, action campaigns probably revolve around wars in France and Wales, border skirmishes with Scotland, and the occasional peasant uprising or pretender to the throne. Crusades were still called from time to time, and English mercenaries served a number of European kings. At a lower level, anyone in service with a lord could find himself detailed to find and wipe out a nest of outlaws, a pack of wolves, or some other threat to the peace. Alternatively, the adventurers might be the outlaws, after powerful enemies have succeeded in a malicious lawsuit.

Thoughtful adventures can involve politics, efforts to replace a weak king without provoking war, and coping with the Black Death and its aftermath. Another problem is posed by the almost constant wars – they must be paid for somehow, but with a constant drain of young men into the armies and the constant burden of taxes on the people, how can this be done without provoking rebellion?

THE MATTER OF FLANDERS

Dynastic succession was a means of acquiring a province without bloodshed (and without wasting its precious resources by fighting battles all over it!), and dynastic politics was an even more popular pastime than fighting wars. This campaign puts the PCs in the middle of some dynastic negotiations which could enrich their king and country – and themselves – considerably if they are successful.

Ideally, all the PCs should have reasonably high Status, and be close enough to their king to be entrusted with a delicate diplomatic mission. Things will work out even if only some of the PCs are so privileged – the others can be their servants and the like.
Preparation

First, the GM needs to choose a suitable province to be at the heart of it all. Flanders was fairly well-off, reasonably close to England, and changed hands a couple of times between France and the Holy Roman Empire. But any province will do, especially if it has some strategic and/or economic value.

Next, the GM must design the major NPCs who are involved. These consist mainly of the ruling house of the province in question and their advisors, the PCs’ king and a couple of his ministers, and one or two rival ambassadors from the countries nearest the province. Most if not all other NPCs can use generic stats (“lackey,” “minister,” “spy,” “guard,” etc.) and a couple of notes on appearance and personality.

Starting the Campaign

The campaign starts with the king summoning a few of his most trusted ministers for a diplomatic mission to the province in question. They are to convey gifts to the ruler of this province, and conduct initial negotiations toward a marriage treaty between the king’s son and the only daughter of the province’s ruler. After a significant thinning of the ducal house by a recent plague, the princess is the sole heir to the province.

The journey, if played in full, could be as fraught with difficulty as the negotiations themselves. The embassy must be kept secret, so the party has to travel without a large escort – making them a tempting target for any local bandits who discover that they are carrying a king’s ransom in gold and other bribe-gifts. Security back home might have failed, making the embassy the target of hired assassins and other unpleasantness on the part of rival nations. If the province is already claimed by another nation, such as France or Spain, then almost any breach of security could be disastrous, leading potentially to open war. At the very least, the would-be ambassadors could face all kinds of official and unofficial obstructions on their journey.

More Problems

Upon their arrival at the foreign court, the ambassadors will find that they are just one of a number of embassies from all over Europe seeking the hand of the princess for a member of their royal family. The aging Duke, so long a mere provincial despised by the crowned heads of Europe, is having the time of his life. He’s playing the various embassies off against each other, forcing the bidding higher and higher, and reveling in being the one everybody wants to please.

There could well be friction between the various embassies, who try to upstage and discredit each other, and may resort to more underhanded means to eliminate the competition. As well as watching for daggers in the dark, the ambassadors must be careful not to be drawn into any situation which could lead to their embassy or nation being discredited or ridiculed – and every other embassy will be devoting a great deal of energy to engineering such situations.

Other problems might arise, of a more fundamental nature. One mean trick is to have the princess fall in love with the best-looking male PC at first sight, sending servants to make secret trysts and threatening suicide if he does not marry her – or worse, threatening to accuse him of improper advances, which would almost certainly lead to the whole embassy being thrown out in disgrace. Either way, the PC’s king would be most displeased. Or the ambassadors might discover that the princess is not as pure as she’s made out to be – perhaps they stumble across a romantic assignation with a servant or stable-boy. Or she has a habit of leaving the breakfast table suddenly, and she’s mysteriously putting on weight...

Concluding the Campaign

The campaign ends when the negotiations are over and it has been decided who gets to marry the princess. The losers must return home to admit their failure, face the wrath of their respective kings, and do their best to make sure that most of that wrath descends on someone else.
A few years ago, the Templars appeared in the PCs’ home area, presented themselves to the king, and announced their intention of founding a monastery there. Upset by their high-handed attitude but unwilling to risk confrontation with such a powerful international military organization (and ultimately with Rome), the king granted them some land and the monastery was built. As elsewhere, these arrogant and mysterious strangers are now being blamed for anything that goes wrong in the area around their stronghold, and the king has been in touch with other rulers who are plotting against the Templars. The present Pope is pliable and politically naive, and will probably bow to political pressure from a strong alliance of kings.

**Getting In**

The first problem the PCs face is getting into the Templars’ monastery; it is closed to all except members of the order. Since they consider themselves above the authority of mortal kings, the Templars would probably refuse a royal command to open their doors for inspection. Such a command would also arouse their suspicions, and they could stall long enough to cover up any evidence of heretical or otherwise undesirable activities.

Joining the order is one way to gain admission, but this is not easy or quick. Warriors who decide to knock on the monastery door and ask to become Templars had better have a good story and a high Fast-Talk skill as well as reasonable martial abilities. Even if they can convince the Master of the monastery that they are genuine, the applicants will then have to swear loyalty to the order above all other things, and undertake a long period of training and indoctrination before they are allowed to participate in any of the order’s activities. An oath of loyalty would be false under these circumstances; in a campaign with moderate or high divine activity, this can be dangerous.

Also, it takes time – maybe years – to infiltrate the order and reach a rank where they are privy to all the order’s secrets. By this time it is almost certainly too late, and those who remain in the order for any length of time without producing results are likely to fall under suspicion of having been corrupted by the Templars’ heresy.

Breaking into the monastery is possible but difficult. Templar monasteries are military strongholds as well as spiritual centers, and the Templars are possibly the most noted warriors in Christendom. If the investigators are caught, the Templars will know that they are under investigation. This will have repercussions at the highest level.

**Dark Secrets**

Having somehow gained admission to the Templar stronghold, the investigators must search for evidence of heresy and witchcraft.

First, the GM must decide whether there is any evidence to find. Are the Templars involved in some heretical cult, or is it all rumor? Even if the Templars are innocent, there may be plenty of evidence pointing to the other conclusion. The order has rituals of its own as well as normal observances, and to anyone but a skilled theologian they might well appear to be contrary to Church practice. Since they are looking for evidence of evil-doing on the part of the Templars, unscrupulous investigators might be satisfied with this alone.

Even if there is an evil cult within the Knights Templar, uncovering evidence of it will not be easy. Aside from the problems of getting in – and staying in long enough to investigate – without being spotted, they face the probability that any evidence is well hidden, or difficult to spot by its nature. The stronghold’s library holds a number of books which outsiders are probably not able to understand. Are these scriptures in Greek, Hebrew, or Aramaic, or are they tomes of forbidden lore? The cult members are only the more senior members of the Order, and any cult rituals take place in a hidden temple far away from prying eyes and junior members.

**Trial**

Having made their way in and out of the Templar stronghold, the investigators must now present their findings to their patron. If they have found no evidence of evil-doing and report this truthfully, they could find themselves unpopular – they were sent to find evidence, and their failure to do so is not mitigated by the fact that there was none to find.

If, on the other hand, they present something that looks convincingly like evidence of heresy and witchcraft on the part of the Templars, things become more complicated. They will probably be sent all over the place as witnesses – first to convince others to join their patron against the Templars, and then to the king to convince him to try the case. Finally, they will have to appear in court as witnesses against the Templars. This will give them a fairly powerful international organization as an enemy. If the Templars are witches or possessed of any magical power, the spies can expect a series of magical attacks before and during the trial, and probably for the rest of their lives.
CROSSOVER CAMPAIGNS

The Middle Ages is such a long and colorful period that it inevitably crosses over with a number of other areas. While it is perfectly possible to come up with a satisfying medieval campaign using this book and the Basic Set alone, the GM can broaden the range of possibilities considerably by combining this book with other GURPS worldbooks.

GMs planning to take the action of the campaign outside England will find several GURPS worldbooks useful, especially GURPS Vikings, GURPS Celtic Myth, GURPS Russia, and GURPS Arabian Nights.

GURPS Imperial Rome covers the period before the Middle Ages, and the information on the western provinces at the end of the Empire will be of interest to GMs who are considering Dark Age campaigns.

GURPS Spirits contains a great deal of information for a GM who is planning a high-magic campaign, with active ghosts, nature spirits and similar entities. The notes on fantasy and horror campaigns on pp. SPI112-113 apply just as well to a medieval campaign.

GURPS Undead, could be used to create an Army of Darkness-style medieval horror campaign. To more fully replicate the movie, one or more player characters might be 20th-century time travelers.

GURPS Illuminati is inspired by real-life conspiracy theories, many of which have their roots in the Middle Ages. What did the Templars find in their explorations beneath Solomon’s temple in Jerusalem? How – and why – did the Freemasons develop from a guild of stoneworkers into an international power group? And what did the alchemists uncover with their experiments?

GURPS Steampunk is set in the 19th century, but a medieval gadgeteering campaign, inspired by the ideas of Leonardo da Vinci and others, offers a lot of possibilities. It could be played straight, as James Bond-style adventure, or it could be played as a tongue-in-cheek, Monty Python meets The Wild, Wild West romp, with lots of colorful equipment failures. Either way, GURPS Low-Tech is invaluable, as are the gadgeteering rules from GURPS Compendium I.

GURPS Supers, likewise, is set firmly in the 20th century, but a Supers campaign set in the Middle Ages offers some intriguing possibilities. If modern-day or near-future folks are bigoted and fearful of mutants, aliens, and other super-powered individuals, imagine the position of such individuals in medieval society. They could very easily find themselves being hunted down as witches, heretics, and demons.

GURPS Time Travel links all the settings covered by GURPS worldbooks, and can provide a useful means of getting established characters from other times and other worlds into the Middle Ages.

ROMANTIC-CHIVALRIC CAMPAIGNS

The stories of Malory, Chretien de Troyes, and others, set in a timeless and romanticized medieval world, have had an enormous impact on the way the Middle Ages have been perceived by later generations. A romantic-chivalric campaign can make a very interesting setting to visit, radically different from most other medieval campaigns.

Slaying dragons, saving maidens, and thwarting enchanters is all in a day’s work.

The romantic-chivalric campaign has some similarities to the Hollywood Middle Ages (see p. 120), but these are mostly superficial. Weaponry and costume are the same, but in this setting these are minor considerations – what matters most is characters, situations, and events.

The language is Shakespearean, but in the romantic-cinematic campaign accents are either flawlessly English (even if the story takes place in France or Ireland) or they are the product of a fortune in elocution lessons in a well-to-do suburb of Boston.

The main characteristic of the romantic-chivalric campaign, though, is significance. Nothing that happens in this setting is random or meaningless. Events are either portents or allegories, foreshadowing momentous things to come or making veiled moralistic comments upon those to whom they happen. Monsters live up to the Latin origin of their name (monstrum – a sign); the sudden appearance of unnatural creatures is invariably a sign of divine displeasure, diabolic influence, or a general indication that Something Is Wrong in the land. Religion, happenstance, and magic fade seamlessly into one another, leaving people to do the best they can in a world which is usually beyond their understanding.
Faith is very important in this kind of campaign. Everyone is devout and pious (except when the story is building towards a stinging miraculous rebuff for impiety). Holy men (who live in monasteries – or, more commonly, in crude huts beside beautiful chapels deep in the monster-haunted forest) are powerful and respected figures. The authority of God is absolute, and demonstrated everywhere in portents and marvels.

Running alongside faith (or more often athwart it) is love. This is courtly love, the bittersweet yearning which denies itself any consummation. A knight devotes himself to his lady, writing her poetry and fighting everyone on her behalf. (In anger if they criticize her, in jealousy if they praise her, and in indignation if they ignore her). The lover mopes endlessly in lovelorn distraction, without ever expecting so much as a kiss or a touch of her hand. A favorite theme is that of a knight torn between the demands of love and piety, or love and loyalty.

**Historical Campaigns**

Being based on a later, idealized view of the Middle Ages, romantic-chivalric campaigns – almost by definition – tend not to be historical. This need not always be the case, however: the exploits of Richard the Lion-Heart lived on in song and story for centuries, and arguably made him more popular after his death than he was during his reign. History is adapted to suit storytelling, of course; old adventures are embellished and new ones invented as the story grows in the telling. Characters become stereotypes, and situations become black and white. Few dilemmas cannot be solved with cold steel.

**Cinematic Campaigns**

Much roleplaying is based not on history, but on what the cinema has shown us in place of history. The Middle Ages were seldom the way that movies have portrayed them, but that doesn’t make the cinematic-medieval setting any less appealing or worthwhile. Some rattling good yarns have been told in “medieval” settings that would make history professors turn pale and start eyeing the exits.

Apart from characters who are often superhuman in their ability (built on 150 points or more), the main characteristic of the Hollywood Middle Ages is chronological compression, especially in terms of technology. Chainmail is standard for everyone from the fall of Rome to the Viking period, and plate armor can reach back into the Dark Ages. Europe is full of 14th-century castles from 500 A.D. onward. Cannon and other firearms, conversely, appear much later in the Hollywood Middle Ages than they did in the real ones, except when the action is set east of Germany, and thus within striking distance of China.

Another characteristic of the Hollywood Middle Ages is the astonishingly wide range of weaponry, especially for knights. Swords too common? Don’t worry – use an axe or morning star. Broadsword not impressive enough? No problem – Renaissance German two-handed jobs were available at the village smithy from the moment the Romans left. Medieval weapons not dashing enough? Simple – nobles and outlaws were using 17th-century rapiers (sometimes with medieval-style hilts, admittedly) from the Norman conquest onward.

Heraldry is high fashion in the Hollywood Middle Ages. Male characters wear brightly colored surcoats bearing their coats of arms, even when relaxing at home. The stock medieval costume is completed with tights, a tight-waisted jerkin with skirts reaching to mid-thigh, and ankle boots.

Everyone in the Hollywood Middle Ages speaks as if he’d swallowed a copy of Shakespeare’s complete works at birth. Speakers should endeavor to wring every last drop of lyric beauty out of the most mundane pronunciations, like ordering dinner (“Come forth, good steward, and load the groaning boards with viands and sweetmeats!”) or commenting on the weather (“Tis set fair for Boreas; the night and morrow have a bitter aspect, upon my oath.”).

And please note – while the term “Hollywood Middle Ages” is a convenient tag for this setting, the blame cannot all be placed upon Hollywood or even the United States. European film industries – especially those of Spain and Italy – have made worthy contributions, and the British film and television industries are responsible for at least as

**Fantastic Campaigns**

Slaying dragons, saving maidens, and thwarting enchanters was all in a day’s work for the knight errant of romantic-chivalric literature. This kind of campaign is distinguished from generic fantasy by the assumption that any creature that is not human (or livestock) is probably evil – and even humans are suspect if they are foreign, capable of using magic, or dressed in black armor!

While cold steel is still undeniably useful, faith and piety play a role in romantic-chivalric campaigns with fantastic elements. Religion becomes a power to counter evil magic, and piety confers some protection from magic and the more fantastic creatures. Only a virgin who is pure of heart can even approach a unicorn, for example, while demonic creatures may be repelled by piety and prayer.

**Mythic Campaigns**

The Grail romances are the classic example of mythic chivalric romance. The world, heavy with metaphor and portent, becomes a quite surreal place, as it reflects the struggle between good and evil being fought out in the souls of mortals.

Mythic content is exclusively Christian. Although it may be flavored with elements of previous Celtic, Saxon, or Viking paganism, these have all been cleansed of their pagan connotations and overlaid with a veneer of Christianity. Pagan gods become devils; their followers become lesser demons, witches, or goblins; and their holy sites become places of mystery and evil magic.
much historical stretching, folding, spindling, mutilating, and general bunkum as the rest of the world put together.

The Hollywood Middle Ages can be used as a setting for adventures in many styles, from blood-and-thunder action (Braveheart) to supernatural horror (The 13th Warrior, while it uses a Viking setting, would work just as well in medieval England). Combining the Hollywood Middle Ages with chivalric romance has given rise to jolly musicals (Camelot) and dark, slightly trippy adventures (Excalibur). And of course, the Hollywood Middle Ages is the most popular (but by no means the only) setting for silly medieval adventures, which are covered below.

SILLY CAMPAIGNS

Silly campaigns can feature various elements, but by far the most common are satire, anachronism, and the non-suspension of disbelief.

SATIRE

A satirical campaign is based on another medieval setting (Hollywood and chivalric romance both lend themselves particularly well to satire), whose characteristics are exaggerated to the point where they become ridiculous. In the movie Jabberwocky, for example, the knighthood of the kingdom is almost completely wiped out as they joust to compete for the right to slay the monster. The wedding sequence in Monty Python and the Holy Grail is a satire both on the Imprisoned Princess theme from chivalric romance and on the set-piece battles in castle halls that were an almost compulsory feature of the earlier Hollywood Middle Ages.

ANACHRONISM

Another rich source of silliness is to put PCs in a medieval world, but give them the attitudes and values of modern-day people. Dennis Cooper in Jabberwocky is ahead of his time when it comes to business efficiency; when he’s not counting barrels (stocktaking, as he calls it, without really knowing why it’s a good thing) in his father’s workshop, he’s advising a blacksmith and his assistant that if they put the rivets on this table here rather than that table there, they will be able to work more efficiently. Other anachronistic characters include:

• The progressive sheriff who tries to rule by consensus rather than oppression, listens sympathetically to the peasants’ complaints, lowers their taxes and feudal duties, and then faces the wrath of his lord as the peasants become fat and lazy while the lord’s coffers dwindle.
• The vain outlaw who cares more about his image than actually bringing in any cash or righting any wrongs – “I’d love to help you, but there isn’t really enough of a crowd in your village. Perhaps if you moved to Nottingham, I could save you from the tax collector...” [consults a parchment appointment book] “say, Thursday?”
• The businesslike knight who calculates his expenses for a monster-slaying quest down to the farthing (including depreciation on armor and equipment), and asks for them to be covered over and above the hand of the princess and half the kingdom.
• The princess who’s perfectly capable of slaying monsters for herself, thank you very much, and thinks poems and serenades are a lot of soppy nonsense.
• The vaguely druidic hermit who is dedicated to getting dragons off the endangered species list.
• And not forgetting, of course, the peasants of the anarcho-syndicalist collective in Monty Python and the Holy Grail.

GURPS Discworld and GURPS Discworld Also feature countless examples of anachronistic characters and situations used to comic effect, as indeed do the novels upon which they are based. Although the Discworld is more generic fantasy than medieval, it is a rich source of silly ideas to plunder.
**NonSuspension of Disbelief**

In chivalric romance and the Hollywood Middle Ages, many banal practicalities are overlooked in the interests of the story. In a strict historical campaign, they can be a source of challenge and frustration. In a silly campaign, they can be a source of humor. For example:

- When taking a holy vow in midwinter, how does a knight get his lips unstuck from a frosty metal cross?
- How does a knight prevent the joints of his armor from rusting and seizing up after a rainstorm?
- How does a questing knight, in the middle of the forest, answer the call of nature in full plate armor? And if he is surprised in such a vulnerable state, how long does it take him to ... buckle his swash again?
- Given that a rope-and-pulley system is needed to get an armored knight onto a horse, does he have to walk to the nearest castle if he happens to fall off (or dismount to answer the call of nature) while on a quest?

**The Law of Comic Inevitability**

No matter what other elements are included within a silly campaign, due respect must be paid to the Law of Comic Inevitability. It is the Law of Comic Inevitability, for example, that decrees that a castle lackey will lower the drawbridge to throw the trash into the moat precisely when a hero has climbed halfway up it.

It also requires that anyone swinging on a chandelier will, at some time or another, find himself completely out of momentum, dangling above a smiling enemy with an upward-pointing sword. For that matter, anyone swinging too violently on a chandelier risks a shower of hot candle-wax, or even a lit candle down the back of the jerkin.

When a knight is suspended from a block and tackle above a horse, the Law of Comic Inevitability requires first that the horse must wander off, and then that the lackey holding the rope must drop it to go after the horse, depositing the knight unceremoniously on the cobbles.

**Accents**

One of the best ways to introduce humor (not to say silliness) into a medieval campaign is to have characters who use Shakespearean word order and sentence construction, but retain the accent and basic vocabulary of Chicago, or Texas, or southern California, or the Bronx. Try this as an exercise – “Yohnduh lies duh cassle of me foddah.”

Bogus accents – the worse the better – can also help silliness along. Dick Van Dyke’s character in *Mary Poppins* sports a particularly splendid example of a bad British accent. Bad French accents can be based on Peter Sellers as Inspector Clouseau in the *Pink Panther* movies or the Taunting French Knights in *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*. Bad Spanish, German, Scandinavian and other accents can be acquired by similar means.

**Medieval Gadgeteering**

One perennial problem with 20th-century players in a historical setting is the overwhelming temptation to help technological progress along a little. It is possible to create all kinds of things using medieval-level technology, from internal combustion engines to rifles. This can turn player characters into James Bond-style technological tricksters and can ruin the balance and flavor of a historical campaign.

The GM should be careful not to stifle the creativity of the players, though, and this is a delicate balancing act. On the whole, it is easy to tell when players are trying to invent something modern using medieval technology, and in these cases the GM might impose an IQ roll to see whether the character(s) in question can have the basic idea – after all, half of invention is being able to conceive of some item or principle which does not as yet exist. It is entirely appropriate to modify the roll according to the time between the age in which the campaign is set and the time when the desired item was invented in the “real” world. This roll is made before the rolls mandated by the invention rules (pp. B186-187) or the gadgeteering rules (pp. CI121-127).

The displeasure of the Church was an ever-present threat to early inventors and thinkers and presented some novel challenges. Galileo was one of several early scientists whose work was hampered by accusations of heresy, and any technological or scientific leap which is not an obvious progression from something that already exists may be seen as heretical or diabolically inspired.

Material science is another great hampering factor. While the principle of, say, the high-velocity rifle was easily accessible to many medieval thinkers (Leonardo da Vinci developed theoretical flying machines, parachutes, and tanks, after all), it may be necessary to develop a great many new techniques in order to make it. Metal quality was unpredictable, particularly where heat stress was involved, and the molding of complex shapes was still prone to many problems. A rifle barrel, therefore, could have a number of flaws in the metal, leading to fractures or even explosions. Other creations could have points of weakness that could lead to them fail in other ways.
People have been writing about the Middle Ages ever since the Middle Ages. A reasonably complete bibliography would be bigger than this book. The sources listed below give a reasonable grasp of the world of the Middle Ages. Most of these books have bibliographies of their own.

Books

History


Gottfried, Robert S. The Black Death: Natural and Human Disaster in Medieval Europe (The Free Press, 1985). A concise and readable account of medieval society across Europe, and how it was shaped by the plague.


McCall, Andrew. The Medieval Underworld (Barnes & Noble, 1993). Covers all aspects of crime, punishment, the criminal classes and other social outcasts. Full of useful details for a gritty, low-society campaign.

Matthews, John and Stewart, Bob. Celtic Battle Heroes (Firebird Books, 1988). A companion volume to Warriors of Christendom, below. Of the four heroes covered, only Macbeth is of direct relevance to this book; the color illustrations are a little disappointing, but the source material is invaluable for GMs planning action in Scotland or the borders in the 10th or 11th centuries.


Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names (Clarendon Press, various editions). As well as providing a source of place names for a campaign area, this book explains their derivations and has a useful essay on place name formation, allowing the GM to produce new but authentic-sounding place names linked to geographic or historical features of the campaign area.


Tannahill, Reay. Food in History (Stein and Day, 1973). A definitive study from earliest chefs to modern times.


Contemporary Sources

Most if not all of these works have been published in many editions through the years. The editions listed here are those used in the preparation of this book.


Bede. History of the English Church and People (Dorset Press, 1985). Idiosyncratic and littered with internal inconsistencies, but still the best source on early Church history in England.
Chaucer, Geoffrey. *The Canterbury Tales* (Penguin, 1966). A party of 14th-century pilgrims, representing many social classes, entertain each other with tales and poems on the way to the shrine of St. Thomas. This edition is a modern translation, but the original is not hard to puzzle out.


Froissart, Jean. *Chronicles* (Penguin, 1968). Hundred Years’ War stories by a master raconteur, who collected them from participants.


Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrenensis). *The History and Topography of Ireland* (Penguin, 1982). A 12th-century account of Ireland based on personal observation (and prejudice!). Filled with wonderful anecdotes, especially about miraculous places and events. A good source for a fantastic campaign.

Gerald of Wales (Giraldus Cambrenensis). *The Journey through Wales* (Penguin, 1978). A first-hand 12th-century account of the country, with many observations on the way of life as well as anecdotes and accounts of miracles.

**Historical Fiction**

Duggan, Alfred. *Leopards and Lilies* (Faber, 1954), *Lord Geoffrey’s Fancy* (New English Library, 1975), and *The Cunning of the Dove* (Pantheon, 1960). Duggan has written some outstanding historical novels (in the strict sense – novelizations of history), set in the Classical world as well as the Middle Ages. The ones above are particularly recommended.


Howard, Robert E. *Hawks of Outremer* (Grant, 1979) and *Sowers of the Thunder* (Grant 1973). Howard, best known as the creator of Conan the Barbarian, wrote a huge amount of historical fiction, set in almost every period and locality. Of particular interest are his Outremer stories, including those above. Blood-and-thunder stuff in the best Howard tradition, these stories are recommended to GMs interested in high-action campaigns.

Peters, Ellis. *The Brother Cadfael* mysteries. Representing a stark contrast to Howard’s violent adventure stories, these stories are set during the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda. Many are available on video, with Derek Jacobi in the title role. Written under a pseudonym by a respected academic, the stories are full of legal and social detail, and are highly recommended.

Scott, Sir Walter. *Ivanhoe*. This novel has been filmed several times (and made into a TV series in Britain, starring Roger Moore before the first James Bond movie was even thought of). It is a classic slice of the Middle Ages as viewed by Victorian England.

**Games**

Jamieson, Evan; Meyer, Richard; and Stoddard, William H. *GURPS Low-Tech* (Steve Jackson Games, 2001). The definitive GURPS source on ancient and medieval technology.


**Movies**

*The Adventures of Robin Hood* (Michael Curtiz, 1938). The film that, more than any other, defines the Hollywood Middle Ages.

*Army of Darkness* (Sam Raimi, 1993). A good basis for an action-oriented medieval horror campaign.


*Black Knight* (Gil Junger, 2001). A time-travel farce involving a theme-park worker sent back to the Middle Ages.

*The Black Shield of Falworth* (Rudolph Mate, 1954). Runs a close second *Prince Valiant* as the worst of the Hollywood Middle Ages. Entertaining nonsense about an orphan squire who discovers he’s the son of a traitor and sets out to clear his family’s name.

*Braveheart* (Mel Gibson, 1995). Outstanding battle scenes, but history takes somewhat of a back seat to Hollywood.


*Jabberwocky* (Terry Gilliam, 1977). Once you get past the silliness, there are some telling observations on medieval life and society.

*A Knight’s Tale* (Brian Helgeland, 2001). The Hollywood Middle Ages meets the music video.
The Lion in Winter (Anthony Harvey, 1968). Especially recommended to those who like political wrangling rather than action.


Prince Valiant (Henry Hathaway, 1954). The Hollywood Middle Ages at its absolute worst.

G O V S S A R Y

abbot: The head of a monastery. The female form is abbess.

adulterine: An castle or guild that lacks a royal charter, and is technically illegal.

almonry: Part of a monastery from which alms, or charitable donations, were given to the poor.

Angevin: A member of the House of Anjou, a dynasty whose members included Stephen and Henry II.

assarting: Clearing land within a demesne to add to the amount of arable land.

aventail: Mail neck-protector riveted to a helmet.

bailey: The enclosure of an early castle, below the motte.

barbican: A fortified extension to a gateway.

barding: Horse armor.

basinet: A round, bowl-like pot helm.

belfry: A church tower with bells, also a siege tower.

bevor: A piece of plate armor protecting the throat and chin.

bill: A long-handled pruning knife, developed into a polearm.

Black Death: A mix of bubonic, pneumonic, and septicemic plagues that ravaged most of Europe in the High Middle Ages.

bodkin point: An arrowhead with a narrow point to penetrate armor.

bombard: A general term for early gunpowder artillery.

bordar: A low-status peasant smallholder, similar to a cottar (q.v.).

broadhead: The standard form of arrow.

burgh: A Saxon fortified town. Also spelled borough.

buttery: Another name for a cellaret; it refers to the butts (or casks) of food stored there, rather than butter.

cannon, upper and lower: Pieces of plate armor protecting the upper arm and forearm respectively; the lower cannon is also called the vambrace.

canon law: The body of law which was applied in ecclesiastical courts, and related mainly to religious and Church matters.

castle ward: Another name for a bailey (q.v.).

Celtic Fringe: The lands of the west and north of Britain where the Saxons, Vikings, and Normans drove the Celts; modern Wales, Ireland, and Scotland.

chamfron: A metal cap to protect a horse’s head.

chapter house: A meeting room in a cathedral or monastery where its business was conducted.

church-scot: A tax, levied in grain and payable to the Church at Martinmas.

Christendom: The Christian world as a whole.

coil: Technically, any close-fitting head-covering with a hole for the face; mainly used to refer to a mail hood.

commutation: A cash payment rendered in place of labor on a lord’s lands.

corsned: A trial by ordeal involving communion wafer; also called parsned.

cottar: A cottager; a low-status peasant who hired out his labor to supplement his income from his smallholding.

couter: A piece of plate armor protecting the elbow joint.

cuir bouilli: Wax-hardened leather, used for making armor; literally “boiled leather.”

cuisse: A piece of plate armor protecting the thigh.

culverin: A light gun, using pre-loaded firing chambers for an increased rate of fire.

curtain wall: The stone wall which links towers to make up the enclosure of a castle.

curtillage: A smallholding consisting of a house and an enclosure around it.

danegefjold: A payment given to Vikings to prevent their raiding.

Danlaw: The Danish kingdom covering northern and eastern England in the Saxon period.

demesne: The farm of a feudal lord.

distraint: The seizing of livestock or other goods to compel a person to perform a feudal duty.

Henry V (Laurence Olivier, 1944; Kenneth Branagh, 1989). The Olivier version was made during World War II, and has weathered very well. In 1990 Kenneth Branagh put together an all-star British cast and made a very good version of the play. The battles are a little small, but otherwise it’s worth seeing.

Macbeth (Orson Welles, 1948). A very dark, brooding version (with a fairly convincing Scottish accent) which conveys the feeling of the play well.

Cadfael. Derek Jacobi has starred in adaptations of many of Ellis Peters’ medieval murder mysteries, set in and around the town of Shrewsbury during the civil war between King Stephen and the Empress Matilda. Highly recommended for their visuals, atmosphere, and detail.


**Glossary**

**mound:** A large artificial embankment.

**donjon:** A castle keep.

**enfeoffed:** Holding lands under a feudal arrangement.

**earl:** A Saxon noble. The word is related to the Norse jarl and would later become the English earl.

**escalade:** An attack on a castle or town wall using ladders.

**estoc:** A narrow stabbing sword designed to penetrate chain mail.

**falchion:** A woodman’s or hunter’s sword with a broad blade and heavy tip; a blend of sword and machete.

**fief:** The area ruled by a knight or noble.

**fyrdman:** A rank-and-file Saxon fighting man.

**gambeson:** A sleeveless jerkin of leather or quilted cloth worn under armor.

**gauntlet:** Any protection of leather or metal worn on the hand.

**gorget:** A plate protecting the throat.

**greave:** A piece of plate armor protecting the shin and calf.

**heater:** The classic medieval shield shape, square at the top and rounded or pointed at the bottom.

**heriot:** A fine or tax — usually in the form of livestock — payable to a lord when a villein inherited property.

**hoard:** An overhanging wooden structure built on top of a castle wall, to facilitate dropping things on besiegers.

**housecarl:** An elite Saxon fighter, similar to the Viking huscarl.

**hundred:** A later Saxon administrative unit, based on a hundred hides of land. A number of hundreds made up a shire (q.v.).

**huscarl:** A retainer and fighting-man in the household of a Viking leader.

**jarl:** A Scandinavian noble; compare to Saxon earl and later English earl.

**keep:** The multistory stone or wooden structure at the center of a castle, containing most of the living space.

**kite:** A form of shield common in the earlier Norman period, long with a broad top and a narrow or pointed bottom.

**mangonel:** A term applied to various types of catapult.

**manor:** Initially, a lord’s house; by the 12th century, a house and all the lands belonging to it — an estate.

**mantelet:** A wheeled wooden shield, used as cover by troops.

**merchet:** A fine or tax payable to a lord on the marriage of a villein’s daughter.

**minister:** A large church from which several priests covered a large area.

**moot:** An assembly at which legal cases were heard. Local folk-moots met every four weeks, and shire-moots twice a year.

**mote:** The mound of a motte-and-bailey castle.

**motte-and-bailey:** The earliest castle type, consisting of a keep on a circular mound and a palisaded enclosure at the foot of the mound.

**nasal:** A metal bar sometimes fitted to a pot helm to cover the nose.

**onager:** A type of catapult.

**parsned:** A trial by ordeal involving communion wafer; also called cornsed.

**pauldron:** A piece of plate armor protecting the shoulder joint.

**pavise:** An oversized, free-standing shield, used as cover by crossbowmen and handgunners while reloading.

**perrier:** A siege weapon similar to a small trebuchet (q.v.), using a crew of men pulling on ropes rather than a counterweight.

**Peter’s Pence:** A cash tribute paid to Rome on St. Peter’s day.

**pick:** A hand weapon used to puncture armor; also a type of battering ram with a narrow point to concentrate force.

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**Pie Powder, Court of:** a court attached to a market, for the speedy resolution of disputes. From the French pied poudré, meaning “dusty feet.”

**plough-alms:** A tax paid to the church, based on the number of plow teams in a village.

**poleyn:** A piece of plate armor protecting the knee joint.

**pot-de-fer:** An early gun which fired a ballista-type dart instead of a ball.

**quarrel:** The most common form of crossbow bolt; its head was square in cross-section.

**reeve:** An official whose duties and powers varied throughout the Middle Ages.

**regnal year:** A date given in terms of a king’s reign. For example, 1066 would be 1 William I.

**sabaton:** A piece of plate armor protecting the upper surface of the foot.

**sallet:** A type of pot helm.

**screw:** A type of battering ram which uses a twisting action to increase damage to stone walls.

**scutage:** A payment made in place of knight service.

**see:** The area over which a bishop or archbishop has authority.

**sheriff:** A royal official who looked after the king’s business in a particular shire. The word was originally shire-reeve.

**shire:** A Saxon administrative unit, the forerunner of the English county.

**sokeman:** A free peasant who owned his own land but had some obligations to a lord. The highest class of peasant.

**soul-scot:** A portion of a dead person’s wealth, given to the church for the good of his soul.

**sow:** A mobile wooden shed used in sieges to protect ram crews and sappers against missiles dropped from above; often covered with uncured hides as protection from fire.

**subinfeudation:** The process of a feudal vassal granting portions of his lands to his followers.

**tenant in chief:** A noble who was granted land directly by the king; the highest rank of noble.

**thane:** A Saxon minor noble, roughly equivalent to a landed knight.

**tithe:** A tax paid to the Church, normally one-tenth of a person’s income.

**trebuchet:** A type of catapult.

**usury:** Lending money at interest.

**vamplate:** The hand-guard on a lance.

**vassal:** Someone who owed feudal duties to another. A peasant was a vassal of his lord, the lord was a vassal of a greater lord (or the King), and — theoretically, at least — the King was a vassal of God.

**villein:** A member of the peasantry, paying rent to a lord and working his lands. Though they were not slaves, the service of villeins could be bought and sold. Insinuation of lowly birth — and therefore lack of honor — was a common form of insult among the nobility from the Norman period on, which is how the word villain came into modern English.

**wergild:** Literally “person-money,” the monetary worth of an individual; used in Saxon law mainly in calculating fines and compensation.

**witan:** A council of nobles in the Anglo-Saxon period.

**wolfe’s head:** An outlaw. A wolf’s head could not look to the law for protection, and anyone aiding or avenging him was committing a crime.

**writ:** A legal document which could be obtained in order to bring a case to court without the normal lengthy preliminaries. The sale of writs was an important source of income for the king’s household in the High Medieval period.
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