

OVERVIEW OF THE BRITISH MIDDLE AGES

Pre-Modern Europe was a diverse group of states that were unified by a common religion rather than a powerful government. Although England shared a common culture with all of Christian Europe it quickly rose to a dominant position, with an exceptionally liberal system of government and commerce. It is especially important that American students understand British history, since the founders of the United States were thoroughly British in culture and outlook

Historical Divisions: Virtually all of the major themes of the European Middle Ages are realized in the history of Britain. Like most of the rest of Western Europe, the British Isles were settled in prehistoric times by Celts and civilized by the Romans. The southeastern regions of Britain became a Roman province, although the wilds of Scotland and Ireland were never seriously Romanized. Soon after the Roman legions left Britain, Germanic tribes from Saxony and Denmark swept in and over the next few centuries overwhelmed the native Celts. The territory settled by the Anglo and Saxon tribes became known as England (Anglo-land), while the Celts were pushed west and north, forming the nations we know as Ireland, Wales and Scotland.

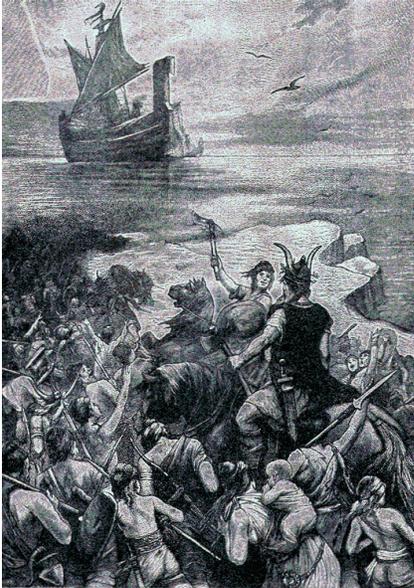
Christianity had spread among the British Celts during Roman times and St. Patrick brought Christianity to the Irish just as Britain descended into its dark ages. Christianity did not begin to spread among the Saxons until the 6th century, but by 793 A.D., when the first Viking attack on English soil was recorded, most of the Saxon kingdoms were predominantly Christian. The Viking attacks posed an existential threat to the Saxon Kingdoms and mark the end of our first division of British History, **Early Britain**.

In 1066 Saxon England was invaded by William the Conqueror, the Duke of Normandy, who brought with him the model of a powerful central government inherited from the Romans. Although the Normans had a tremendous influence on English government and laid the foundations for a powerful, centralized, monarchy, the culture and language of the country remained predominantly Saxon. The Norman line reigned for 90 years, but was superseded by the Plantagenet dynasty founded by Henry II, a great-grandson of William the Conqueror. The Rise of Henry Plantagenet marks the end of our second division of British History, **Saxons, Danes, and Normans**.



STEPPING GENTLY ON THE CLOAK, SHE PASSED ON

The **Plantagenet Kings** reigned for over three hundred years, from the 12th through the 15th century. The dynasty produced many well-known kings and princes such as Henry II, founder of the line; Richard the Lion-heart, hero of the Third Crusade; and Richard III, the villain of Shakespeare's greatest historical tragedy. The best known wars of the Plantagenet reign were the Hundred Years War with France that resulted in the loss of almost all English territory on the continent, and the War of the Roses, which brought the Plantagenet dynasty to an end.



DANES EMBARKING FOR THE
INVASION OF ENGLAND

The **Tudor dynasty**, which succeeded the Plantagenets, was founded by Henry Tudor and is closely associated with the Reformation in England. Henry VIII of England and his daughters Mary and Elizabeth were the most important Tudor monarchs, and all three were prominent figures in the English Reformation. The other development of great importance that occurred during the Tudor era was the discovery of the New World and the sea-route to East Asia. Although Spain dominated the fields of exploration and sea-faring in the early 16th century, by the end of Elizabeth's reign, British sailors were among the most respected in Europe.

The Tudor reign ended near the turn of the 17th century when the throne was passed to James Stuart of Scotland, a nephew of Elizabeth. For the next hundred years England and Scotland were ruled as separate countries under the **Stuart dynasty**. Just as the Tudors are known as the reformation monarchs, the Stuarts are associated with the English Civil Wars, the struggle of parliament to gain predominance over the monarchy, and the rise of religious pluralism. In the final years of the Stuart era, Scotland and England were permanently united, and the rise of the **British Empire** began.

The final divisions of the British Middle Ages unit are histories of **Scotland** and **Ireland**. Although several of the most famous characters of Scottish history, such as William Wallace, Robert Bruce, and Mary Queen of Scots, are introduced as part of English history, the complete story of Scotland is reserved for its own unit. Neither the Romans nor the English were ever able to subdue the ferocious Scots, who preferred their independence to vassalage under their wealthy and powerful neighbor. The story of Scotland is rich in local lore and clan rivalry, and when the pugnacious Scots did unite with England, it was as equals rather than a subject population.