Duke William and His Fleet Cross the Channel to Pevensey, from the Bayeux Tapestry, c. 1000–1082.
French School. Wool embroidery on linen. Musée de la Tapisserie, Bayeux, France.
Looking Ahead

British literature developed in an era characterized by foreign invasions and social turbulence. Germanic tribes left northern Europe and invaded the island of Britain. The dialects spoken by these tribes, now separated by water from the European mainland, evolved into a separate language called English. Writers used that language to create works of great power and beauty—works that formed the foundation of British literature.

Keep the following questions in mind as you read:

- How did foreign invasions affect British history and culture?
- Why was the Roman Catholic Church important to medieval culture?
- What cultural forces does the medieval romance reflect?

ALABAMA STANDARDS (pages 4–17)

Course of Study
1.5 Analyze major historical developments in language and literature in the British Isles.
2. Read with comprehension a variety of informational reading materials.
2.2 Analyze charts and tables for conclusions.

AHSGE Objectives
II-2 Draw conclusions.
II-3 Determine cause and effect.
**Timeline 449–1485**

**BRITISH LITERATURE**

449

- **c. 700**
  An unknown poet composes *Beowulf*, the oldest known epic poem in English

- **c. 731**
  The Venerable Bede composes *The Ecclesiastical History of the English People* in Latin

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750

- **892**
  Monks begin writing *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a compilation of the records of English history

- **c. 940**
  Monks compile *The Exeter Book*, preserving a number of Anglo-Saxon lyrics

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**BRITISH EVENTS**

449

- **449**
  Germanic tribes invade Britain

- **597**
  St. Augustine, missionary, establishes monastery in Canterbury

- **664**
  Synod of Whitby unites British Christian Church with Roman Catholic Church

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750

- **787**
  Danish invasions begin

- **886**
  Danelaw is established in northeast England

- **1066**
  William the Conqueror invades England

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**WORLD EVENTS**

449

- **476**
  The western Roman Empire falls

- **537**
  Emperor Justinian completes cathedral of Hagia Sophia in Constantinople

- **c. 570**
  Muhammad, the founder of Islam, is born in Mecca

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750

- **683**
  Empress Wu becomes the first woman to rule China

- **768**
  Harun al-Rashid becomes ruler of Muslim Empire

- **800**
  Charlemagne is crowned Holy Roman Emperor

- **1000**
  Leif Eriksson sails to North America from Greenland

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Visit [www.glencoe.com](http://www.glencoe.com) for an interactive timeline.
**1200**

- **c. 1300** Earliest ballads are composed
- **1375** First part of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight* is completed
- **c. 1386** William Langland writes the allegorical poem *Piers Plowman*, a protest on behalf of the common people
- **c. 1387** Geoffrey Chaucer begins the *Canterbury Tales*

**1400**

- **1420s** Margery Kempe dictates her autobiography
- **1469** Sir Thomas Malory writes *Le Morte d’Arthur*

**1215** King John signs the *Magna Carta*

**1295** First Parliament begins

**1337** Hundred Years’ War, a series of wars between England and France, begins

**1349** The Black Death sweeps through England

**1355** A series of civil wars between the House of York and the House of Lancaster, called “Wars of the Roses,” begins

**1258** Mongols capture Baghdad

**1295** Marco Polo returns to Venice from China

**1310–1314** Dante begins writing *Divine Comedy*

**1325** Tenochtitlán, the capital of the Aztec Empire, is completed in Mexico

**1312** Mansa Musa rules Mali Empire in Africa

**1341** Joan of Arc is burned at the stake in France during the Hundred Years’ War

**1455** The Gutenberg Bible is printed from movable type in Germany

**Reading Check**

**Analyzing Graphic Information** From 449 to 1066, which warriors invaded Britain?
MEDIEVAL WEALTH
The household goods of a wealthy thirteenth-century butcher in the English town of Colchester included the following:

- one trestle table (with boards stored in a corner except at mealtimes)
- probably some settles, or stools
- two silver spoons
- one cup
- one tablecloth and two towels
- one brass cauldron
- one brass dish
- one trivet, or three-legged stand
- one iron candlestick
- one washing-basin and pitcher
- two beds
- two gowns
- one cloak
- two barrels

In the Middle Ages, the life of English peasants was a cycle of recurring labor. The seasons largely determined peasant activities, with each season bringing new tasks. Harvest time in August and September was especially laborious. A good harvest of grains for making bread and brewing ale was crucial to survival in the winter months.

WERGILD
In Anglo-Saxon society, blood feuds avenged wrongdoings, but claimed many lives. To avoid revenge from the slain man’s kin, one could pay them wergild, or “man-price,” a sum of money that reflected the deceased’s importance. In Wessex, a fixed scale was observed:

- nobleman or member of the warrior class: 1200 shillings
- free peasant: 200 shillings

DOMESDAY BOOK
Commissioned in 1085 by William the Conqueror, the first draft of the Domesday Book contained census-type records for 13,418 English estates for tax purposes. William later imposed Danegeld, a tax to pay for defense against Viking invasions.

THE BLACK DEATH
During the first wave of the plague in 1349, approximately 300 people died each day within a square mile in London. Before the Black Death had run its course, it ravaged Europe, killing between one-third and one-half of the population.

PERCENTAGE OF LAND OWNED IN ENGLAND IN THE ELEVENTH CENTURY, According to the Domesday Book

- King and his family 17%
- Barons, Lords, and Church Tenants 54%*
- Bishops and Abbots 26%
* About a dozen barons controlled a quarter of the land in England.
Britain is the largest of a group of islands off the northwest coast of Europe. The fertile soil and mild climate of Britain’s southern lowlands attracted a series of invaders, who established small kingdoms that eventually merged into a single nation. Some of the displaced native peoples fled west and north to the highlands of Wales and Scotland.

Reading Check

Analyzing Graphic Information:

1. On the basis of *wergild*, how valuable was a nobleman in comparison to a free peasant?

2. In which months of the year did medieval peasants harvest crops?

3. Where were most of the towns located in medieval England?
The Anglo-Saxons

In A.D. 43 the Romans conquered the Celtic tribes of southern Britain and introduced a standard of living more advanced than any the Celtic tribes had ever known. Early in the fifth century, however, when the Roman Empire began to fall, the Roman legions left Britain to defend Rome, and the Britons became easy prey to invaders. In 449 the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes—Germanic tribes collectively referred to as “Anglo-Saxons”—began invading Britain’s eastern shores.

The Britons—according to legends, led by a king named Arthur—won a few victories against the invaders. Gradually, however, the Anglo-Saxon warriors, clothed in animal skins and wielding spears, drove the Britons into the mountains and took the land for their own. It was a bloody beginning for the nation that would come to be known as England.

These Germanic invaders took over the southeastern part of the island and called it “Angle-land.” They formed small tribal kingdoms, supported themselves through farming and hunting, and believed in many different gods. Only toward the end of the seventh century, when Christianity was firmly established, did a unified civilization emerge.

Vikings and Normans

During the eighth and ninth centuries, other Germanic tribes attacked Britain. Danes and Norsemen took to the seas in an attempt to win Britain by force. By the middle of the ninth century, most of England had fallen to the invaders. However, the tide turned in 878 when Alfred, the Saxon king of Wessex, led his warriors to victory over the Danes in the Battle of Edington. Alfred went on to capture London and, eventually, much of England. For these and other feats, Alfred was called “the Great.”

During the next century, Alfred’s son and grandson won back all of England from the Danes, and at last the country was at peace.

These peaceful times, however, were short-lived. When King Edward died in 1066, William, Duke of Normandy (a region in northwest France also settled by the Vikings), laid claim to the English throne. When the English council of elders chose Harold II as king, William retaliated by attacking and defeat-
ing the Anglo-Saxons at the Battle of Hastings. He emerged as the first Norman king of England, ending the Anglo-Saxon era.

Feudal England
Following the Norman Conquest, the Anglo-Saxons became the subjects of the Norman aristocracy. William the Conqueror introduced to England the continental social, economic, and political system called feudalism. Under that system, land (the real wealth of the nation) was divided among noble overlords, or barons. Lesser lords, called knights, pledged their wealth and services to the overlords, who, in return, provided use of the land. At the lowest end of the social scale were the serfs, peasants pledged to the lord of the manor and bound to the land.

“To no one will we sell, to no one deny or delay right or justice.”
—King John, from Magna Carta

Feudal relationships sometimes erupted in heated conflicts. In the early 1200s, King John, needing money for military campaigns, imposed heavy financial burdens on his barons without consulting them. In 1215 a group of those barons forced the unpopular King John to agree to a Great Charter, or the Magna Carta. By this document, he agreed not to raise taxes without the consent of the barons. Many see in this curtailment of royal power the beginning of constitutional government in England, including the right to trial by jury.

War and Plague
The fourteenth century was a dark time in British history. Beginning in 1337, the English and French waged a series of wars for control of lands in France. Known as the Hundred Years’ War, that conflict drained England financially. However, the ensuing break with France helped England develop a national identity independent of French influence.

In the midst of the Hundred Years’ War, an epidemic called the Black Death swept through Europe. This plague first struck England in 1348, with new outbreaks occurring during the next decades. The Black Death eventually killed almost a third of England’s people. This massive loss of life eroded the feudal system. Still, towns and cities continued to grow. The resulting shift in power from the landed aristocracy to an urban middle class set the stage for a new era: the Renaissance.
A complex society such as that in the modern United States offers a wide range of heroic types. The Anglo-Saxons, however, recognized only a single heroic type: the warrior, who embodied the qualities valued by the tribes who settled on Britain’s shores. Courage was an important virtue because, by demonstrating courage, a warrior could achieve fame and immortality. Loyalty to one’s tribal lord was also important, as was wisdom in making decisions and guiding others. Physical strength was crucial to overcoming one’s enemies.

**A Warrior Society**

For the early Anglo-Saxons, warfare was a way of life; their tribal organization, values, and beliefs—as well as their poetry—reflected that reality. Tribes consisted of warrior families led by a nobleman who, in turn, served a chief or overlord. An Anglo-Saxon ruler was primarily a warlord who protected his people from attacks and led his followers on expeditions. The warlord and his followers formed a close-knit group known as a *comitatus.* Warlords rewarded the bravest of their followers with treasure. (One of the most common epithets for a lord or ruler was “ring-giver.”) In return, warriors showed absolute loyalty to their leader. The Roman historian Tacitus described the fierce loyalty of the Germanic warriors from whom the Anglo-Saxons were descended: “On the field of battle it is a disgrace to a chief to be surpassed in courage by his followers, and to the followers not to equal the courage of their chief. And to leave a battle alive after their chief has fallen means lifelong infamy and shame.”

**Oral Literature**

The Anglo-Saxons brought their Germanic language, religion, culture, and oral literary traditions to Britain. Anglo-Saxon storytellers created heroic songs describing warriors’ great deeds and celebrating qualities such as strength, courage, and loyalty, which they believed could save the people from the evils that threatened them. Minstrels known as *scops* (shôps) performed these songs during the banquets held at the mead-halls of Anglo-Saxon rulers. (Mead is an alcoholic beverage made from fermented honey.) In a mostly illiterate society, such songs served as literary entertainment. To the warriors who listened to them, these heroic songs also provided models to emulate and a goal to pursue: namely, to win fame and be remembered after death for one’s deeds.

“He who earns praise / Has under heaven the greatest glory.”

—Widsith, the Minstrel

**Germanic and Christian Traditions**

The two most important influences on Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, literature were the Germanic tradition and the Christian religion. Anglo-Saxon literary tradition was deeply rooted in the dark, heroic tales of Germanic mythology, which depict a tragic world in which even the gods ultimately perish. Since Germanic religious beliefs held no promise of an afterlife, the warrior’s primary goal was to achieve fame in this life. The coming of Christianity, with its omnipotent God and promise of eternal life, did not so much replace this stark Germanic mythology as coexist with it. In works such as *Beowulf* (see pages 24–50), the poet combines both Germanic and Christian elements. For example, Grendel is described as both a troll-like creature and a descendant of Cain, the first biblical murderer.

**Importance of Wyrd**

Because of constant intertribal warfare and the primitive state of science and medicine, life in early Anglo-Saxon times was strife-ridden and brief. As a result, the early Anglo-Saxons believed that fate, which they called *wyrd,* controlled human destiny and that one’s ultimate and inescapable fate was death. The hero’s only appropriate response was to face this somber destiny with courage. *Beowulf’s* last words express the Germanic view of wyrd: “Fate has swept our race away, /Taken warriors in their strength and led them/To the death that was waiting. And now I follow them.”
In 991 Viking raiders defeated an Anglo-Saxon force, killing its leader and many of his followers. In a heroic song written a few years later, a poet commemorated the Anglo-Saxon force’s heroic last stand.

from *The Battle of Maldon*

The strife was stern, warriors were steadfast,  
Bold in battle; fighters fell  
Weary with wounds. Death covered earth.  
Oswold and Ealdwold all the while,  
Both the brothers, marshalled their men;  
Bade friend and kinsmen endure in combat  
And never weaken, but wield the sword.  
Byhtwold encouraged them, brandishing buckler,  
Aged companion shaking ash-spear;  
Stout were the words he spoke to his men:  
“Heart must be braver, courage the bolder,  
Mood the stouter as our strength grows less!  
Here on the ground my good lord lies  
Gory with wounds. Always will he regret it  
Who now from this battle thinks to turn back.  
I am old in years; I will never yield,  
But here at the last beside my lord,  
By the leader I love I think to lie.”

*Reading Check*

**Interpreting** Which values of the Anglo-Saxons does this passage from *The Battle of Maldon* reflect?
It has been observed that a community’s tallest buildings reveal its dominant values. On the basis of this standard, modern skyscrapers strikingly indicate the importance of commercial values in U.S. society. By contrast, in medieval English cities, the tallest buildings were towering stone cathedrals, which symbolized the importance of the Roman Catholic Church in the life of the people. The first English cathedral was built in Canterbury between 1070 and 1180, beginning a period of more than four hundred years of cathedral-building. These awesome and towering cathedrals were artistic masterpieces created by the most talented architects, masons, artists, and craftspeople of the time to celebrate the glory of God.

Christianizing England
In 596 Pope Gregory I sent missionaries to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. By the year 650, most of England was Christian in name, though many people retained some pagan beliefs and traditions. Meanwhile, Celtic monks from Ireland had brought Christianity to other parts of England, establishing England’s first monastery on the island of Lindisfarne off its coast. With Christianity came the glimmerings of education and culture. By the eighth century, Anglo-Saxon culture reached its peak in the Northumbrian monasteries that produced decorated manuscripts, known as illuminated manuscripts. Some of them, including the Book of Durrow and the Lindisfarne Gospels, rank among the most beautiful works of art in the Middle Ages.

Monasteries
As Christianity spread throughout Anglo-Saxon England, some men and women chose to dedicate their lives to work and prayer. These men (known as monks) and women (known as nuns) joined religious orders, which varied greatly in their rules for communal living. Some religious orders were very strict, demanding poverty, fasting, absolute obedience, and manual labor.

English monks established libraries and schools within their monasteries, where they emphasized the importance of the written word—especially the Bible. Working as scribes, Anglo-Saxon monks copied manuscripts by hand, thereby preserving much of the classical and Anglo-Saxon literature that survives today. The Venerable Bede and other monks also composed their own scholarly literature, which represents the first written literature in England. The earliest important work of this kind was Bede’s *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (see page 82), which offers a remarkably complete picture of early Anglo-Saxon life and times. However, like most monastic scholars of the era, Bede composed his *History* in Latin, the language of church scholarship. It was Alfred the Great, the era’s most important political leader, who first encouraged the widespread use of Old English in written literature. Alfred’s greatest achievement in this regard was *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, an Old English history in prose and poetry.

Pilgrimages
One way to express religious devotion in the Middle Ages was to undertake a pilgrimage, or journey, to a sacred site. If English pilgrims could not go on pilgrimages to Jerusalem, Rome, or the famous shrine at Santiago de Compostela in Spain, they could still visit various holy sites in their own country. One of the most important destinations for English pilgrims was Canterbury Cathedral, where in 1170 Archbishop Thomas à Becket had been slain. The pilgrims described in Chaucer’s *Canterbury Tales* (see page 92) are journeying to this holy site to seek blessings from the martyred archbishop.

Religious Drama
In a time when few people could read, the church used sermons, stained-glass windows, and popular entertainment to teach the truths and historical events of religion. English drama developed from enactments of biblical stories during church services on feast days such as Palm Sunday and Easter. Eventually, these dramatic scenes moved from the cathedral to the village green and finally to pageant wagons. The church would often have common people, such as members of a bakers’ guild, dress up like characters in the Old and the New Testaments.
In several cities in England, these plays were well attended, and as a result complete cycles developed, beginning with the creation of the world and concluding with the last judgment. These plays were known as **mystery plays** because they were performed by the guilds (at that time mystery meant “trade” or “craft”). Less realistic dramas called **morality plays** were also popular. Featuring allegorical figures representing good, evil, and other abstract qualities, these plays presented moral lessons.

The following passage comes from a cycle of mystery plays performed in the city of York.

**from The Creation of Adam and Eve**

**GOD:** In paradise shall ye sam won; Of earthly thing get ye no need. Ill and good both shall ye con; I shall you learn your life to lead.

**ADAM:** Ah, Lord since we shall do no thing But lof thee for thy great goodness, We shall obey to thy bidding, And fulfil it both more and less.

**EVE:** His sign since he has on us set Before all other thing, certain, Him for to lof we shall not let, And worship him with might and main.

**GOD:** At heaven and earth first I began, And six days wrought ere I would rest; My work is ended now at man: All likes me well, but this the best.

**Reading Check**

**Analyzing Cause and Effect** How did the lack of literacy in the Middle Ages indirectly lead to the emergence of drama in England?
For many people today, the knight in shining armor is emblematic of the Middle Ages. This is partly because of the enduring popularity of medieval romances. Featuring brave knights courting lovely maidens, noble women wearing pointed headdresses, castles containing moats and drawbridges, minstrels wandering, and common folk enjoying tournaments and pageantry, the romance created striking, albeit mostly imaginary, portraits of medieval life.

**The Knight**

Constant warfare characterized life in the Middle Ages, with troops of heavily armed warriors, or knights, fighting one another for supremacy. These knights enjoyed great social prestige and formed the nucleus of the feudal aristocracy, which was based on the relationship between lords and vassals. In exchange for tracts of land, vassals pledged to fulfill various obligations to their lords, the foremost of which was military service.

Trained as warriors but with few other responsibilities, knights had little to do but fight. When not engaged in actual warfare, knights provided sport and entertainment for others by participating in showy tournaments, which gave them the opportunity to practice fighting and improve their skills. However, even these mock battles were dangerous and sometimes fatal. By 1500 the nature of jousting changed to encourage a safer form of entertainment. The church also attempted to regulate knightly violence by outlawing fighting on Sundays and holidays.

**Chivalry and Courtly Love**

In the eleventh and twelfth centuries, under the influence of the church, an ideal of civilized behavior, called chivalry, gradually took hold among the nobility of Europe. The term chivalry derives from the French word chevalier, meaning “horseman.” Chivalry referred to the code of ethics that knights were obliged to uphold. According to that code, knights strove to be honorable, generous, brave, skillful in battle, respectful to women, and protective of widows and orphans. This romantic attitude would affect much of the literature of the period, especially the songs and stories. Although only partly successful, the code of chivalry did help to civilize the conduct of knights and to elevate the status of women.

Closely allied to the code of chivalry, courtly love described the relationship between a knight and a courtly lady, who was usually married to someone else. In medieval times, upper-class marriage was rarely a love match between a man and a woman. It was instead a commercial arrangement involving an exchange of property or goods or an alliance of families. However, courtly love, as popularized in the songs and poems of the troubadours in southern France, proclaimed the transcendent value of passionate love and the all-consuming devotion of a knight toward his lady—the kind of relationship, for example, shared by Sir Lancelot and Guinevere in the Arthurian legends.

“Whither has not flying fame spread and familiarized the name of Arthur the Briton, even as far as the empire of Christendom extends?”

—Alain de Lille

**The Rise of Romance**

Originating in France in the 1100s, the romance became the most popular literary genre in medieval England. Most romances describe the adventures of legendary knights and celebrate chivalry and courtly love. Working in both verse and prose, many English writers produced romances about the legendary King Arthur and his knights of the Round Table. The most highly regarded verse romance in English is Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, written in the 1300s by an unidentified poet. It blends Celtic themes (such as elfland) and the Anglo-Saxon poetic device of alliteration (which was old-fashioned by this time).
INTRODUCTION

Reading Check
Comparing and Contrasting How would you compare medieval knights with Anglo-Saxon warriors?

from Le Morte d’Arthur
by Sir Thomas Malory

So [Arthur and Merlin] rode till they came to a lake, the which was a fair water and broad, and in the midst of the lake Arthur was ware of an arm clothed in white samite, that held a fair sword in that hand. Lo! said Merlin, yonder is that sword that I spake of. With that they saw a damosel going upon the lake. What damosel is that? said Arthur. That is the Lady of the Lake, said Merlin; and within that lake is a rock, and therein is as fair a place as any on earth, and richly beseeen; and this damosel will come to you anon, and then speak ye fair to her that she will give you that sword. Anon withal came the damosel unto Arthur, and saluted him, and he her again. Damosel, said Arthur, what sword is that, that yonder the arm holdeth above the water? I would it were mine, for I have no sword. Sir Arthur, king, said the damosel, that sword is mine, and if ye will give me a gift when I ask it you, ye shall have it. By my faith, said Arthur, I will give you what gift ye will ask. Well! said the damosel, go ye into yonder barge, and row yourself to the sword, and take it and the scabbard with you, and I will ask my gift when I see my time. So Sir Arthur and Merlin alit and tied their horses to two trees, and so they went into the ship, and when they came to the sword that the hand held, Sir Arthur took it up by the handles, and took it with him, and the arm and the hand went under the water.

in a seriocomic tale of a quest undertaken by King Arthur’s finest knight. Around 1470, as the Middle Ages were waning, Sir Thomas Malory retold the entire cycle of Arthurian legends in Le Morte d’Arthur (“The Death of Arthur”), a superb work of Middle English prose.
Why It Matters

The centuries between the Anglo-Saxon invasions and the end of the Hundred Years’ War witnessed many watershed events in British history. The Anglo-Saxon invasion brought the Germanic traditions that influenced British culture and society. It also introduced the Germanic language, many words of which still form the basic vocabulary of English-speakers throughout the world.

The Norman Conquest brought French language, culture, and institutions that profoundly affected society in medieval England. By establishing basic political rights, the Magna Carta became the foundation of law and government first in Great Britain and later in the United States.

The Romantic movement of the late 1800s and early 1900s found one of its primary sources of inspiration in medieval romances. One category of romance literature—the legends of King Arthur—remains popular to this day.

Cultural Links

The Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf inspired the novel Grendel, by the modern American writer John Gardner, which tells the story from the monster’s point of view.

Geoffrey Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales is an example of a literary form used worldwide: a collection of tales within a frame story. Other notable examples of frame tales include the Metamorphoses by Ovid, and The Arabian Nights.

Based on earlier versions of the Arthurian legend, Sir Thomas Malory’s Le Morte d’Arthur, in turn, inspired Alfred, Lord Tennyson’s The Idylls of the King and T. H. White’s The Once and Future King.

Connect to Today

Use what you have learned about the period to do one of these activities.

1. Speaking/Listening Translations of Old English and Middle English works, such as Beowulf and Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, vary considerably. Working with other students, present an oral reading of three or four translations of the same passage from either of these works. Then discuss how the translations differ in emphasis and literary quality.

2. Visual Literacy Research one of the illuminated manuscripts created in medieval monasteries, such as the Book of Kells. Then create a visual display for your class, presenting photocopies of some of the most remarkable pages. Include explanations of how the manuscript was produced and descriptions of its stylistic features.

ALABAMA STANDARDS (page 18)

Course of Study
11. Critique visual communication for effectiveness.
12. Evaluate oral presentation skills of self and others.

AHSGE Objectives
II-2 Draw conclusions.
IV-4 Locate information in reference material.

Study Central Visit www.glencoe.com and click on Study Central to review the Anglo-Saxon Period and the Middle Ages.