England. Compiled in 1085 and 1086, the Domesday Book records the results of the survey. It provides a record of English property and life—the number of people and houses, the size of landholdings, the amount of rents, and so on. While its purpose was to provide data for tax levies, the Domesday Book, which still exists, provides a meticulous account of medieval life in England—a resource that exists for no other medieval kingdom. Many years later, the name Domesday (Doomsday) came to be applied to the book because the information collected by the assessors was irreversible, as was the Last Judgment described in the Bible.

William's conquest of England, known as the Norman Conquest, was a significant event not only for the history of England but also for the history of the English language. After 1066, the French spoken by William and his nobles began to influence the Old English that had been spoken in England prior to the Norman Conquest. The resulting language, known as Middle English, was the language of the poet Chaucer and is still mostly understandable even today, though not easy to read. By comparison, Old English looks and sounds like a foreign language.

F. Growth of Towns

Background

By the later Middle Ages (1300–1400), western Europe was undergoing many changes. Some of those changes had been brought about by the Crusades, expeditions by European Christians meant to free areas considered sacred by Christians (what is today modern Israel and Lebanon) from Muslim control. The Crusaders traveled to the Middle East by ship and, rather than return empty, the ships came back laden with silks, perfumes, spices, and other luxuries from Asia that had passed along trade routes to the Middle East. (For a further discussion of the importance of the Crusades to the development of the Middle Ages, you may wish to refer to the discussion of wars between Muslims and Christians in Section III, “The Spread of Islam and the ‘Holy Wars,’” on pp. 128–142.)

It was not long before Italian cities, such as Venice, Genoa, and Pisa, which was a port city until the 15th century when a buildup of silt blocked the city from the sea, had merchant fleets plying the Mediterranean between the Middle East and such faraway places as England and Flanders, roughly what is today the western part of modern Belgium. Merchants in 80 cities along the North and Baltic Seas joined together in the Hanseatic League to protect and promote their business interests. By the 1400s, all sections of Europe were connected by a network of trade routes along which goods flowed, not only from Asia and the Middle East, but also within Europe—wool from England, cloth from Flanders, wine from Italy, salt from France, and salted fish from Norway.

Towns as Centers of Commerce

During the early Middle Ages, most people lived on manors and made their living by farming. Here and there were market towns, where people came to buy from a local craftworker or an itinerant peddler some item they could not make for themselves.

With the growth of international trade and the rise of banking and a money
economy, some enterprising people realized that there was wealth to be made from commerce, the buying and selling of goods. A new social and economic class began to appear in towns across Europe—the middle class. Not beholden to manor lords, the middle class over the centuries came to wield a great deal of power in many countries.

Although early cities and towns followed a feudal model (under the control of a lord or high-ranking clergy), the structure became more relaxed as trade flourished and merchants grew more powerful. As the towns grew, merchants sought greater freedom from feudal control and more power to enact their own laws and create municipal governments. In England and Germany, particularly, cities and towns were places where serfs could go to find a certain amount of freedom. Henry V, emperor of Germany (1099–1125), declared that “city air brought freedom,” and indeed, if a settler stayed in a city for more than a year and a day, he or she was declared a free person.

Another aspect of the development of towns was the founding and expansion of universities. Some examples of medieval university towns include Oxford and Cambridge in England, St. Andrews in Scotland, Paris and Avignon in modern-day France, Erfurt and Wittenburg in what is now Germany, Bologna and Pisa in Italy, Lisbon in Portugal, Barcelona and Salamanca in Spain, Krakow in Poland, and Upsala in Sweden. At universities such as these, students might study theology, philosophy, law, or medicine. In the medieval period, many educational programs were organized around the seven liberal arts, which divided into the trivium (grammar, rhetoric, and logic), and the quadrivium (arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy).

Houses were built near these important town centers, and sometimes people even lived on the second floor of shops. All of the buildings in medieval towns were built close to one another, with small dirt streets or paths linking the buildings. Most towns were enclosed by a wall made of stone or earth for protection from sieges.

**Guilds and Apprentices**

As commerce became more important, guilds were organized to protect craft-workers and train future workers. Guilds were groups of workers in a particular craft or trade within a town or city—women as well as men. There were guilds of shoemakers, weavers, goldsmiths, painters, ribbon makers, bricklayers, bakers, papermakers, and so on. Guilds set wages, hours, working conditions, and prices for goods.

To learn a craft or trade, a child would be apprenticed to a guild master at the age of seven or eight. The child would be sent to live with this master craftworker and to work for him or her for seven years without wages. The next step was to become a journeyman, or hired worker. Most continued as journeymen working for a guild member for the rest of their lives. Few workers were invited into guilds as full members, or masters.