# MEDIEVAL ENGLAND – GLOSSARY OF TERMS

ABBEY (see MONASTERY)

ABBOT/ABBESS

The head of a monastery. The abbot was regarded as the “father” of all of the monks in his monastery. Female heads of monasteries/convents were called abbesses. In some double monasteries, the abbess was head of both the male and female religious houses.

ABSOLUTION/ABSOLVE

Remission of and forgiveness for sins, granted by a priest through the sacrament of penance. Some sins or penalties for sins (such as Excommunication) could not be absolved by just any priest. A bishop or the pope might reserve the power to absolve someone from a sin or its engendered penalty to himself or a superior.

ALDERMAN

The Anglo-Saxon ealdorman (meaning “chief man”) was an officer of the king who was essentially leader of a shire, which included the presidency of the shire court; as they became more powerful and transformed into earls, the shire-reeve took their place as head of a shire. The name survived for two types of town official, of far lesser status yet important locally. One type was the executive officer of a gild, notably a Merchant Gild. The second use of the title was for the members of the town council, but this use is not common until the fifteenth century.

ALLOD

Land held outside of feudal tenure (i.e., land which was owned rather than land which was simply possessed). By the eleventh century, it was commonly held that there were no allodial lands in the French Kingdom. After the Norman Conquest, allodial lands in England were all declared to be held in feudal tenure. This meant that the Crown was technically the “owner” of all the land in England (apart from some allodial lands held by the Church) but it allowed its vassals to have possession (or SEISIN) of land. Allodial lands had a much greater role in Germany where, during the chaos of the late ninth and early tenth centuries, the five great Dukes and a number of other powerful families were successful in asserting allodial rights over a significant portion of their lands.

AMERCEMENT

A financial penalty inflicted at the mercy of the king or his justices for various minor offenses. The offender is said to be amerced and the monies paid to the crown to settle the matter are called an amercement (See also FINE).

ANATHEMA

A condemnation of heretics, similar in effect to major excommunication. Anathema engenders complete exclusion from Christian society.

APOSTATE

The term used to describe one who leaves religious orders after making solemn profession. Apostasy was considered a serious crime in the eyes of the church, being not only a breach of faith with God but also with the founders and benefactors of their religious house.

ARCHBISHOP (in the Early Middle Ages, aka Metropolitan)

An ecclesiastical official having the same sacramental powers of any BISHOP but greater jurisdiction. An Archbishop's SEE encompasses the sees of a number of bishops (the sum of which is referred to as a province), though he would also have an episcopal SEE unto himself.

ASSART

English term for turning woodlands into pasture or cropland. To assart without license was a serious offense.

ASSIZE

A word with several meanings, it usually refers to a meeting of feudal vassals with the king or the decree(s) issued by the king after such a meeting. Assize could also refer to a legal action or remedy. King Henry II (d. 1189) created a series of assizes for settling disputes concerning possessory rights (SEISIN) which were invoked by writs of the same name (see WRIT). Henry also issued the Grand Assize in 1179 which created an alternate mechanism of settling disputes through judgment by peers rather than trial by ordeal. The Assizes of Clarendon (1166) established juries of presentment as a mechanism for applying Royal jurisdiction to criminal law (see JURY).

ASYLUM (Sanctuary)

The right for a Bishop to protect a fugitive from justice or to intercede on his behalf. Once asylum was granted, the fugitive could not be removed from the bishop’s protection until after a month’s time. Fugitives who are granted Asylum must pledge an oath of abjuration never to return to the realm, after which they are free to find passage to the borders of the realm by the fastest way. If found within the borders after a month’s time they may be hunted down as before with no right of asylum to be granted ever again.

BAILIFF

Under the manorial system a bailiff was in charge of superintending the cultivation of the manor. The term was also applied in England to the king's officers generally, such as sheriffs, mayors, etc., and more particularly to the chief officer of a hundred. The county within which the sheriff exercises his jurisdiction is still called his bailiwick, while the term bailiff is retained as a title by the chief magistrates of various towns and the keepers of royal castles.

BAN

A King's power to command and prohibit under pain of punishment or death, mainly used because of a break in the King's Peace. Also a royal proclamation, either of a call to arms, or a decree of outlawry. In clerical terms, an excommunication or condemnation by the church.

BANALITIES

Fees which a feudal lord imposes on his serfs for the use of his mill, oven, wine press, or similar facilities. It sometimes includes part of a fish catch or the proceeds from a rabbit warren.

BARON

A vassal who holds his land (see FIEF) directly from the Crown and serves as a member of the King's Great Council. It is not a title per se, but rather a description of the Tenants in Chief class of nobility.

BENEDICTINE ORDER

The largest of the monastic orders; founded by St. Benedict of Nursia (d. 547) and regulated by the rule he wrote (see MONKS).

BENEFICE (lat. beneficium)

A general term for grant of land or a stipend given to a member of the aristocracy, a Bishop, or a monastery, for limited or hereditary use in exchange for services. In ecclesiastical terms, a benefice is a church office that returns revenue. A prebend, for example, is a modest benefice given to a priest or other member of the parish clergy. The papacy assumed ever greater control over the distribution (collatio) of ecclesiastical benefices from the late twelfth to the early fourteenth century. See also FIEF.

BENEFIT OF CLERGY (lat. privilgium fori)

A privilege enjoyed by members of the clergy, including tonsured clerks, placing them beyond the jurisdiction of secular courts. Any cleric was entitled to have any legal proceeding in which he was involved heard in a Church court. This was good for the cleric because he might expect a more favorable result in disputes against lay-persons in a church court and because the penalties which church courts could impose were usually far lighter than those of the civil courts. Over the High and Later Middle Ages, this situation changed.

BISHOP

Higher ecclesiastical order; the bishops are the teachers of doctrine. Bishops hold jurisdiction over a SEE or diocese encompassing a number of Parishes. Within his SEE a bishop ordains priests, is judge over his flock and his priests, confirms Christians into the faith, and holds all the other sacramental powers of any priest. In the early Church, bishops were chosen “by clergy and people”. Through the Early Middle Ages, secular lords in Western Europe gained the power of choosing and even investing bishops. The Investiture Contest re-established the principle that bishops had to be elected, although participation in the election was now limited to the clergy of the cathedral chapter. During the Later Middle Ages, the papacy arrogated to itself the power to name almost all the bishops in Christendom.

BORDAR

A type of peasant. A small holder typically holding more land than a cottar (cottager) but less than a villein. Bordars were lower status than villeins, and likely subsistence rather than surplus farmers. They did not pay geld, probably paid little rent, and, like cottars, they were reliant for supplementing their work on the demesne and more wealthy villeins.

BOROUGH

Derived from the Anglo-Saxon term burh, which was originally applied to any fortified place, such as a thegn's house or a hilltop – not necessarily a populated place. During the wars between the Anglo-Saxons and Danes, it was particularly applied to centers of population that were protected with defensive earthworks; such of those centers which continued to flourish in later times came to be called boroughs. The district around the burh or borough was known as the shire.

BULL

An important letter or decree determining some issue, so-named for the heavy leaden seal affixed at the bottom (lat. bullus). Usually issued by popes, hence the term “papal bull.”

BURGESS

A freeman in a medieval town (borough) who held land called a burgage.

BURGHER

A general term for the urban-dwelling middle-class who were neither peasants nor nobles. Burghers were generally well to do merchants, tradesmen, and artisans.

BURH

Anglo-Saxon term for a fortified place. (See BOROUGH)

# CANON

1) an enactment by an ecclesiastical council; or 2) member of the chapter of a cathedral, collegiate church, or of certain religious orders. Just as with MONKS and FRIARS, some canons were identified by their distinctive habit; for example, the Augustinian canons were known as the Black Canons because they wore black habits.

CARDINAL

Originally, a term applied to the CLERGY in and around Rome. By the mid-eleventh century, reforming popes appointed like-minded colleagues to these positions and relied upon their counsel and assistance in carrying out reform. By the late eleventh century, the cardinals gained the exclusive right in canon law to elect the Pope. Thereafter, the “College of Cardinals” became an ever more prestigious body of administrators and counselors that supervised the administration of the papal CURIA and from which popes were chosen.

CASTELLAN

In the eleventh century, a noble possessing a castle and often exercising the power of the ban. Thereafter, a castellan was the official in charge of a castle and its garrison, but the castle belonged (at least in theory) to the king.

CATHARS (aka Albigensians)

A heretical group that flourished from the mid-twelfth to the mid-thirteenth century in Southern France and Northern Italy. The Cathars believed in a form of MANICHEANISM, holding that there were two supreme powers corresponding to Good and Evil, Light and Dark, Spirit and Matter. The Cathars were highly critical of the Church, among other reasons because it appeared to them to have sold out to Materialism. The Cathars were divided into hearers, believers and the perfecti, a sort of clergy whose status was granted by a laying-on of hands ritual after a period of prayer and fasting. By the end of the thirteenth century, the perfecti had developed a hierarchical organization; however, the Cathars as a whole began to splinter into various factions. Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) encouraged efforts at reconversion of the Cathars to orthodox Christianity, above all by the Franciscans and Dominicans. He also attempted to induce French Nobles and the King of France to conquer the lords of Southern France who tolerated and protected the Cathars. From 1209-1228, crusade privileges were offered to knights who followed up on this policy. This “Albigensian Crusade” resulted in the expansion of French Royal power into Southern France. Thereafter, for several decades inquisitors endeavored to ferret out and “re-educate” Cathars from Languedoc west into the Pyrenees.

CATHEDRAL

A bishop's church, named for his chair (from the Greek word for “chair,” latinized as “cathedra”).

CHAMBERLAIN

An officer of the royal household. He is responsible for the Chamber, meaning that he controls access to the person of the King. He is also responsible for administration of the household and the private estates of the king. The Chamberlain is one of the four main officers of the court, the others being the CHANCELLOR, the JUSTICIAR, and the TREASURER.

CHANCELLOR

The officer of the English royal household who supervised the monarch's secretarial or notarial service. The chancellor was responsible for the Chancery, the arm of the royal government dealing with legal and foreign affairs. Usually the person filling this office was a Bishop chosen for his knowledge of the law.

CHIVALRY

Literally the code of behavior of knights (Fr. chevalier). Twelfth-century romance-writers (esp. French writers) posited a moral and social code of conduct of knights based on courage, honor, loyalty, and generosity (prouesse, onor, loyauté, and largesse). Chivalry was really the old Germanic warrior code with some important modifications. Christian elements, such as piety and a duty to protect the unarmed and defenseless (the clergy, peasants, and merchants), had simply been grafted onto the older warrior ethos, along with more civilizing elements (courtoisie or courtliness, and love for a usually unattainable lady). The spread of chivalry was concomitant with the conscious professionalization of knighthood from the late eleventh century. One can view the development of chivalry as the civilizing aspect of this process. While the civilizing features of chivalry were more celebrated, they were more slowly realized than chivalric concepts respecting performance on the battlefield. Warriors were still warriors, and attempts to civilize them progressed slowly.

CLERGY (clerics)

The people who hold positions in the Church. According to the traditions of the Catholic Church the clergy are a visible order, distinguished from the rest of society by their appearance and their lifestyle (see TONSURE). The clergy enjoyed a variety of privileges and immunities dating from the later Roman Empire, but some of these were contested by secular rulers; this basic tension between the secular and the ecclesiastical was a fundamental theme of medieval thought and politics. The clergy may roughly be divided into two groups: the secular clergy and the regular clergy. The secular clergy are made up of the Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops, Bishops, Archdeacons, Deans, parish Priests and many other, lesser officers whose function is to minister to the laity and to coordinate the operation of that ministry; and the regular clergy comprises those who have decided to devote their lives to religious works by living according to a certain rule (regular means “ruled” in Latin). Regular clergy include MONKS and FRIARS. Most monks were not priests. The principal benefit of clerical status was immunity from civil jurisdiction. (See BENEFIT OF CLERGY)

By the twelfth century some hybrid clerics began to appear. Regular canons, for example were canons (that means they were the clerics of a cathedral church) who decided to adopt a rule like monks. By the mid-twelfth century, it was also established that all scholars and students were members of the clergy, entitled to the same privileges and immunities as all other clergymen.

COMMUNE

A sworn association formed by the citizens of a town or city for the mutual defense of their liberties and/or persons.

CONFESSION

The public or private acknowledgment of sinfulness regarded as necessary to obtain remission and forgiveness through the sacrament of Penance.

CONSTABLE

English title for an officer given command of an army or an important garrison (see CASTELLAN). Also the officer who commands in the king's absence.

CONTUMACY

Stubborn or willful disobedience to one's lord. The guilty party would forfeit their fief and, at times, even be excommunicated.

CORVEE

Labor service attached to land or to a person. In feudal terms, corvee could apply to the requirement that a serf work on his lord's DEMESNE, clear forest land, or maintain the roads.

COTTAGER/COTTAR

A type of peasant. A cottager held very little land, and what land they did have was typically not ploughland but subsistence only scrubland. Living in a “cott”, cottars would have had gardens in which to grow vegetables. They were reliant for food and work upon the demesne and the more landed villeins.

COUNT/COUNTY

The continental equivalent of the English Earl. Ranks second only to Duke.

# CROFT

An enclosed plot of land, often adjacent to a dwelling house.

CURIA REGIS

Literally, the King’s Court. The curia regis was both the king’s royal council and a court of justice. The council was comprised of the king’s barons and prelates, and it was customary for the king to consult this council before any significant undertaking. As a judicial body, the curia regis was the highest court in England and the judgments rendered by it were final.

CUSTOM (lat. Consuetudo, Mos)

In medieval law, custom held an important albeit amorphous place. Germanic legal traditions held that custom was the vehicle for the expression of law. Later Roman law accepted that custom was an interpreter of law and might be able to abrogate law through non-observance. As positive legal ideas became more important from the twelfth century on, custom was gradually degraded in fact in favor of legislation. Nevertheless jurists continued to enunciate the old platitudes about the legal efficacy of custom.

CUSTUMAL

An inventory detailing all the various types of revenue that the lord was entitled to receive from his tenants. It set out the names of all the tenants along with the details of the land they held and the particulars of the rents, labor services, and payments in kind which each of them owed to the lord.

DANEGELD

A tax first collected at the end of the tenth century by the Anglo-Saxon monarch to provide tribute for the Danes (Dane Gold). Anglo-Saxon and Norman kings continued to levy the Danegeld occasionally until the mid-twelfth century.

DANELAW

About half of England, northeast of a line from the Thames to Chester that was conceded to Danish authority and Danish law by Alfred the Great of Wessex in a treaty with Guthram of Denmark signed in 885. Alfred's heirs completed the conquest of the Danelaw in the mid-tenth century.

DEMESNE

The part of the lord's manorial lands reserved for his own use and not allocated to his SERFS or freehold tenants. Serfs worked their lord’s demesne land for a specified numbers of days per week. The demesne could either be scattered among the serf’s land, or in a separate area, the latter being more common for meadow and orchard lands.

DENARIUS

The English silver penny, hence the abbreviation d. It was the coin in most common circulation.

DISTRAINT

In legal actions it was sometimes necessary to compel a defendant to come to court to answer a charge. One method of compulsion was to distrain on the personal property of the defendant; that is, to seize some of the defendant’s possessions so that he could only regain them by providing sureties for coming to court, or by an illegal rescue. Usually moveables at the defendant’s residence or place of business were targeted. “Distraint” might refer to the action of arrest (also called distress) or to the objects arrested. Sometimes a recalcitrant defendant might have to be distrained repeatedly. Distraint could also be applied to compensate a plaintiff in cases of debt, arrears of rent, or the cost of damages awarded by the court, where the convicted party refused to pay. Unless distraint was authorized by the court (so that a town officer, or even the plaintiff himself, could undertake it), it was itself a crime – with some exceptions.

DIOCESE (see SEE)

DISSEISIN (See SEISIN)

DOMESDAY BOOK

Briefly, the Domesday Book was the outcome of King William I’s attempt to find out just what it was he’d conquered in 1066. As a newcomer, he knew little of the resources of England, and particularly of those resources on which the king had direct call. But he knew well enough that the land was the source of wealth and power. And so in 1086 he sent inquisitors through the shires to conduct a survey. This resulting and nameless description of the country was coming, less than a century later, to be called “Domesday” – the day of judgment; for the survey officially established who owned what (or whom) and who owed what (money or services) to whom. There were two volumes, which have been styled Great Domesday and Little Domesday, the latter covering East Anglia. While not comprehensive in its coverage, the survey provides a picture of much of the country that is unparalleled in medieval England. In particular there are gaps in coverage of the towns (London, Bristol and Winchester being the most notable absences), but over 100 places inhabited by burgesses are surveyed. So Domesday gives us our first real look at English medieval towns, with comparative information applicable to both the period immediately preceding the Conquest, and the period when the survey was undertaken; the comparison allows us to see, for example, the adverse effects of the Conquest – many boroughs had suffered damage and depopulation, either in the course of the resistance to the Normans, or because of the planting of castles in key strategic urban centers, to control the local and regional populations.

DOUBLE MONASTERY

Combined monastery for men and women separated by gender. Ruled by either an abbot or abbess.

DUKE

A title derived from the Roman dux; a duke was the ruler of a district called a duchy. In England the title is now used by and reserved for members of the royal family.

EARL

The highest title attainable by an English nobleman who is not of royal blood. Also known in earlier times as Ealdorman. Word related to Jarl.

ESCHEAT

The right of a feudal lord to the return of lands held by his vassal, or the holding of a serf, should either die with out lawful heirs or suffer outlawry.

ESSOIN

An excuse for non-attendance at a court session. It was anticipated that, for various reasons, a man might not be able to attend a court session to prosecute or defend a charge and so provision was made for a certain number of absences without penalty, which were expected to be genuine and valid. Permissible excuses were: illness serious enough to confine one to bed; absence abroad; being busy in the king’s service; and misadventure en route to court. The excuse had to be presented by some friend or agent of the essoined party; some men appear so frequently delivering essoins that it seems they did it as part of their livelihood. Since only in certain cases could judgments be rendered in the persistent absence of a defendant, essoins were often used as part of a strategy to delay the progress of cases. Some types of cases, requiring speedy remedy, restricted or eliminated them.

EUCHARIST

Eucharist refers to both the ceremony commemorating the Last Supper in which bread and wine are consecrated and consumed, as well as the consecrated elements (esp. the bread) consumed during this ceremony.

EXCHEQUER

The financial department of the English royal government from the reign of Henry I onwards. The chief officer of the Exchequer was the TREASURER. SHERIFFS, in their role as regional chief accountants, presented reports to the exchequer at Easter and Michaelmas. An upper exchequer made up of the TREASURER, CHANCELLOR, JUSTICIAR, and several important barons met occasionally to audit the activities of the lower exchequer or exchequer of receipt. The name, exchequer, derives from the checked cloth which covered the desk of the Treasurer of the Exchequer when he received monies from the SHERIFFS and other officials.

EXCOMMUNICATION

Exclusion from the membership of the church or from communion with faithful Christians. Those judged “tolerati” (subject to minor excommunication) could still mingle with the faithful, but those judged “vitandi” (subject to major excommunication) were to be utterly shunned.

EYRE, JUSTICES IN

Itinerant Justices who journeyed around England to hear various cases under Royal jurisdiction from the reign of Henry I well into the Plantagenet period. Henry II greatly expanded the use of such justices.

FAIR

A market held at regular intervals, usually once to twice a year. Fairs tend to offer a wider range of goods than normal markets. They are generally licensed by either the king, a local lord, or a chartered town.

FARM

A fixed sum, usually paid annually, for the right to collect all revenues from land; in effect, rent. Lords may farm land to vassals, receiving a fixed annual rent in place of the normal feudal obligation. Many sheriffs farm out their shires, contracting in advance to pay a fixed annual sum to the crown, thus obtaining the right to collect any additional royal revenues for their own profit.

FEALTY (See HOMAGE AND FEALTY)

FELONY

In feudal law, any grave violation of the feudal contract between lord and vassal. Later it was expanded in common law to include any crime against the King’s peace and came to mean any serious crime.

FEUDAL AIDS

Monetary payments which VASSALs were required to make to their lord under certain circumstances. The most common of these were: the knighting of the lord’s eldest son, the marriage of his eldest daughter, ransom for a captive lord, and -- later -- the lord going on crusade when the VASSAL did not.

FEUDAL INCIDENTS

Incidents were additional rights held by a lord. The three feudal incidents were the right of wardship (the right to administer a fief during the minority of a deceased vassal’s heir, or the right to sell that right); marriage rights (the right to approve the marriage of a female fief-holder or the widow of a vassal, or the right to sell that right); and relief (the payment made by a vassal’s heir to enter into, or take possession of, his father’s fief upon inheriting it).

FEUDALISM

A political system defined by the decentralization of governmental responsibilities into the hands of individuals who are bound to the center by personal commitments (the oaths of HOMAGE AND FEALTY). Over the course of the Middle Ages, feudalism took many forms. A simple or flat form of feudalism existed in the Carolingian period (Charlemagne’s dynasty) where all lands were held by the VASSALS directly from the king/Emperor. In the wake of the disintegration of the Carolingian Empire, power coalesced at many more levels so that an individual knight might be three or four lords removed from the King. This arrangement was known as SUBINFEUDATION and it often resulted in uncertainty over a vassal’s primary allegiance. This uncertainty was resolved by the implementation of the concept of the LIEGE LORD. The liege lord could be either the lord from whom the largest fief was held (vassals could hold multiple fiefs from multiple lords) or the lord from whom all fiefs were ultimately held – in the latter case the liege lord was usually the king. When two or more of a vassal’s lords were fighting with each other, as was often the case, the vassal’s obligation to his liege lord superseded his obligation to all other lords. The precise nature of the feudal arrangement varied greatly according to time and place and feudalism is really more a term of convenience created by nineteenth century historians than it is a description of a coherent system of government.

FIEF (lat. feudum )

A term for lands possessed under feudal tenure; normally held by the VASSAL of a lord in return for stipulated obligations, esp. military service. A fief could also be a monetary stipend (see FIEF-RENTE) or even an office. By the eleventh century, fiefs were held to be heritable, although the inheritor was obligated to pay RELIEF to the lord in exchange for his recognition of the succession. The vassal and fief-holder held varied jurisdictional rights in his fief, from simple police power to full responsibility to see that justice was done. The precise nature of obligations and jurisdictional rights pertaining to a fief varied from region to region and over time. A fief could be called a holding. In English parlance, a fief that was expected to support one knight was called a Knight’s Fee.

FIEF-RENTE

French term for FIEFs granted in money -- a specified revenue source or sum -- rather than in land. The number of Fiefs-Rente grew in the twelfth and early-thirteenth centuries. It declined just as rapidly thereafter in favor of contracts for military service without feudal bonds.

FINE

A sum of money paid to the Crown to obtain some grant, concession, or privilege. Unlike an AMERCEMENT, a fine is not a monetary penalty; although failure to offer and pay a customary fine for some right would undoubtedly lead to an amercement.

FORMARRIAGE (aka merchet)

The sum commonly paid by a serf to his lord when the serf’s daughter married a man from another manor.

FRANKPLEDGE

The legal condition under which each male member of a tithing (a tithing was originally a group of ten households) over the age of twelve is responsible for the good conduct of all other members of the tithing. Each member of the tithing was responsible for damage caused by other members and for producing accused lawbreakers from their tithing in court. Cases of law-breaking were heard twice a year at a View of Frankpledge.

FRIARS

Literally “brothers.” The term friar refers to a number of new religious orders founded in the thirteenth century that emphasized poverty and an apostolic lifestyle. The friars were unlike MONKS in that they did not seek escape from the corruption of the world by retreat into a MONASTERY, but resided in cities and engaged the world on its own terms. Some friars engaged in (moral) preaching, teaching, and undertook other service functions. The papacy employed friars, esp. Dominicans, as inquisitors over the course of the Later Middle Ages. The most important friars were the Grey Friars (Franciscans), the Black Friars (Dominicans), and the White Friars (Carmelites).

GAVELKIND

A form of land-tenure whereby a man’s property was divisible among his sons. Also, customary free tenure in Kent.

GELD

The tax paid to the crown by English landholders before the Conquest, and continued under the Norman kings. This was done in the form of “2 shillings on the hide” so a manor assessed at 5 hides paid 10 shillings. It was an ad-hoc tax levied as the king required.

GUILDS

A term for trade associations, the aims of which were to protect members from excessive competition and maintain commercial standards. The first guilds were merchant guilds; later came craft guilds as industry became more specialized. Guilds maintained a system of education wherein apprentices served a master for five to seven years before becoming journeymen at about age nineteen. A journeyman worked in the shop of a master until he could demonstrate to the leaders of his guild that he was ready for master status. Guilds also served as political organizations that endeavored to influence or control the policies of town and city governments in the High and Later Middle Ages.

HAGIOGRAPHY

The writing of the lives of saints, which were frequently idealized and embellished to present moral lessons. They were extremely popular throughout the Middle Ages. Although the biographies of the saints themselves are often suspect, background details of hagiographies often reveal aspects of everyday life to modern scholars.

HERIOT

A payment that a feudal lord could claim from the possessions of a dead serf or other tenant, essentially a death tax. There were various forms of heriot. In parts of Germany, the lord might be entitled to the serf’s best animal (besthaupt), or best article of clothing (bestkleid) as heriot. Generally if a tenant died in battle the heriot was forgiven.

HIDE

Anglo-Saxon unit of land-measurement for assessment of tax; theoretically it was 120 acres, but in practice it varied between 60 and 240 acres. It is by custom the land that can be cultivated with one eight-ox team in one year.

HOMAGE AND FEALTY

The ceremony by which a VASSAL pledges himself to his lord and vice-versa. Homage refers to the ceremonial placement of the VASSALs hands within the hands of his lord (lat. immixtio manum). Fealty refers to the oath in which the VASSAL pledges his faith and acknowledges all of his obligations to his lord in return for the grant of a FIEF.

HONOUR (aka Barony)

A holding or group of holdings forming a large estate, such as the land held by an Earl.

HOSPITALLERS (See MILITARY ORDERS)

HUE AND CRY

In the absence of a police force, apart from the town sergeants (who served an enforcement rather than a crime detection role), apprehending criminals was partly the responsibility of the community. This was handled either by reporting crimes after the fact, or – if the crime were discovered in process or freshly committed – by raising hue-and-cry. This involved loud proclamation by the discoverer or the victim, male or female, in order to alert those in the vicinity. Those persons then had the obligation to join with the declarer of the crime in pursuing the criminal, usually to the boundary of the community, continuing the clamor in the process. Anyone participating in hue-and-cry had the right to arrest a criminal. In this context the carrying of arms was permitted and a criminal violently resisting arrest might be killed with impunity, but not otherwise – lynchings were very rare, and even wounding or killing a criminal to hinder flight was unlawful. Victims of conspicuous crimes (e.g. rapes or assaults) might also raise hue-and-cry, even if the culprit had escaped, in order to summon those who could witness the effects of the crime.

HUNDRED

A unit of local administration that comes to our attention in the tenth century. The name may have originally referred to a territory of 100 “hides” (a measurement of area), or to a grouping of 100 men for peace-keeping purposes (a larger-scale version of the tithing). We cannot be sure which due to the inconsistent use of the term. In the former Danelaw the “wapentake” had a similar role. Generally, a hundred was larger than a village but smaller than a county, but the precise relationship between hundreds and towns is uncertain. Many towns had acquired, by the time of Domesday, the status of a hundred (or at least a half-hundred – which made little practical difference).

INFANGENTHIEF

The right sought by borough and manor courts to apprehend and punish anyone caught thieving within the boundaries of their jurisdiction.

INDICTION

A unit of time of fifteen-years’ duration, introduced by the Roman Emperor Constantine as a cycle for tax assessments, it was still used as a way of determining dates into the High Middle Ages

INDULGENCES

During the Middle Ages, forgiveness for sin could be purchased from the Church as indulgences, removing the burden of penance for the commission of sins. A lucrative source of income for the Church, the practice was condemned by most reformers.

INFIDEL

A non-believer (one who is “not faithful”). A pejorative label applied by Christians to Muslims and vice-versa.

INQUISITIO

Popularly (and somewhat unfairly) known as an instrument for rooting out and punishing heretics and non-believers. The word means “asking into” something, carrying the sense of an investigation or inquiry. In canon law, inquisitio referred to a procedure developed out of the cognitio extraordinaria of Roman law. This procedure was promoted by Pope Innocent III (1198-1216) as an alternative to accusatio and denunciatio, procedures which were customarily used in connection with the ORDEAL. After clerical participation in ORDEALs was banned by the Fourth Lateran Council (1215), the inquisitio quickly became the most commonly used procedure for ecclesiastical crimes. Rather quickly, the inquisitorial procedure became standard in civil as well as canon law. In English Law, the inquest was the venue in which the JURY operated, at first called to answer questions concerning local law and custom and matters of landholding. Just as on the continent, when the ordeal was rendered non-viable by the Fourth Lateran Council, the inquest became the standard legal procedure. As an instrument against heresy, the medieval inquisitio was more of a method than an institution. Until at least the thirteenth century, perhaps later, inquisitions were ad hoc affairs created to ask into a particular case and then disbanded. The large-scale employment of inquisitors for longer periods of time only began in the fourteenth century. The scandalous horrors of the “Roman Inquisition” and above all the “Spanish Inquisition” were products of the Early-Modern Period, not the Middle Ages!

INTERDICT

The suspension in an area of all sacraments except for baptism and extreme unction. In general it does not ban high feast days. Used to force persons/institutions/communities or secular lords to a view dictated by the church/pope.

JONGLEUR (see MINSTREL)

JURY

Members of a community called by an official to give answer to a question under oath. In English law, an accusing jury dates to around A.D. 1000, but was prescribed and established by King Henry II in the Assize of Clarendon (1166). When the ORDEAL was rendered non-viable by the Fourth Lateran Council (canon 18) in 1215, juries began to be used by justices to determine guilt or innocence.

JUSTICIAR

The head of the royal judicial system in England and the king’s deputy when the king is absent from the country.

JUVENES (literally “youths”)

A term describing knights who have completed their training and been dubbed, but are unmarried and have not established households of their own – hence they are still considered “youths,” regardless of their actual age. In fact, knights could remain juvenes for 20, 30, or even 40 years if they remained unmarried and childless. These juvenes were occupied with adventures (wars and tournaments) that would earn them money and fame, and establish their reputations as warriors. They were most often supported in the household (mesnie or maisnie) of their lord’s oldest son, with whom they fought and from whom they hoped to earn rewards, especially lands of their own or marriage to an heiress. While juvenes were often the younger sons of the nobility, and therefore could not expect to inherit their father’s patrimonies, oldest sons were also considered juvenes until they married.

KNIGHT

The retainer of a feudal lord who owes military service for his FIEF, usually the service of one fully-equipped, mounted warrior. The ideals to which knights aspired were prowess and CHIVALRY.

KNIGHT’S FEE (see FIEF)

KNIGHT SERVICE

A type of military tenure in which a vassal must serve his lord as a knight for a certain period each year (usually 40 days) in return for his fief. It was the dominant form of land tenure in medieval England.

LAITY (laypeople, laymen, laywomen)

Anyone not in religious orders.

LEGATE, PAPAL

A special representative “sent” by the Pope. A legate could be given very limited or very broad powers by the pope. There was a lively discussion among jurists as to the limits of legatine authority and how legatine authority compared to the authority of a bishop or archbishop within his own SEE.

LIBERAL ARTS, SEVEN

The basic curriculum for education as established in the Carolingian Age. The Seven Liberal Arts included three disciplines at the primary level (the Trivium): Grammar, Rhetoric and Dialectic, and four disciplines at the secondary level (the Quadrivium): arithmetic, geometry, music and astronomy. In the Twelfth Century Renaissance the Quadrivium was largely passed over and emphasis was placed on the disciplines of the Trivium. Grammar and Rhetoric were the basis of the Humanistic stream of thought, while Dialectic was the basis of the Scholastic stream. Education in the Liberal Arts, or in some of them was the essential precursor to study in the higher disciplines of Theology, Philosophy, and Law. After the twelfth century, the dialectical, Scholastic Method, reinforced and further developed by Aristotle’s works, somewhat marginalized the humanist genres.

LITURGY

A form or formulary (in effect, a guide) for conducting a religious service. Liturgy also refers to a religious service that is conducted in accordance with such a form or formulary.

MAN-AT-ARMS (aka Yeoman)

A soldier (not a mounted knight) holding his land in exchange for military service.

MAINMORTE (see MORTMAIN)

MANOR

A small holding, typically 1200-1800 acres, with its own court and probably its own hall, but not necessarily having a manor house. The manor as a unit of land is generally held by a knight (KNIGHT’S FEE) or managed by a bailiff for some other holder.

MANORIALISM

The agricultural system of personal relationships that organized a laboring population around the estate or manor of a noble lord. It has been defined as economic feudalism.

MARCHER LORD

Lord of a border district, such as the boundaries of Wales and Scotland.

MARK

A measure of silver, generally eight ounces, accepted throughout western Europe. In England a Mark was worth thirteen shillings and four pence, or two thirds of one pound.

MARKET

A place where goods may be bought and sold, established in a village or town with the authorization of a king or lord, secular or ecclesiastical. The lord extends his protection to the market for a fee, and allows its merchants various economic and judicial privileges. See also FAIR.

METROPOLITAN see ARCHBISHOP

MESSUAGE

A home with its adjoining buildings and adjacent land.

MILITARY ORDERS

Special orders of chivalric knighthood organized in connection with the crusades. Military orders fused elements of monastic life with soldiery. The first such order, the Knights of St.John of the Hospital of Jerusalem originated in 1070 with the aim of protecting a hospital for Christian Pilgrims to the Holy Land. Commonly called the Hospitallers, the Knights of St. John flourished during the crusades and acquired various lands in the Mediterranean including the islands of Rhodes and Malta. As the Knights of Malta, the order endures to this day. The second of the military orders and the most famous was first called the Poor Knights of Christ, but quickly became known as the Templars because they had a house on the site of the Temple of Solomon soon after their foundation in 1119. The Templars quickly became so rich that they served as repositors and disbursers of a portion of the French Royal Treasury. This incited jealous opposition and, in 1307, the direct action of the French Monarchy. King Philip IV’s men arrested all the Templars in France for heresy, idolatry, and for various obscene practices. Although many French Templars confessed under torture, investigations of the Order in other countries produced no evidence in support of the charges. Pope Clement V was compelled to sanction the dissolution of the order (at the Council of Vienne, 1312) and to permit the execution of the Grand Master of the Order and others. The Templars’ wealth was transferred to the Hospitallers. Some believe the order has continued to exist in secret from then till today and this has been grist for conspiracy theorists. The third of the major military orders was the Order of Teutonic Knights. Founded in Jerusalem in 1190, this order became focused on conquest and conversion in the Baltic region by the thirteenth century. The order built an Ordenstaat with considerable power by the late thirteenth century. There were two, much smaller military orders founded in Spain.

MILITES CHRISTI

Literally, soldiers of Christ. Some monks (esp. Cistercians) considered themselves to be the soldiers of Christ, who fought against their own flesh and the Devil. This type of monasticism particularly appealed to JUVENES.

MINSTREL (aka jongleur)

A poet and singer who lived and traveled off of the largess of the aristocracy. See also TROUBADOUR/TROUVERE

MONASTERY (aka abbey)

General term for a place where MONKS or Nuns live removed from the corrupting influence of the secular world under the regulation of a monastic rule, sometimes referred to as a “spiritual fortress”. A monastery governed by an Abbot or Abbess (sometimes called an abbey) was essentially autonomous. Monastic houses administered by a prior or prioress (called a priory) were subject to supervision by a superior at another monastery. This was the rule for Cluniac monasteries, which were all under the supervision of the Abbot of Cluny.

MONEYER

A person licensed by the crown to strike coins, receiving the dies from the crown, and keeping 1/240 of the money coined for himself.

MONKS

Men who have abandoned the secular world for a common life of prayer and labor with other like-minded men. Christian monasticism originated in fourth-century Egypt and spread across the Mediterranean quickly. Monks live in a MONASTERY. Most monks live under a monastic rule, such as that of St. Benedict, which regulates their lives to a schedule of prayer, work, reflection, and perhaps learning. Monks take vows of poverty, chastity, and obedience. Monastic orders wear distinctive habits and can be identified by these (e.g., the Black Monks are Benedictines, the White Monks are Cistercians). The major monastic orders of Western Europe during the High Middle Ages were: Benedictines, Carthusians, Cistercians, Cluniacs, and Premonstratensians.

MOOT

Deriving from an Old English term meaning “meeting”, a moot was a decision-making mechanism. As folkmoot, it was a usually open-air gathering of a community, sometimes headed by a royal official (in which manifestation it might be a shiremoot, hundred-moot, or burh-moot), for the administration of local affairs and particularly the administration of justice through local custom. Under Alfredian law, the folkmoot seems to be the mainstay of legal administration. Towns had their own version of the moot, which had aspects both of court and of council meeting; the various names by which versions of this was known in different towns included burhgemot, portmoot, portmanmoot, assembly, and congregation. Assembly and congregation represented more the legislative aspect of the folkmoot, while the others were more the judicial aspect; decision-making remains at the root of each. Husting was yet another term used for a court whose origins may be said to lie with the moot. The term, with Norse derivations (possibly associated with a verb “to speak”), refers to a meeting of the folk (Anglo-Saxon “thing”) – that is male adult free men – inside a building (house), in contrast with the open-air folkmoot. The Viking “thing” had legislative and judicial functions; its method of voting, said to be by participants making a noise with their weapons, was known as “wapentake”, and this later became associated with the region over which the thing had jurisdiction. Although medieval London had both a folkmoot and a husting (the latter visible as early as the tenth century), we should not read too much into this differentiation.

MORTMAIN (aka main mort)

Literally, dead hand. An English term for a conveyance to the Church, either a charitable donation or bequest. From the reign of Edward I, the English Monarchy attempted to prevent the permanent alienation of land to the “dead hand” of the church (and so beyond royal taxation and jurisdiction).

NEPOTISM

The practice of bestowing offices or honors on one’s family members.

OATH

A solemn and binding, sworn promise. The oath of FEALTY is perhaps the best known. Oaths were also commonly used as promises to undertake a specific task or as a means of swearing to the truth of one’s testimony. Oaths were usually sworn on relics, the idea being that the saint would reveal whether the oath taker were truthful or lying, or that the saint would punish the oath taker for failing to keep their promise. In cases where aristocrats or royalty were accused of a crime, they could generally clear themselves by means of swearing an oath and finding OATH-HELPERS to support their testimony.

OATH-HELPER (lat. Compurgator)

One who supports the oath of another. Anyone clearing himself in court by means of an oath had to be supported by oath-helpers who also testified on oath to his truthfulness. Custom, or the court, specified the number of oath-helpers required.

OBLATE/OBLATION

An oblate is a child who is dedicated the Church, usually at the age of 6 or 7. The practice is called oblation. Oblates were raised in the monastery and became monks (or nuns – girls could be dedicated to convents) when they reached adolescence.

ORDEAL

The mode of proof in judicial procedures in Western Europe until the early thirteenth century. An ordeal was a test given to the accused (and sometimes the accuser as well) which determined guilt or innocence definitively. The theory of the ordeal was that God himself intervened in human affairs and through the ordeal would give judgment. The most common ordeal was the ordeal by oath, called Compurgation. The accused would have to pronounce an oath declaring his innocence. If he were to falter in the pronunciation of the words, this would indicate that the accused was guilty. More serious offenses might require that the accused produce a number of supporters who would also have to take and pass the oath test. A slip by one of these “oath-helpers” was as determinative as by the accused himself. Very serious crimes required far more serious ordeals. The two most renowned such ordeals were the ordeals by hot iron and the ordeal by cold water. In the former, the accused was required to pick up a piece of red hot iron, carry it in his hands a prescribed number of steps and set it down again. The hands would then be carefully bandaged. After several days, the bandages would be removed and the hands examined. If they were healing normally, the person was judged innocent, but if they were festering, the judgment was guilty. The cold water ordeal is well known for its application in the Early-Modern period in the witch-craze. The accused would be bound tightly and thrown into a body of water that had been blessed by a priest. If the accused sank and was thus received by the water, the judgment was innocent, but if he floated and was thus rejected by the water, the judgment was guilty. Presumably, the accused would be taken from the water before drowning.

Although the Ordeal is commonly regarded as thoroughly irrational, it was used within a quite rational tradition of negotiation, based upon a principle of reciprocity. If the accuser and the accused could not agree to settle the dispute and it proceeded to law, the accused would have to vindicate himself by the prescribed ordeal. If the accused made his ordeal, the accuser would then be required to make the same ordeal in order to vindicate himself against the charge of bringing a false accusation. In such cases, the accuser was then subject to the same penalty as that which would have applied to the accused. Like the present system of English civil law, which requires the loser to pay all the legal costs of the case in addition to any damages, this system provided a tremendous incentive to settlement and a discouragement to weak suits.

There were other ordeals used in different regions such as walking on hot coals or pulling stones from the bottom of a pot of boiling water. One other sort of ordeal that was reserved for members of the aristocracy was trial by combat. Parties to a dispute could fight themselves, or they could put up a champion to fight in their place. Combat could be to the first blood or to the death. The use of champions in trial by combat is a sort of anthropological origin of the Common law reliance upon lawyers in a trial.

OUTLAWRY

The process of putting a person outside the protection of the law. A milder sentence of outlawry could be used in cases where an accused person failed to appear in court; the more serious sentence of major outlawry was generally reserved for cases of contumacy, treason, and felony. The milder sentence deprived an outlaw of his civil rights (people were prohibited from assisting him or offering him food or shelter) and was used to coerce the outlaw into recognizing the court’s jurisdiction over him. Anyone declared a major outlaw was banished from the kingdom for life, forfeited his possessions to the Crown, and could be killed on sight if found within the kingdom.

OYER AND TERMINER

To hear and give judgment. A court of Oyer and Terminer was one of final judgment usually held by one of the king’s judges.

PANNAGE

An English legal term for the practice of turning domestic pigs out in a wood or forest to forage for food such as fallen acorns. It also refers to the right to allow pigs to forage in the woods, and to payments made to a lord for this right.

PARLIAMENT

English legislative and judicial body that evolved from the King’s Great Council. The crucial period for the expansion of this body to include both common people and nobles was from the late-thirteenth to the late fourteenth century. The English kings were in constant need of money to prosecute their wars and summoned larger and larger numbers to council. These members made grants to the crown contingent upon having their complaints heard and generally being paid attention to.

PATRIMONY

The lands, rights, and/or titles inherited from one’s father.

PENANCE

A Catholic sacrament. Penance describes the series of activities a penitent performs to atone for the commission of a sin; these include repentance, confession, atonement, and absolution. More generally, the term is used to characterize the works of satisfaction imposed on or recommended to a penitent by a priest.

PREBEND (see BENEFICE)

PRESENTATION (in English law aka Advowson)

In the canon law of patronage, the right of a patron to nominate a candidate for a benefice. It was expected that a “suitable” nominee would receive the benefice, but from the late-twelfth century, the papacy tried to weaken this presumption and to undermine this right.

PRIMOGENITURE

The right of the eldest son to inherit the estate or office of his father.

PRIORY (see MONASTERY)

REEVE

Originally, an Anglo-Saxon royal administrator responsible for justice. This office evolved into the SHERIFF (from shire reeve – the king’s deputy in the county). The title Reeve also applied to the supervisor or the foreman of a manor – the manor Reeve performed the same task as the bailiff, but he was elected by and from the tenantry.

RELIEF

The fee paid by the heir of a deceased person on securing possession of a FIEF. The amount of relief was normally set by CUSTOM, but circumstances such as the strength or weakness of the lord could well affect this. A lord in a particularly strong position might demand a much larger sum in relief, but demands for very high relief might well drive a lord’s VASSALs into rebellion.

SAKE AND SOKE

The right to hold a judicial court and retain the fines imposed by that court.

SARACENS

A term used in the Middle Ages for Muslims/Arabs from the Saracen Empire (another name for the Muslim Caliphate). The term Saracen (“not from Sarah”) is derived from biblical genealogies which assert that the Arabs are the descendants of Hagar, Sarah’s handmaiden.

SCOT AND LOT

Taxes and tribute, usually assessed by district.

SCUTAGE

Literally, “shield money.” This is a term used in England for monetary payments made to the King by KNIGHTS in lieu of military service. In the twelfth century, as military professionalism grew and a commercial economy developed in Western Europe, King Henry II realized that he could fight more efficiently with paid troops rather than feudal levies which were bound to include many soldiers of little skill. Thus he began the practice of commuting knight service for cash payments. In the early thirteenth century, King John tried to collect scutage more than once per year, which helped to drive his BARONS into a major rebellion.

SEE – also known as a diocese.

A general term for the geographical extent of the jurisdiction of any bishop. Any bishopric is a See, as is any archbishopric, as is the “universal” jurisdiction of the papacy. One refers to an episcopal see, or to the Apostolic see (i.e. the papal jurisdiction over the whole Church).

SEISIN

A term used in the feudal system of England after the Norman Conquest. Seisin is the right to possess a piece of land. In theory, the cCown in England owned all the land in the realm except for some which was owned by the Church. But even though the Lords and Vassals beneath the King owned no land, they possessed a lot of it and that right of possession, called Seisin, was given a considerable degree of protection in law. (Disseisin is the term used for the seizure of a piece of land, the taking away of another’s seisin.)

SERF

The term has both a general and a specific meaning; in general the term serf means any unfree person. The term applies to those agricultural workers who bind themselves to landholders by oath or are born in such a status. The serf exchanges aspects of his freedom for protection and a measure of security. In most cases this entailed the obligation of the serf either to do agricultural labor on the lord’s fields, or to provide a portion of the produce from land that the lord permitted him to farm, or both. In a more narrow, legal sense serfs were the most unfree of the unfree: a true serf was bound to a plot of land and could not move or marry or make a number of other such life decisions without the consent of his lord. Usually, such permission had a price. Villein, by contrast, is a term that refers to agricultural workers in a feudal system who are basically free, having only the obligation to do labor for the lord on a defined number of days. Serfdom was an advantageous condition in times of chaos, such as the late ninth and early tenth century when a variety of invading people’s made life extremely dangerous in Western Europe. Furthermore, because true serfs were, in effect, completely under the jurisdiction of their lords, they were not subject to the legal power of anyone else, and anyone who harmed a serf would have to answer to his lord who was obligated to protect the serf (and his own honor).

SERGEANT

A servant who accompanies his lord to battle, or a horseman of lower status used as light cavalry. Sergeants owe service of a non-knightly character to a lord. Such persons might carry the lord’s banner, serve in the wine cellar, make bows and arrows, or any other dozen occupations. Sergeants pay the feudal dues of WARDSHIP, FORMARRIAGE, and RELIEF but are exempt from SCUTAGE (because they are non-knightly).

SHERIFF

(From Shire Reeve) The official who is the chief administrative and judicial officer of a shire. Many of its jobs where taken over by the itinerant justice, coroner, and justice of the peace. The Sheriff collected taxes and forwarded them on to the EXCHEQUER, after taking his share.

SHILLING

Measure of money used only for accounting purposes and equal to 12 pennies.

SHIRE

English county. The shire court conducted the administrative, judicial and financial business of people living in the county.

SIMONY

The buying or selling of spiritual things, particularly church offices and benefices. The word derives from the biblical story of Simon Magus who tried to buy from the apostles the power to perform miracles.

SOCAGE

Socage was one of the feudal duties and hence land tenure forms in the feudal system. A farmer, for example, held socage land in exchange for a clearly-defined, fixed payment to be made at specified intervals to his feudal lord, who in turn had his own feudal obligations to the Crown. In theory this might involve supplying the lord with produce but most usually it meant a straightforward payment of cash, i.e., rent.

SOKEMAN

A sokeman belonged to a class of tenants, found chiefly in the eastern counties, occupying an intermediate position between the free tenants and the bond tenants or villeins. As a general rule they had personal freedom, but performed many of the agricultural services of the villeins. Historians generally suppose they bore the rank of “sokemen” because they belonged within a lord’s soke or jurisdiction.

TAILLE (aka tallage)

A word with several meanings: literally, “an exaction”, a taille can refer to an irregular tax imposed on peasants by a lord at his will. Such taille could be both arbitrary and onerous. Taille can also refer to a tax imposed on a town as a price for liberties such as a market, again imposed arbitrarily. In France, the taille refers to emergency taxes imposed by the king on households. Such taxes were called “fouages” until the late fourteenth century when that term was replaced by the more general, taille. By the fifteenth century, this taille became an annualized tax collected by region.

TEMPLARS (See MILITARY ORDERS)

TENANT-IN-CHIEF

English nomenclature for a VASSAL who holds his FIEF directly from the king. All barons are Tenants in Chief.

TEUTONIC KNIGHTS (See MILITARY ORDERS)

THEGN (aka Thane)

A term used in Northern Europe and the British Isles during the Early Middle Ages meaning a military companion to the king. It came to mean a land-holding administrative office.

TITHING

A group of householders in the Frankpledge system. Originally a tithing had ten members, but eventually numbers varied considerably.

TOFT

An enclosure for a farmstead.

TOLL AND TEAM

The privilege of having a market, and jurisdiction over villeins.

TONSURE

The rite of shaving the crown of the head of the person joining a monastic order or the secular clergy. It is a visible sign of admission to the CLERGY.

TOURNAMENT/TOURNEY

Practice combat for knights.

T.R.E. (abbreviation for *tempus Regis Edwardi*, “in the time of King Edward”)

Used as an abbreviation in Domesday Book to note the state of holdings during the time of King Edward, as opposed to the time in which the Domesday inquest was undertaken (i.e. 1086).

TREASURER

In the English Monarchy, the chief financial officer of the realm and senior officer of the EXCHEQUER.

VASSAL

A free man who holds a FIEF from a lord to whom he swears HOMAGE AND FEALTY. He owes various obligations, primarily military. But he is also required to advise his lord and pay him the traditional feudal aids required on the knighting of the lord’s eldest son, the marriage of the lord’s eldest daughter, and the ransoming of the lord should he be held captive.

VILLEIN

The least unfree of the unfree (see SERF). Villeins owed labor service to a lord, were subject to his manorial court, bound to the land, and subject to certain feudal dues. They were also the wealthiest class of peasant and usually cultivated 20-40 acres of land.

USURY

Excessive interest on money loaned. Usury was forbidden by canon law based upon biblical injunctions. There was an intense debate among theologians and jurists as to how much interest was excessive and what was a “just price”.

WAPENTAKE

A historical subdivision of some northern counties in England, corresponding roughly to the hundred in other shires.

WARDSHIP

The right of a feudal lord to the income of a fief during the minority of its heir. The lord was required to maintain the fief and to take care of the material needs of the ward. When the ward came of age, the lord was required to release the fief to him in the same condition in which he had received it.

WASTE

The term generally given to land which is unusable or uncultivated within a holding. It is not taxed. It is sometimes referred to land destroyed by war or raids, which is likewise not subject to tax.

WERGELD

A reparational or compensatory payment usually demanded of a person guilty of homicide or other wrongful death, although it could also be demanded in other cases of serious crime. In early Germanic law, each person’s life and limbs had a set monetary value (the value varied according to a person’s status), and this monetary value was paid by a wrongdoer to the family of the person who had been injured or killed.

WITAN (aka Witanagemot)

Council composed of nobles and churchmen that advised the Anglo Saxon Kings of England and chose the successor to the throne of the Anglo-Saxon realm. This evolved into the king’s council, then the Great Council, and finally into Parliament.

WRIT

Most broadly, an English word for an official document produced by the chancery from the time of the Anglo-Saxon monarchs on. King Henry II (d.1189) greatly reformed the operation of legal and judicial institutions in England so that writs became the principal mechanism for invoking Royal jurisdiction in various legal disputes. Henry devised four specific actions (called ASSIZEs in this context) concerning possessory rights which were initiated by writs of the same name: 1) novel disseisin: designed to compel the return of SEISIN of land to the rightful holder; 2) mort d’ancestor: designed to assist heirs who have not been allowed to take possession of lands which should have come to them; 3) darrein presentment: designed to settle disputes over advowson, a right to present candidates for an ecclesiastical benefice (see PRESENTATION); and 4) utrum: designed to determine whether a particular holding was secular or ecclesiastical. A bit later was developed the assize and writ praecipe, designed to enforce a conveyance of land by fine.