

in memoriam

V.E.N.

S.C.S.

An interest in the middle ages often brings the non-specialist reader up short against a word or term which is not understood or only imperfectly understood. This dictionary is intended to put an end to all that: it has been designed to be of real help to general readers and specialists alike.

The dictionary contains some 3,400 terms as headwords, ranging from the legal and ecclesiastic to the more prosaic words of daily life. Latin was the language of the church, law and government, and many Latin terms illustrated here are frequently found in modern books of history of the period; similarly, the precise meaning of Old English and Middle English terms may elude today's reader: this dictionary endeavours to provide clarity. In addition to definition, etymologies of many words are given, in the belief that knowing the origin and evolution of a word gives a better understanding. There are also examples of medieval terms and phrases still in use today, a further aid to clarifying meaning.

CHRISTOPHER COREDON has also compiled the *Dictionary of Cybernymys*. Dr ANN WILLIAMS, historical consultant on the project, was until her retirement Senior Lecturer in medieval history at the Polytechnic of North London.

“Will attract any student and teacher and librarian keen to get a reasonably-priced all-purpose quick reference guide to some 3,000-4,000 terms regularly used in, and often found in, sources from and about the Middle Ages. [...] A dictionary, then, very clear to use, general-purpose as well as a useful desk-source for the expert, and suitable for the academic library where the medieval period is seriously studied.” LIBRARY REVIEW.

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A DICTIONARY OF
MEDIEVAL TERMS
AND PHRASES

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with Ann Williams

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DICTIONARY

A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, I, J, K, L, M, N, O, P, Q, R, S, T, U, V, W, X, Y, Z

Regnal Dates

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Titles of Related Interest

PREFACE

In recent years, history has become the focus of increasing popular interest, both in book form and on television. This dictionary is intended not for historiographers (who will not need it) but rather for the readers of history who are neither specialists nor academically trained.

There is an astonishing amount of material that is readily available today. *Domesday Book* can be bought in a modern translation, in one paperback volume, for less than the cost of a ticket to a football match – all two million words. There are paperback editions of texts of the period, in which the voice of the time can still be heard, while *Bracton* is easily accessible on the Internet. And there is, of course, the literature. From Geoffrey of Monmouth to Chaucer, to Thomas Malory – it is all available, sometimes in modern English, and there the imagination of the past can be seen and heard at work. The people are recognisable. Chaucer is subject to adaptations which attempt to make him ‘relevant’: but modernisation strips his characters of just what it is that makes them recognisably flesh-and-blood human beings: their voice and milieu. Malory’s *Morte D’Arthur* was being printed by Caxton in the same year as the Battle of Bosworth, 1485: a decisive exposition of the Arthurian legend which had persisted throughout this period appeared simultaneously with the battle which was the last of the era we call medieval.

The period can be made to look very good, even glamorous, with well-chosen pictures. Iconic knights in armour on gorgeously arrayed horses, the castles and tournaments, the brightly coloured clothing of the men and women of the nobility, so rich in comparison with ours, so unlike that of the little-seen peasantry – all provide evocative images. But all that they thought and believed was utterly different, even alien, to our ways of thought and belief. The Church and its place in the lives of those people, its power over actions and its intimate place in daily life and thought is just one such profound difference among many.

The medieval period is separated from us by language as much as time. This was a time of languages: English, French and Latin. English, and its several dialects, was spoken by the majority; French/Anglo-Norman was the language of power, while Latin was used by scholars here and throughout Europe and in the writing of history and the making of records, e.g. the rolls which record government business. Therefore this dictionary includes words and terms in those languages, because to write about the past, the modern historian must use the terms and language used in that past. Inevitably, the non-specialist reader encounters words which are either unfamiliar or, more often, words being used which are ‘sort of’ understood, are familiar, but which, when checked, turn out to have unexpected meanings. In an attempt to aid a better understanding of these terms, an etymology has been given to many of them: the unfamiliar becomes clearer if one can see something of its origin. However, no claim to originality is being made by including etymologies. All have been checked against those offered in *The Oxford English Dictionary* and Onions’s *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology*. They have been placed at the end of each definition, so as not to obtrude.

So far as possible, persons have been kept out of definitions. Bede (c.673– 735), Geoffrey of Monmouth (c.1100–54) and the great chronicler and court historian, Jean

Froissart (*c.*1333–1400/01), are mentioned, as is John Wyclif (*c.*1330–84). Fortunately, historical terms do not rely upon individuals. However, the time of their use is important and therefore monarchs are named without hesitation. (For those who are a little uncertain about the regnal dates of the Henrys and Edwards, and others, a list has been appended.) To include less familiar names without an entry and details of their life would be unhelpful; information on those few which are included should be readily available.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks are due to David Ferris, Curator of Rare Books and Manuscripts at Harvard Law Library, for permission to quote from their on-line edition of Bracton's *De Legibus et Consuetudinibus Angliae*. This site gives both the Latin text and an English translation. The URL of the home page is: <http://hls15.law.harvard.edu/bracton/index.htm>, where there can be found details about both text and translation.

I wish to express my great debt of gratitude to Dr Ann Williams, who kindly read this dictionary in its final stages, at a time of ill-health and when she was occupied with valuable work of her own. The lightness with which she wore her scholarship only enhanced her suggestions and made her corrections a pleasure – which learning always should be. This dictionary is much improved as a result of her scrutiny. Further thanks are owed to Clive Tolley for his editorial rigour and his *kotkansilmä*. Obviously, errors that remain are mine. Thanks are also due to PHG for encouragement and an easy hand when pouring drinks.

ABBREVIATIONS

abbr.	abbreviation, abbreviated
AL	Anglo-Latin
AN	Anglo-Norman
approx.	approximately
Ar.	Arabic
AS	Anglo-Saxon
<i>ASC</i>	<i>Anglo-Saxon Chronicle</i>
c	century
<i>c.</i>	<i>circa</i>
d	penny/pence, e.g. 30d = 30 pennies/pence
d.	died
<i>DB</i>	<i>Domesday Book</i>
dim.	diminutive
Du.	Dutch
Fr.	French
Gr.	Greek
<i>Her.</i>	heraldry
Ir.	Irish
Ital.	Italian
L	Latin
<i>LHP</i>	<i>Leges Henrici Primi</i>
lit.	literally (of a translated word or phrase)
ME	Middle English, between <i>c.</i> 1066 and <i>c.</i> 1500
MS	manuscript
OE	Old English, between <i>c.</i> 500 and <i>c.</i> 1066
OFr.	Old French
ON	Old Norse
orig.	original, originally
s	shilling, e.g. 2s = two shillings
W	Welsh
[]	brackets enclose alternative forms of headwords, and etymologies
<	is derived from
*	cross-reference to a Headword

A

À outrance. The term used to describe jousting in a hostile manner, when injury or death were expected and even wished for. Jousting could also be *à plaisir*, for pleasure. [< OFr. *outrance* = beyond bounds, extreme; Fr. *à outrance* = to the bitter end] – Cf. [À PLAISIR](#); [JOUST OF PEACE](#); [JOUST OF WAR](#)

À plaisir. Term used to describe jousting for pleasure, as a test of skill, rather than mortal combat. In such an event points were variously scored. – Cf. *previous*; [JOUST OF PEACE](#); [JOUST OF WAR](#)

Abacus. Orig. a flat surface or board covered with sand and used as a drawing board by mathematicians; architecturally the top, flat part of a capital (supporting the architrave); latterly the computing device made of rows of beads.

Abaddon [Apollyon]. Angel of the Bottomless Pit; also, hell itself. Hell seemed powerfully real at this time. The terror of spending eternity in hell added greatly to the universal fear of death. The fires were not considered to be metaphorical but to be real: it was the Inferno, the place of punishment.

Abatement [rebatement]. *Her.* A **charge* or mark of disgrace. It was either sanguine or **tenné* in colour. An older version of the names of the colours was ‘staynande colours’. Such marks were rarely, if ever, used: no one willingly displayed signs of disgrace. [ME *abate* = to bring down, curtail] – Cf. [GUSSET](#)

Abba. Christ used this Aramaic word when speaking of God; from this came the title **abbot*. St Benedict determined on the use of abbot in his *Rule*. A similar title, *abuna*, was used by Syrian Christians and Ethiopians of a priest. The Arabic *abuna* = father.

Abbacy. Office of either an **abbot* or **abbess*; the Latin form is *abbatia*.

Abbess. The head of a community of nuns; after the Dissolution of the monasteries, the madam of a brothel, a usage which suggests vigorous Protestantism. The Latin form was *abbatissa*. – Cf. [ABBOT](#)

Abbey. A community of monks or nuns, governed by an **abbot* or **abbess*; thus the building of such a community – each was part of one of the monastic orders; after the Dissolution, a church once belonging to such a community. [< OFr. *abbeie* < L *abbatia* = abbey, monastery]

Abbey lubber. A lubber = an idle person, a sponger. Abbey lubber was one who existed on **doles* and alms given out by abbeys and religious houses. They were considered professional beggars. – Cf. [BEGGING](#); [CUSTOM HOUSE](#)

Abbot. The head of a community of monks; also spelt ‘abbat’ till the 17c. [< L *abbas* <

Aramaic *abba* = father] – Cf. [ABBA](#); [ABBESS](#); [FILIATIO](#)

Abbreviatio. An abbreviation of the *[DB](#) was made during the early part of the 13c by the monks of Westminster Abbey for presentation to King Henry III by way of thanks for the work he had done in rebuilding the abbey.

Abecedarius. A name given to a school pupil just beginning to read.

Abel. Second son of Adam and Eve; considered a kind of Christ-figure because of his good life and particularly his violent death. – Cf. [CAIN](#)

Abjure. To renounce something under oath usually on the Bible: in a time of faith, a solemn act. – Cf. *next*

Abjure the realm. Permanent exile. The sentence to leave the kingdom was applied to many who had sought *[sanctuary](#). Once the 40 days' sanctuary was over, a criminal was given the chance to abjure the realm. The guilty person was assigned a port to leave the kingdom from and a specific route to follow; the time permitted might be as little as seven days or as much as 40 days. He was dressed in a long white garment, of the kind usually worn by someone under sentence of death. He also carried a cross to show he was under protection to discourage the aggrieved from punishing the man themselves – which happened often enough. – Cf. *previous*; [NORTHAMPTON, ASSIZE OF](#)

Abraham, bosom of. Phrase used of the place of bliss found by the righteous dead. It was an image much used by medieval artists, expressed by showing figures sitting on the lap of Abraham the patriarch.

Abutment. That point where a support and what is supported meet, e.g. a supporting wall, pillar, buttress and an arch.

Abyss. *Her.* The centre of an *[escutcheon](#). – Cf. [FESS POINT](#)

Acceptor. Latin term for a hawk. The word was qualified by many adjectives. For example, *acceptor de pertica* = a hawk off the perch; *acceptor mutatus* = a mewed hawk; *acceptoricus canis* = a spaniel accompanying hunts with hawks. – Cf. [MEW](#)

Accident. A medieval philosophic concept indicating the material body of an object, as distinct from its essence (referred to as 'substance'). Thus in eucharistic transubstantiation the accident of the bread, i.e. its material quality as bread, was believed to remain, while the words of consecration had changed its substance or essence into the body of Christ.

Accidentia. Accidental or non-predictable items of royal income. While a rent and *[farm](#) might be fixed, a *[fine](#) or *[tallage](#) could be increased in number and value.

Accidie. What today we might call depression: a torpid state, lacking interest in anything and suggesting sloth. It was a condition which afflicted monks, as despair was considered one of the seven deadly sins. [< L *acedia* = weariness of body or soul] – Cf. [SINS, SEVEN DEADLY](#)

Acclamation. Word used for the loudly voiced acceptance of a new monarch at his

coronation. It was a part of the procedure of electing monarchs before the Conquest. At William I's coronation on Christmas Day, 1066, in Westminster Abbey, the cry of acclamation was so loud that William's soldiers, on guard outside, thought he was being attacked and went on a rampage, killing many people and burning down a great many buildings. [< L *acclamo* = to acclaim]

Accolade. Ceremonial embrace or salute at the bestowal of a knighthood after the familiar tap, **adoubement*, on the shoulder with a sword. Orig. the important moment was the girding on of the knight's sword and spurs. [OFr. *acoler* = embrace about the neck] – Cf. CINGULUM MILITARE; DUB

Accompanied. *Her.* Used of a **charge* which is found between two others. – Cf. ACCOSTED

Accorné. *Her.* Having horns of a different **tincture* from the body's. [< OFr. *corne* = horn]

Accosted. *Her.* Term for two charges placed either side of a third. [< L *accosto* = to be beside] – Cf. ACCOMPANIED

Accroupi. *Her.* Resting, of a lion. [< OFr. *croup* = an animal's rear]

Accrued. *Her.* Describes a **charge* in the form of a full-grown tree. [< L *accresco* = to grow]

Achievement. *Her.* A word synonymous with the more common 'hatchments'. It was used esp. of coats of **arms* displayed at a funeral, or on the front of the house of one who had died, or before a **tournament*, which indicated a particularly distinguished feat of arms. When a monarch died his or her arms were blazoned on a **sable* field.

Acolyte. A priest's assistant who carried out lesser tasks, such as carrying candles. He would have been a member of one of the four **minor* orders. [< L *acolytus* < Gr. *akolouthos* = follower]

Acre. Orig. a piece of arable, tillable land; a unit of measure = 4,840 sq yards. – Cf. FURLONG; ROOD 1

Acrostic. Poems in which the first or last letters of successive lines formed a word or phrase were popular in this period. The hiddenness of the acrostic gave it a didactic quality which accorded with an impulse which found more evident expression in the **mendicant* preachers. – Cf. CAYME'S CASTLES

Acton [aketon]. A padded, stuffed vest or undergarment worn beneath **mail*. [< Ar. *al-qutun* = cotton]

Acts of mercy. See CORPORAL ACTS OF MERCY

AD. See ANNO DOMINI

Ad aratrum. Lit. ‘at the plough’. – Cf. [IN PECUNIA](#)

Ad limina. Lit. ‘to the threshold’. Phrase used of an archbishop’s visits to the threshold of the apostles, i.e. Rome. Having received the *[pallium](#) it was expected that he should go to Rome every three years, if possible.

Ad malam. Lit. ‘at rent’. The term used in records and accounts for land rented out. The OE word, *mal*, was simply latinised. [< OE *mal* = rent] – Cf. [AD OPUS](#); [MALMAN](#)

Ad opus. Lit. ‘at work’. Land worked by villeins was known as *ad opus*, i.e. being worked. – Cf. [AD MALAM](#); [MALMAN](#)

Ad pondum. Lit. ‘by weight’. Method of payment in which coins were weighed, rather than counted. Latin *pondus* = pound, from which our monetary pound. – Cf. [TALE](#)

Ad quod damnum. Lit. ‘at what damage?’ The phrase was used of inquisitions undertaken to discover what damage or loss of revenue the king might incur in a district or town if he granted a market licence.

Ad succurrendum. Lit. ‘towards salvation’. The medieval Latin term used of the benefactor of a monastery who, late in life, joined that house as a full member. [< L *succurro* = run to the aid of, to help]

Adder. *Her.* When used heraldically, adder referred to any kind of snake, for which ‘serpent’ was a synonym; asps were also named in this context. Visually there was no difference except for the *[tincture](#).

Addice. See [ADZE](#)

Addorsed [endorsed]. *Her.* Term used of two animals shown back to back; it could be used of any object in a *[blazon](#). – Cf. [AFFRONTANT](#)

Adelingus. Latin form of *[atheling](#).

Adjure. To put a person on oath. [< L *adjuro* = to swear]

Admiral. Although ships had always been used in war, the first time an English admiral was appointed with that title to be in charge of a fleet was 1303, when Gervaise Alard was so appointed by Edward II as captain and admiral of the *[Cinque Ports](#)’ fleet. However, a commission had been issued in 1295 naming Barrau de Sescas as admiral. Later that year two further appointments were made by royal writ. One of those named, Sir William Leyburn, was described as *amiraux de nostre navie Dengleterre*. The title captain and admiral of the fleet was used until 1344. An admiral of all the fleets was commissioned in 1360, there being North, West and Other fleets at the time. Clerks of the king’s ships provided administration between times of war from the 13c until a navy board was created in 1546. [< Ar. *amirail* = a *[Saracen](#) ruler or commander; *amir-al-bahr* = commander of the sea; thus admiral; cf. *emir*] – Cf. *next*

Admiralty, Black Book of the. MS containing documents connected with the admiralty

of Sir Thomas Beaufort, 9 Hen. VI; ordinances of war made in 1385 and 1419. Volumes II–IV contain the Domesday of Ipswich, the laws of ***Oléron**, the Spanish *Consolat de la Mar*, the maritime laws of Gotland, Visby, Flanders, etc. The book is a collection of laws, in French and Latin, relating to the navy, the original MS of which is preserved in the admiralty archives at Whitehall.

Adoubement. The ceremonial tap on the shoulder at the knighting ceremony. – Cf. **ACCOLADE**; **DUB**

Adscriptus glebae. The term describing the status of a ***serf** as ‘belonging to the land’; one who could be transferred with it were the land to change lord. [< L *adscriptus* = stated in writing (and belonging) + *glebae* = to the land] – Cf. **ATTORN**

Adulterine castle. Modern term for castles built without the king’s permission. In ***LHP** building a castle without licence (*castellatio sine licentia*) placed the builder *in misericordia regis* = in the king’s mercy. During the ***anarchy** of King Stephen’s reign many hundreds of such castles were built. However, these were not the stone-built castles which still stand. Rather they were all hastily thrown up, wooden stockades on earth mounds. One such construct, given the name of castle, was nothing more than a wooden square atop a church tower.

Adumbration. *Her.* A figure shown in outline or in shadow.

Adventus Saxonum. Lit. ‘the advent or arrival of the ***Saxons** (in England)’. Just when they began to settle here is far from clear. Between the departure of the Romans in 410 and the late 6c there is not much that can with certainty be given a year date. Bede has the Saxons settling 450–5; the ***ASC** gives 449 as their first entry into England.

Advocatus ecclesiae. Lit. ‘advocate of the church’. Latin term for a lord who undertook to protect a monastery or church from secular enemies and to act as patron. There was a ceremony at which he took an oath and his sword was blessed. This ceremony evolved from the ***Truce** of God which had emerged in the 10c. It was, however, a position with the potential for abuse: the advocate could too easily ask for money by way of confirmation. In other words, protection money could be demanded. The *advocatus* was also known sometimes in the Latin records as *actor ecclesiae* = acting (in the sense of doing something) for the church.

Advowson. The right to present a clergyman for appointment to the bishop of the diocese by one who had the patronage or was guardian of a ***benefice** or an ecclesiastical house. Advowson was an incorporeal inheritance. The Latin used in 13c records was *advocatia*. [< L *advoco* = to summon (a priest to serve)]

Adze [addice]. *Her.* An axe.

Æhtemann. A serf or bondsman. [< OE *aht* = possessions, a serf]

Ærendraca. A king’s agent or messenger, though perhaps not officially so as was the ***nuncius regis** of later times; rather a *legatus regis*, or ambassador perhaps, charged with specific tasks. The rank is now unclear but was akin to that of ***staller** and ***pedesecus**. [<

OE *arende* = message + *raca* = someone who moves forward]

Æthel. First element of numerous aristocratic AS names = noble. [< OE *æðel* = noble, of good birth] – *Cf. next*

Ætheling. Prince or lord. A member of a royal AS family; a prince of the blood royal and heir to the throne; a person considered worthy of the throne. When used in the **ASC* it was nearly always applied to members of the West Saxon royal family. [< OE *æðeling* = prince] – *Cf. previous*

Affer. See *AVER*

Affinity 1. **Canon* law was strict in forbidding marriage between couples too closely related by marriage or by being a godparent. Such marriages could be rendered null by the Church. Thus, though a later instance, Henry VIII's marriage to Catherine of Aragon was deemed null because she had allegedly been married to Henry's brother, Arthur. When, in the 11c and 12c, the Latin *affinitas* was used it was this sense that was intended, not the second political sense found in the following entry. [< L *affinitas* = relationship] – *Cf. next*

Affinity 2. Affinity is used today to describe the network of relations within a magnate's own country. This comprised knights and esquires who supported him in local affairs. During Edward III's reign, and the emergence of **bastard* feudalism, magnates began to take on permanent retainers; they were also extending their power and were able to influence local courts through which they intimidated those they wished to constrain. While the **justice-in-eyre* system might bring central authority to justice, local politics remained comfortably within the magnate's hands. – *Cf. previous; BUZONE; FAUTOR*

Afforestation. The conversion into a designated forest with the legal trappings attaching thereto which circumscribed or forbade hunting by any but the lord. The Normans were particularly avid hunters and greatly extended forest law. Perhaps a third of England was subject to such law under the Norman kings and early Plantagenets. The New Forest, as it is still known a millennium later, was created by William I in 1079. – *Cf. DISAFFORESTATION; FOREST ASSIZES; FOREST, CHARTER OF THE*

Affrontant. *Her.* Describes two animals facing each other. Synonyms are 'confronting' and 'respecting'. – *Cf. next; ADDORSED*

Affronty. *Her.* The term for a **charge* shown facing outwards at the viewer, particularly when that charge is a lion. This is known as 'full aspect' when used of birds. – *Cf. previous*

-age. Suffix which gives a quality to a word it is attached to, e.g. **courage*. [< Fr. *age* < L-*aticus*] – *Cf. -AGIUM*

Agist. To admit livestock into a forest but more usually to pasture for a set time, and/or at a specified cost. The term is still used in Cumbria when sheep farmers move their flocks to lower pasture in winter. [< AN *gister* = to lodge] – *Cf. next*

Agistment tithes. The **tithe* imposed upon the owner of land used for agisting; later, the right to the use of forest land, its **herbage*. – *Cf. previous; GISEMENT*

Agistor. Officer in charge of **agistment*; an officer who watched over the king's forests. – Cf. *AGIST*; *FOREST ASSIZES*

-agium. Second element of Latin words such as **ancoragium*, **barragium*, **berbiagium*, **hibernagium*, functioning as the equivalent English element *-age* which gives a quality, and here a sense of right or privilege, e.g. **faldage*. – Cf. *-AGE*

Agnate. Term indicating common descent within a kindred group from one particular male ancestor, usually on the male side. – Cf. *LLWYTH*

Agnung. Ownership, possession; also proof of ownership of land. [< OE *agnung* = ownership] – Cf. *TALU*

Agnus Dei. Lit. 'lamb of God'. The phrase used by John the Baptist of Christ, taken from the book of Isaiah 53:7. Later the two words became the opening a part of the mass. The lamb became a familiar icon or symbol of Christ, e.g. in Æthelred the Unready's coinage of c.1009 and later in both medieval and Byzantine painting.

Ague. Feverish sickness with high fever, perhaps the **sweating* sickness or malaria. Severe cases were probably genuine influenza; others, the bad head-cold we persist in calling 'flu. [< L *acuta* = acute]

AH. The Latin abbreviation of *Anno Hejira*, the year of Mohammed's flight to Medina, which in the Christian calendar was 622. This year is considered the beginning of the Islamic era and thus of the Islamic calendar. It is analogous to **AD*.

Aide de la venerie. Lit. 'helper of the hunt'. AN title for an assistant huntsman, used of young men with some years experience of hunting, with horses of their own. This was a route into the knighthood for ambitious young men not nobly born. As an *aide* the young man, perhaps 20 years old, would have a **varlet* of his own. The horses used on these occasions were not esp. bred; the **courser* and **palfrey* were ridden to hounds. Such riding skills acquired as an aide were considered vital to one who might become a knight. – Cf. *LYMER*; *VARLET DES CHIENS*

Aids. One of the obligations or **feudal* incidents of a tenant requiring him to make payments of money to his lord. Requests were prompted by many occasions; however, **Magna Carta* imposed limits. **Bracton* distinguished between services or concomitant services and 'reasonable aids', i.e. the giving of money. The occasions permitted for the request of an aid were: the knighting of an eldest son, and the first marriage of an eldest daughter. Others were for the need or indigence of the lord, e.g. the giving of money for a ransom to release the lord. – Cf. *TALLAGE*

Aiguise. *Her.* Pointed, esp. sharply so. [< Fr. *aiguiser* = sharpen]

Aislé. *Her.* Used of a creature depicted with wings which it does not have naturally. [< Fr. *aile* = a wing]

Ait. See *EYOT*; *WICK*

Ajouré. *Her.* The term used of a *chief which can be seen through or is *crenellé.

Aketon. *See* ACTON

al-. The Arabic definite article. It is still to be found in English words such as *algebra and *alchemy, the consequence of Europe benefiting from Arabic learning.

Alant. *Her.* A *charge showing a short-eared mastiff.

Alb. The white vestment, usually floor length, worn by all *clergy, from *acolyte to bishop. [< L *albus* = white]

Alba firma. Lit. ‘white *farm, white payment’. The annual rent payable to a lord, esp. the king, in ‘white money’, i.e. assayed silver. – *Cf.* BLANCH FARM; INBLANCH; WETHERSILVER

Alberia. *Her.* Used of a shield devoid of charges, being wholly white or *argent. [< L *albus* = white]

Alce. *Her.* Another term for a *griffin.

Alchemy. The science and chemistry of the Middle Ages, popularly known for the search for a means of turning base metal into gold, and also for an elixir of life. It was a resource of great knowledge of metals, allied with a belief that a perfectly pure substance could purify what was base by contact. Dante placed alchemists in the eighth circle of the *Inferno* with all other falsifiers. [< Ar. *al-kimiya* = art of transmuting metals]

Alcoran. The *Koran.

Alderman. The senior member or warden of a *guild; latterly, a borough magistrate or officer equivalent to mayor. [< OE *ealdorman* = a prince or chief, ruler of a district]

Ale. A pale brew made without hops. Without tea or coffee, and the water not reliable, those unable to get wine drank ale, small beer or cider. [< OE *ealu* = ale, beer]

Ale-conner. An inspector of ale; every village or place with an *ale-house would have had one. [*conner* = an inspector or examiner < OE *cunnan* = to know] – *Cf.* ASSIZE

Alegar. Malt vinegar, a vinegar made from ale; for the poor who brewed ale but did not drink wine. [14c ale + *egar* = acidic, pungent < OFr. *aigre* = keen, sharp < L *acer* = sharp, bitter]

Ale-house. It is not clear that every village had an ale-house, but one without an ale-house or brewster would be unlikely. Often they would be found at or near cross-roads. The Latin term used was *domus potationis* = a drinking house. This ale or beer was not very strong. [OE = *ealabus*]

Aleppo boil [oriental sore]. Conditions in the Eastern Mediterranean were unfamiliar and hostile to ill-equipped European crusaders. The boil was the outward sign of a disease known to modern medicine as leishmaniasis. It was the consequence of a parasitic

infection, with unpleasant symptoms of boils, ulcers and liver damage; it was frequently fatal (disease was a more effective killer of crusaders than the Saracens). Aleppo was in today's north Syria. Then it was an important garrison town of the Muslim forces.

Alerion. *Her.* Eagle depicted without beak or feet but with wings spread wide. [< L *alario* = of the wings of an army] – Cf. [MARTLET 2](#)

Ale-stake. Taverns used to sport a pole like a flag-pole, on which a bush was hung. An ivy bush was the sign used, ivy being sacred to Bacchus.

Ale-wife. See [BREWSTER](#)

Algebra. This word is derived from the title of an Arabic text, *Kitab al-jabr wa al-muqabalah* (The Book of Integration and Equation) written by al-Khwarizmi (d. 850). The word *al-jabr* of the title is of two parts: *al* = the + *jabr* = reunion of parts. – Cf. *next*; [AL-](#)

Algorism. System of Arabic numeration, arithmetic. European acquaintance with and adoption of Arabic numerals came from translations of Arab mathematicians, esp. in Moorish Spain. [< Ar. *al-Khwarizmi* = a 9c Arab mathematician; thus also, algorithm] – Cf. *previous*; [THETA](#)

Alidad. Device for measuring angles with e.g. an **astrolabe*. [< Ar. *al-idada*]

Alien priory. A monastery or convent established in England yet subject to a mother-house in another country, usually France. These were small establishments, sometimes with only two or three monks in residence. Their function was administrative, looking after the lands belonging to the mother-house. In 1294 many such properties were confiscated, at a time of war with France. In 1378 all the monks in alien priories were expelled, their lands being acquired by the crown. – Cf. [CLUNY](#); [DENIZEN](#)

Alienation. This term is used of property given by its owner to another, e.g. from a lord to a monastery, and particularly of lands given by the king to supporters, or those he wished to become supporters. – Cf. [DE DONIS](#); [ENFEOFFMENT TO USE](#)

Alkanet. A red dye taken from plants of the borage family, *Alkanna lehmannii*. The colour is known today as henna. [< Ar. *al-hanna*]

Alkaron. The **Koran*. An instance of an Arabic word entering the English language, if temporarily, and retaining the definite article *al-* prefix, cf. **algebra* and **algorism*.

Allegiance. Loyalty due to one's lord. At Salisbury, in 1086, William I had all landowners in England swear allegiance to him. It was a sign, if one were needed, of the new king's power: all land in the kingdom was his. – Cf. [DOMAIN](#)

Alliteration. A distinctive feature of OE poetry, alliteration employed similar or identical sounds from the beginning of stressed syllables. It continued in use until the late 14c, alongside French-influenced forms of rhyme and metre. Of the great English poets, William Langland was the last to use alliteration. In OE verse the poetic line was divided

in two: generally, each half-line had two stressed syllables, of which either or both from the first half-line alliterated with the first from the second half-line.

Allodium [allod]. An *allodium* was inherited, family land held absolutely, rather than of a lord or monarch. – Cf. ALLEGIANCE; FIEF

Almagest. Ptolemy's great treatise on astronomy; translated by Arab scholars in the 9c; this Arabic text was translated into *Latin in the 12c, making it accessible to European scholars. The works of Aristotle followed this path back into Europe via Moorish Spain.

Almesfeoh. Lit. 'alms' fee'. The cash render to the pope from the kingdom of England, first given by Alfred the Great. This was also known as *Peter's pence or *Rome-scot.

Almoign. An ecclesiastical possession. [< AN *almoin* < L *eleemosyna* = alms] – Cf. next; FRANKALMOIGN

Almoner. An official who dispensed *alms for some other person or institution, e.g. the king and queen each had an almoner, as would a religious house; an alms-giver. Robert Mannyng (c.1330) uses *aumenere* in *Handlyng Synne*: 'Seynt John, the aumenere'. [< AN *aulmoner* = an almoner < L *eleemosyna* = alms] – Cf. next; AUMENER

Almonry. The place from which *alms were dispensed. [< OFr. *aulmosnerie* < L *eleemosyna* = alms] – Cf. previous

Alms. Charity for the destitute and poor. Such giving was deemed one of the duties of a monastery and the wealthy. Alms were doled out on a monastery's patron saint's day, for example, or on the anniversary of its founder's death, and on Good Friday; also on Good Friday one penny was given to all who came. Endowments were left for alms-giving. [< OE *almyse*, *almesse* = alms] – Cf. ALMONER; DOLE

Almuce. A large cloth cape, often with attached hood turned down over the shoulders and lined with fur. Doctors of Divinity and canons wore one lined with grey fur.

Alnage. See AULNAGE

Altarage. The revenue of a church or *cathedral received through oblations to an altar. The Latin form was *altaragium*. – Cf. -AGIUM

Alure. A passage or gallery to walk in; particularly a parapet or gallery behind battlements or a church roof; also a *cloister. [< AN *aleür* = a passage < L *alura*] – Cf. AMBULATORY

Alveary. A bee-hive. [< L *alvearium* = a group of beehives, *alvarus* = a beehive] – Cf. BEOCEORL; MELLITARIUS

Amber. A dry measure of four *bushels; a liquid measure of 48 *sesters. [< L *amphora*]

Ambidexter. The Latin term for a juror who took money from both sides; generally, a swindler. [< L *ambidexter* = both sides] – Cf. ANTITHETARIUS

Amblar. As its name suggests, a slow-moving horse; one not bred as, nor suited to be, a

**destrier* or a **courser*.

Aambo [ambon]. Latin word for the desk from which the Epistle and **Gospel* were read in early Christian churches. It was replaced by the now familiar pulpit during the 14c.

Ambry [aumbry]. A small cupboard let into the wall of a church for storing the vessels of the mass; a place where books were kept. [< L *armarium* = chest, closet]

Ambulant. *Her.* Walking.

Ambulatory. A place for walking, e.g. the **cloister* of a monastery or convent; also, the aisle around the **sanctuary* of a church or **cathedral*; the space behind the high altar of a church. – Cf. *ALURE*

Amen. Lit. ‘so be it’. The Hebrew word which ends a prayer.

Amerce. To impose a fine, of the kind imposed by a lord of the **manor*. [< AN *amercier*, à *merci* = at (the) mercy (of another)] – Cf. *next*

Amercement. The imposition by a lord of a discretionary penalty; later the penalty itself. The greatest imposer of ameracements was the king; they were a royal fine. **Magna Carta* deals with such royal penalties. Thus, ch. 20 states of freemen: ‘A free man shall be fined only in proportion to the degree of his offence, and for a serious offence correspondingly, but not so heavily as to deprive him of his livelihood.’ Magnates were to be treated similarly in ch. 21: ‘Earls and barons shall be fined only by their equals, and in proportion to the gravity of their offence.’ [< AN *amercier*, à *merci* = at (the) mercy (of another)] – Cf. *previous*

Amice. A white scarf worn on the shoulders by celebrant priests; sometimes expensively decorated, perhaps like **orphrey*. [< L *amicio* = to clothe, cover]

Amiens, Mise de. An attempted reconciliation or settlement (*mise*) between the king, Henry III, and Simon de Montfort, arbitrated by Louis IX of France in January 1264. De Montfort declined to accept and the Barons’ War was the result.

Amour courtois. A term coined by Gaston Paris in the late 19c to describe the kind of adoration found, for example, in Chrétien de Troyes’s romances and the *Roman de la Rose*. – Cf. *COURTLY LOVE*

Ampula [ampulla]. A small container or phial of water. These were sold as souvenirs for pilgrims to take home; at Canterbury *ampulae* of ‘Becket water’ were considered to have medicinal or miraculous powers. The word was also used of the containers of the sacramental oils.

Anarchy. A large part of King Stephen’s reign from approximately 1135 to 1154 is so called, although a better term might well be civil war. The term is no longer favoured, as it suggests a more general state of disorder than actually existed at the time.

Anathema. **Excommunication* and condemnation, usually of a heretic. The word can

also be used to indicate someone damned, e.g. 'he was anathema'. – Cf. [EXCOMMUNICATION](#)

Anchor. *Her.* When used in *[heraldry](#) the anchor is a sign of hope, from its being something which gives security.

Anchor-hold. The cell of an anchorite or anchoress. [< anchor + ME *hold* = confinement, constraint] – Cf. *next*; [ANCORSETL](#); *Ancrene Riwe*

Anchorite. Anchoress is the female form. A recluse; a person persuaded by faith to reject the world and live in isolation. Sometimes such persons were immured, wholly confined and even literally walled in. Before one could be 'bricked in' permission was required from a bishop. One of his duties would be to officiate, for which ceremonies in *[pontificals](#) survive. Indeed, an anchoress received the last rites, and had the office of the dead said over her. She then entered her cell and was bricked in, accompanied at each stage by various prayers. Strange as it may seem today, such women felt they were entering a community. The **Ancrene Riwe* makes plain, as it praises the feeling of communality, that the anchoresses communicated with one another through servants, described as 'maidens', who carried spoken messages to and fro between the cells. These cells typically had three windows, a private altar, and a bed and crucifix. One of the windows gave a view of the altar of the church to which the cell was attached; a second window opened into servants' quarters through which food and, presumably, a chamber-pot were passed; the third and smallest, known as the 'parlour' window, faced outwards and was used to speak to visitors. This was the smallest so as to minimise the temptation implicit in seeing the outside world. This last was similar to the **fenestra parvula* of Gilbertine monasteries. The *Ancrene Riwe* offers the following as definition of an anchorite: 'an anker is called an anker ... [for being] anchored under the church like an anchor under the ship [to hold it] so that waves and storms don't overturn it'. [< Gr. *anakhoro* = to withdraw]

Ancilla. Latin for 'female slave'. Nuns would sometimes refer to themselves as *ancillae* (i.e. handmaids of the Lord). – Cf. [SERVUS](#)

Ancoragium. The Latin term for the fee or duty paid by a ship for anchorage in a port or haven.

Ancorsetl. The cell of an *[anchorite](#); an *[anchor-hold](#). [< OE *ancor* = anchorite, hermit + *setl* = place, residence] – Cf. [CHIRCHETHURL](#)

Ancrene Riwe. *A Rule for Anchoresses.* This is sometimes also known as *Ancrene Wisse*. This text gives rules for the behaviour of female recluses who were not within one of the established orders. The *Riwe* was written in English anonymously for three sisters of gentle birth. Both Latin and French versions were available until the 16c. Its use of alliteration is highly ornamental, while its tone has the fervour of sermon and the intensity of poetry. The *Riwe* is one of the earliest surviving examples of sustained ME prose. – Cf. [ANCHORITE](#)

Ancrene Wisse. *See previous*

Andred. The Weald, the great forest in Kent and Sussex. – Cf. [WOLD](#)