

into larger divisions called "hundreds," probably because they had in early times about a hundred freemen capable of serving in war or as jurors in the courts. Many hundreds made up a shire. Each shire had its shire court presided over by an alderman, and each had its "shire-reeve" or sheriff who was the king's representative and watched over his interests. Over all were the king and the Witenagemot, or Witan. The king's authority varied greatly according to the personal ability of the man who held the office. He was, in general, the law-giver, the leader of the army, and the judge. His power in the state grew as the extent of his dominions increased. In all important matters, he took the advice of the Witenagemot, or meeting of the wise men, an assembly made up of the chief officers of the king's court, the bishops and abbots of the church, and the aldermen of the shires. With the consent of the freeholders of the country, this assembly passed laws, voted money, and on the death of the king chose his successor, though up to this time they had always chosen some member of the royal family. The Witenagemot was the most important governing body in England.

#### SUMMARY

At the request of the Britons, the Saxons drove away the barbarians of the north. Soon they killed or expelled the Britons also and seized the land for themselves. They finally accepted Christianity, but the rapid spread of civilization was arrested by the ravages of the Danes. Alfred the Great restored the land to peace and safety, but after his death the Danish power increased, so that, for a time, England was ruled by Danish kings. The first literature composed on English soil was the work of Cædmon, Bede, and Alfred the Great.