

Origins of English (up to 1066)

Historical Background

Before the time of the Roman colonization in A.D. 43, Britain was populated by Celts and Britons, relatively primitive people without organized society and literary culture. Britain remained a part of the Roman Empire for nearly four hundred years, during which time Romans and Britons intermarried and the framework of society was established.

When the Roman Empire began to crumble in the 5th Century, the Romans abandoned Britain, and the remaining inhabitants were involved in conflicts with surrounding peoples. Eventually the remnants of the Roman province were conquered by Germanic invaders from Northern Europe.

These invaders, known collectively as Anglo-Saxons, established themselves in what is now England and for two hundred years they themselves were involved in defending their kingdoms against successive invaders from Europe. The history of England from about 600 to 850 A.D. is the story of the rise and fall of petty Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and the efforts of successive states to unify England.

The Anglo-Saxons understood the concept of a social organization that was greater than the individual and because of prevailing warlike conditions, the warrior occupied a pre-eminent position in their society. Great feasts were a part of Anglo-Saxon life, and it was normal for legends relating to the deeds of great Germanic heroes of the past to be told. The entertainer delivered the story in a rhythmic kind of chant. Occasionally he was accompanied on a harp, but in general, there was little decoration and the epic was straightforward narrative verse on the subject of a great warrior and his deeds. In A.D. 597 the Anglo-Saxon king was converted to Christianity by a Catholic mission from Rome. Some evidence of Anglo-Saxon paganism still exists today, in, for example, the names of the days of the week: Monday - Mon

Tuesday - Tiu (god of war)

Wednesday - Woden (god of war)

Thursday - Thor (Jupiter)

Friday - Frigg (Venus)

Saturday - Saturn's day

Sunday - Sun's day

Continually fighting against further waves of invaders from Europe, the Anglo-Saxons were finally conquered by the Normans from Northern France in 1066. This ended the Anglo-Saxon history of England.

Cultural influences and the development of the language

The original Celts spoke a type of Germanic language and took their language with them when they were pushed by the Romans and later the Saxons to the highland regions of what are now Scotland, Wales and Ireland. A form of this language is still spoken today in these parts of Britain (although only by a few people). Despite four hundred years of Roman occupation, not many Latin words were incorporated into the language. The Latin influence came later. The development of the language was much affected by the different invaders from different parts of Europe who settled in various parts of the country. The Angles in the East ("Angleland" = "England") and the Saxons in the South. These regional invasions and settlements

are the main reason that there are so many different dialects and accents in a country which is relatively small.

Christianity enriched the language by introducing Latin words related to the Church. Contact with Roman Christianity also brought a general advancement in culture introducing words like 'school', 'master' and 'grammar'. Furthermore as Church schools opened, the Anglo-Saxons' spiritual and intellectual outlook was widened. Not only did Anglo-Saxons learn about the Scriptures but also the classical writings of Virgil and the ancient Greeks.

This advance in culture also developed Anglo-Saxon words to express new ideas. In the North, Scandinavian words were adopted, e.g. 'law' , 'egg' and 'window', 'they', 'their' and 'them'. The forms of speech of invaders were continually being mixed into the language. Generally though, the language was simple, and characterized by many changes in words and inflections to show case, tense, gender, number and person.

There were several declensions of nouns and adjectives agreed with nouns. Verbs were highly inflected e.g. 'Sing, sand, sung'. Fewer than 25% of modern words are derived from Old English as it is called, but they are the most frequently used common nouns, verbs, pronouns, connectives and articles.

An example of Old English of A.D. 900: "*Ohtere saede his hlaforde, Aelfrede cyninge, paet he ealra Noromonna noromest bude . . .*" Which is: "Ohtere said to his lord, Alfred the King, that he of all Northmen, northmost dwelt ...

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