**The Norman Conquest of the English Language**

By [H.R. Loyn](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/21201) | Published in [History Today](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/43) [Volume: 30 Issue: 4](http://www.historytoday.com/taxonomy/term/2754)

At first the English withstood the Norman attack of 1066. But soon they succumbed to the invaders, as did their virile language of record. An article by H.R. Loyn.

We read Elizabethan prose at times with an antiquarian curiosity but little linguistic difficulty. With a few tricks learned, Chaucer is open to the intelligent schoolboy or schoolgirl. With many more tricks and much greater intellectual effort early Middle English prose can be mastered, and the Englishman can still just believe that he is reading English. Beyond the twelfth century it takes the faith of Barnes, the Dorset poet, or the skill of Professor Henry Higgins to convince an Englishman that this is still his own tongue. Language-men call the language of Anglo-Saxon England 'Old English'; to the intelligent scholar on the Clapham omnibus it is better thought of as Anglo-Saxon, a different language from English, demanding from him as much effort and sheer hard intellectual grind as, say, modern Norwegian, though mercifully not as much as modern German. Why should this be so? Is time alone enough to account for it? Or does the red thread of the Norman Conquest run across our linguistic history as it does across our social and institutional past?

There is an intelligible reason for attributing much if not everything to the Normans. Sir Walter Scott reminded us long ago of the social pressures that caused the cow and the calf and the sheep to be Saxon in the field and French when served up as beef and veal and mutton. There are also reasons for attributing nearly all change to wider European phenomena. The 100 years from 1050-1150 witnessed rapid development for all the communities in western Europe, and it is not surprising that the age of the Investiture Contest, the Crusades, and the so-called twelfth- century renaissance should experience radical changes in language, the triumph of Latin, a true movement from epic to romance. It is the object of this article to look again at the evidence relating to the state of the English language in 1066, and to consider the effects of the Norman Conquest upon its development.

The traditions behind the use of Anglo-Saxon were strong and long. Bede tells us that the Christian missionaries at Ethelbert's court in the earliest years of the seventh century helped to bring it about that legal decrees were written down after the examples or exemplars of the Romans, but also *Anglorum sermone* , in the tongue of the English; and, as such, the *Laws of Ethelbert* have survived to this day. Bede rejoiced that the scriptures were being studied in the languages of five different peoples in Britain: the English, the Britons, the Scots, the Picts, and the Latins, but he added that Latin had become common to the four other peoples named through the study of scripture. Nevertheless, he respected the vernacular, and showed great sympathy for the first known English poet, Caedmon, who translated Holy Scripture into his own tongue, that is English 'like, as it were, a clean animal, chewing the cud, turning it into the most harmonious song'. Bede himself composed in English. His last task, completed as he lay dying, was the translation of the Gospel according to St. John into English. His so-called death-song became one of the best recorded and best preserved fragments of English verse.

Bede died in 735. Later in 787 the papal legates to King Offa held a reforming synod in the Mercian Kingdom. They were determined that the people should know about their deliberations, and so the chapters of the reforming decrees were read out *tam latine quam theochscae* , both in Latin and in the 'theodish' tongue. *Theodish* or *deutsch* , the language of the people, is what the Germanic Anglo-Saxon vernacular seemed to the good Italian cardinals. King Alfred (871-99) made heroic efforts by his own hard work and example to translate and to make available to all 'those books which may be necessary for all men to know'. In a famous statement (we remember the substance, but sometimes forget the reservation) he gave it as his objective to bring it to pass that 'if we have peace... all the youth now in England, born of freemen who have the means that they may apply to it, may be devoted to learning, *as long as they cannot be of use in other employment* , until such time as they can read well what is written in English. Those whom one wishes to teach further and to be brought to Holy Orders could be instructed further in the Latin language'. A century later the greatest scholars of the age, Aelfric and Wulfstan, a shade shamefacedly at times, wrote in Anglo-Saxon. The Age of King Ethelred was also the Golden Age of Anglo-Saxon prose: grammarians, schoolmasters, lawyers, and administrators thought and wrote in Anglo-Saxon.

Why was this so? Why was there this persistent concern with and concentration on the vernacular? Were the Anglo-Saxons different from other peoples? Dare we take back our notorious lack of facility or sheer stupidity at language study 1,600 years and more? Is this seeming obsession with theodish so remarkable? Let us first look at four fields where the use of the vernacular was so conspicuous by the last century of Anglo-Saxon England on the part of ealdormen, in the European context both unusual and remarkable, that is to say the fields of law, administration, religion, and literature and learning.

A surprising volume of legal material has survived. Some indeed is in Latin. The Anglo-Saxon Church was part of the universal Church, Matters concerning procedures at baptism, arrangements for church services, penal clauses leading to excommunication and statements of marriage law were recorded by and for the priestly class in the universal language, Latin. But an astonishing amount of legal material went straight into the theodish tongue. Virtually all secular law and much of what we regard as ecclesiastical law when issued and authenticated by the King and the Witan has survived in the vernacular. Perhaps this is matter only for qualified surprise. We are after all dealing with the early Middle Ages and with a society where the vernacular was not Latin-based. The contrasts that come immediately to mind, France and Italy, concern communities where the vernaculars were for the most part Romance tongues. What was French in the eleventh century but Latin badly spoken? In other non-Latin European communities, Celtic and Scandinavian, the vernaculars were used or came to be used in much the same way. What is remarkable is the early nature of the written record that has survived. In the tenth and eleventh centuries it was clearly customary and commonplace that an English king and his advisers should spend much time framing rules and procedures, guidelines for coping with offences and penalties, and that these should be committed to writing and permanence in English, intelligible to all.

Statements of law, framing of general legal rules, are all well and good, but carrying out the mandates is quite another matter, the province of the administrator. There is plentiful evidence of active administrative life in late Anglo- Saxon England on the part of earldormen, thegns, reeves and tax-collectors in the name of the king or of great lords, ecclesiastical and lay (see Glossary at end of article). One feature deserves special mention, the evolution of the sealed writ, the master-product of the Old English secretariat. The writ, as it survives from the end of the period, consists of a government order in the vernacular, sent from the royal court to the local shire courts, stamped and authenticated by the king's great seal. It was often short and to the point, articulating royal government and making the royal will known to the men who counted in the locality, the earls, bishops and thegns assembled in the shire court; and it was in English. A dispute over the discharge of obligations on the Manor of Chew that belonged to the Bishopric of Wells was resolved by Edward the Confessor by a curt order to Earl Harold and 'all my thegns in Somerset' that the King was not going to permit any wrong to be done to the bishop. The range of royal activity was extensive. Edward the Confessor issued the following writ in favour of the great church of St. Peter, the cathedral church, at York, referring to lands and rights in Devonshire.

King Edward sends friendly greetings to bishop Leofric and earl Harold and Wada and all my thegns in Devonshire. And I inform you that I have granted to Ealdred the deacon of archbishop Ealdred, the minster at Axminster, and all things lawfully pertaining thereto, with sake and soke, as fully and completely as ever any priest before him had it, as a pious benefaction for St. Peter's minster at York.

Writs in the vernacular help us to understand England as a community accustomed to some sophistication in government from royal courts through shires and hundreds; and this view is supported by ancillary evidence, private fragments of abstracts of law relating to the conditions and ranks of men, the payment of wergelds, the pledges given at marriage ceremonies and guild regulations. Practical administrative rules were framed as a matter of course in the native tongue. Again it might be asked what is so remarkable about this: there is not much point in issuing orders in a language which cannot be understood. What is remarkable is the framing of such regulations, general and particular, on such a wide scale; and also of course the survival of such records.

We come then to the third field, the use of the vernacular in written ecclesiastical record other than law. There is also the practical side of the business, the teaching, the preaching, the framing of guides to doctrine and godly instruction. In relation to language the great Benedictine revival of the tenth century, the work of Saints Dunstan, Ethelwold and Oswald, supported by King Edgar, had unusual results. The continuous history of English monasticism might indeed be held to start with Glastonbury under Dunstan; but the cultural results were distinctive and odd. It was during the second half of the tenth century that Old English, so to speak, came of age in the linguistic sense as a written language. The creation of what is called a *Schriftssprache* , a language bound by general rules of form, syntax, and orthography was the creation of the late tenth century. This was truly a precocious and remarkable thing in western Europe, and is bound up in a sense with the last of the fields for consideration, that of literature and learning. The names that come first to mind here are those of theologians and homilists, but this may be misleading. The sermons and homilies of Aelfric and Wulfstan exceed in bulk the rest of the prose of the period but the accidental consequences of the preservation of material by use should be taken into account. Aelfric's work was still being used by conscientious clerics in the reign of King John. In fact the material produced was quite wide-ranging, including grammar, colloquies and even a little scientific work. Byrhtferth of Ramsey, for example, wrote a book that was something of a hotchpotch, including much on computations, on the seasons, the signs of the zodiac and the divisions of the day. He even gave advice on how to build a house.

We first of all survey the site of the house and also hew the timber into shape and neatly put together the sills and lay down the beams and fasten the rafters to the roof and support it with buttresses and afterwards delightfully adorn the house.

Byrhtferth wrote in English, but was indeed self-conscious about it and a shade arrogant. He knew a little Hebrew and Greek as well as Latin and occasionally betrays a certain linguistic pride not unfamiliar in those who have learned their Latin well. He tells us in English that the day is divided into 24 hours, 96 points, 240 minutes, 360 parts, 960 moments, 1,440 ostents and 541,440 atoms. With the condescension of the learned he goes on to say:

I take it, o rustic priest, that you will not know what atoms are, but I will make clear the meaning of the word to you. *Tomos* in Greek is interpreted *divisio* in Latin and *todaelednyss* in English:*atomos* in Greek equals *indivisio* in Latin.

The same attitude appears elsewhere in his writing. At one paint he says that he could add many things from the writing of men of learning, but because he knows these things seem sufficiently complex to clerks and rustic: priests, he addresses his words to young monks who have occupied their childhood with scientific works, such as those of Sergius, Priscian, Cato and Bede. In his emphasis on 'rustic priests' (*uplendisca preost* ) he gives a valuable clue to the reasons for the strength of the vernacular in late Anglo-Saxon England. The Church was stronger than its Latinity.

Medical knowledge was also available in English to 'uplandish priests', presumably as well as to others, in the shape of the Leechdoms. There was also considerable botanical knowledge. Betony was the herbal maid of all work, useful for twenty-nine distinct aches and pains.

If a man's head be broke [we read] take the same weed [i.e. betony], scrape it and rub it very small to dust, then take two drams weight and swallow it in hot beer. Then the head heals very quickly after the drink.

Or again there is a splendid passage, illustrating linguistic sense as well as botanical knowledge, on the humble fleawort.

This wort is called psyllion, since it has seeds like fleas [*psylla* meaning flea], whence in Latin also it is named pulicone [from *pulicem* , flea] and some men call it flea-wort. It has minute leaves and rough, and it has a stalk tufted with side shoots, and it is by nature dry and tender and is produced in cultivated places.

In prose this last century of Anglo-Saxon England had produced work of variety and vitality, even if little enduring creative work was written after about 1020. In poetry, too, the period had much to offer, mare perhaps in the preservation of the best poetry in the great codices written about AD 1000 than in new creation. Variety again abounded, epic poetry from Beowulf to Maldon, poems on exotic beasts, riddles, gnomic verses, one exquisite lyric, the love-poem of Wulf and Eadwacer, and one of the greatest religious poems, the Dream of the Rood, sophisticated, turbulent, tormented. Whoever painted the picture of stolid, unimaginative Saxons knew nothing of their poetry and little of their art.

In law, in administration, in religion, prose and poetry the English language was used vigorously and effectively. Does this advance serious historical argument at all? Does it do more than tell us that the English were English? We may here miss the point. To be as self-consciously English in the eleventh century as the mass of surviving material suggests may indicate an unusual precocity in government, in the art of record-making, in literary self-awareness. The level of lay literacy in late Anglo-Saxon England appears to have been surprisingly high. This much ravaged, much conquered but intrinsically rich land demanded a degree of permanent intelligible record well above the average.

What happened to all this wealth of language development under the Normans? The main lines are clear. Latin replaced Anglo-Saxon completely as the language of government record and administrative record. Norman magnates, Norman prelates, Norman government officers, Domesday commissioners, clerks of all description, expected records to be kept in Latin. Socially the language of the court and so of society became the language spoken by the conquerors, that is to say Norman French, but Norman French did not serve as a replacement for Anglo-Saxon in government or in literature, As a literary language French is not important in England until the second half of the twelfth century, as a language of law and government not until well into the thirteenth.

So we come to the most difficult and complex problem of all. Was English deliberately suppressed at the time of the Norman Conquest) Succeeding generations were interested in the problem, sometimes getting the answers heavily wrong. Many in the twelfth century saw William as responsible for the introduction of written law, presumably in Latin, a totally false concept. Later as French became more general and fashionable, explanations changed and came nearer the truth. Social and educational reasons provide the basic causes. The rhyming chronicle of Robert of Gloucester at the end of the thirteenth century summed up the situation admirably:

And the Normans could not then speak any speech but their own; and they spoke French as they did at home, and had their children taught the same. So that the high men of this land, that came of their blood, all retain the same speech which they brought from their home. For unless a man know French, people regard him little; but the low men hold to English, and to their own speech still. I ween there be no countries in all the world that do not hold to their own speech, except England only. But undoubtedly it is well to know both; for the more a man knows, the more worth he is.

Trevisa later put the matter even more strongly, observing that uplandish men (the very word used by Byrhtferth of his rustic priests) liken themselves to gentle- men, strive with great effort to speak French, so that they might be more highly regarded. Heavy social pressure made it essential for a man to speak French, initially (though this applied to few in the eleventh century) if he were to play an active part in the new feudal world, but increasingly as French became the language of commerce and of gentility on a much wider basis.

But let us take the argument back directly to the Norman Conquest and what do we find? In government and administration, writs were issued by the Conqueror in English but not for long. By the 1070s Latin was the language of the Chancery. Anglo-Saxon England had enjoyed two languages for permanent record, English and Latin. Now there was to be one, Latin alone. Yet remember that we treat of record and not of substance. The spoken language of the courts, shires and hundreds, was as it had always been, the vernacular in the full sense, the language of Devon or Norfolk or Yorkshire or the land between Ribble and Mersey. Legal texts in Anglo-Saxon continued to be copied, the laws of Edward the Confessor in theory, of Cnut in practice. But when half a century after the Conquest a creative local lawyer wanted to put the laws and customs of the courts (the so-called 'Laws of Henry I') in the Winchester area into shape, he did his work in Latin - of a sort - with a vast number of good English words, wergeld, bot, frith and grith, sake and soke, given proper Latin forms and endings to make them respectable. There was to be no new legislation in English, there were to be no new writs in English: the native language well had run dry as a language of record, though not as a language of use.

On the religious side affairs were more complicated. The Normans acted with strict propriety. They had no need to act illegally. They could get all they wanted, and still stay well within the law. At the top level this was easy. No Englishman was appointed to high office in the Conqueror's reign. And the new bishops and abbots, French-speaking to a man, brought with them their clerks, their households, their chosen followers who did military service for their new estates. French became the language of the inner group, but not of course still of the mass of the clergy and laity. The result was more complicated than is often realised. Many of the best manuscripts in Anglo- Saxon have been preserved for us in these generations immediately succeeding the Conquest. First-class scribes copied, used, and preserved Anglo-Saxon work in great Norman houses at Canterbury, at Rochester, and at Bury St. Edmunds, as well as in the West Country fastnesses of Worcester and Exeter. The *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* continued to be kept at some centres, certainly at Peterborough, with visible change of language to early Middle English, as late as 1155. The continuity of English Prose was assured. The *Schriftssprache* , standard Old English, remained intelligible, but after 1120 was no longer a reasonable vehicle for new composition; and your upland priest would interpret it as a country parson still interprets the Authorized Version for his flock, teaching and instructing in the language of the countryside. When serious new composition occurs, Layaman's *Brut* , the *Owl and the Nightingale* , *Ancrene Riwle* and *Ancrene Wisse* , it is in the language of the countryside, the Home Counties, Dorset, the west Midlands. Why should this be, and should we attribute the loss of the ordered universal written language of Anglo-Saxon England to the Normans?

We recognise increasingly the 100 years from 1050-1150 as one of the great turning points in western European history. The shift in method of thought that took place, sometimes characterised as a move from epic to romance, is best studied in areas recognised as most important to the age: theology, religious doctrine, Christology, biblical study. But here in our local specialised worId of language under the unique and bizarre impact of a French conquest of Germanic England we meet another reminder of the central problem. The Romance becomes the Romance of the twelfth-century Renaissance: central administration, ordered urban religion, cathedral schools, universities, all counter- pointed by the ordered Cistercian withdrawal to desert places. And literary activity, not the stiff formal theological activity alone, but the whole gamut from the scholar John of Salisbury to the Goliardic poets became universal, European and Latin. In theology, Anselm; in literature, Geoffrey of Monmouth; in history, William of Malmesbury; in learning, John of Salisbury: these giants straddle the first century after the Norman Conquest in England. English apprenticeship in Angle-Saxon blossomed into Anglo-Norman achievement in Latin. There was a break from the precocious ordered prose of Anglo-Saxon England. France and Germany and Scandinavia, the high noon of saga literature, had their great literary surge forward between 1150 and 1250. England had nothing to put by the side of Chretien of Troyes, the Minnesanger or Snorre Sturlusson. English or Anglo-Norman genius diverted to central Latin paths. In this respect we look before and after, from Aelfric to Chaucer, and the east Midland and London dialect of Chaucer emphasises the break from the West Saxon past.

We praise the Norman for order and universality, for the concentration of wealth in the economy, for mottes and baileys, for preservation of internal peace, and protection from outside foes. They plundered their subjects, but they did indeed protect them from others. We must not forget the loss. And one consequence of the plundering was the stifling of the precocious vitality of the standardised Old English literary culture.

**Glossary**

**bot:** compensation;

**ealdorman:** a man of noble rank in charge of an important office under the king, normally in the reign of Alfred, a single shire. Later in the tenth century his sphere of authority could extend to several shires;

**frith and grith:** terms for personal peace;

**hundred:** a subdivision of a shire. In parts of the Danelaw the corresponding division was known as a wapentake;

**motte and bailey:** a fortified mount with attached enclosure, the commonest form of fortification in the century after the Norman Conquest;

**reeve:** a superior servant in charge of an estate (Anglo-Saxon gerafa);

**sake and soke:** rights of jurisdiction (literally cause and suit);

**thegn:** originally a term meaning servant, but by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period a nobleman with a special wergeld (q.v.);

**wergeld:** blood-price, the sum paid in compensation for the death of a man. This was normally reckoned at 200s for a simple freeman, and 1,200s for a nobleman.

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