

To what extent did the invasions of the British Isles impact the origins of the English language?

History
Origins of the English Language

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Introduction

The English language has gradually developed over many centuries of war and political turmoil, beginning with runic inscriptions and slowly evolving into the complex and universal language that is written, read, and spoken today all over the world. However, the true origins of English are difficult to understand and can only be examined when a wider timeframe is considered and the impact of brutal invasions is put under a microscope. Until the initial Anglo-Saxon invasion of the British Isles in 450AD, the islands remained under the leadership of the Celtic people with the influence of the Roman Empire, who introduced new elegance to their way of life and to their language.¹ At the time, they spoke diverse Celtic languages with a light Latin influence from the Romans, but English was nowhere close to being developed yet. It was not until the first invasions by the Anglo-Saxons in the fifth century that the language became a distant rung on a ladder as the British Isles began the slow climb to the creation of English.² Understanding a linguistic history starkly contrasts from simply learning unadorned facts of a historical event. In truth, the development of a language is significantly different than any other problem that a historian might face because it contains a sequence of ever-changing, abstract patterns that move in the background behind that sum of concrete events. Rather than a checklist or a straight-forward product of some dramatic situation, a linguistic history is fluid and created and revised every day by entire populations, shaped without any anticipated forethought or conscious planning. It holds a significance that other historians seldom face as their studies will never involve such complex underground concepts. Language is meant to be changed and

¹ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 51.

² *ibid*, 52.

digested as societies interpret words under their own unique lights. Would English in the United States today be completely different had the Normans not taken over the Isles, or would English still find a way to resurface after the Viking rule? The “what if” questions must be sorted in order to understand the consequences of invasions and rule amongst languages printed on the pages of our history books. Therefore, this essay will examine the extent of the impact that the numerous invasions upon the British Isles had on the origins of the English language, beginning with the Anglo-Saxon conquest over the islands and the Celtic people. This paper will then discuss the coming of Christianity and its heavy impact on the slow development of English letters and pronunciation from runic inscription to Latin symbols. This heavy use of Latin pushed English as a language to be hidden and put underground. Rather than the previous Germanic dialects, Latin became the primary language for literacy and for those in power. This forced the infancy of Old English to become dormant all through the reign of Christianity as well as the age of the Vikings, also known as the Norweigan invasion, soon after.³ Had the Vikings been successful in their siege of the Isles, this invasion may have introduced Old Norse into the culture as well as the underground Germanic dialects that would soon become Old English. However, as time continued, English resurfaced and became cemented as a true language. This occurrence was due to the Norman Conquest, an invasion that revived the language from the lower classes and brought it into new popularity and prestige.⁴ These four key historical events are arguably the most important happenings to occur in the development of English, each serving to shape the path that English would take to become a true language. Yet, language is only made up of populations speaking roughly alike one decade and then speaking so infinitesimally different the

³ *ibid*

⁴ *ibid*, 58.

next that the specific alterations are impossible to trace. A language cannot be created in a single event, rather it is slowly morphed and formed over time, changing both daily with new words and phrases as well as being altered slowly over many decades. Language is composed of these arduous patterns shared from tongue to tongue, only measured by life's great history-altering moments that determine a dramatic future. This essay will, therefore, examine to what extent the invasions of the British Isles impacted the origins of the English language. Each invasion provided its own impression on the melting pot of languages that have formed English, some holding more impact than others. Ultimately, the introduction of Christianity may have been the most salient event for the creation of the language itself. However, without the revival of English through the Norman Conquest centuries later, the language may have been lost forever. Therefore, each historical event itself had a unique level of impact, but without the invasions of the British Isles, there would be no English language at all. The British Isles would have continued to speak a plethora of varied Celtic languages, developing further through their culture and Roman influence. However, there was a gradual invasion that prohibited this from happening. The Anglo-Saxon invasion is what began the formation of a new language: the English language.

Anglo-Saxon Invasion of the British Isles (450-470AD)

During a time of expansion in Western Europe from the start of the fifth century, invaders swept the land, searching for weaker colonies to overtake. Celtic people inhabited Britain as natives to the Isles, speaking Celtic languages that, with many tribal invasions, would soon

evolve into Anglo-Frisian, a primitive form of Old English.⁵ The Romans had settled on the Isles around the year 50BC and had presided over the Celts for several centuries before the initial invasions began⁶. However, after the invasions began early in the fifth century, their place in the Empire was short-lived. Rome would not expend the armies required to combat both the Northern invasions and the tribes pestering their troops from the East, so they were eventually forced to withdraw from the Isles.⁷ With the withdrawal of Rome from the Isles, Celtic culture was fragile and their language could be easily influenced by the invading parties. The gradual invasion into Britain was conducted by three primary tribes: the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes coming from different districts throughout Germany and Denmark and all speaking variations of the West-Germanic tongue.⁸ The Angles traveled across the North Sea from the southern areas of what is known today as Denmark, residing in the northern regions of the Isles such as Northumbria and Mercia. Their language was an unspecified Ingvaeonic Germanic dialect, also known as a North Sea Germanic tongue.⁹ The Saxon people hailed from the northern parts of modern Germany, traveling to the center of the Isles and landing in East Anglia. They also spoke a variety of Germanic dialects, differing only slightly from the Ingvaeonic dialects that dominated the Angles' languages.¹⁰ Jutes arrived from the northernmost areas of modern Denmark, invading the southernmost lands of the Isles in Wessex. Although there are many competing theories behind what language the Jute tribes originally used, it is most prominently believed that they spoke a group of Proto-Norse languages that would later morph into the same

⁵ *ibid*

⁶ Mastin, Luke. "Old English." *The History of English*. Last modified 2011. Accessed September 19, 2019. https://www.thehistoryofenglish.com/history_old.html.

⁷ *The Adventure of English*. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

⁸ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 55.

⁹ *ibid*, 56.

¹⁰ *ibid*

Ingvaemonic Germanic dialects that the Angles and Saxon tribes spoke.¹¹ These Ingvaemonic and Germanic dialects held the most influence over the variety of Celtic languages that were spoken in the Isles at the time because the Angles and Saxons held such power over the lands. In order to survive, the Celtic natives were forced to learn and understand the Germanic dialects as they and their invader's cultures were blended. The invading parties were seen as less civilized than the Celts, who had still held onto many pieces of sophisticated Roman culture.¹² The Celtic people still lived in walled towns and villas with connecting roads that the Romans had left behind as they fled back to the mainland to rejoin the rest of the Empire. Angles, Jutes, and Saxons had just come from their own tribal lands where they were able to live freely, in contrast to their unwelcome arrival at the Isles where they were seen as wild and barbaric. Ironically, the Celts had been seen the same way when the Romans first occupied the Isles, bringing the civilization and sophistication that the Celtic people were now attempting to uphold, despite the barbaric culture of invading parties.¹³ There was animosity between the different tribes and little integration took place for many years to come. Although the tongues of the three tribes began to unite into the Germanic dialects originally spoken by the Angles and Saxons, no real language was ever truly established.¹⁴ By this point, the Celtic language had already been influenced by Latin from the Romans, and the mixture of this Celtic-hybrid and the Germanic tongues was beginning to create a new sound in the Isles. English was still far off, but the seeds were finally being planted.

¹¹ *ibid*, 56.

¹² *The Adventure of English*. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

¹³ Martin, Russel L. "Anglo-Saxon Language." Edited by John Ragosta. Monticello. Last modified July 17, 2018. <https://www.monticello.org/site/research-and-collections/anglo-saxon-language>.

¹⁴ *The Adventure of English*. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

As the three tribes began to take full power of the Isles, Celtic tribes and territories were pushed back further into the mainland, inhabiting Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, all countries where Gaelic culture still survives today.¹⁵ As they left, they took their original Celtic languages with them, only leaving behind an insignificant amount of their language in the history of English. However, now that the native Celtic people had been pushed out of the Isles, the Angles, Saxons, and the Jutes had free reign over the land. The tribes fought over the Isles, waxing and waning in their influence and power, but eventually, the Saxons became the dominant group and created a new Anglo-Saxon nation.¹⁶ By the end of 470AD, the Romans had completely withdrawn from the Isles and the Empire was beginning to fall apart. Culture and language were completely changed as the fall of the Roman Empire in 476AD lead to the abandonment of Roman-British values and welcomed the adoption of a Germanic lifestyle and language from the tribal invasions.¹⁷ This marked the first real evidence of the tribal invasion impacting culture so heavily that the language itself was actually altered. At the fall of the Roman Empire, the three original tribes, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, became a single nation and were now called the Anglo-Saxon people. The Anglo-Saxons spoke in primitive forms of English that were still considered Germanic dialects at that time.¹⁸ Certain words were kept from the Celtic languages before the Anglo-Saxons, such as *rice* (kingdom), *ambiht* (servant), and *dun* (hill), while others were adopted from various Germanic dialects and used throughout the new Anglo-Saxon nation such as *brocc* (badger), *carr* (rock), and *torr* (lake).¹⁹ Words from the tribal tongues are often more heavy with harsh consonants (*r*, *c*, and *t*) while the Celtic languages used

¹⁵ *ibid*

¹⁶ *ibid*

¹⁷ "The Fall of the Roman Empire." Ancient Civilizations. <https://www.ushistory.org/civ/6f.asp>.

¹⁸ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 56.

¹⁹ *ibid*, 57.

softer sounds from the Latin that had been adopted from Roman culture. However, the influence of Latin was not yet prominent enough in order to enable English to emerge. When written and read, the language was made up of runic symbols rather than the Latin alphabet used today.²⁰

The invasions of the three initial tribes may have been the most crucial historical events in the creation of the English language, marking the true origin of English itself. The Anglo-Saxon people had settled into the Isles and forced out the native Celts, leaving the Isles with a new culture and a blended variety of Germanic tongues that, with the introduction of Christianity, would soon develop a step closer to becoming English.

The Coming of Christianity

Although many of the Celts had already been introduced to Christianity by the Roman culture in 50BC when they had invaded the Isles, most of the Anglo-Saxon population was Pagan and therefore unfamiliar with the religion when the Archbishop of Canterbury, Saint Augustine, arrived from a northern area of modern Algeria called Thagaste in 597AD, bringing his 40 missionaries with him.²¹ With the Celtic people mostly pushed out, St. Augustine had to introduce the religion to an entire nation basically from scratch. Not much is known about his mission, but the influence that Christianity had on the English language is undeniable. St. Augustine became the first of many missionaries that would Christianize the Isles, starting with Kent in the early seventh century and having won over Northumbria by 664AD.²² It would take

²⁰ *ibid*

²¹ "Saint Augustine of Canterbury." Britannica. Last modified 2019. Accessed September 19, 2019. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Saint-Augustine-of-Canterbury>.

²² *ibid*

time to convert an entire nation of what were considered wild or barbaric people, and Christianity was very controversial among the Anglo-Saxons; many citizens even rejected the religion altogether. It was not until King Ethelbert of Kent announced his conversion that it began to spread rapidly. By 700AD, the entirety of Britain would be a Christian nation²³; however, the coming of Christianity introduced more than simply the coming of a new religion. This new era of Christianity reintroduced Latin into the Isles and made its first introduction of Latin into the melting pot of Germanic languages used by the Anglo-Saxons. This also created a monastic way of life that instated scholarship and learning in southern England, making it one of the most intellectually advanced countries of the western world at the time.²⁴ This strong scholarship charged and solidified the Latin influenced Germanic dialect as the true language of the Isles through the power of literacy and education. As the citizens were educated in the language, it became concretely spoken and a real alphabet was enforced.²⁵

Until the introduction of Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons used an alphabet of runes made up of stark, angled lines developed to scratch into wood or carve into stone. But because the Bible was now so important in their culture, they were forced to develop a more complex language. The Anglo-Saxons adopted the Latin alphabet, and with the application of foreign sounds and the creation of new words, they were able to discuss more advanced and abstract concepts.²⁶ Before the introduction of Christianity, from about 400-600AD, more than half of the words available in the Anglo-Saxon language dealt with incredibly simple and mundane topics: plants and animals, food and household items, and buildings or settlements.²⁷ From the time that

²³ *ibid*

²⁴ *The Adventure of English*. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

²⁵ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 57.

²⁶ *ibid*

²⁷ *ibid*, 58.

Christianity was introduced to about 1000AD, words like *boccræft* (literally meaning book-craft, or literature), *folclagu* (folk-law, or law of the people), and *bibliodece* (library) were used, demonstrating the elevation of language through culture.²⁸ As new concepts emerged, new words needed to be created, therefore without the introduction of Christianity and its impact on civil culture, many words in the Anglo-Saxon language would have never come into existence and the early English language may not have flourished in the way that it did.

The Bible was written in pure Latin rather than the Germanic dialect-hybrid that had developed, making it impossible for the Anglo-Saxons to read. Although they were still expected to follow the teachings of priests and Saints, these citizens were unable to study the religion properly.²⁹ It became a symbol of class if you were able to read the Bible rather than rely on the teachings of those who could, and literacy and education began to separate the powerful from the weak. Those in the higher class refused to translate the Christian Bible into a language that the Anglo-Saxons would understand, and it became futile for those with lesser power to attempt to understand Christianity without relying on those fluent in Latin.³⁰ The Germanic dialects that Old English originated from were forced underground as they were only spoken by the poor and low-status Anglo-Saxons.³¹ Many would consider this the death of a language, or at the very least the elimination of an origin, and it was not until after the Vikings came to invade the Isles that the Old English language was truly revived.

The introduction of Christianity into the Anglo-Saxon language heavily impacted the origin of English through the transition from tribal runes to a Latin alphabet as well as the

²⁸ *ibid*

²⁹ The Adventure of English. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

³⁰ *ibid*

³¹ *ibid*

elevation of language through a cultural shift. Scholarship and literacy brought the Isles into an age of true English, influencing the language itself in powerful ways. However, the arrival of Christianity also had the potential to be the demise of English as class wars had forced the language underground. This negative effect was only ratified after the Viking invasion of 850AD.

The Norweigan Invasion of the Vikings (850-878AD)

As the Anglo-Saxons were establishing their cultural golden-age, those seeking to expand from Norway began to find easy targets among the rich monasteries in the late ninth century along the eastern and southern coasts of the English nation. Norweigan warriors came in the form of Vikings seeking power through the conquering of large amounts of land, particularly the healthy lands of the Isles.³² The Vikings searched to expand their populations, which meant that they would need to find more acceptable lands for their farms than the hilly areas of Norway, and also extract the wealth and treasures that had begun to collect in the new Anglo-Saxon Isles.³³ Beginning with small-scale raids, these Vikings discovered that the Northern regions, such as Northumbria and East Anglia, were completely defenseless. Upon this discovery, they made the decision to move into full invasions from 850 to 878AD, overrunning and occupying large portions of the Eastern Isles. The Vikings came with ships from the north, entering the Isles with rudimentary, yet powerful weaponry and coming in less organized armies than those that had

³² Mackenzie, Laura. "Where Did the Vikings Come from and Who Were They?" HistoryHit. Last modified July 11, 2018. <https://www.historyhit.com/where-did-the-vikings-come-from-and-who-were-they/>.

³³ "Why Did the Vikings Invade Britain?" HistoryHit. Last modified April 11, 2019. <https://www.historyhit.com/why-did-the-vikings-invade-britain/>.

previously invaded.³⁴ During the time of the Norweigan Invasions, the languages of the British Isles were moderately stabilized. Those speaking a Germanic dialect, the infancy of Old English, remained underground from the coming of Christianity. The introduction of the Latin Bible pushed Germanic dialects to the lowest classes, meaning the Vikings mainly interacted with Latin-speaking citizens. However, because the Vikings were unable to fully conquer, or even hold very many territories long enough to make an impact, their Old Norse language never made a significant impression on the long-term creation of English.³⁵ Of each invasion into the British Isles, the Norweigan Invasion of the Vikings held the least impact on the English language.

The Norman Conquest (878-1066AD)

Excluding the migration of the Anglo-Saxon tribes in the fifth century from the mainland to the Isles, the Norman Conquest is the event that holds the single most significance in the external history of the English language. After the introduction of Latin through Christianity and the age of the Norweigan sieges over the British Isles, English was a dying language. The class wars had almost ended English from its very start. The Norman people had defeated the Anglo-Saxons in the Battle of Ethandun and the Anglo-Saxon reign came to a halt.³⁶ They agreed to remain east of a set boundary in which the Anglo-Saxons, who had originally come mainly as tribes from Denmark, were free to live as Danes under Danish Law, more commonly referred to as Danelaw.³⁷ The Normans continued to suppress the language as William the

³⁴ *ibid*

³⁵ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 58.

³⁶ *ibid*

³⁷ *ibid*, 59.

Conqueror brought French into the hybrid of dialects, now with the upper classes speaking both Latin and French as a way to hold power over those beneath them.³⁸ The English language was hidden away as if it were only background noise to the great conquests of the Normans, but it would not be rid of so easily. Language is a living thing, developing and evolving each time another person speaks it aloud. Although it may have been shrouded by the history books and put out of mind by those in power, the language still flourished underneath the floorboards where the laborers and low-class citizens spoke it fervently. The reason they persisted with their own secret dialect may have been that speaking a shamed language gave those citizens a feeling of rebellion and power against those in authority rather than to attempt to adopt their posh French and Latin.

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King Alfred the Great is credited with saving Old English and raising the prestige and scope of the language to a level higher than that of any other vernacular at the time in Europe. He translated the Bible in 886AD from harsh Latin into the Germanic languages that the Anglo-Saxon people spoke, which was soon cemented as Old English.⁴⁰ By translating the Bible, he dissolved any authority that the Latin and French speaking people were able to hold over lower-class citizens who spoke only Germanic dialects, now called Old English. He also founded the first public schools, forming a literate and educated audience for literature that he brought over from the European mainland and creating an educated class that was able to administer the growing bureaucracy of the growing political state.⁴¹ King Alfred organized the Anglo-Saxon government so well in fact, that the Danes in their Danelaw were finally unable to withstand the

³⁸ *ibid*

³⁹ *The Adventure of English*. ITV. 2003. Produced by Melvyn Bragg.

⁴⁰ Williams, Joseph M. *Origins of the English Language*. New York City, NY: The Free Press, 1975, 60.

⁴¹ *ibid*, 62.

military attacks by the second generation Normans. King Alfred's son, Edward the Elder became ruler of the British Isles in the early 900s. There were several more generations of rulers before the death of a monarch without an heir divided and weakened the state in 1066.

The linguistic consequences of this invasion and colonization are greatly recognized in the vocabulary and semantics of the language. When understanding the impact of French and Latin on English vocabulary, we can note that more than 75% of all nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs are explicitly borrowed from other languages.⁴² During the Norman occupation of the Isles, about 10,000 French words were incorporated into Old English. About one-third of all English words are derived directly or indirectly from French, and it's estimated that there are more than 1,700 true cognates in the two languages.⁴³ Based on this, it can be determined that the impact of the Norman invasion was not only important for its revival of the English language, but also for the heavy influence that French held in the finalization of English as a language.

Conclusion

The invasions of the British Isles drastically changed the origins and developments that English took on its route to becoming a true cemented language. Political turmoil and savage wars have shaped English in ways that are seemingly so small and difficult to trace that the only way to truly track its alterations is through the study of historical events. Contrary to most historical studies, language is not simply a sum of concrete and spectacular happenings, but rather what is impacted by them. A historian of English describes not how an individual speaker

⁴² "Terms of Enrichment: How French Has Influenced English." ThoughtCo. Last modified November 4, 2019. <https://www.thoughtco.com/how-french-has-influenced-english-1371255>.

⁴³ *ibid*

has used language at some moment in the past, but rather how through time the shared abstract patterns of language have been gradually altered and changed, evolving and adapting to better fit the historic circumstances. The first invasion by the Angles, Saxon, and Jute tribes brought the Germanic dialects to the Isles, building the first foundation for English to take root, securing its place in the mouths of Westerners. Security of the language in its infancy became the most impactful of the four key invasions; however, the arrival of Christianity brought the drastic modifications English went under during the transition to a Latin religion. The addition of a Latin alphabet powered literacy in the language while the introduction of a strong class system pushed English underground. The Viking invasion lead Old Norse to the Isles, but it was not until the final invasion by the Normans that allowed rise to scholarship and literacy in the English language, making this conquest the second most impactful event to occur in the origins of English. Each invasion brought with it a new culture and a new addition to the fusion of dialects that became the English language. Without the many invasions and rulers of different tongues, the history of English becomes foggy with “what if” statements and timelines thrown out of balance. This essay explored to what extent the invasions of the British Isles impacted the origins of the English language, examining each shift in power and culture under a microscope in order to discover the evolution of English. When all is considered, there is overwhelming evidence that the invasions of the British Isles did significantly impact the origins of the English language, strongly influencing the very words that define this global language today.

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