HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF OLD ENGLISH

Pre-Germanic Britain

The history of the English language begins with the invasion of the British Isles by Germanic tribes in the 5th c. of our era. Prior to the Germanic invasion the British Isles must have been inhabited for at least fifty thousand years. Archeological research has uncovered many layers of prehistoric population. The earliest inhabitants whose linguistic affiliation has been established are the Celts. The Celts came to Britain in three waves and immediately preceded the Teutons. Economically and socially the Celts were a tribal society made up of kins, kinship groups, clans and tribes; they practised a primitive agriculture, and carried on trade with Celtic Gaul.

The first millenium B.C. was the period of Celtic migrations and expansion. Traces of their civilisation are still found all over Europe. Celtic languages were spoken over extensive parts of Europe before our era; later they were absorbed by other IE languages and left very few vestiges behind. The Gaelic branch has survived as *Irish* (or Erse) in Ireland, has expanded to Scotland as *Scotch-Gaelic* of the Highlands and is still spoken by a few hundred people on the Isle of Man (the *Manx language).* The Britonnic branch is represented by *Kymric* or *Welsh* in modern Wales and by *Breton* or *Armorican* spoken by over a million people in modern France (in the area called *Bretagne* or *Brittany*, where the Celts came as emigrants from Britain in the 5th c.); another Britonnic dialect in Great Britain, *Cornish,* was spoken in Cornwall until the end of the 18th c.

In the first century B.C. Gaul was conquered by the Romans. Having occupied Gaul Julius Caesar made two raids on Britain, in 55 and 54 B.C. The British Isles had long been known to the Romans as a source of valuable tin ore; Caesar attacked Britain for economic reasons – to obtain tin, pearls and corn, – and also for strategic reasons, since rebels and refugees from Gaul found support among their British kinsmen. Although Caesar failed to subjugate Britain, Roman economic penetration to Britain grew; traders

and colonists from Rome came in large numbers to settle in the south-eastern towns. In A.D. 43 Britain was again invaded by Roman legions under Emperor Claudius, and towards the end of the century was made a province of the Roman Empire.

The province was carefully guarded and heavily garrisoned: about 40,000 men were stationed there. Two fortified walls ran across the country, a network of paved Roman roads connected the towns and military camps. Scores of towns with a mixed population grew along the Roman roads – inhabited by Roman legionaries and civilians and by the native Celts; among the most important trading centres of Roman Britain was London.

The population further north was but little affected by the Roman occupation and remained Celtic both in language and custom. On the whole, the Romanisation of distant Britain was more superficial than that of continental provinces (e.g. Gaul and Iberia, where the complete linguistic conquest resulted in the growth of new Romance language, French and Spanish).

The Roman occupation of Britain lasted nearly 400 years; it came to an end in the early 5th c. In A.D. 410, the Roman troops were officially withdrawn to Rome by Constantine. This temporary withdrawal turned out to be final, for the Empire was breaking up due to internal and external causes, – particularly the attacks of barbarian tribes (including the Teutons) and the growth of independent kingdoms on former Roman territories. The expansion of Franks to Gaul in the 5th c. cut off Britain from the Roman world.

After the departure of the Roman legions the richest and most civilised part of the island, the south-east, was laid waste. Many towns were destroyed. Constant feuds among local landlords as well as the increased assaults of the Celts from the North and also the first Germanic raids from beyond the North Sea proved ruinous to the civilisation of Roman Britain.

Germanic Settlement of Britain. Beginning of English

Undoubtedly, the Teutons had made piratical raids on the British shores long before the withdrawal of the Romans in A.D. 410, but the crisis came with the departure of the last Roman legions. The Britons fought among themselves and were harried by the Picts

and Scots from Scotland. Left to their own resources, they were unable to offer a prolonged resistance to the enemies attacking them on every side. The 5th c. was the age of increased Germanic expansion. About the middle of the century several West Germanic tribes overran Britain and, for the most part, had colonised the island by the end of the century, though the invasions lasted well into the 6th c.

Reliable evidence of the period is extremely scarce. The story of the invasion is told by Bede (673-735), a monastic scholar who wrote the first history of England, HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA GENTIS ANGLORUM.

According to Bede the invaders came to Britain in A.D. 449 under the leadership of two Germanic kings, Hengist and Horsa; they had been invited by a British king, Vortigern, as assistants and allies in a local war. The newcomers soon dispossessed their hosts, and other Germanic bands followed. The invaders came in multitude, in families and clans, to settle in the occupied territories; like the Celts before them, they migrated as a people and in that the Germanic invasion was different from the Roman military conquest, although it was by no means a peaceful affair.

The invaders of Britain came from the western subdivision of the Germanic tribes. To quote Bede, “the newcomers were of the three strongest races of Germany, the Saxons, the Angles and the Jutes”. Modern archeological and linguistic research has shown that this information is not quite precise. The origin and the linguistic affiliation of the Jutes appears uncertain: some historians define them as a Frankish tribe, others doubt the participation and the very existence of the Jutes and name the Frisians as the third main party in the invasion. It is also uncertain whether the early settlers really belonged to separate tribes, Saxons and Angles, or, perhaps, constituted two mixed waves of invaders, differing merely in the place and time of arrival. They were called Angles and Saxons by the Romans and by the Celts but preferred to call themselves *Angelcyn* (English people) and applied this name to the conquered territories: *Angelcynnes land* (‘land of the English’, hence *England*).

The first wave of the invaders, the Jutes or the Frisians, occupied the extreme south-east: Kent and the Isle of Wight.

The second wave of immigrants was largely made up of the Saxons, who had been expanding westwards across Frisia to the Rhine and to what is now known as Normandy.

The final stage of the drift brought them to Britain by way of the Thames and the south coast. They set up their settlements along the south coast and on both banks of the Thames and, depending on location, were called *South Saxons, West Saxons* and *East Saxons* (later also *Mid Saxons,* between the western and eastern groups). The Saxons consolidated into a number of petty kingdoms, the largest and the most powerful of them being *Wessex,* the kingdom of West Saxons.

Last came the Angles from the lower valley of the Elbe and southern Denmark; they made their landing on the east coast and moved up the rivers to the central part of the island, to occupy the districts between the Wash and the Humber, and to the North of the Humber. They founded large kingdoms which had absorbed their weaker neighbours: *East Anglia*, *Mercia,* and *Northumbria.*

Thus Angles, Saxons and Jutes (or Frisians) founded seven kingdoms in Britain, Heptarchy: *Kent* (the kingdom of Jutes or Frisians), *Essex* (the kingdom of east Saxons), *Sussex* (the kingdom of South Saxons), *Wessex* (the kingdom of West Saxons), and three kingdoms of Angles: *Northumbria, Mercia and East Anglia*.

There was, probably, little intermixture between the newcomers and the Celtic aborigines, though there is a wide difference of opinion among modern historians as to their relative proportion in the population. Gildas, a Celtic historian of the day, alluded to the settlement as the "ruin of Britain" and described the horrible devastation of the country: the invaders pulled down British villages and ruined the Roman British towns. They killed and enslaved the Britons or drove them to the distant parts of the country. The Britons found refuge in the mountainous districts of Cornwall and Wales; some Britons fled to Armorica (later called *Small Britanny* or *Bretagne,* in Modern France). Celtic tribes remained intact only in Scotland and Ireland.

The bulk of the new population sprang from the Germanic invaders, though, to a certain extent, they intermixed with the Britons. Gradually the Germanic conquerors and the surviving Celts blended into a single people.

The invaders certainly prevailed over the natives so far as language was concerned; the linguistic conquest was complete. After the settlement West Germanic tongues came to be spoken all over Britain with the exception of a few distant regions where Celts were in the majority: Scotland, Wales and Cornwall.

The migration of the Germanic tribes to the British Isles and the resulting separation from the Germanic tribes on the mainland was a decisive event in their linguistic history. Geographical separation, as well as mixture and unification of people, are major factors in linguistic differentiation and in the formation of languages. Being cut off from related OG tongues the closely related group of West Germanic dialects developed into a separate Germanic language, English. That is why the Germanic settlement of Britain can be regarded as the beginning of the independent history of the English language.

Events of External History between the 5th and 11th c.

The history of Anglo-Saxon Britain from the 5th to the 11th c. has been reconstructed from multiple sources: Bede's ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY, Celtic and Anglo-Saxon historical chronicles and legal documents. Some events of external history have a direct bearing on the development of the language and therefore must be recalled here.

The relative weight of the OE kingdoms and their interinfluence was variable. Four of the kingdoms at various times secured superiority in the country: Kent, Northumbria and Mercia – during the Early OE, pre-written period, and Wessex – all through the period of Written OE.

The supremacy of Kent to the south of the Humber lasted until the early 7th c.; it is attributed to the cultural superiority of Kent and its close contact with the mainland. The 7th and the 8th c. witnessed the temporary rise of Northumbria, followed by a period of balance of power of the three main rivals (Northumbria, Mercia, and Wessex) and the dominance of Mercia, large and prosperous kingdom in the rich Midland plains. Yet already during Mercia's supremacy Wessex had secured the control of Sussex and Kent, and was growing more influential. The conquest of Mercia by Wessex in the early 9th c. reversed the position of the two kingdoms: Wessex was brought to the fore and acquired the leadership unsurpassed till the end of the OE period (11th c.). Wessex was a kingdom with good frontiers and vast areas of fertile land in the valley of the Thames; the control

of London and the lower Thames valley (formerly part of Essex) as well as the growing contacts with the Franconian Empire contributed to the rise of Wessex. Apart from internal reasons the unification of England under the leadership of Wessex was speeded up by a new factor: the pressure of a common enemy.

In the 8th c. raiders from Scandinavia (the "Danes") made their first plundering attacks on England. The struggle of the English against the Scandinavians lasted over 300 years, in the course of which period more than half of England was occupied by the invaders and reconquered again. At first the Danes came in small bands, ravaged the district and escaped with the booty to their ships. About the middle of the 9th c. the raids increased in frequency and entered upon a new phase; great war hosts began to arrive making attempts at conquest and settlement. The Scandinavians subdued Northumbria and East Anglia, ravaged the eastern part of Mercia, and advanced on Wessex. Like their predecessors, the West Germanic invaders, the Scandinavians came in large numbers to settle in the new areas. They founded many towns and villages in northern England; in many regions there sprang up a mixed population made up of the English and the Danes. Their linguistic amalgamation was easy, since their tongues belonged to the same linguistic group. The ultimate effect of the Scandinavian invasions on the English language became manifest at a later date, in the 12th- 13th c., when the Scandinavian element was incorporated in the central English dialects; but the historical events that led to the linguistic influence date from the 9th and 10th c.

Wessex stood at the head of the resistance. Under King Alfred of Wessex, one of the greatest figures in English history, by the peace treaty of 878 England was divided into two halves: the north-eastern half under Danish control called *Danelaw* and the south-western half united under the leadership of Wessex. The reconquest of Danish territories was carried on successfully by Alfred's successors but in the late 10th c. the Danish raids were renewed again; they reached a new climax in the early 11th c. headed by Sweyn and Canute. The attacks were followed by demands for regular payments of large sums of money (called *Danegeld* "Danish money"), which was collected from many districts and towns; about one eighth of Danegeld came from London, the largest and wealthiest of English towns. In 1017 Canute was acknowledged as king, and England became part of a great northern empire, comprising Denmark and Norway. On

Canute's death (1035) his kingdom broke up and England regained political independence; by that time it was a single state divided into six earldoms.

A most important role in the history of the English language was played by the introduction of Christianity. The first attempt to introduce the Roman Christian religion to Anglo-Saxon Britain was made in the 6th c. during the supremacy of Kent. In 597 a group of missionaries from Rome despatched by Pope Gregory the Great ("St. Augustine's mission") landed on the shore of Kent. They made Canterbury their centre and from there the new faith expanded to Kent, East Anglia, Essex, and other places. The movement was supported from the North; missionaries from Ireland brought the Celtic variety of Christianity to Northumbria. (The Celts had been converted to Christianity during the Roman occupation of Britain.) In less than a century practically all England was Christianised. The strict unified organisation of the church proved a major factor in the centralisation of the country.

The introduction of Christianity gave a strong impetus to the growth of culture and learning. Monasteries were founded all over the country, with monastic schools attached. Religious services and teaching were conducted in Latin. A high standard of learning was reached in the best English monasteries, especially in Northumbria, as early as the 8th and 9th c. There was the famous monastery of Lindisfarne, founded by Aidan, who had come with the Irish priests; the monastery of Jarrow, where the Venerable Bede, the first English historian, lived and worked. During the Scandinavian invasions, the Northumbrian culture was largely wiped out. The monastery at Lindisfarne was destroyed by the Danes in one of their early plundering attacks. English culture shifted to the southern kingdoms, most of all to Wessex, where a cultural efflorescence began during the reign of Alfred (871-901); from that time till the end of the OE period Wessex, with its capital at Winchester, remained the cultural centre of England.