

## I INTRODUCTION

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*Richard M. Hogg*

### 1.1 Political history and language history

Bede begins his story of the Anglo-Saxon invasions and settlements of Britain as follows (it seems more appropriate here to quote from the Old English translation than from the original Latin text):

Ða wæs ymb feower hund wintra and nigon and feowertig fram ures Drihtnes menniscnysse þæt Martianus casere rice onfeng ond VII gear hæfde. Se wæs syxta eac feowertigum fram Augusto þam casere. Ða Angelpæod and Seaxna was gelaðod fram þam foresprecenan cyninge [Wyrtegeorn wæs gehaten], and on Breotone com on þrim miclum scypum, and on eastdæle þyses ealondes eardungstowe onfeng þurh þæs ylcan cyninges bebod, þe hi hider gelaðode, þæt hi sceoldan for heora eðle compian and feohtan. And hi sona compedon wið heora gewinnan, þe hi oft ær norðan onhergedon; and Seaxan þa sige geslogan. Ða sendan hi ham ærenddracan and heton secgan þysses landes wæstmbernysse and Brytta yrgþo. And hi þa sona hider sendon maran sciphære strengran wigena; and wæs unoferswiðendlic weorud, þa hi togædere geþeodde wæron. And him Bryttas sealdan and geafan eardungstowe betwih him, þæt hi for sybbe and for hælo heora eðles campodon and wunnon wið heora feondum, and hi him andlyfne and are forgeafen for heora gewinne.

(*Bede* 1.12)

It was four hundred and forty-nine years after the birth of our Lord that the Emperor Martian came to the throne, and reigned for seven years. He was the forty-sixth Emperor since Augustus. The Angles and the Saxons were invited by the aforesaid king [he was called Vortigern] and they came to Britain in three large ships and received dwelling places in the eastern part of this island by order of that same king who had invited them here, so that they would battle and fight

Richard M. Hogg

---

for their land. And at once they fought against their enemies who had often come down on raids from the north, and the Saxons won the battles. Then they sent messengers home, ordering them to tell of the fertility of this land and the cowardice of the Britons. And then they immediately sent here a larger fleet with stronger warriors; and, when they were gathered together, they formed an invincible army. And the Britons gave them dwelling places to share between them, on condition that they fought for peace and for prosperity in their land and defeated their enemies, and the Britons would give them provisions and estates on account of their victory.

Bede was writing in the eighth century, although he uses as a source the writings of Gildas which date from the middle of the sixth. Even so, approximately 100 years stands between Gildas and the arrival of those two famous brothers Hengist and Horsa, the traditional founders of the English nation.

It is therefore reasonable to suggest that the truth of Bede's account is sanctified more by tradition than by a correspondence with actual events. There is, for example, a growing body of archaeological evidence of Germanic peoples being in Britain during the fourth century (note, for example the fourth-century rune at Caistor-by-Norwich mentioned in §3.2.2 of chapter 3 and see the careful discussion in Hills 1979). But a clue to the most important event relating to the Germanic settlements comes at the very beginning of the Bede extract, with the reference to the Roman Emperor. Until 410 the Romans had occupied and governed Britain, but in that year they left Britain, and there can be no doubt that a major consequence of their departure was that the organisational structures which the Romans had erected for the governance of the country began to decay. In essence a vacuum of authority and power was created by their departure, and the Germanic tribes on the other side of the North Sea, who would already have been aware of the country's attractions, perhaps by their fathers or forefathers being mercenaries in the Roman army in Britain, were eager and willing to step into the breach.

The first two hundred years of Anglo-Saxon occupation of Britain are almost wholly unsupported by contemporary documentary evidence, the evidence being primarily archaeological and also, although more speculatively, toponymical (see chapter 7), or to be deduced from later writers such as Bede. But it is safe to conclude that the earliest settlements were in East Anglia and the south-east, with a gradual spread along the Thames valley, into the Midlands, and northwards

## Introduction

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through Yorkshire and into southern Scotland. From the linguistic point of view the most remarkable feature of the Anglo-Saxon settlement must be the virtually complete elimination of the Celtic languages, principally Welsh and Cornish. In the whole of Old English it is doubtful whether there are more than twenty Celtic borrowings into literary vocabulary (of which the most widespread now, but not in Old English, is perhaps *cross*). On the other hand, outside the literary vocabulary a very large number of place-, especially river-, names were retained by the invaders, hence *Thames*, *Severn*, and settlement-names such as *Manchester* (with the second element OE *ceaster* ‘former Roman settlement’). It would seem that, although relations were sometimes friendly, the fifth- and sixth-century Anglo-Saxons were in this respect as resolutely monolingual as their twentieth-century descendants.

It is linguistically improbable that the first Anglo-Saxons all spoke the same form of language. Indeed Bede states that the Anglo-Saxon invaders came from three Germanic tribes, the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes, and such a division, if accurate, would as much reflect linguistic as geographical or social differentiation. Since Bede’s account directly equates the Angles with Anglian, the Saxons with Saxon (for our purposes, West Saxon), and the Jutes with Kentish, it is clearly tempting to assume that the Old English dialects to which we most usually refer (see here chapter 6) have their origins directly in pre-settlement Germanic. Such a view was certainly widely accepted in the first half of this century and earlier, but it has been strongly challenged since then (see especially DeCamp 1958 and, for a contrary view, Samuels 1971).

Without attempting to draw any firm conclusions, it may be worth formulating a number of general principles relevant not only to this question but to other similar questions concerning the Anglo-Saxon period. On the one hand, the reports of Bede, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and other early records must be privileged by virtue of their closeness in time to the events. In addition, that closeness in time may be further enhanced by the reliance of, say, Bede, writing ca AD 700, on even earlier writers such as Gildas. On the other hand, we can be certain of one thing, namely that the transmission of historical information in the earliest period of the Anglo-Saxon settlement must have been considerably more unreliable than it is today, and hence subject to much (not necessarily deliberate) distortion. In general, too, we must beware of forcing anachronistic meanings on ancient terms. As, for example, Strang (1970: 377–9) points out, terms such as Angles, Saxons and Jutes

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Richard M. Hogg

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need not have been mutually exclusive nor need they have referred to the same kind of entity: thus Angle may have referred to a tribe, whilst Saxon referred to a tribal confederacy. Jute remains yet more mysterious.

These considerations seem to force us into a compromise position, namely that the Anglo-Saxon invaders, coming from northern Germany and Denmark, already bore with them dialectal variations which in part contributed to the differentiation of the Old English dialects, but that nevertheless the major factors in that differentiation developed on the soil of Anglo-Saxon England. Certainly the remarks of Bede and other early writers are perhaps best viewed as iconic representations of the truth, rather than as simply interpreted historical verities.

The expansion of the Anglo-Saxon settlements in the centuries immediately following the initial invasions cannot be traced in any detail. Broadly, the first settlements were in East Anglia and south-east England, and there was a fairly quick spread so that by the end of the sixth century Anglo-Saxon rule of whatever kind, but one presupposing the dominance of Old English as the language of the people, had been extended over most of what is now England and was quickly encroaching on southern and south-eastern Scotland. Areas where Celtic remained dominant certainly included Cornwall and Wales, where in the eighth century Offa's Dyke was to become an important divide. Of the further parts of north-west England little is known, but the best estimate is that in such a sparsely-populated and remote area Anglo-Saxon and Celtic settlements existed side by side.

In strictly political and secular terms the seventh century probably witnessed the consolidation of Anglo-Saxon authority over their newly won territory, best symbolized by what we now know as the Heptarchy or rule of the seven kingdoms. These were the kingdoms of Wessex, Essex, Sussex, Kent, East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria. Linguistically the concept of the Heptarchy is extremely important for it is from that concept that we obtain the traditional Old English dialect names: West Saxon, Kentish, Mercian and Northumbrian (the term Anglian as a cover term for Mercian and Northumbrian is taken from Bede's tripartite division of the Germanic settlers discussed above). But several words of warning are needed here. Firstly, it would be misleading to think of these 'kingdoms' in modern terms: their boundaries must have been vague and subject to change, not susceptible to the precise delineation of the kind that we are accustomed to today. Secondly, kingdoms of the Heptarchy and dialects areas are not necessarily

## Introduction

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isomorphic, even when they share the same name. For example, although texts originating from the kingdom of Mercia are commonly held to be Mercian one and all, it is clear that they have widely varying dialectal features, to the extent that two ‘Mercian’ texts may show as many distinctions as a ‘Mercian’ text and a ‘Northumbrian’ text. Thirdly, the absence of a dialect corresponding to one or other of the kingdoms of the Heptarchy does not imply the non-existence of such a dialect. Thus the absence of an East Anglian dialect cannot sensibly be taken to imply that there were no dialect variations particular to that area during the Old English period. Rather, all that is implied is the quite prosaic claim that we know of no texts certainly originating from the East Anglian area during the period, although place-name evidence, when collected and assembled, should allow us to ascertain some of the phonological and lexical characteristics of the dialect.

Whatever the merits of the concept of the Heptarchy, from the linguistic point of view the most important fact is that the political centres of power fluctuated considerably from the seventh to the ninth centuries. At first, Kent was probably of major importance (so, too, at the time must have been East Anglia, but without major linguistic consequence). It was to Kent that the first Roman Christian missionaries came, notably St Augustine in 597. With the conversion of Anglo-Saxon England (but not necessarily the Anglo-Saxon inhabitants!) to Christianity, although not by virtue of St Augustine’s mission (see below), came that crucial cultural artefact, the Roman alphabetic system of writing. The consequences of this are more fully spelt out both below and in chapter 5, §5.2, but it needs to be said here that the Roman alphabet was essential in the remarkably early development of a vernacular manuscript tradition in Britain compared with what obtained elsewhere in the Germanic areas. The Germanic runic alphabet was either not fully used for normal communicative purposes or was written on objects not likely to be preserved intact, or, most probably, a combination of both pertained.

By about the middle of the seventh century the major centres of political (and hence cultural) power had shifted northwards, to the Anglian kingdoms of Mercia and Northumbria, especially the latter. Indeed for several decades around 700 Northumbria could claim, at Jarrow, Durham and Lindisfarne, and in the persons of men such as Bede and Alcuin, to be one of the major cultural centres of Western Europe. Since it was also at this time that texts began to be written in English rather than Latin, it is not surprising that most of the earliest

Richard M. Hogg

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English texts are of Northumbrian origin, as in the case of *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Bede's Death Song* and the runic inscription on the Ruthwell Cross. Other texts which survive in an early eighth-century form, such as the *Epinal Glossary*, are predominantly Mercian, although they seem to bear traces of an earlier southern origin. Even at a later time this early northern predominance leaves its traces in poetry. Although the point is now highly controversial (see Chase 1981 and especially the essay by Stanley 1981 therein), the composition of *Beowulf* may be attributable to the latter part of the eighth century, when the Mercian kingdom, especially under Offa, dominated much of England.

Accelerated by events which we shall discuss shortly, by the end of the ninth century political power had been transferred, irrevocably, to southern England, more particularly the kingdom of Wessex centred at Winchester. But even under Alfred, who ruled from 871 to 899, although we witness the first real flourishing of Anglo-Saxon literature, with the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and various translations of Latin originals, the West Saxon dialect is markedly influenced by Mercian. This is because Alfred, in order to establish a firm cultural, educational and literary foundation, had to seek the help of Mercians such as Bishop Wærferth, and the Welshman Bishop Asser, for it was only in Mercia that the scholarly tradition of the North had been able to survive, and there is precious little evidence to support any such tradition in the South.

One of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles reports for 793 that 'the harrying of the heathen miserably destroyed God's church in Lindisfarne by rapine and slaughter' (Garmonsway, 1954:56). Tall oaks from little acorns grow. This note of righteous indignation, no doubt a reaction to Alfred's later battles, indicates the first known intrusion of the Vikings onto Anglo-Saxon soil. Sporadic raids continued thereafter, but from 835 onwards, when the Vikings plundered Sheppey, raids became more and more frequent along the southern and, presumably, eastern coasts, until in 865 a Viking army over-wintered in East Anglia. By 870 these Danes had overrun not merely East Anglia but all the eastern and central parts of Mercia and Northumbria, whilst mainly Norwegian Vikings occupied the north-western parts of Britain, the Isle of Man and the area around Dublin. Indeed the Danes were clearly threatening Wessex.

If Alfred had not come to the throne of Wessex in 871 the course of England and of its language would no doubt have been immeasurably different. For Alfred's strategy and tactics in both war and diplomacy

## Introduction

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enabled him first to regroup his forces and then, in 886, by the Treaty of Wedmore, establish a truce with the Danish leader Guthrum which in only a few years was to lead to Anglo-Saxon dominance in the country, albeit heavily tinged in many areas by Danish influence. Viking raids and battles continued on and off for several years, but by about 895 the many Vikings who remained, rather than going off to fresh pastures and fertile plunder in northern France, posed no threat.

Although it is certainly an understatement of Alfred's strategy, from our point of view the most important feature of the Treaty of Wedmore was that it recognized the Danish settlement of northern and eastern England, roughly north-east of a line from London to Chester, in which areas Danish law was to hold. This area – the Danelaw – must have been occupied by many Danish speakers living alongside English speakers (see Ekwall 1930, Page 1971). The marks of the Danelaw are easily observable today, most obviously in the pattern of place-names ending in *-by*, the Danish word for 'settlement' (see further the discussion in chapter 7). But reminders of the Danelaw survive elsewhere in the language. In order to understand the situation it is necessary to remember that the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons were both Germanic peoples with the same Germanic traditions (see here the approving references to Danes in *Beowulf*) and that their languages, stemming from a common source not many centuries before, must have been to some extent mutually comprehensible, albeit with some difficulty. Furthermore, in national terms there was no relation of conqueror to vanquished, (although in one area Danes might be dominant rulers, in another Anglo-Saxons would be) and thus the groups met more or less as equals and certainly with much in common. In these circumstances Danish and English communities could not remain entirely separate and always hostile (although they were undoubtedly both often). It is not surprising, therefore, that Scandinavian linguistic features entered the English language quite extensively, even, in time, giving such basic words as *they* and *are*. This borrowing of function words is not a feature of the later borrowings from French, and is a significant indicator of the closeness of linguistic form between Scandinavian and English at the time. However, the majority of Scandinavian borrowing into English belongs to the post-rather than the pre-Conquest history, and there are few Scandinavian loan words in Old English, for example. Those there are, such as *lagu* 'law' and *wicing* 'pirate', belong primarily to the eleventh century. The reasons for the time-lag between Scandinavian settlement and loan-

Richard M. Hogg

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word borrowing are difficult to ascertain, but such a time-lag is also typical of the later borrowings from French, and it may be that no important conclusions should be drawn from it. Of course it is quite possible that some Scandinavian loans, typically of the Scand. *kirk* type vs. the English *church* type, are unrecognizable because of the failure of the Anglo-Saxon orthographic practice to distinguish between the relevant sounds (for further discussion, see chapters 3 and 5).

In political terms the tenth century saw the consolidation of Alfred's gains and the unification of Anglo-Saxon England under a single ruler. It was this as much as ecclesiastical history (see below), which contributed to the rise of a literary standard language or *Schriftsprache* based upon West Saxon norms. It is notable that from the tenth century onwards distinctively non-West Saxon texts only appear in any quantity from Northumbria, the area most heavily influenced by the Vikings and furthest from the West Saxon centre of authority. Kentish texts become more and more heavily influenced by West Saxon, and the production of unambiguously Mercian texts is more notable by its absence than its presence.

At the beginning of the eleventh century, when Ethelred the Unready (OE *unræd* 'the ill-advised one') was on the throne, the Danes again became of major importance, with the ultimate consequence that in 1016 Canute (Cnut) came to the throne, a Danish King of England for the first time. Since this achievement was more diplomatic than military, and since Cnut had at least as many opponents in Denmark as in England, the pattern of relations was somewhat different from that of the earlier Viking invasions. Essentially, Cnut's court was an Anglo-Danish one, and alongside Cnut's Danish followers there co-existed a considerable number of English advisers, of whom, perhaps, the best known is Wulfstan, archbishop of York. Under these circumstances it might be expected that over the next twenty-six years of Danish rule there would have been a considerable degree of Danish–English bilingualism and that much Danish vocabulary would have entered the language. But although this did happen to some extent with a writer such as Wulfstan, mainly because of his relations with Cnut and his archbishopric of York, elsewhere Danish influence remained by and large a property of what had been the earlier Danelaw. Occasional Scandinavian words are found in other writers, even including Ælfric, but their number is low.

When, in 1042, an English king regained the throne, namely Edward the Confessor, he turned out to be a harbinger of French influence rather



## Introduction

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than a restorer of the English tongue. A king perhaps wiser in the ways of heaven than the ways of earth (unlike Cnut, who seems to have been equally wise in both), and, what is more to the point, one who had spent a long period in exile, Edward cultivated close relations with the dukes of Normandy and even, in 1050, appointed a Frenchman as bishop of London. When Edward died in January 1066 he had managed, with the help of the rival claimants, to muddy the succession to the throne sufficiently to ensure that both Harold and William of Normandy could lay reasonable claim to the throne, and neither was reluctant to do so. The conclusion of that rivalry is well-known.

It is most reasonable to suggest that the most important immediate effect of the Norman Conquest was political and that the most important long-term effects were cultural. This is to imply that the Norman Conquest itself had rather less immediate effect on the linguistic structures of English than is often supposed. However it does not imply that the eventual influence of French upon English was not considerable, which would obviously be counter-factual. The point is rather more subtle. The eventual influence of French upon English was a long-term one, and can be ascribed to the cultural patterns which the consequences of the Norman Conquest imposed upon England. But if we concentrate solely on the eleventh and early twelfth century, virtually no French loans are found, and of the few that do occur, they are often ambiguously French or Latin, e.g. *castel* 'castle'. The reasons for this may be similar to the time-lag concerning Scandinavian influence, but it seems more likely that the lack of French influence was a result of the manner of the Norman assumption of rule, which involved relatively few people and had an immediate effect only on the upper echelons of English society.

This topic, however, is one more proper to Volume II of this History than to Volume I. There are clear linguistic indications that by about 1100 the structure of our language was beginning to be modified to such a considerable degree that it is reasonable to make that the dividing line between Old English and Middle English: in phonology the characteristic Old English diphthongal system was disappearing, and the variety of vowels in unstressed syllables was meagre; in morphology more and more inflexions were falling together, and morphosyntactic categories such as case and gender were no longer unambiguously expressed except in a minority of instances; in syntax the old word-order type SOV was clearly in decline. The important point to note, however, is that such shifts were not caused by the Norman Conquest,

Richard M. Hogg

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rather they were the product of a long-term trend in the history of the language. It is doubtful whether the Norman Conquest, in the first instance at least, contributed significantly to the acceleration of these trends.

### 1.2 Ecclesiastical history and language history

It is entirely fitting that the first major history of English-speaking Britain, although written in Latin, should be called *An Ecclesiastical History of the English People*. Throughout the Anglo-Saxon period the church existed in virtual equality as a centre of power and culture alongside the political structures. And this could give rise to considerable complication. One obvious point here is that the centre of the church quickly became Canterbury, in the heart of Kent. But politically Kent was one of the weakest kingdoms, squabbled over for centuries by the Mercians and the West Saxons. Thus, in the first half of the ninth century Mercian linguistic influence on Kentish texts was considerable, whilst towards the end of the period West Saxon texts can sometimes be seen to have Kentish influence, either because they were written in Kent or because the ecclesiastical influence of Kent was so much stronger than its political influence.

But this is to anticipate. Firstly, we should recall that Christianity did not come to Britain only with the mission of St Augustine in 597. During the Roman occupation of Britain the Romans had brought Christianity to the country and the native Celts had been converted. As long as the Romans remained, this form of Christianity did not diverge significantly from that on the Continent, but after the departure of the Romans and the arrival of the non-Christian Anglo-Saxons, the church became isolated from developments elsewhere, and although not wilfully persecuted, suffered depredation at the hands of the uninterested, albeit not actively hostile, invaders.

St Augustine's achievement, therefore, was not the conversion of Britain but rather the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons. And this conversion took place in a country where Christianity already existed. Indeed Augustine's mission gave a new impetus to British Christianity. From its stronghold at Iona off the west coast of Scotland British Christianity spread to Northumbria under the leadership of Aidan, who both founded the monastery at Lindisfarne and converted King Oswald of Northumbria to Christianity. The consequences of the differences