

Introduction: Multilingualism in Early Medieval Britain

In the early eighth century, the Northumbrian historian Bede wrote: ‘at the present time, there are five languages in Britain . . . these are the English, British, Irish, Pictish, as well as the Latin languages; through the study of the scriptures, Latin is in general use among them all’.¹ One hundred years later, the British author of the *Historia Brittonum* described how Britain held four peoples, ‘the Irish, the Picts, the Saxons and the British’.² It was clear to those who lived in early medieval Britain that Old English, the precursor of the modern English spoken around the world today, was one of four vernacular languages (native tongues) spoken and that those who spoke it were one of four *gentes* (peoples) to inhabit the island. As the centuries passed, they would be joined by Norse-speaking groups of Scandinavians collectively known as Vikings and the French-speaking Normans, among others to leave their linguistic mark on the island. Early medieval Britain was a multilingual space: a place where multiple languages were in use simultaneously. Britain’s various tongues did not merely coexist alongside one another, but also frequently overlapped within the same spheres: religious, intellectual, political, economic, and visually, whether on the pages of manuscripts or inscribed on stone monuments for passers-by to see.

Yet Old English has too often been treated as if it existed separately from the other languages that were spoken in early medieval Britain,³ a phenomenon caused in large part by the rise of nationalism from the early modern period onwards.⁴ This means that materials from different linguistic traditions are rarely studied together,⁵ and while a handful of excellent individual studies have explored aspects of multilingualism in early medieval Britain, they have largely focused on one linguistic relationship at a time: Old English and Old Norse,⁶ Old English and Welsh,⁷ Old Irish and Welsh,⁸ Old English and Latin,⁹

¹ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, i.1, 16–17.

² Morris, *Nemius*, 59 and 18.

³ Early exceptions include Hector Munro and Nora Kershaw Chadwick, and Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson; see Lapidge, *Interpreters of Early Medieval Britain*. More recently, see Callander, *Dissonant Neighbours*; Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom*; Brady, *Origin Legends*; and Ireland, *The Gaelic Background of Old English Poetry before Bede*.

⁴ Geary, *Myth of Nations*, 15–40.

⁵ Exceptions include Trotter, *Multilingualism in Later Medieval Britain*; Tyler, *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in England*; Jefferson and Putter, *Multilingualism in Medieval Britain (c. 1066–1520)*; Schrijver, *Language Contact and the Origins of the Germanic Languages*; and Clarke and Ni Mhaonaigh, *Medieval Multilingual Manuscripts*.

⁶ Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England*.

⁷ Higley, *Between Languages: The Uncooperative Text in Early Welsh and Old English Nature Poetry*; and Callander, *Dissonant Neighbours*.

⁸ Sims-Williams, *Irish Influence on Medieval Welsh Literature*.

⁹ Stephenson and Thornbury, *Latinity and Identity in Anglo-Saxon Literature*; Gallagher and Tinti, *The Languages of Early Medieval Charters*.

Middle English and French.¹⁰ The implications of isolating Old English from its insular counterparts are not just a matter of scholarly semantics. In a 2014 speech during the lead-up to Brexit, for instance, then-UKIP leader Nigel Farage stated that ‘this country in a short space of time has frankly become unrecognisable . . . it is the fact in many parts of England you don’t hear English spoken any more. This is not the kind of community we want to leave to our children and grandchildren’.¹¹ Farage’s xenophobic speech restricted ‘English’ identity to native speakers and implied that the presence of multiple languages in England was a recent change, and in his view, a change for the worse.

Yet as we have seen, Bede’s characterisation of Britain’s linguistic landscape as composed of four vernaculars with Latin as a shared *lingua franca* meant that the island was perceived as a multilingual space in the early medieval period. This Element outlines the web of multilingual connections within early medieval Britain as understood and experienced by its inhabitants, offering a comprehensive synthesis of the evidence from the pre-Norman period that situates Old English as one of several living languages which together formed the basis of a vibrant oral and written literary culture. The volume explores exchanges between the vernacular languages of early medieval Britain (Old English, Irish Gaelic, Pictish, and British), as well as Old Norse, which entered the island during the Viking Age, and Latin, concluding with a look at the impact of Norman French from the eleventh century onwards. (There is not space to discuss Ireland or continental Europe, but the conclusions drawn here extend to these regions as well.)¹² Each section centres around a key thematic topic and is illustrated through a series of memorable case studies that encapsulate the extent to which multilingualism appeared in every facet of life. This Element follows the ebbs and flows of contact patterns between various vernaculars over time, making an overall argument for the dynamic extent of transcultural literary and linguistic culture in Britain before the arrival of the Normans.

A language is a structured system that groups of sentient beings use to communicate with one another. All of the languages spoken in early medieval Britain – as was the case throughout most of the medieval European west, with some notable exceptions such as Finnish, Hungarian, and Basque – are descended from the same ancestral language, and therefore belong to the same language family, known as Indo-European. When a group of people moved to a new location, their language naturally diverged over time from that spoken in the place that they had left. When two groups diverge enough to have different

¹⁰ Wogan-Browne et al., *The French of England, c.1100–c.1500*. ¹¹ Sparrow, ‘Nigel Farage’.

¹² Tinti, *Europe and the Anglo-Saxons*; Mullen, *Southern Gaul and the Mediterranean*.

speech patterns or vocabulary but are still largely intelligible to one another, their languages are referred to as dialects. When they are no longer largely intelligible, they have become different languages. Scholars use the terminology of genealogy to describe the relationships between languages: two languages may have ‘descended’ from a common ‘ancestor’, or ‘evolved’ until they ‘diverged’ from one another. ‘Related’ languages belong to the same language ‘family’ and can share varying degrees of closeness depending upon how far up the ‘family tree’ their shared ancestor exists.

The five languages named by Bede represent three branches within the broader Indo-European language family.¹³ Latin belongs to the Italic branch and is the ancestor of modern Romance languages such as Spanish, Italian, and French. The latter is also partly descended from Norman French, whose speakers came to Britain in 1066. British – which would eventually split into the Welsh, Cornish, and now-extinct Pictish languages – and Irish Gaelic are Celtic languages. Old English belongs to the Germanic language family, which includes such languages as German, Flemish, and Dutch in addition to Old Norse, the language spoken by the Vikings and the ancestor of modern Scandinavian languages like Icelandic, Norwegian, Danish, and Swedish. Our journey through the multilingualism of early medieval Britain will also touch on other languages spoken there at various points, such as Frisian and Greek, but will focus mostly on the languages recognised by those who lived in early medieval Britain as having been spoken by major groups of permanent inhabitants.

The written history of Britain by Britons began with the arrival of the Romans and Latinate culture to the island,¹⁴ which was inhabited from the Palaeolithic period, but not continuously.¹⁵ Permanent settlement began around 9,000 years ago after the end of the last Ice Age.¹⁶ The precise date at which a recognisable ‘Celtic’ culture and language family emerged is uncertain, though migration from Gaul during the Bronze Age has been suggested as influential.¹⁷ Depictions of the island by classical Greek and Latin authors described its inhabitants using terminology cognate with Celtic languages,¹⁸ and certainly by the Iron Age,¹⁹ people speaking the ancestor of the Celtic language family

¹³ Kapović, *The Indo-European Language*.

¹⁴ For references to Britain in classical and late antique texts, see Merrills, *History and Geography in Late Antiquity*.

¹⁵ Darvill, *Prehistoric Britain*; Pettitt and White, *The British Palaeolithic*.

¹⁶ Conneller, *The Mesolithic in Britain*.

¹⁷ Patterson et al., ‘Large-scale migration into Britain during the Middle to Late Bronze Age’.

¹⁸ Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*, 2–14 and 29–52.

¹⁹ Haselgrove and Pope, *The Earlier Iron Age in Britain and the Near Continent*; Haselgrove and Moore, *The Later Iron Age in Britain and Beyond*; Cunliffe, *The Ancient Celts*.

(known as Proto-Celtic or common Celtic) and associated with the La Tène material culture lived in Britain.²⁰ By 43 CE, when southern Britain was annexed and subsequently invaded as part of the Roman Empire under the emperor Claudius, the island was inhabited by speakers of several Celtic languages: Pictish and Gaelic were spoken in modern-day Scotland, British in the Old North and southern Britain, as well as Gaelic in pockets of what is now Wales. For the next 350 years, Britain south of the Firth of Forth was a Roman province.²¹ The Roman impact on all facets of British life was significant,²² not least on multilingualism. The Romans brought with them a new language and alphabet – Latin, both written and spoken – whose influence persisted long past their departure in the fifth century.²³

During the fifth and sixth centuries, the Anglo-Saxons – loose groupings of Germanic-speaking peoples from the continent – came to Britain.²⁴ The language they spoke after their arrival is known as Old English. Bede described how ‘they came from three very powerful Germanic tribes, the Saxons, Angles, and Jutes’,²⁵ and this perception of political division despite a common language played a crucial role in the history of early medieval Britain. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes formed many separate kingdoms after their arrival, and it is important to note that something approaching an ‘English’ identity did not emerge until a much later time period. Nigel Farage’s speech quoted above is one of many which aptly illustrate the dangers of imagining that an unbroken, monolithic concept of supposed ‘English’ identity can be extended back until the fifth century. Although the phrase was already current in pre-Norman Britain, not all of the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes living there would have thought of themselves primarily as ‘Anglo-Saxons’: they were more likely to consider themselves first as Northumbrian, or Bernician, or as an inhabitant of their home village. But they were aware that they shared a language with those of their neighbours who did not speak British, Pictish, or Gaelic.²⁶ This Element therefore uses the phrase ‘Anglo-Saxon’ to denote the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes as a group who shared a language but not political cohesiveness, in order to avoid giving the false and dangerous impression that a unified ‘English’ identity can be projected back to post-Roman Britain.

²⁰ Harding, *The Archaeology of Celtic Art*.

²¹ The extent of Roman-controlled territory was marked by two walls running West–East across Britain: Hadrian’s Wall (at the Solway Firth) and the Antonine Wall (at the Firth of Forth).

²² Salway, *A History of Roman Britain*; Bédoyère, *Roman Britain*; Fleming, *Britain after Rome*.

²³ Gerrard, *The Ruin of Roman Britain*.

²⁴ For good surveys of the early period, see Yorke, *Kings and Kingdoms of Early Anglo-Saxon England*; and Naismith, *Early Medieval Britain*.

²⁵ Colgrave and Mynors, *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, i.15, 51.

²⁶ See Hines, ‘Who Did the Anglo-Saxons Think They Were?’.

By the time Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica* was written in the early eighth century, Britain's multilingual landscape consisted of five languages: Old English, spoken in southern Britain; Pictish, spoken in what is now Scotland; Gaelic, spoken in what are now Scotland and Wales; British, spoken in southern Britain and the Old North; and Latin, spoken throughout the island. The next stage in Britain's linguistic evolution involved concurrent, though unrelated, additions and subtractions. During roughly the same time as the arrival of the Vikings, from the late eighth century onwards, the Pictish language was also vanishing.²⁷ The Pictish people lived in northern Britain, in the geographical region now known as Scotland, and spoke a Celtic language like British, though very little written material in Pictish survives.²⁸ In the early medieval period, the kingdom of the Picts existed alongside the Gaelic kingdom of the Dál Riata, which encompassed territory in both Britain and Ireland. Over time, Gaelic influence and political power increased until the Pictish kingdom and language were either conquered by or absorbed into a broader Gaelic kingdom within the region that would become known first as Alba and later as Scotland. The Pictish language and political identity vanished by the mid-ninth century, and the process of Gaelicisation was complete by the eleventh century. A similar process of linguistic erosion took place in the southwest in what is now Cornwall, where British (which would eventually split into Welsh and Cornish) was subsumed by the expansion of Old English speakers into that region and the absorption of Cornwall into Anglo-Saxon England. The loss of Cornish was a much more gradual process than that of Pictish: the last native speaker died in the eighteenth century, and Cornish is now a revived language.

Another significant movement of a people into Britain was that of groups of Scandinavians, known collectively as Vikings, beginning in the late eighth century.²⁹ The Old Norse word *vikingr* seems often to have meant something like 'pirate' and has become used as a shorthand for groups of sea-based peoples who emerged from the Scandinavian regions and raided widely across the medieval world from roughly the eighth to eleventh centuries, eventually forming new settlements in the places that they had initially attacked.³⁰ These 'Vikings' spoke the Germanic language of Old Norse, which was related to Old English. In Britain, the Viking Age began with raids carried out on coastal communities during the summers in the late eighth and early ninth centuries. By the mid-ninth century, the Vikings were 'overwintering', allowing them to carry

²⁷ Fraser, *From Caledonia to Pictland*; Woolf, *From Pictland to Alba, 789–1070*.

²⁸ Forsyth, *Language in Pictland*; and Forsyth, 'Literacy in Pictland'.

²⁹ Loyn, *The Vikings in Britain*; Downham, *Viking Kings of Britain and Ireland*; Edmonds, *Gaelic Influence in the Northumbrian Kingdom*.

³⁰ Brink, 'Who Were the Vikings?'

out larger raids throughout the year and penetrate inland. By the end of the ninth century, the Vikings had formed permanent settlements, and would remain an identifiable presence on the island for the next two hundred years.

Finally, the Norman Conquest of England brought with it another significant linguistic influence on medieval Britain.³¹ At the Battle of Hastings on 14 October 1066, Harold Godwinson, the last Anglo-Saxon king, was defeated and killed, after which the Norman challenger subsequently referred to as William the Conqueror was crowned king of England. The Conquest was perceived by contemporaries as a watershed moment that eventually ushered in a new king, language of rule, class of Norman nobility, and system of government. In addition to its political consequences, the Conquest also had a significant impact on the development of the English language. The daily language of commerce, government, and politics slowly became Norman French, which would eventually develop into its own dialect, known as Anglo-Norman or the French of England. Its grammatical, syntactical, and orthographic impact on Old English was substantial enough that the structure of the language itself changed, entering a new historical-linguistic phase known as Middle English, which is beyond the scope of this study.³²

Many languages were spoken in early medieval Britain, but that alone does not make it multilingual. Multilingualism occurred when these languages interacted. How did such interactions take place? What does our evidence look like? Languages could be expressed orally (spoken), visually (sign language), or in written format (text).³³ Surviving evidence of multilingualism in an oral context is sparser because we are reliant on analysing surrounding languages to determine patterns of contact. Evidence of linguistic borrowing (when specific words are adopted from one language into another) and syntactic and grammatical influence (when contact between two languages changes grammatical patterns in the inflections of individual words or the structure of sentences) can help to tell us when two languages have been in frequent enough contact with one another that one altered something fundamental about another. Such linguistic changes can be seen by comparing languages within the same family. For example, if we compare a Germanic language like Old English with other Germanic languages on the continent and we find in Old English an expanded vocabulary, altered syntax, or changes in inflection patterns, we can conclude that Old English has changed over time. If we then compare Old English to the other languages its speakers had frequent historical contact with

³¹ Williams, *The English and the Norman Conquest*; Thomas, *The Norman Conquest*; Faith, *The Moral Economy of the Countryside*.

³² Ingham, *The Transmission of Anglo-Norman*.

³³ On medieval sign language, see Bruce, *Silence and Sign Language in Medieval Monasticism*.

and discover similar vocabulary and grammatical/syntactical patterns newly present in Old English, we can conclude that those languages had an influence on Old English. This type of linguistic influence worked both ways, and examining patterns of change can tell us what types of contact may have taken place between their speakers: an ‘arriving’ language new to a given region might bring technological vocabulary that would be adopted into an ‘inhabitant’ language at the same time as the ‘arriving’ language might also adopt terminology for native flora and fauna from the ‘inhabitant’ language. Placenames and personal names are another key source of evidence for oral contact across languages. When Old English placenames have Celtic rather than Germanic roots, we know that at least some individuals from these two language groups were in close enough contact with one another to exchange local information.³⁴ Similarly, personal names are a deliberate choice made by parents on behalf of their children reflective of their cultural surroundings. When a Welsh family gave their son an Old English name, an Anglo-Saxon family gave their son a French name, or the elements of an individual’s name combined Old English and Cornish, we can deduce that they lived in a multilingual environment.

While individual moments of oral and visual communication were sometimes recorded in our source material, it is unsurprising that most of our surviving evidence for multilingualism in early medieval Britain is preserved in written form. Written material in early Britain was overwhelmingly set down using the Latin alphabet, with the additional occasional use of the runic (Germanic)³⁵ and ogham (Celtic)³⁶ alphabets discussed in Sections 1 and 3. This Element does not catalogue every multilingual interaction from pre-Norman Britain, but rather seeks to convey the range of languages, media, people, and events involved, via four sections’ worth of thematic case studies. These case studies illustrate a range of scenarios: texts or manuscripts containing more than one language, individuals fluent in multiple tongues, political gatherings where several vernaculars were spoken, and documents translated from a known or lost original. There is naturally a good deal of overlap between the examples included, and another scholar could easily interpret them within a different organisational structure. I have chosen a thematic approach to illustrate the wide range of moments in early medieval Britain where multiple languages overlapped and interacted. Section 1 introduces the practicalities of multilingualism by selecting a few of the most memorable and interesting texts

³⁴ Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*; Padel, *Cornish Place-Name Elements*; Coates and Breeze, *Celtic Voices, English Places*.

³⁵ Barnes, *Runes*.

³⁶ Higgitt, Forsyth, and Parsons, *Roman, Runes and Ogham*; Sims-Williams, *The Celtic Inscriptions of Britain*.

and manuscripts from across the early medieval period to study in depth. Section 2 focuses on multilingualism in a religious and intellectual context, considering especially the use of translated texts while the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were in the process of conversion to Christianity. Section 3 explores the political nuances of multilingualism, paying close attention to oral translation and vernacular language acquisition. Section 4 delves into the economic and practical sides of multilingualism, focusing particularly on its impact in the lives of non-elites. The Conclusion wraps up by taking stock of where things stood on the eve of the Norman Conquest of England and looks briefly forward to the post-Norman period. This Element argues that early medieval Britain was not just a place where multiple languages were spoken: rather, it was a space where those languages interacted, and the culture and history that emerged were products of those interactions.

1 Manuscripts and Multilingual Texts

Our first section introduces the range of physical evidence available by selecting a few of the most memorable and interesting multilingual texts and manuscripts from across the early medieval period as lenses through which to comment on the particular cultural resonances of their multilingual elements. Other sections of this Element will explore multilingualism largely through the act of translation, in both written and oral contexts. Here, the focus is on texts, manuscripts, and objects such as inscribed stone monuments and artwork that incorporated two or more languages simultaneously and deliberately, underscoring the extent to which multilingualism was embraced across early medieval Britain as a means of artistic and intellectual expression.

We must first clarify some differences in the implications of multilingualism within texts versus within manuscripts. Multilingual texts are those in which an author has incorporated more than one language within the same work. This section will explore texts in which multiple languages have been deliberately combined, such as a cryptogram whose solution required a knowledge of both Latin and Greek; Old English charms which include lines of garbled Old Irish or Latin as incantations; macaronic poems combining Old English, Latin, and Greek into one text; and a Latin/Old-English glossary, an early form of dictionary. Such texts are clearly designed to showcase the fact that their authors knew multiple languages. Others may have been less intentional in nature, particularly those incorporating vernacular placenames into a Latin narrative, such as Asser's inclusion of Welsh placenames in his Latin biography of ninth-century West Saxon king Alfred the Great.³⁷ Multilingual manuscripts, on the other

³⁷ Keynes and Lapidge, *Alfred the Great*.

hand, contained several linguistic layers, not always written at the same time or by the same author, meaning that not every author or scribe who worked on these manuscripts had knowledge of more than one language. The layers of languages contained within these physical objects reveal the multilingual milieu in which they were produced, underscoring the range of linguistic knowledge circulating within the shared academic environment of early medieval Britain.

How did people in early medieval Britain learn a second language? As we will see below, many individuals acquired multiple vernacular languages during the course of their life experiences: a period of exile, a long voyage, a politically advantageous fosterage. For most second-language learners of Latin and other 'academic' languages like Greek, however, linguistic knowledge was taught via the same classroom tools and techniques that are still in use today. To explore this process in depth, we turn to our first case study: the text known as the Corpus Glossary (Cambridge, Corpus Christi College MS 144), produced in the early ninth century.³⁸ The Corpus Glossary contains 8,712 entries, making it the largest surviving alphabetical glossary from Anglo-Saxon England.³⁹ The bulk of this text is in Latin, but over 2,000 words are glossed in Old English in a Mercian dialect. The process through which the Corpus Glossary came to be was a complicated one. First, difficult words in individual manuscripts were glossed interlinearly (between lines of text) or marginally (in the blank margins of manuscript pages). These headwords, known as *lemmata*, and their explications were then stripped from their manuscript context and compiled into lists known as *glossae collectae*, which were copied again: first in batches by source text, and then rearranged alphabetically by the first letter of headwords. Finally, the Corpus Glossary scribe both recast many of the Latin explications in his sources into Old English and rearranged all the entries into AB alphabetical order (alphabetised by first and second letter) to produce the manuscript that remains today.⁴⁰

The Corpus Glossary is composed of two discrete units, known as the First and Second Corpus Glossaries, that illustrate the strategies that scholars in early medieval Britain developed to learn, teach, and study texts in multiple languages. The First Corpus Glossary contains a list of largely Hebrew names from the Bible and Greek technical terms of grammar, metre, and rhetoric, with interpretations. The Second Corpus Glossary is a large collection of glossed *lemmata* in a mixture of Latin, Old English, and (mostly) transliterated Greek,

³⁸ Hessels, *An Eighth-Century Latin-Anglo-Saxon Glossary*; Lindsay, *The Corpus Glossary*; Lindsay, *The Corpus, Épinal, Erfurt and Leyden Glossaries*.

³⁹ Lendinara, *Anglo-Saxon Glosses and Glossaries*, 16.

⁴⁰ Lindsay, *The Corpus, Épinal, Erfurt and Leyden Glossaries*, 1–16; 36–8; 44–53.

rearranged in AB order. The incipits (openings) of these texts and the layout of the manuscript that contains them show that they were beautifully designed and spaced to complement one another. What can their form tell us about their function? The First Corpus Glossary, composed mostly of Hebrew names from the Bible and their interpretations, is much shorter, far more tightly focused, and easier to digest and navigate as an inclusive collection of material. Its focus is largely narrowed to a key subset of knowledge, Hebrew names and Greek terminology, which form 70 per cent of its included material.⁴¹ A further 15 per cent of its contents takes the form of transliterated Greek terms of grammar, metre, and rhetoric, and their explications, drawn from a known grammatical glossary.⁴² Several entries are trilingual, in the *tres linguae sacrae* (three sacred languages) of Hebrew, Greek and Latin. The community that designed and used the First Corpus Glossary did so for an audience that studied Hebrew names, Greek grammatical terms, and Old English encyclopaedic information regularly enough that a focused reference guide – in other words, a teaching tool – was deemed desirable.

The types of knowledge contained in both the First and Second Corpus Glossaries were valued by the community that produced them, but these documents were used for different reasons. The Second Corpus Glossary contains almost 9,000 entries in a blend of Latin, Old English, and transliterated Greek. It was designed for functionality: its AB order, clear spacing, and headwords for each section meant that it could function as a dictionary. Yet these entries were severed from the texts from which they were originally culled, which suggests an inherent value in the information in its own right. In other words, the Corpus Glossary functioned not only as a dictionary but also as an encyclopaedia. What types of knowledge could a reader have gained from a text like this? The Corpus Glossary incorporated material from a wide range of sources, including historical and classical works as well as Latin and Greek grammatical material. Even if the users of the Corpus Glossary did not have access to the complete texts from which these entries were originally stripped, a reader of this manuscript would still encounter an enormous amount of learning, in Latin, Greek, Hebrew, and Old English, from the classical and late antique worlds, and would need to be a fairly adept scholar already in order to successfully navigate it. The contents of the Corpus Glossary underscore the prevalence of multilingualism in the scholarly milieu of early medieval Britain,

⁴¹ Lapidge, 'The School of Theodore and Hadrian'; Pfeifer, 'Early Anglo-Saxon Glossaries and the School of Canterbury'.

⁴² Lendinara, *Anglo-Saxon Glosses and Glossaries*, 18; glossary ed. Gneuss, 'A Grammarian's Greek-Latin Glossary in Anglo-Saxon England'.