Cultural History of Medieval England

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English Linguistics

Campus Essen
Who were the Normans?

The Normans were original descendants of Vikings who had settled in the north of France some centuries before and had adopted the French language of the region.

In the dispute over the successor of Edward the Confessor (1042-1066), the Norman lord, William, Duke of Normandy (c. 1027-1087), who felt he had a claim to the English throne, enforced this by successfully invading England in 1066.
Norman possessions at the height of their political power (12th century)
England at the time of the Norman Invasion

William the Conqueror
The Battle of Hastings (Sussex) in 1066
Town of Bayeux (Normandy) where the Bayeux Tapestry was prepared and is housed. This illustrates the Norman Conquest of England by William the Conqueror in 1066.
The Bayeux Tapestry depicting scenes from the Norman Invasion, 1
The Bayeux Tapestry depicting scenes from the Norman Invasion, 2
The death of Harold from the Bayeux Tapestry
The Domesday Book

A record of land ownership in Anglo-Norman England completed in 1086 at the behest of William the Conqueror.
An online version of the Domesday Book is available here.

The National Archives at Kew (greater London)
The Magna Carta was a legal charter written in Latin and issued in 1215 by King John. It proclaimed certain rights of the king’s subjects and specified legal procedures. As such it is taken as a precursor to many later documents of constitutional law including the constitutions of other countries, such as the United States.

Although England has this early document it does not have a written constitution but rather governs on the basis of common law, a legal system based on decisions made by courts which act as precedents for later cases.
Middle English

After the invasion of England by the Normans in 1066, the West Saxon 'standard', which was waning anyway due to natural language change, was dealt a death blow. Norman French became the language of the English court and clergy. English sank to the level of a patois (an unwritten dialect). With the loss of England for the French in 1204 English gradually emerged as a literary language again. For the development of the later standard it is important to note (1) that it was London which was now the centre of the country and (2) that printing was introduced into England in the late 15th century (1476 by Caxton). This latter fact contributed more than any single factor to the standardisation of English. It is obvious that for the production of printing fonts a standard form of the language must be agreed upon.

This applied above all to spelling, an area of English which was quite chaotic in the pre-printing days of the Middle English period.
Middle English dialect areas
The dialects of Middle English

The dialectal position of Middle English is basically a continuation of that of Old English. The most important extralinguistic fact for the development of the Middle English dialects is that the capital of the country was moved from Winchester (in the Old English period) to London by William the Conqueror in his attempt to diminish the political influence of the native English.

NORTHERN

This dialect is the continuation of the Northumbrian variant of Old English. Note that by Middle English times English had spread to (Lowland) Scotland and indeed led to a certain literary tradition developing there at the end of the Middle English period which has been continued up to the present time (with certain breaks, admittedly).

*Characteristics.* Velar stops are retained (i.e. not palatalised) as can be seen in word pairs like *rigg/ridge; kirk/church.*
**The dialects of Middle English**

**KENTISH**
This is the most direct continuation of an Old English dialect and has more or less the same geographical distribution.

*Characteristics.* The two most notable features of Kentish are (1) the existence of /e:/ for Middle English /i:/ and (2) so-called "initial softening" which caused fricatives in word-initial position to be pronounced voiced as in *vat*, *vane* and *vixen* (female fox).

**SOUTHERN**
West Saxon is the forerunner of this dialect of Middle English. Note that the area covered in the Middle English period is greater than in the Old English period as inroads were made into Celtic-speaking Cornwall. This area becomes linguistically uninteresting in the Middle English period. It shares some features of both Kentish and West Midland dialects.
The dialects of Middle English

WEST MIDLAND

This is the most conservative of the dialect areas in the Middle English period and is fairly well-documented in literary works. It is the western half of the Old English dialect area Mercia.

Characteristics. The retention of the Old English rounded vowels /yː/ and /øː/ which in the East had been unrounded to /iː/ and /eː/ respectively.

EAST MIDLAND

This is the dialect out of which the later standard developed. To be precise the standard arose out of the London dialect of the late Middle English period. Note that the London dialect naturally developed into what is called Cockney today while the standard became less and less characteristic of a certain area and finally (after the 19th century) became the sociolect which is termed Received Pronunciation.

Characteristics. In general those of the late embryonic Middle English standard.
Some figures from Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales

Geoffrey Chaucer
(1340-1399)
The opening lines of the Canterbury Tales by Geoffrey Chaucer read by an actor in an accent which is assumed to be that used at Chaucer’s time (late 14th century).

Whan that Aprill with his shoures soote
the droghte of March hath perced to the roote,
And bathed ev ery veye in swich licour
Of which vertu engendred is the flour;
What Zephyrus eek with his sweete breath
Inspired hath in ev ery hold and heeth
The tendre croppes; and the yonge sonne
Hath in the Ram his half cours yronne;
And smale foweles maken melodye,
That slepen al the nyght with open eye,
(So priketh hem nature in hir corages,)
Thanne longen folk to goon on pilgrimages,
And Palmeres for to seken straunge strondes,
To ferne halwes kowthe in sondry londes.
And specially fram ev ery shires ende
Of Engelond to Caunterbury they wende,
The hooly blisful martir for to seke,
That hem hath holpen whan that they were seeke.
The invention of printing

Johannes Gutenberg or Johann Gensfleisch (c. 1398-1468)

The 42-line Gutenberg Bible completed in 1456 in Mainz
The introduction of printing to England

Printing was introduced to England in 1476 by William Caxton. This led to an increasing regularisation of orthography and morphology.

Therefore I, William Caxton, a symple personne, have endevoeyed me to wryte fyrst over all the said Book of Polycronyccon, and sommewhat have chaunged the rude and old Englishe that is to wete, Certain words which in these days he neither usyd ne understanden.
**English monarchs (from 1066 onwards)**

*Norman Kings*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
<th>Monarch</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1066-1087</td>
<td>William I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1087-1100</td>
<td>William II (Rufus)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1066-1087</td>
<td>(the Conqueror)</td>
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<tr>
<td>1100-1135</td>
<td>Henry I</td>
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*House of Blois*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1135-1154</td>
<td>Stephen</td>
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*House of Plantagenet*

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1154-1189</td>
<td>Henry II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1189-1199</td>
<td>Richard I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1199-1215</td>
<td>John</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1216-1272</td>
<td>Henry III</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1272-1307</td>
<td>Edward I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1307-1327</td>
<td>Edward II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1327-1377</td>
<td>Edward III</td>
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*House of Lancaster*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Period</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1399-1413</td>
<td>Henry IV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1413-1422</td>
<td>Henry V</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1422-1461</td>
<td>Henry VI</td>
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English monarchs (continued)

House of York
1461-1470 Edward IV

House of Lancaster
1470-1471 Henry VI

House of York
1471-1483 Edward IV 1483 Edward V
1483-1485 Richard III

House of Tudor
1485-1509 Henry VII 1547-1553 Edward VI
1509-1547 Henry VIII 1553-1558 Mary I
1558-1603 Elizabeth I

House of Stuart
1603-1625 James I (James VI of Scotland)
1625-1649 Charles I