

Lecture 2 Old English period. Historical Background

Archaeological digs reveal that the British Isles were occupied during the Bronze Age, between 2000 and 1500 BC. But history as we know it began with the Celts, those warring tribes that had invaded eastern Europe between the fifth century BC and the beginning of the Roman conquests.

The First Celtic Occupants were at the beginning of the Iron Age, between the eighth and sixth centuries BC, that Celts began to occupy the British Isles. They settled not only in Ireland, but throughout Great Britain. These Celtic tribes were numerous (listed here by their Latin designations): Caledones, Damnonii, Novantae, Selgovae, Votadini, Carvetii, Brigantes, Parisi, Deceangli, Ordovices, Silures, Demetae, Cornovii, Corieltauvi, Dobunni, Durotriges, Dumnonii, Icenii, Catuvellauni, Trinovantes, Cantiaci, Atrebates, Belgae, and Regni.

Each of these peoples (themselves divided into many tribes) spoke its own Celtic language (Indo-European family). Intercomprehension must have been relatively straightforward from one person to the next, but more difficult the further one tribe lived from the other. For example, Caledonians, who lived in the north, probably had trouble understanding southern Celts such as the Dumnonii, Durotriges, Belgae, Regni, Cantiaci, etc. We know that the Celts of Britain could understand certain Celts of Gaul, such as the Caletes, Osismii, Veneti, Carnutes, etc., who lived on the other side of the English Channel. Julius Caesar's remarks in his *Gallic Wars* (Book I), although about the continental Gauls rather than the Celts of *Britannia*, are a fitting summary of the Celtic languages in general:

All Gaul is divided into three parts, one of which the Belgae inhabit, the Aquitani another, those who in their own language are called Celts, in our Gauls, the third. **All these differ from each other in language, customs and laws.** The river Garonne separates the Gauls from the Aquitani; the Marne and the Seine separate them from the Belgae. Of all these, the Belgae are the bravest, because they are furthest from the civilization and refinement of [our] Province, and merchants least frequently resort to them, and import those things which tend to effeminate the mind; and they are the nearest to the Germans, who dwell beyond the Rhine, with whom they are continually waging war; for which reason the Helvetii also surpass the rest of the Gauls in valour, as they contend with the Germans in almost daily battles, when they either repel them from their own territories, or themselves wage war on their frontiers. One part of these, which it has been said that the Gauls occupy, takes its beginning at the river Rhone; it is bounded by the river Garonne, the ocean, and the territories of the Belgae; it borders, too, on the side of the Sequani and the Helvetii, upon the river Rhine, and stretches toward the north. The Belgae rise from the extreme frontier of Gaul, extend to the lower part of the river Rhine; and look toward the north and the rising sun. Aquitania extends from the river Garonne to the Pyrenaean mountains and to that part of the ocean which is near Spain: it looks between the setting of the sun, and the north star.

Aujourd'hui, les langues celtiques sont en net déclin: seuls le breton en France (l'ancienne Armorique), le gallois au pays de Galles, l'irlandais et l'écossais ont survécu:

Group	Languages
Gaulish	Gaulish†, Celtiberian†
Brythonic	breton, gallois, cornique†
Gaelic	Irish, Scottish, Manx†

It should be noted that numerous immigrants arriving in Canada during the 18th and 19th centuries still spoke Gaelic, Irish, or Scottish.

The Roman Occupation

In 55 BC, Julius Caesar landed to the south of the island of Great Britain, then still called "Britain" or *Britannia* (in Latin). But his two invasions (55 and 54 BC) seem to have had little effect on the history of Roman Britain, for they resulted in neither annexation nor colonial settlement. Then in 43 AD, the Emperor Claudius invaded Britain with four Roman legions (roughly 40,000 men). Occupation went no further north than Hadrian's Wall (95 km long), which today separates England from Scotland; at the time, *Britannia* did not include Scotland (Caledonia) or Ireland (Hibernia).

The Romans believed that the Celtic "natives" were less developed and civilized than they were, and that it was their duty to make them conform to their lifestyle and cultural values. Thus they formed cities and created a vast network of roads covering the entire country, while a hierarchy of civil servants managed the country and the army ensured that order reigned.

Latin was the common language for both Romans and local inhabitants. However, Romanizing the island's inhabitants—whom the Romans called ***Brittones*** (or "Britons")—was done rather superficially, and old-time Celtic persisted, at least in the countryside. In other words, "Britons" continued to speak a variety of Celtic languages, with the exception of the local élites, who were generally bilingual, and for whom Romanization was clearly successful.

Rural populations were not assimilated by the Roman occupants. Latin was no more than a foreign language, no doubt necessary to maintaining harmonious relations with the Romans. The Latinization of cities was more successful, but not to the extent that inhabitants had to change languages.

Then in the third century came the first Viking incursions on the island of *Britannia*. In the fourth century, following the great reforms of the Emperor Diocletian (284–305), the province of *Britannia* was divided into *Britannia Superior* to the west and *Britannia Inferior* to the east (*see map above*). Subsequent increases in Germanic attacks also contributed to the decline of the Roman Empire in Britain. Roman legions withdrew from the island permanently in 407.

The Arrival of Germanic Tribes

Beginning in 450, the **Angles**, a Germanic people from what is today Schleswig-Holstein (south of Denmark), settled on the southern coasts of *Britannia* and drove back

the Celts to Cornwall and Wales. Once settled in England, the Germanic tribes borrowed a number of terms from the Celtic vocabulary; all that remain today are *bin* (Old English *binn*, manger), *brock* (O.E. *brocc*, badger), and *dun* (O.E. *dunn*, dull brown). The legend of King Arthur has preserved the memory of the fierce resistance of "Britons" (synonym for "English").

Although all of these Germanic invaders—**Angles, Saxons, Friesians, Jutes** (from Jutland in Denmark), even **Franks**—came from different places (albeit from the same civilization), they identified themselves either as **Angles** or **Saxons**, whence the name **Anglo-Saxon**. To the north was the **Scotti** kingdom, which gave its name to the country, Scotland.

In seventh century *England* there were seven major Germanic kingdoms: Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex (East), Wessex (West), Sussex (South), and Kent. At this time, Germanic tribes still spoke their original languages (Old Norse, Frankisch, Friesian, Saxon, Anglian, etc.), all of them stemming from common or proto-Germanic. Thus, although English did not yet exist, the peoples who had settled there would become the ancestors of a language whose evolution was just beginning. Between the mid-fifth century and the beginning of the seventh century, Celts from *Britannia* (essentially Cornwall and Wales) were chased from the island by the Angles, Jutes, and Saxons. Crossing the Channel, they sought refuge in Armorica (today's French Brittany), where they introduced the Breton language. Eventually, the Britons in turn pushed the Gallo-Romans east of Armorica (which meanwhile had become Brittany) and then came up against the Franks, who nevertheless left them much to themselves. Ties between Brittany, Cornwall, Wales, and Ireland remained close, and conferred a strong enough sense of identity to fend off the Franks.

1. Word stress.

A dynamic or forced stress was employed. Word stress was fixed: it remained on the same syllable in form – and wordbuilding. Polysyllabic words, especially compounds, may have two stresses, the chief being fixed on the first root morpheme. The position of stress in the words with prefixes varied: verb prefixes were unaccented, while in nouns and adjectives the stress was commonly thrown to the prefix..

2. Old English vowels. Changes of stressed vowels. Independent changes.

Fronting or palatalisation of [α] and [α:]. Positional deviations or restrictions to this rule: short [a] could change to [o] or [ã] and long [a:] became [o:] before a nasal. The preservation of the short [a] was caused by a back vowel in the next syllable.

Splitting of [a] and [a:] in Early Old English

Change illustrated		E x a m p l e s		
PG	OE	Other OG languages	OE	NE
a	æ	<i>Gt þata</i>	þæt	<i>that</i>
		<i>O Icel dagr</i>	dæ3	<i>day</i>
	o, ã	<i>Gt mann(a)</i>	mon	<i>man</i>
		<i>O Icel land</i>	land	<i>land</i>
	a	<i>Gt magan</i>	mazan	<i>may</i>
		<i>Gt dagos,</i>	dazas	<i>days</i>
a:	æ:	<i>OHG dâr</i>	þær	<i>there</i>
		<i>OHG slâfen</i>	slæpan	<i>sleep</i>
	o:	<i>OHG mâno</i>	mōna	<i>moon</i>
		<i>O Icel mánaðr</i>	mōnaþ	<i>month</i>

Old English reflections of PG diphthongs. The diphthongs with the i-glide were monophthongised into [i:] and [a:], respectively; with u-glides were reflected as long diphthongs [io:], [eo:], and [ea:].

Old English Reflexes of Proto-Germanic Diphthongs (or Bi-Phonemic Sequences)

Change illustrated		E x a m p l e s		
PG	OE	Other OG languages	OE	NE
a + i	a:	<i>Gt stains</i>	<i>stān</i>	<i>stone</i>
		<i>Gt ains</i>	<i>ān</i>	<i>one</i>
e + i	i:	<i>Gt meins</i> ¹	<i>mīn</i>	<i>mine, my</i>
		<i>Gt reisan</i>	<i>rīsan</i>	<i>rise</i>
a + u	ea:	<i>0 Icel austr</i>	<i>ēast</i>	<i>east</i>
		<i>Gt auso</i>	<i>ēare</i>	<i>ear</i>
		<i>Gt augo</i> (cf.. G Auge)	<i>ēaze</i>	<i>eye</i>
e + u	eo:	<i>Gt þiudans</i>	<i>þēoden</i>	‘king’
		<i>Gt kiusan</i>	<i>cēosan</i>	<i>choose</i>
i + u	io:	<i>Gt diups</i>	<i>dēop, dīop</i> ²	<i>deep</i>
		¹ The vowel in <i>Gt</i> is [i:], though the spelling resembles the PG [ei]. ² In OE the diphthongs [eo:] and [io:] occur as dialectal variants.		

Assimilative vowel changes.

The front vowels [i], [e], and [æ] changed into diphthongs with a back glide when they stood before [h], [ll], or [l]. The change is known as breaking.

The Germanic invasions in *Britannia* caused placenames to change in relatively short order. Thus, insular Britain (*Britannia*) became **England**, the "land of the Angles." At first, Roman Armorica was called by its Latinized Gaulish name of *Letavia*—a name the Welsh preserved in their word for Brittany, *Llydaw*—then became *Britannia Minor* ("Little Britain"), as opposed to *Britannia Major* ("Great Britain"). Over time, the Latin form of *Britannia* evolved in France into *Bretanie* (whence the English *Brittany*), then *Bretaigne*, and finally *Bretagne*.

Bretons gave the Quimper region the name *Cornouailles* (the furthestmost southwestern region of Great Britain called *Cornwall*). Gaul eventually became **France** (from the name Franks).

Old English (or Anglo-Saxon): 700 to 1100

The Old English (or Anglo-Saxon) period extended from about 700 to the 11th century. Other Germanic nations joined the Anglo-Saxons already settled in Britain, such as the **Jutes** of Jutland (Denmark) and a number of **Friesians**. The Jutes took over the southern part of the island as well as the Isle of Wight off the south shore, while the **Angles** settled in the north of England and the **Saxons** in the southwest after confining the Celts to the west (Wales and Cornwall).

War led the numerous Germanic kingdoms to merge, obliterating the traces of Roman organization and changing *Britannia* to the land of the Angles and Saxons. Following the Christianization of the Welsh and Irish in the fifth century and Scots in the sixth, the Saxon kingdoms were evangelized under Pope Gregory the Great (590–604).

While the ancient Celtic nations were being driven back in the west of Britain (see map of *Britannia* above), the Vikings returned in the eighth ninth 9th centuries to vanquish all the Saxon kingdoms except Wessex. As they spoke **Old Norse**, the Vikings brought with them new northern words, roughly thirty of them, including call (Old English *ceallian*: "cry"), fellow (*feolaga*: "partner"), husband (O.E. *husbonda*: "head of the house"), law (O.E. *lagu*: "establish"), wrong (O.E. *wrangr*: "crooked," "unjust"), etc. Thus England remained dominated by Wessex. In time, the Danes settled in the east of England and formed a kingdom called Danelaw (*Danalagu*: "region where Danish law holds sway").

Questions for discussion

1 The classification of Germanic languages: the main peculiarities of the Germanic Languages

2 The Main Peculiarities of the Germanic Languages ‘

3 Peculiarities of the grammatical system of Germanic languages

4 Periodisation of the history of English language

5 Chronological Division in the History of the English Language. Historical Background of English.

6 A short history of the origins and development of English: write about five events that shaped the History of English