The year 1066 marks the beginning of a new social and linguistic era in England, but it does not actually identify the boundary between Old and Middle English. It was a long time before the effects of the Norman invasion worked their way into the language, and Old English continued to be used meanwhile. Even a century later, texts were still being composed in the West Saxon variety that had developed in the years following the reign of King Æthelred (p. 29). The period we call Middle English runs from the beginning of the 12th century until the middle of the 15th. It is a difficult period to define and discuss, largely because of the changes taking place between the much more distinctive and identifiable worlds of Old English (§3) and Modern English (§§5-6). The manuscripts give an impression of considerable linguistic variety and rapid transition. Also, the gradual decay of Anglo-Saxon traditions and literary practices, overlapping with the sudden emergence of French and Latin literacy, gives much of this period a clamorous and unfocused character. It is not until 1400 that a clear focus emerges, in the work of Chaucer, but by then the period is almost over. Chaucer himself, indeed, is more often seen as a forerunner of Modern English poetry than as a climax to Middle English.

The rise of French

The main influence on English was, of course, French – strictly, Norman French, the language introduced to Britain by the invader. Following William of Normandy’s accession, French was rapidly established in the corridors of power, French-speaking lineages took over their own retitles. Soon after, French-speaking abbots and bishops were in place. Lanfranc, Abbot of St Stephen’s at Caen, was made Archbishop of Canterbury as early as 1070. Within 20 years of the invasion, almost all the religious houses were under French-speaking superiors, and several new foundations were solely French. Large numbers of French merchants and craftsmen crossed the Channel to take advantage of the commercial opportunities provided by the new regime. And aristic lords retained strong ties with Normandy, where the nobles kept their estates. Doubtless bilingualism quickly flourished among those who crossed the social divide – English people learning French in order to gain advantages from the aristocracy, and baronial staff learning English as part of their daily contact with local communities. But there is hardly any sign of English being used among the new hierarchy – a situation which was to continue for over a century.

DOMESDAY

A survey of the opening folios of Great Domesday, the larger of the two volumes which make up the Domesday Book, the survey of England and its people compiled by William I in 1086, is made up largely in Latin. In fact, it is almost an English language historian for the information it contains in Latin, but it is of value to the English language historian for the names it preserves, including English personal names and (to a lesser extent) place names. The spelling, however, is unsatisfactory. The written use of Latin conventions which were an inadequate means of representing English sounds.

Domesday Book: Henry I

In the 12th century, contemporary accounts suggest that some children of the nobility spoke English as a mother tongue, and had to be taught French in school. French continued to be used in Parliament, the courts, and in public proceedings, but we know that translations into English increased in frequency throughout the period, as did the number of handbooks written for the teaching of French.

The rise of English

During the 12th century, English became more widely used among the upper classes, and there was an enormous amount of immigration with English people. The largely monolingual French-speaking court was not typical of the rest of the country. Richard Fitz Neal’s Dialogue de Scaccario (“A Dialogue on the Exchequer”), written in 1177, reports:

Now that the English and Normans have been dwelling together, many things relating to marriage, the two nations have become so mixed that it is scarcely possible today, speaking of free men, to tell who is English, who is Norman.

By the end of the 13th century, contemporary accounts suggest that some children of the nobility spoke English as a mother tongue, and had to be taught French in school. French continued to be used in Parliament, the courts, and in public proceedings, but we know that translations into English increased in frequency throughout the period, as did the number of handbooks written for the teaching of French. From 1246, a different political climate emerged. King John of England came into conflict with King Philip of France, and was obliged to give up control of Normandy. The English nobility lost their estates in France, and抗争 grew between the two countries, leading ultimately to the Hundred Years War (1337–1453). The status of French diminished as a spirit of English nationalism grew, culminating in the Battle of Agincourt (1415). In 1462, English was recognized for the first time at the opening of Parliament. By about 1425 it appears that English was widely used in England, in writing as well as in speech.

Reasons for survival

How had the language managed to survive the French invasion? After all, Celtic had not survived the Anglo-Saxon invasions 500 years before (p. 8). Evidently the English language in the 11th century was too well established for it to be supplanted by another language. Unlike Celtic, it had a considerable written literature and a strong oral tradition. It would have taken several hundred years of French immigration, and large numbers of immigrants, to have changed things – but the good relations between England and France lasted for only 150 years, and some historians have estimated that the number of Normans in the country may have been as low as 2 per cent of the total population.

This 150 years, nonetheless, is something of a dark age in the history of the language. There is hardly any written evidence of English, and we can thus only guess about what was happening to the language during that period. Judging by the documents which have survived, it seems that French was the language of the government, law, administration, literature, and the Church, with Latin also used in administration, education, and worship. The position of English becomes clearer in the 13th century, when we find an increasing number of sermons, prayers, romances, songs, and other documents. Finally, in the 14th century, we have the major achievements of Middle English literature, culminating in the writing of Geoffrey Chaucer (p. 58).

The Dynastic Conquest

A modern drawing of Southampton, Hampshire, c. 1500. At that time, one of the most prosperous towns of the city was called French Street (not the middle of the three thoroughfares running north-south), evidence of its location for many French merchants and sailors. The town's early growth was due to its position south of strong early English settlement.

One way of trying to plot French influence in this period is through the analysis of baptismal names (see the discussion of nomenclature, p. 140). Notable pre-Conquest names were chiefly West Germanic (p. 6), but showed the influence of Scandinavian in the Danelaw, and also of Celtic in the border areas – Godwine, Egbert, Alfred, Wulfric, Æthelric, Edwin, and the like. Within a century of the Conquest, most of these had been replaced by such names as John, Peter, Simon, and Stephen. A Canterbury survey made in the 1160s shows that 75 per cent of the local names were Continental. Names in the history of the English naming has reflected this influence since ever since.

All understand the English Tongue

*European* writers sometimes provide insights into the linguistic state of the nation. A much-quoted example is from William of Malmesbury’s Gesta Regum (History of the Kings) (1155). Although some men who have lived at court do know French, he says, nobody now knows only French. Everyone, whatever their learning, knows English, (grammatical endings, see p. 49, spelling), conventions, see, e.g., p. 40. The result was two cultural achievements (§10). 

In English song: I know not where,иф you go y your way, I will no longer dwell, No Layn will I speak no [nor] wone, But English, but men may [more], but we can [ache] now [more],

And somone can [some know] Frenchsche and no Layn, so I will no longer dwell, I have [now] [crown] [over] [more] and dwell [be],

And some can of Layn a party [famous] [Frenchsche, i.e. French].

Bope [be] and loved, old and yonge, 100 yngles and sciences englishe tonge.