A fundamental change in the structure of English took place during the 11th and 12th centuries—one without precedent in the history of the language, and without which the modern English that we understand could not have come into being. This change affected both the vocabulary and the grammar of Old English, and it is known as the transition from Old English to Middle English. The transition was gradual and occurred over several centuries, but by the 12th century, English had undergone significant changes that set the stage for the development of Modern English.

The decay of inflections
One fact about this is doubtless: it is that the Old English period is preoccupied with the study of the decay of the inflectional system. The surviving texts suggest that the change started in the north of the country, and slowly spread south. Several of the old endings are still present in the 12th-century text of the Peterborough Chronicle opposite, but they are not used with much consistency, and they no longer seem to play an important role in conveying meaning.

But why did the Old English inflectional endings decay? The most obvious explanation is that it became increasingly difficult to hear them, because of the way words had come to be stressed during the evolution of the Germanic languages (p. 8). The ancestor language of Germanic, Indo-European, had a ‘free’ system of accentuation, in which the stress within a word moved according to intricate rules (p. 248). In Germanic, this system changed, and most words came to carry the main stress on their first syllable. This is the system found throughout Old English. As always, there were exceptions—the goffries, for example (p. 21)—that were never stressed.

Having the main stress at the beginning of a word can readily give rise to an auditory problem at the end. This is especially so when there are several endings which are phonetically very similar, such as -om, -en, and -as. In rapid conversational speech it would have been difficult to distinguish them. The situation is not so far removed from that in Modern English, where people often make such sounds as -ible, -able (visible, washable) or -ian (Belgian or Belgian) sound the same. This neutralization of vowel qualities undoubtedly affected the Old English system.

The contact situation
However, sudden mutation cannot be the sole reason. Other Germanic languages had a strong initial stress, too, yet they retained their inflectional systems (as is still seen in modern Dutch and Luxembourgish; and in some northern dialects of Modern English? Some scholars cite the Viking settlement as the decisive factor (p. 25).

During the period of the Daneslaw, the arts, the contact between English and Scandinavian would have led to the emergence of a pidgin-like variety of speech between the two cultures, and perhaps even eventually to a kind of creole which was used as a lingua franca (p. 344). As with pidgins everywhere, there would have been a loss of word endings, and greater reliance on word order. Gradually, this pattern would have spread until it affected the whole of the East Midlands area—from which Standard English was eventually to emerge (p. 50).

As the very least, they conclude, this situation would have accelerated the process of inflectional decay—and may even have started it.

Whether such arguments are valid depends on how far we believe that the speakers of Old English and Old Norse were unable to understand each other at the time, and this is largely a matter of speculation. Perhaps there existed a considerable degree of mutual intelligibility, given that the two languages had diverged only a few hundred years before. The roots of many words were the same, and in the Icelandic sagas it is said that the Vikings and the English could understand each other. Whatever the case, we can tell from the surviving Middle English texts that the Daneslaw was a much more progressive area, linguistically speaking, than the rest of the country. Change which had here affected southern England. Some form of Viking influence cannot easily be dismissed.

As inflections decayed, so the reliance on word order became critical, resulting in a grammatical system which was different from that found today. There is no sign in the Peterborough Chronicle extract of the Old English tendency to put the object before the verb, for example (p. 6). The subject-verb-object order, already noticeable feature of Old English, has become firmly established by the beginning of the Middle English period.

The Peterborough Chronicle
We are fortunate to have the later years of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle (p. 14) which continues to the middle of the 12th century, to illustrate this period of change. In 1116, most of the monastery at Peterborough was destroyed by fire, along with many monastic properties. The monks immediately began to replace the Priory which had been lost. They borrowed the town from the Chronicle of another monastery, copied it out, and then carried on with the revision of the text. They continued until 1131, but then the writing stopped—probably because of the chaotic conditions of civil war which existed in the reign of King Stephen, some of which are described in the extract below.

This extract is from the Chronicle when it begins again in 1154, after the death of Stephen, adding several events from the intervening years. The language is now quite different. Despite points of similarity with the previous work, the general impression is that the writer is starting again, using vocabulary and grammatical patterns which reflect the language of his time and locality, and inventing new spelling conventions to cope with new sounds. The extract has been freely adapted from the original, to correct the difficulty of drawing a sharp boundary between the development of a language. But it does not take much longer before the uncertainty is resolved. Other texts from the 12th century confirm the new direction in which the language was moving and within a century of the one of the Chronicle, there is no doubt that a major change has taken place, in the structure of English. (The first twelve lines of the illustration are transcribed and translated below.)

[Me deed croddet strange abuton here] haed and [Som pleace knout thou abut] their head and

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