

A Study on the Impact of Foreign Influences on Old English

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The Old English period is followed by Middle English (12th to 15th century), Early Modern English (ca 1480 to 1650) and finally Modern English (after 1650). Old English was not merely the product of the dialects brought to England by the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes. These dialects only formed the basis of the grammar of Old English and the source of the larger part of its vocabulary. But other elements entered into Old English in the course of the first 700 years of its existence in England. It was brought into contact with three other languages, namely, those of the Celts, the Romans, and the Scandinavians. Old English showed certain effects from each of these contacts, especially in the form of additions to its vocabulary. The three influences are discussed in some detail in the sections I, II, and III below.

I. The Celtic Influence on Old English

The invasion of the Celtic population of Britain by the Anglo-Saxons led to the mixture of the two peoples and the two languages. Old English vocabulary had numerous words that the Anglo-Saxons adopted from the speech of the Celts. In parts of England, contact between the two peoples was constant for several generations.

The evidence for this contact in the English language is found chiefly in placenames. Also, a number of important centers in the Roman period have names with Celtic elements. The name

London itself most likely goes back to Celtic. The greatest number of Celtic names survive in the names of rivers and hills and places near them. Thus, the Thames is a Celtic river name, and several Celtic words for river or water are preserved in the names Avon, Dover, and Wye, among others.

Outside of placenames, the influence of Celtic on English is almost negligible, since no more than ten OE words can be traced to a Celtic source with certainty.

Not many of the abovementioned Celtic words attained a permanent place in the English language. Some words soon disappeared, and others were used only locally. The kind of relation between the Celtic and Anglo-Saxon peoples did not bring about any considerable influence on English life or speech. The Celts were a conquered people, and the Anglo-Saxons had little occasion to adopt Celtic modes of expression. Thus, the Celtic influence on Old English remains the least of the early influences that affected the English language.

II. The Three Latin Influences on Old English

The second influence exerted on English, the Latin influence, was great, unlike that of Celtic. This is because Latin was not the language of a conquered people, but the language of an advanced civilization from which the Anglo-Saxons wanted to benefit. Contact with that civilization extended over many centuries, and began long before the Anglo-Saxons came to England and continued all through the Old English period. For hundreds of years, the Germanic tribes who later became the English, had various relations with the Romans, from whom they acquired a large number of Latin words. When these Germanic tribes came to England later, they saw the evidence of the long Roman rule in England and learned additional Latin words from the Celts, who had previously acquired them from the Romans. A century and a half after the coming of the Germanic tribes to England, Roman missionaries reintroduced Christianity into England, and the result was an additional adoption of Latin words into English.

Thus, there were three distinct occasions on which English borrowed from Latin before the end of the Old English period. It is interesting to consider the character and extent of each of these borrowings.

A. Latin Influence of the Zero Period

This influence can also be referred to as "continental borrowing," i.e., borrowing that took place before the Germanic tribes came to England, when they were still in their continental (or European) homes. During this period several hundred Latin words entered the various Germanic dialects as a result of the extensive contact between the two peoples. By the fourth century, the

Germanic population within the Roman Empire was several million people, who were found in all classes of society.

About fifty Latin words can be credited to the Germanic tribes, the ancestors of the English when they were still occupying their homes in Europe, before coming to the British Isles. These words indicate the new conceptions that the Germanic peoples learned from their contact with a higher civilization. In addition to agriculture, the chief occupation of the Germanic tribes in the Roman Empire was war. This experience is reflected in words borrowed from Latin like camp (battle), segn (banner), pīl (javelin), weall (wall), pytt (pit), straeligt (street), and mīl (mile).

Larger in number are the words related to trade, e.g., cēap (bargain); mangian (to trade) with some of its derivatives, like mangunghūs (shop); pund (pound); sēam (loan); mynet (coin), from which Old English formed the words mynetian (to mint, to coin) and mynetere (moneychanger); and eced (vinegar).

A number of the new words related to domestic life, household articles, and clothing. Examples include: cytel (kettle), mēse (table), scamol (bench), teped (carpet, curtain), pyle (pillow), sigel (necklace), and probably cycene (kitchen), cuppe (cup), disc (dish), cucler (spoon), line (rope), and gimm (gem).

The speakers of the Germanic dialects also adopted Roman words for some foods, such as cīese (cheese), spelt (wheat), pipor (pepper), senep (mustard), cisten (chestnut tree), and cires or ciresbēam (cherry tree), and probably the words butere (butter), ynne or ynnelēac (onion), plūme (plum), pise (pea), and minte (mint).

Latin words related to the building arts include such words as cealc (chalk), copor (copper), pic (pitch), and tigele (tile).

There were also some miscellaneous words such as mūl (mule), draca (dragon), pāwa (peacock), the adjectives sicor (safe) and calu (bold), pīpe (pīpe = musical instrument), cāsere (emperor), and Sæternesdæg (Saturday).

B. Latin Influence of the First Period

This influence may also be referred to as Latin through Celtic transmission. The Latin influence that resulted from the period of the Roman occupation of Britain was slight. A very few words (about 5) and a small number of Latin elements in placenames owe their presence in English to this period, since there was no opportunity for direct contact between Latin and Old English in England. It is true that the Celts had adopted more than 600 Latin words but these

words were not passed on due to the lack of relations between the Celts and the English. Among the few Latin words that the Anglo-Saxons have acquired after setting in England is ceaster (town), which forms an element in English placenames such as Chester, Colchester, Dorchester, Manchester, Winchester, Lancaster, Doncaster, Gloucester, Worcester, and many others.

Other Latin words that belong to this period are port (harbor, town), munt (mountain), torr (tower), and wīc (village). These words are also found as parts of placenames.

The Latin influence of the First Period remains the slightest of all the influences that Old English owed to contact with Roman civilization.

C. Latin Influence of the Second Period

By the Second Period we mean the period during which the Christianizing of Britain took place. The greatest influence of Latin on Old English came as a result of the conversion of Britain to Roman Christianity, which began towards the close of the sixth century in the year 597. Numerous traces of the influence of Christianity were seen in the vocabulary of Old English. This influence on the vocabulary is discussed in subsections 1 and 2 below.

1. The Earlier Influence of Christianity on the Vocabulary

The period between the introduction of Christianity in 597 to the end of Old English extended for more than five centuries. During this time Latin words gradually entered English. There were many new conceptions that resulted from the new religion and demanded expression but the resources of the English language were inadequate. The borrowed words include abbot, alms, altar, angel, anthem, ark, candle, canon, cleric, deacon, disciple, epistle, hymn, litany, manna, martyr, mass, minister, noon, nun, offer, organ, palm, pope, priest, psalm, relic, rule, shrine, synod, and temple.

The new religion also exercised a profound influence on domestic life, such as the names of article of clothing and household use. Examples include cap, sock, silk, purple, chest, and sack.

Borrowed words denoting food included beet, caul (cabbage), lentil, pear, radish, doe, oyster, and lobster.

Names of trees, plants, and herbs included pine, aloes, balsam, lily, mallow, marshmallow, and plant.

Words related to education and learning comprise school, master, Latin, grammatic(al), verse,

meter, gloss, and notary (a scribe).

Miscellaneous words include anchor, fan (for winnowing), fever, place (as in marketplace), sponge, elephant, phoenix, and mancus (a coin).

Learned or literary words include circle, legion, giant, consul, and talent.

Although the abovementioned words are mostly nouns, Old English also borrowed a number of verbs and adjectives, e.g. the verbs *āspendan* (to spend), *bemūtian* (to exchange), *dihtan* (to compose), *pīnian* (to torture), *pinsian* (to weigh), *sealtian* (to dance), *trifolian* (to grind), *tyrnan* (to turn), and the adjective *crisp*.

2. The Influence of the Church Reform on the Vocabulary

The flourishing state of the church that led to the abovementioned additions to the English language did not continue uninterrupted, and reform had to be made. This reform is sometimes called the Benedictine Reform, after the name of St. Benedict. As a result of this reform and the improved state of learning connected with it a new series of Latin borrowings took place. These were words of a less popular kind than the ones borrowed earlier, and were often scientific and learned words.

However, as in the earlier borrowings, a large number of words were related to religious matters, e.g., *Antichrist*, *apostle*, *cell*, *collect*, *creed*, *demon*, *font*, *idol*, *prime*, *prophet*, *sabbath*, and *synagogue*.

Literary words predominated, among which were *accent*, *brief* (v.), *decline* (as a grammatical term), *history*, *paper*, and *title*.

A large number of plant and herb names were introduced in this period, including *coriander*, *cucumber*, *ginger*, *petersili* (parsley), among others.

A few names of trees were borrowed, such as *cedar*, *fig*, *laurel*, and *magdāla* (almond).

Medical terms included *cancer*, *paralysis*, *plaster*, and other.

Words relating to the animal kingdom included *camel*, *scorpion*, and *tiger*.

To sum up, as a result of the Christianizing of Britain about 450 words appeared in English writings before the end of the Old English period, in addition to the many derivatives and

biblical proper names. However, about 100 of these 450 words were either purely learned or retained their foreign character so that they could hardly be considered part of the English vocabulary. Among the remaining 350 words, some did not make their way into general use until later, when they were reintroduced. But a large number of them were fully incorporated into the language. Examples of such words include plant (n.) which was later made into a verb, fersian (to versify), glēsan (to gloss), and crispian (to curl), to mention only a few.

III. The Scandinavian Influence on Old English

Near the end of the Old English period the English language underwent a third foreign influence, namely the Scandinavian influence. For some centuries the Scandinavians remained quietly in their home, but in the eighth century they began a series of attacks on all the lands near to the North Sea and the Baltic. While the Swedes established a kingdom in Russia, the Norwegians colonized parts of Britain, the Faroes, and Iceland. And the Danes founded the dukedom of Normandy and finally conquered England. In the beginning of the eleventh century Cnut, king of Denmark obtained the throne of England. The daring sea-rovers who made these unusual achievements were known as the Vikings, and their period, extending from the middle of the eighth century to the beginning of the eleventh is known as the Viking Age. The Scandinavian conquest of England resulted in the third foreign influence on Old English.

Large numbers of Scandinavians settled in England. An indication of their number is the fact that more than 1,400 places in England bear Scandinavian names. Most of the settlers were Danes, and there was a considerable number of Norwegians in the southwest and north. Scandinavian farmers intermarried with the English. And in the districts where peaceful settlement took place, conditions were favorable for an extensive Scandinavian influence on Old English.

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