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History of English

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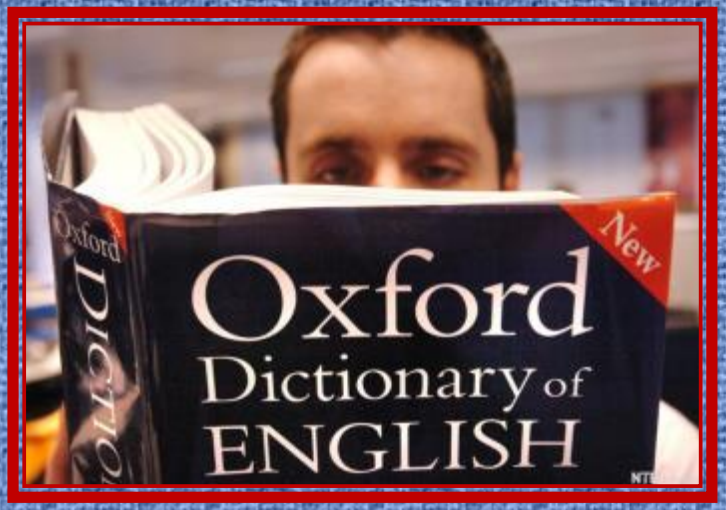
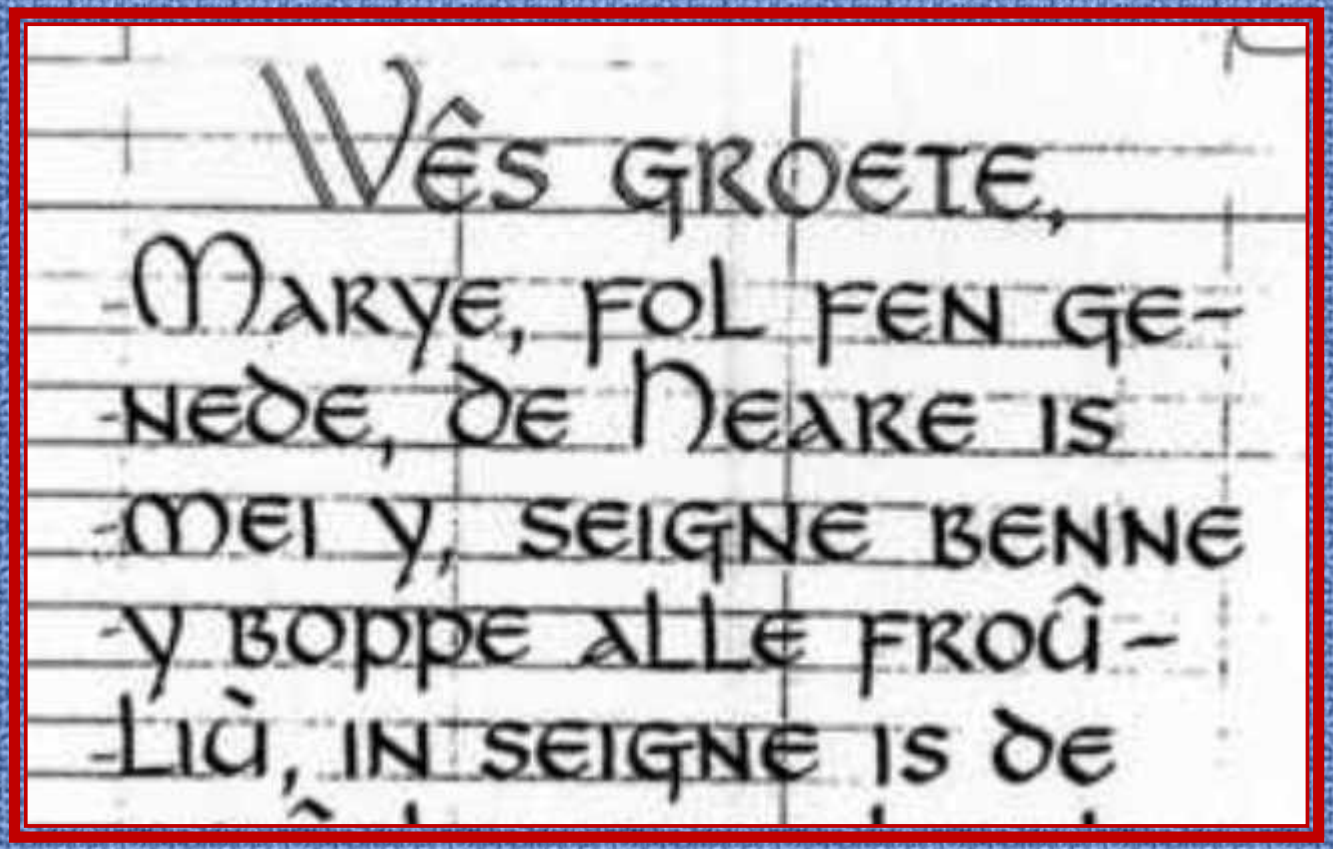
The Anglo-Saxon Settlement

Part I



It's never easy to pinpoint exactly when a specific language began, but in the case of English we can at least say that there is little sense in speaking of the English language as a separate entity before the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain.

Little is known of this period with any certainty, but we do know that Germanic invaders came and settled in Britain from the north-western coastline of continental Europe in the fifth and sixth centuries.



The invaders all spoke a language that was Germanic (related to what emerged as Dutch, Frisian, German and the Scandinavian languages, and to Gothic), but we'll probably never know how different their speech was from that of their continental neighbours.

However it is fairly certain that many of the settlers would have spoken in exactly the same way as some of their north European neighbours, and that not all of the settlers would have spoken in the same way.

The reason that we know so little about the linguistic situation in this period is because we do not have much in the way of written records from any of the Germanic languages of north-western Europe until several centuries later.

When Old English writings begin to appear in the seventh, eighth and ninth centuries there is a good deal of regional variation, but not substantially more than that found in later periods. This was the language that Alfred the Great referred to as English in the ninth century.

The Celts were already resident in Britain when the Anglo-Saxons arrived. Some scholars have suggested that the Celtic tongue might have had an underlying influence on the grammatical development of English, particularly in some parts of the country, but this is highly speculative.

The number of loanwords known for certain to have entered Old English from this source is very small. Those that survive in modern English include brock (badger), and coomb a type of valley, alongside many place names.

The Scandinavian Settlements

Part II

The next invaders were the Norsemen. From the middle of the ninth century large numbers of Norse invaders settled in Britain, and in the eleventh century the whole of England had a Danish king, Canute. The distinct North Germanic speech of the Norsemen had great influence on English.

These include some very basic words such as take and even grammatical words such as they. The common Germanic base of the two languages meant that there were still many similarities between Old English and the language of the invaders.

However, much of the influence of Norse, including the vast majority of the loanwords, does not appear in written English until after the next great historical and cultural upheaval, the Norman Conquest.

1066 and after 1066 and all that

Part III

The centuries after the Norman Conquest witnessed enormous changes in the English language. In the course of what is called the Middle English period, the fairly rich inflectional system of Old English broke down.

It was replaced by what is broadly speaking, the same system English has today, which unlike Old English makes very little use of distinctive word endings in the grammar of the language. The vocabulary of English also changed enormously, with tremendous numbers of borrowings from French and Latin, in addition to the Scandinavian loanwords already mentioned, which were slowly starting to appear in the written language.

Old English, like German today, showed a tendency to find native equivalents for foreign words and phrases (although both Old English and modern German show plenty of loanwords), whereas Middle English acquired the habit that modern English retains today of readily accommodating foreign words.

Trilingualism in English, French, and Latin was common in the worlds of business and the professions, with words crossing over from one language to another with ease. One only has to flick through the etymologies of any English dictionary to get an impression of the huge number of words entering English from French and Latin during the later medieval period. This trend was set to continue into the early modern period with the explosion of interest in the writings of the ancient world.

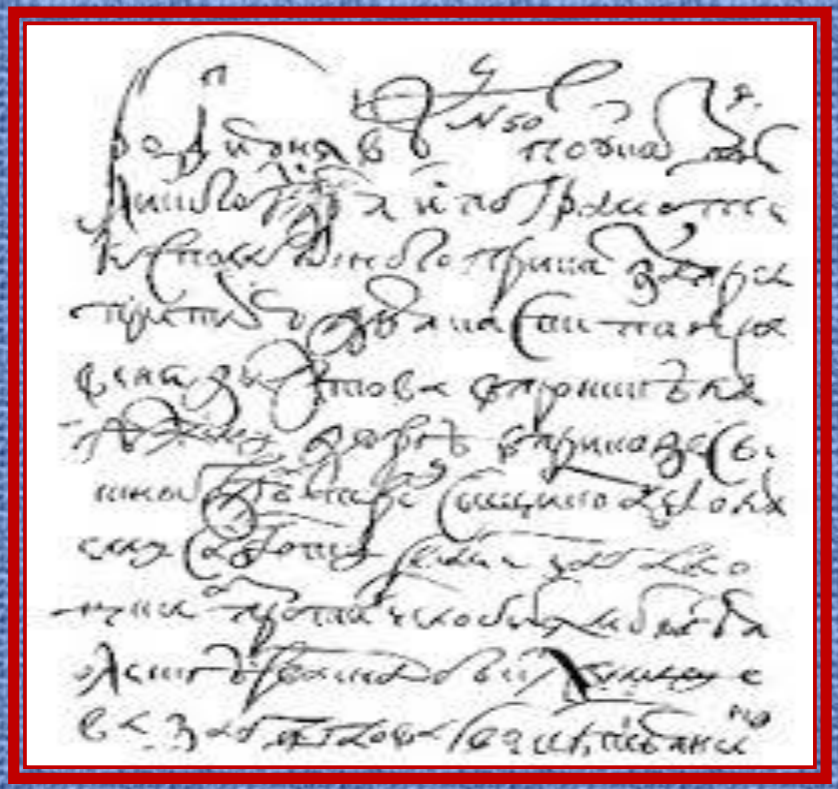
Standardization

Part IV

The late medieval and early modern periods saw a fairly steady process of standardization in English south of the Scottish border. The written and spoken language of London continued to evolve and gradually began to have a greater influence in the country at large.

For most of the Middle English period a dialect was simply what was spoken in a particular area, which would normally be more or less represented in writing - although where and from whom the writer had learnt how to write were also important. It was only when the broadly London standard began to dominate, especially through the new technology of printing, that the other regional varieties of the language began to be seen as different in kind.

As the London standard became used more widely, especially in more formal contexts and particularly amongst the more elevated members of society, the other regional varieties came to be stigmatized, as lacking social prestige and indicating a lack of education.



In the same period a series of changes also occurred in English pronunciation (though not uniformly in all dialects), which go under the collective name of the Great Vowel Shift. These were purely linguistic sound changes which occur in every language in every period of history.

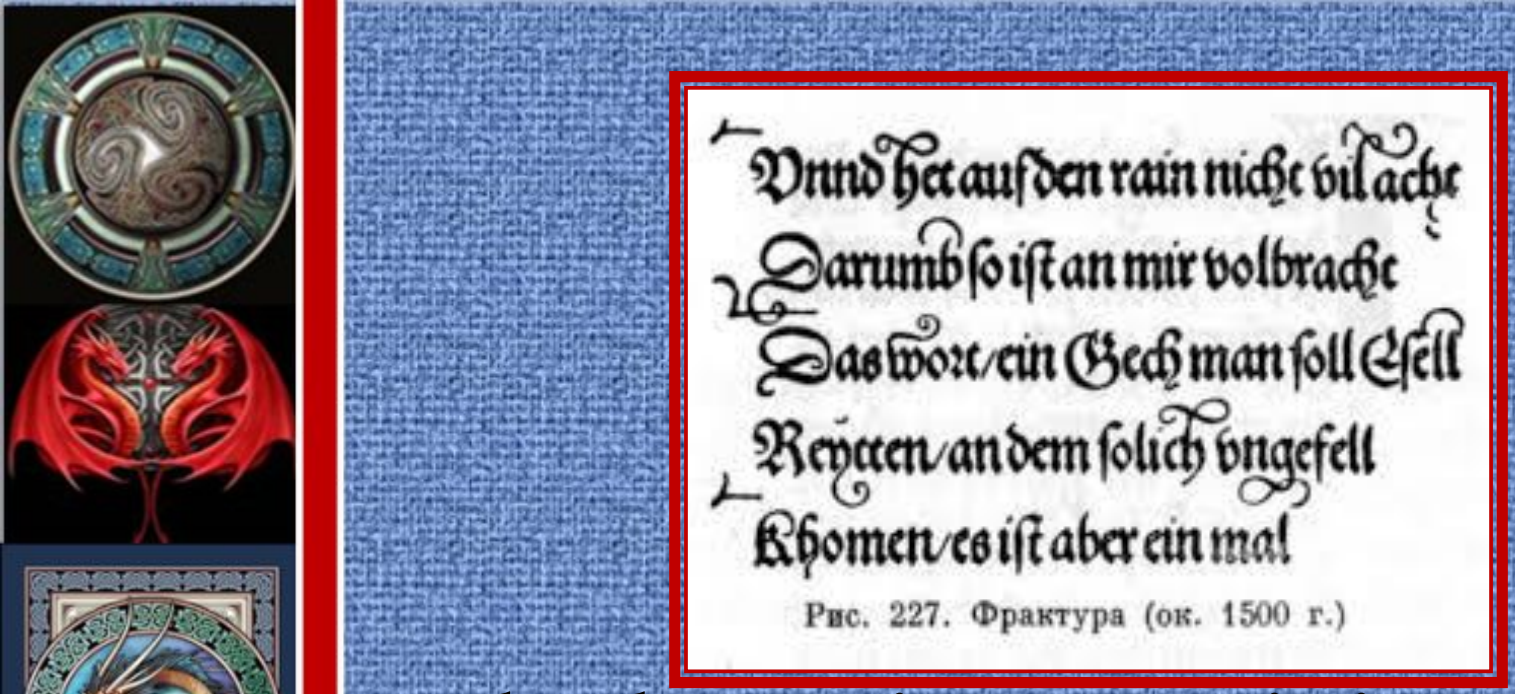

Vnnd het auf den rain nicht vil ache
Darumb so ist an mir volbrachte
Das wort/ein Gech man soll Esell
Reytten/an dem solich vngefell
Khomen/es ist aber ein mal

Рис. 227. Фрактура (ок. 1500 г.)

The changes in pronunciation weren't the result of specific social or historical factors, but social and historical factors would have helped to spread the results of the changes. As a result the so-called pure vowel sounds which still characterize many continental languages were lost to English.

The phonetic pairings of most long and short vowel sounds were also lost, which gave rise to many of the oddities of English pronunciation, and which now obscure the relationships between many English words and their foreign counterparts.

Colonization and Globalization

Part V

During the medieval and early modern periods the influence of English spread throughout the British Isles, and from the early seventeenth century onwards its influence began to be felt throughout the world. The complex processes of exploration, colonization and overseas trade that characterized Britain s external relations for several centuries became agents for change in the English language.

This wasn't simply through the acquisition of loanwords deriving from languages from every corner of the world, which in many cases only entered English via the languages of other trading and imperial nations such as Spain, Portugal and the Netherlands, but through the gradual development of new varieties of English, each with their own nuances of vocabulary and grammar and their own distinct pronunciations.

More recently still, English has become a lingua franca, a global language, regularly used and understood by many nations for whom English is not their first language.

The eventual effects on the English language of both of these developments can only be guessed at today, but there can be little doubt that they will be as important as anything that has happened to English in the past sixteen hundred years.

Thank for your attention!

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