

The Birth of the English Language

In the early years of its history, Great Britain was repeatedly invaded by various populations. We owe the birth of the English language to two of these invaders:

1) The Anglo-Saxons

2) The Normans.

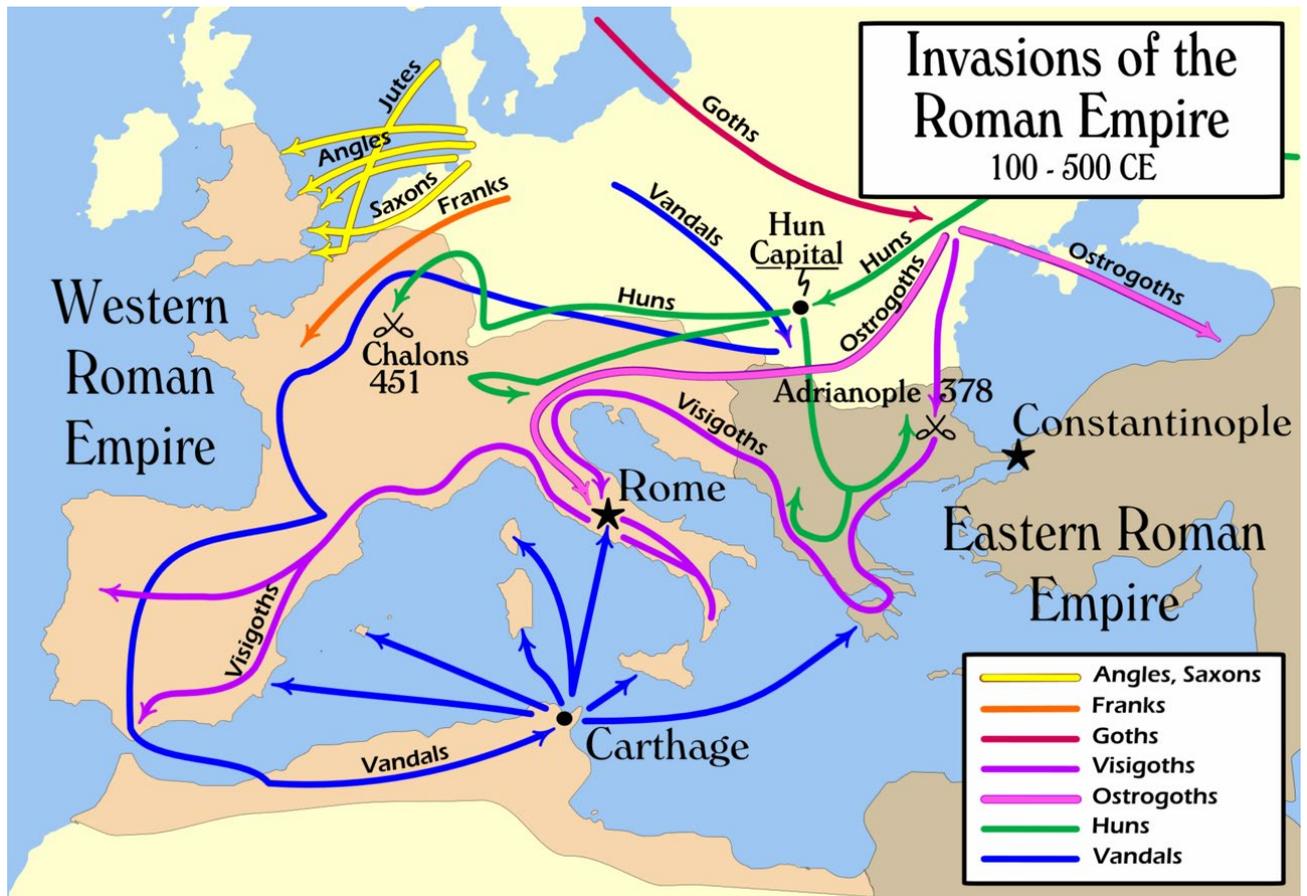
The Celts were the first inhabitants of the British Isles.

England underwent a conquest by the Romans around 50 b.C.

This was not a migration, but a military occupation, and Latin did not merge with the Celts' language, Gaelic.

Towards 400 C.E. the Romans abandoned Great Britain and came back to the mother country to defend it against

The Barbarian Invasions



The Barbarian Invasions marked the division of the former Roman Empire into smaller linguistic and cultural realities, the very first roots of the future European National States.

Barbarians were mainly Germanic tribes, moving to the West to find new lands, pushed by the Huns (who had Turkish origins and were no Germans).

England was invaded by Angles, Saxons and Jutes, who were Germanic populations and spoke Germanic dialects. They only conquered England and crushed the Celts and their civilization. Gaelic was wiped out from England but survived in Wales, Scotland and Ireland.

element in Medieval Europe, as Latin culture had been for the Roman Empire.

England became Christian and monasteries imported the Latin Alphabet. With ink and parchment it was now possible to write longer texts rapidly, and monks wrote down the Anglo-Saxon literature in the original language but using Latin letters.

They added a couple of runes for the sounds that did not exist in Latin.

From Beowulf (composed orally in the V - VI century; written down in the IX - X century)

Ða com of more under misthleopum
Grendel gongan, Godes yrre bær;
mynte se manscaða manna cynnes
sumne besyrwan in sele þam hean.

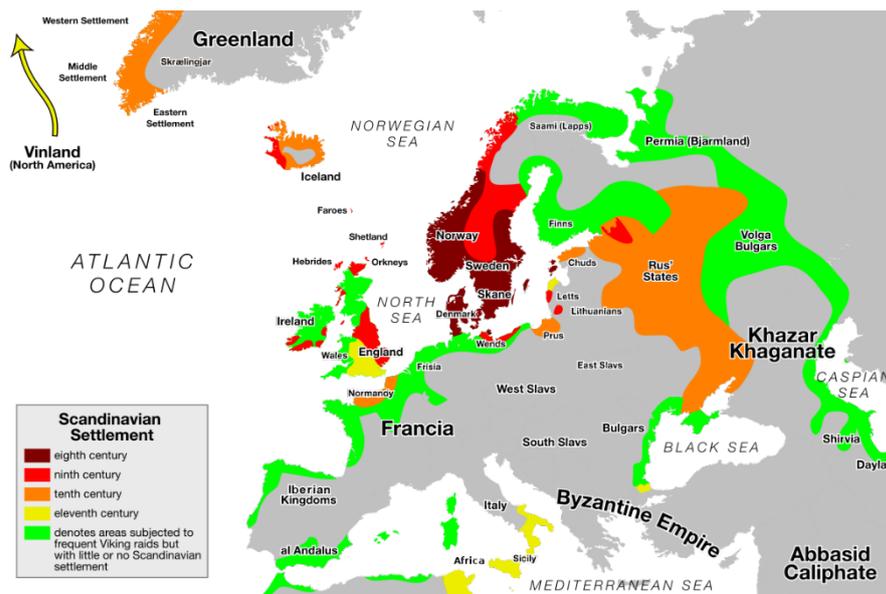
Our Father - in Old English

Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum;
Si þin nama gehalgod
to becume þin rice
gewurþe ðin willa
on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg
and forgyf us ure gyltas
swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum
and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge
ac alys us of yfele soþlice .

This sounds like German, not like English. Why is Modern English so different? Why does it contain so many words that sound like Italian?

The Vikings or Normans

During the Middle Ages the Vikings, coming from Scandinavia, invaded and conquered various areas of Europe and Asia. Some of them settled in France (currently “Normandy”) and in the long run started to speak French.



Then in 1066 the Normans conquered England. The Norman aristocracy moved to England, established the Feudal System and ruled the country. French became the official language; literature was written in French at the courts of the barons, the language of authority, of power, of the ruling class was French. Written English disappeared.

However, the English language survived because little by little French barons started to marry local women, and so their children learnt English as their mother tongue.

French disappeared as a spoken language in England, but a large amount of French vocabulary penetrated the English language. Still nowadays French-derived vocabulary belongs to a higher, more cultivated register than Anglo-Saxon derived words.

** Andrea - animals*

English simplified its grammar, lost inflections and enriched its vocabulary with words coming from French. Middle English (XIV century), the language of Geoffrey Chaucer, was born. Still today we find a plethora of near-synonyms in English. In each pair the former word comes from Anglo-Saxon, the latter is of French origin.

** Zaccaria - Near-synonyms.*