Even as Augustine’s mission was proselytizing in southern England, northern England was being converted by missionaries from Ireland. At the time, the Irish church was organized somewhat differently from the Roman church, and over the years of isolation from Rome, the Irish had failed to keep up with changes emanating from Rome, primarily minor points such as the calculation of Easter, appropriate clerical tonsure, and the like. The two branches had no major doctrinal discrepancies, and, for England, their differences were resolved amicably in favor of Rome at a synod held in Yorkshire in 664.

Christianization was an important landmark in the history of the English language because it brought England and the English speakers into the only living intellectual community of Europe, that of the Latin Church. England immediately adopted the Latin alphabet, and English was soon being written down extensively. New loanwords from Latin began to appear in English. During the seventh and eighth centuries, the level of Latin scholarship was so high in England that English scholars were in demand on the Continent. Alcuin of York became director of Charlemagne’s Palace School.

The Anglo-Saxon church and, consequently, Anglo-Saxon learning declined sharply with the Viking invasions. The Vikings themselves were pagan and had no compunctions about robbing English monasteries, burning books, and killing, enslaving, or dispersing monks. After the Treaty of Wedmore (A.D. 878), King Alfred was able to achieve some revival of intellectual life, but the major rebirth of learning after the Danish invasions did not come until the reign of his grandson Edgar. In the second half of the tenth century, inspired and supported by the ongoing Benedictine Reform on the Continent, three English churchmen—Dunstan (Archbishop of Canterbury), Ethelwold (Bishop of Winchester), and Oswald (Bishop of Worcester and Archbishop of York)—reformed monastic rules, brought in better-educated clergy, had new churches built, established schools, and encouraged the copying of both English and Latin manuscripts.

### The Viking Invasions and Their Aftermath

While the English—for they can be termed such by now—were still fighting among themselves, the island was subjected to a new wave of Germanic invaders. These were the Vikings, the terror of all Europe and even the Mediterranean. Their first attack on Europe was in 787, when a contingent of Danish Vikings landed in Dorsetshire. In 793, the Vikings (or Danes, as the English called them) sacked the wealthy Lindisfarne Priory off the Northumberland coast. England’s weak defenses and rich monasteries made it a tempting target for the Danes, who continued to plague the English for another century and came close to taking the country over entirely. Early raids were primarily hit-and-run, but the Danes soon realized that England was a valuable piece of real estate and began settling in previously terrorized and conquered areas.

In 865, a huge Viking army landed in East Anglia, and within five years the Danes controlled most of northeast England and were moving toward Wessex. At last, the ruler of Wessex, King Alfred, managed to beat the Danes soundly at Ashdown in 871 and again at Edington in 878. Under the terms of the subsequent Treaty of Wedmore, Guthrum, the Danish leader, was forced to accept Christianity and to retreat to the
Danelaw, a section of northeast England that the English agreed to recognize as Danish territory in return for a cessation of the incursions into other parts of the island.

King Alfred, certainly among the greatest kings England has ever had, not only held the Danes at bay but also fortified towns and built the first English navy. Furthermore, his talents extended beyond the military. Disturbed by the decline in learning caused by the Viking attacks on monasteries (the only real centers of intellectual activity), Alfred had important Latin texts translated into English, arranged for the compilation of other texts, founded schools, and instituted the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, a log of important events that was kept continuously in some areas of England until well after the Norman Conquest. Fortunately for England, Alfred had competent heirs. His son Edward the Elder was king of Wessex and his daughter Æthelfled ruled Mercia after her husband died; between the two of them, they kept Danish power in check and further unified the country.

In the early eleventh century, renewed Norse invasions produced more turmoil and ended with the Danish king Cnut on the English throne (1016). Cnut’s sons, less able than he, so misgoverned England that power returned to Alfred’s line in 1042 in the person of Edward the Confessor. Edward died without a direct heir in 1066. Of the several claimants to the throne, the most important were (a) Edward’s brother-in-law Harold Godwineson, whom a group of English lords selected as king; (b) Harold Haardraade, king of Norway; and (c) William, Duke of Normandy, who insisted that Edward had promised him the throne. In 1066, Harold Haardraade landed a huge fleet in Yorkshire; he was killed at Stamford Bridge and Harold Godwineson routed his troops. Two days later, Duke William sailed from Normandy with a large army bound for Essex. Harold Godwineson force-marched his troops 190 miles south to meet William, and the two armies met near Hastings in East Sussex. William had the great advantages of fresh troops and cavalry (Harold had only infantry). After Harold was killed by an arrow through his eye, William won the battle and eventually all of England.

**Inner History**

In the following discussions of Old English, a late variety of West Saxon is used as a model for all of Old English. This practice is misleading because, first, “classical” West Saxon represents a late stage of Old English, and second, it seems to have been a somewhat artificial literary dialect. Most important, West Saxon is not the direct ancestor of any of the standard dialects of Present-Day English. However, we really have no alternative because the overwhelming majority of surviving OE texts are written in West Saxon.

**Old English Phonology**

**Consonants**

Old English (OE) retained all the consonants of Common Germanic, although the distribution of some of them had been altered by sound changes that occurred between the split-up of Common Germanic and the earliest surviving OE texts. In addition,
LOANWORDS

Most of the OE lexicon was native in origin and of two types, Indo-European or Germanic. The IE portion comprises those words found not only in Germanic languages but also in other IE languages (and not borrowed from one IE language into another). It includes the most essential vocabulary, such as the names of the numbers from 1 to 10, kinship terms for the nuclear family, and basic terms essential to any language, like the words meaning sun, water, to eat, head, movable property, tree, high, cold, flat, red, to stand, to have, to run, to laugh. The Germanic element consists of items either common to all branches of Germanic or to West Germanic alone, but not found in other IE languages. Some of the Common Germanic words in OE are bæc ‘back’, bάn ‘bone’, folc ‘folk’, grund ‘ground’, rotian ‘to rot’, sēoc ‘sick’, swellan ‘to swell’, wērig ‘weary’, and wīf ‘woman’. Common only to West Germanic are OE brōc ‘brook’, crafian ‘to crave’, īdel ‘idle’, cniht ‘boy, knight’, sōna ‘immediately’, and wēod ‘weed’.

Celtic Influence

Despite extensive contacts between Germanic and Celtic speakers on the Continent and both extensive and intensive contacts after the Anglo-Saxons came to England, OE had only a handful of loanwords from Celtic languages. Some of these were originally from Latin (late OE cros from Old Irish cross from Latin crux), and some had been borrowed while the Anglo-Saxons were still on the Continent (OE ríc ‘kingdom’). Of the half dozen or so words apparently borrowed after the Anglo-Saxons came to England, only bin ‘storage box, crib’ and perhaps hog and dun ‘greyish-brown’ have survived in the standard language to the present day; a few others, such as carr ‘stone’ have survived in dialects only. Much more Celtic influence is shown in place names and place-name elements; Thames, Dover, London, Cornwall, Carlisle, and Avon are the most familiar of many surviving Celtic place names in Britain.

Scholars usually explain the lack of Celtic influence on English vocabulary as resulting from the fact that the Celts were a conquered people whose language would have had little prestige, and hence the English would have had little incentive to borrow vocabulary from them. While this is true, it is not a completely satisfactory explanation, particularly in view of the fact that, in other situations, conquerors have borrowed proportionally more vocabulary items from their subject populations, even when the general cultural level of the conquerors was much higher than that of the conquered peoples. For example, the Romans borrowed scores of words from Germanic, and American English has retained well over a hundred words from the various American Indian languages. Even granting that the English colonists found more unfamiliar things to be named in the New World than the Anglo-Saxons found in England, the paucity of Celtic loans in OE is still puzzling.

Scandinavian Influence

The extensive—and usually unpleasant—contact between the English and the Scandinavians began well within the Old English period. However, few certain Scandinavian loans appear in OE texts, partly because Old English and Old Norse were so similar that loans from Old Norse are not always easy to detect, partly because there would have been no prestige attached to the use of Scan-
The few Old Norse words that do appear in OE texts often chronicle the relationship between the English and the Norse. Although the English themselves were no mean seamen, the Norse were even better, and so we find the Norse loans hā ‘rowlock’ and cnearr ‘kind of small ship’ in OE. Orrest ‘battle’ and rān ‘rapine’ reflect the context in which the English met the Norsemen. The structure of Norse society and social classes differed in many ways from that of the English; hence the loanwords hofding ‘chief, leader’, hold ‘chief, notable’, wearg ‘felon’, and hūscarl ‘member of the king’s bodyguard’. Two or three dozen additional Old Norse words are recorded during the OE period, including such miscellaneous items as Æled ‘firebrand’, cenep ‘moustache’, flāh ‘deceitful’, mundlēow ‘hand-washing basin’, scynn ‘skin’, fur’, and frōd ‘wise’. However, the extensive influence of Old Norse (ON) on English was not to appear until Middle English.

**Latin Influence**

The only major foreign influence on OE vocabulary was Latin, from which Old English had several hundred loanwords. The influence began in Common Germanic times, when such words as belt, cheese, copper, linen, and pole were borrowed. While the ancestors of the English were still on the Continent, West Germanic dialects borrowed many Latin words, including beer, butter, cheap, dish, mile, pit, plum, shrive, sickle, stop, street, tile, and wine. (PDE spellings are given; the OE spellings were usually somewhat different.)

Because the language of the Church was Latin, Christianization predictably brought Latin loanwords to English. Among the many Latin loans in OE relating to religious practice or intellectual life are the following.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Latin Word</th>
<th>English Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>abbad</td>
<td>‘abbot’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>alter</td>
<td>‘altar’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>calic</td>
<td>‘chalice’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>candel</td>
<td>‘candle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>cantic</td>
<td>‘canticle’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>capellan</td>
<td>‘chaplain’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>clūstor</td>
<td>‘cloister’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>fers</td>
<td>‘verse’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lētānta</td>
<td>‘litan’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mæsse</td>
<td>‘mass’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>prīm</td>
<td>‘the first hour’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>sācēr</td>
<td>‘priest’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ōdīmiama</td>
<td>‘incense’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>traht</td>
<td>‘tract’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ymnere</td>
<td>‘hymnbook’</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The English, however, were also resourceful in adapting existing native words to express Christian concepts. For Latin sanctus, native hālig ‘holy’ was used; for Latin deus, native god; for Latin dominus, native hūlford. Native gāst translated Latin spiritus; synn served for Latin peccatum; and biddan ‘pray’ for Latin orare. Some of these ingenious translations may seem humorously irreverent to modern ears; for example, OE translated Epiphany as bæðdæg ‘bath day’ because Epiphany was supposedly the day of Christ’s baptism.

Linguistically, the English language between the mid-eleventh and the sixteenth centuries is sufficiently homogeneous to justify the single label of Middle English. On the other hand, the political and social status of both the language and its speakers changed greatly during this period, and three distinct subperiods can be identified: the sudden decline in the status of English after the Norman Conquest, the gradual re-emergence of English as the national language, and the rise of a standard form of the language superimposed upon the many English dialects.

1066–1204: English in Decline

The Norman invasion is arguably the single most cataclysmic event in English history. It was the last—but the most thoroughgoing—invasion of England by foreigners. It unified England for the first time in its history. And it was the most important event ever to occur in the outer history of the English language. Politically and linguistically, it was a French conquest of England. Ethnically, it represented the last of the great Germanic invasions of England.

William I (William the Conqueror, Duke of Normandy) was a descendant of Rollo the Dane, the Viking who had terrorized northern France until, in A.D. 911, the harassed French king, Charles the Simple, was forced to conclude an arrangement with him similar to that King Alfred had made with the Danes in England a few years earlier. Rollo and his followers took control of the area of northern France that became known as Normandy (Norman = "north man"). The Normans soon gave up their own language in favor of French, but it was a French heavily influenced by their original Germanic dialect, a fact that was much later to be of significance in the ultimate resurgence of English in England.

Following his defeat of Harold Godwineson at Hastings, William rapidly subjugated the rest of southeast England. Rebellions in the north and west of England delayed his securing of these areas, but within about ten years after the Conquest, all of England was firmly under William’s control. Most of the Anglo-Saxon nobility was killed, either at Hastings or in the subsequent abortive rebellions. The remaining English speakers accepted William’s kingship with resignation if not enthusiasm. One of the reasons for this relatively easy acceptance was that William brought the land more unity, peace, and stability than it had experienced for generations. During his reign, the Viking attacks ceased. The numerous internal squabbles came to an end. William established a ring of castles on the Welsh borders and thereby kept the Welsh under control. William himself was a stern and ruthless ruler, but he was not genocidal; his subjugation of England was a business matter, not a holy war. Where existing English laws and customs did not conflict with his own regulations, he allowed English practices to remain.

William replaced Englishmen with Frenchmen in all the high offices of both state and Church, partly to reward his French followers for their support, partly because he, justifiably, felt that he could not trust the English. Even the scriptoria of the monasteries were taken over by French speakers (although at Peterborough the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle continued to be written in English until 1154).
Along with his French officials, William also imported the principle of the feudal system, the notion of the state as a hierarchy in which every member was directly responsible to the person above him in the hierarchy. Vassalage was hereditary from the dukes directly under the king at the top to the peasants at the bottom. Although these peasants were not slaves, they were bound to the land. Hence the English speakers of one area had few opportunities to communicate with those of other areas, and dialectal differences among the regions increased. There were few towns of any size in which speakers from various areas could congregate, thereby reconciling the most outstanding dialectal differences. Without literacy and a standard written language—or any written language at all—to act as a brake on change, dialectal differences in English proliferated.

During much of the Middle English period, the kings took French wives and spent most of their reigns in their extensive possessions in France. They did not speak English at all, though some of the later kings apparently understood it. The English court was a French-speaking court. Indeed, some of the finest French literature of the period was written in England for French-speaking English patrons.

The linguistic situation in Britain after the Conquest was complex. French was the native language of a minority of a few thousand speakers, but a minority with influence out of all proportion to their numbers because they controlled the political, ecclesiastical, economic, and cultural life of the nation. The overwhelming majority of the population of England spoke English, but English had no prestige whatsoever. Latin was the written language of the Church and of many secular documents; it was also spoken in the newly emerging universities and in the Church. Norse was still spoken (but not written) in the Danelaw and other areas of heavy Scandinavian settlement, though it was soon to be assimilated to English, its influence being restricted primarily to loan-words in English and to dialectal peculiarities of the area. Beyond the borders of England proper, Celtic languages still prevailed in Wales and Scotland (where a new standard Scots English was eventually to develop, based on the English of Edinburgh).

Within a short time after the Conquest, there was probably a fair amount of bilingualism in England. Even if the kings had no English, most of the nobility would have had to learn at least a number of English words in order to communicate with their Anglo-Saxon underlings. Estate officials and household supervisors must have used English to give orders and to receive reports. Even though the kings usually did not take English wives, many of the nobility soon did; the result would have been bilingual children. Even if both the lord and his lady spoke only French, they probably had English-speaking nurses for their offspring, and the children learned English from these nurses and the other servants. Conversely, many Anglo-Saxons would have attempted to learn French as a means of improving their social and economic status. From the beginning, English speakers would have become familiar with such French words as tax, estate, trouble, duty, and pay. English household servants would have learned French words like table, boil, serve, roast, and dine. From French-speaking clergy, the English would have learned such words as religion, savior, pray, and trinity. Most of these words do not appear in written English until after 1204, but only because little written English has survived from the period of 1066–1204. When such words do appear in writing, they are used with the confidence of familiar, universally known words.
sea, and further invading Celtic territory. Had the Britons (Celts) been able to maintain Roman organization and discipline, they would have easily been able to repel the invaders, at least in the beginning. The Britons, however, constantly squabbled among themselves and, as a result, were steadily forced back toward the west, southwest, and north of the island. At the beginning of the sixth century, the Britons did manage to unite briefly under the leadership of King Arthur (who was probably not a king at all but rather a general of Romano-British background). They won a great victory around A.D. 500 at Mt. Badon, perhaps located near Bath. Anglo-Saxon military activity and the flood of immigrants halted for the next half century, and some of the Anglo-Saxons even returned to the Continent. The halt was only temporary, however, and, by the middle of the sixth century, Anglo-Saxon pressure on the Britons was again in full force.

Once in control of the best parts of the island, the Anglo-Saxons continued to indulge their warwarring habits by fighting among themselves. Traditionally, there were seven major kingdoms, collectively termed the Heptarchy: (1) Northumberland, extending from southeast Scotland down to the Humber River; (2) East Anglia, including present-day Norfolk and Suffolk; (3) Mercia, including the rest of central England over to Wales; (4) Essex; (5) Kent; (6) Sussex; and (7) Wessex in the southwest over into Devon. (See Figure 5-2.) This neat division is, however, too simplistic: borders shifted with the rise or decline of petty kings, and there were several minor kingdoms about which little is known. In general, the locus of major power shifted steadily southward during the Anglo-Saxon period. Northumbria dominated in the seventh century, Mercia in the eighth, and Wessex in the ninth and tenth.

By the sixth century, Roman Britain lay in ruins. Public works like roads, bridges, and baths were neglected. Cities and towns decayed and then apparently were abandoned. Peasants, the bulk of the population, clustered in tiny villages surrounded by their fields. At least some Anglo-Saxon kings, on the other hand, managed to amass great wealth and power, as is evidenced by the magnificent seventh-century cenotaph burial of an East Anglian king (probably Rædwald) at Sutton Hoo. The eighth-century Mercian King Offa was sufficiently prominent and confident to be offered a marriage treaty by Charlemagne—and to decline the offer. Offa even had at his disposal a large labor force which built the 120-mile earthworks known as Offa’s Dyke.

The Christianization of England

During the disorder that followed the withdrawal of the Roman legions and the coming of the Anglo-Saxons, Christianity had died out among the Britons. The only religion of the Anglo-Saxons themselves was Germanic paganism. In A.D. 597, Pope Gregory sent a mission under St. Augustine (not to be confused with the earlier St. Augustine, Bishop of Hippo and author of City of God) to Kent. Conversion was relatively swift, although backsliding took place occasionally during the early years, and pagan customs and beliefs survived for centuries under the veneer of Christianity. For example, the English names for four of the days of the week are still those of the Germanic divinities Tiw, Wodan, Thor, and Frig; and even the most sacred of Christian holidays, the paschal festival, is named for the Germanic goddess Eastre.