

Middle English: External history

By the late 11th century, virtually all great landowners, bishops and abbots are from the continent:

- mostly Normans (French speakers)
- Flemish, Italians, Bretons...

e.g. the first two Archbishops of Canterbury after 1066, Lanfranc and St Anselm, were both born in Italy and were teachers at Bec Abbey (Normandy) before being called to England

Large-scale replacement of the élite → Anglo-Saxon traditions of literacy practically disappear (although the language of the vast majority remains English)

Middle English: External history

Writing habits of clerics come from the continent after 1066:

$p, \delta, \text{æ}$, later $p > \emptyset$

$\emptyset > k, q, x, z; th, ch, sh, sch...$

This is why ME **looks** more familiar than OE!

OE [kwe:n, θæt]	<i>cwen, þæt</i>
ME [kwe:n, θat/ðat]	<i>queen, that (quene, quean, þat...)</i>
MoE [kwi:n, ðæt]	<i>queen, that</i>

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Middle English: External history

The major languages of England after 1066:

- **English** (=late OE, transition to ME)
- **Anglo-Norman** (=French spoken by Normans in England)
- **Latin** (the language of serious business, the church, administration, its position strengthened after 1066)
- (Celtic languages – no influence on English)

points of contact:

- landowners needed to communicate with their peasants
- bishops & priests needed to preach to people who only understood English
- merchants needed to sell their goods in the cities
- ambitious young men needed to learn French for upward mobility...

Middle English: External history

France in the focus of policy and cultural ambitions;

English kings (& all barons) are nominally French vassals as dukes of Normandy – until King John loses all French lands by 1216 (his death)

By the late 13th century, the aristocracy switches to English as a first language; but French literature, art forms etc. continue to have great influence.

→ they start hiring tutors from France – who speak Central French (Paris & Île de France)

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Middle English: External history

Copying English texts is discontinued in many monasteries; where it is continued, it is more and more erratic; great variety! E.g. forms of the word *length* in ME manuscripts:

- | | | |
|------------|-------------|------------|
| a) lengþe | h) langthe | o) lengh |
| b) lengthe | i) longthe | p) lenkt |
| c) lenȝthe | j) linth | q) lenght |
| d) lenkthe | k) lynth | r) lenep̄e |
| e) lencþe | l) leenkþe | s) lengeth |
| f) lengye | m) leyngthe | t) lenkith |
| g) lencye | n) leeyngþe | |

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Middle English: External history

The English language gradually reasserts its positions in the 14th–15th centuries

Teaching at some schools in English (John of Cornwall)
Parliamentary debates recorded in English (& Latin)
Pleas at law courts entered in English
Royal charters etc. in English

London becomes an important city by late 14th c.; royal administration works in English by this time, official forms of writing are on the way to being standardised (Italian Chancery hand).

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Middle English: Internal history

The transition from Old to Middle English involves some general tendencies that are common to continental Germanic languages in roughly the same period:

- neutralisation of unstressed vowels
- near-neutralisation of vowel length
- reduction of inflectional morphology
- influx of foreign words

And also particular changes that are specific to English (or to dialects of English), e.g. OE *ā* > ME *ō*

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Middle English: Internal history

reduction of inflectional morphology

e.g. OE nouns had several different forms:

<i>stān</i>	<i>stānas</i>	>	ME <i>stone</i>	<i>stones</i>
<i>stānes</i>	<i>stāna</i>			
<i>stāne</i>	<i>stānum</i>			

set of verb forms also reduced:

OE	<i>wē sungon</i>	'that we sing'		
	<i>wē sungen</i>	'that we should sing'		
			>	ME <i>we sungen</i>

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Middle English: Internal history

neutralisation of unstressed vowels

In OE, unstressed vowels could distinguish words or word forms:

stānes ≠ *stānas* (Sing Gen ≠ Plur Nom)
faran 'to travel' ≠ *faren* 'travelled'
sunu 'son' ≠ *suna* 'sons'...

In ME, unstressed vowels reduce to [ə] (=e) or (y)/(i)

→ *stones*, *faren*, *sune*...

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Middle English: Internal history

Changes in vowel length (late OE / early ME):

- Pre-cluster lengthening
- Pre-cluster shortening
- Trisyllabic shortening
- Open syllable lengthening

(all the four changes have led to alternations that are still with us in present-day English!)

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Middle English: Internal history

near-neutralisation of vowel length

In OE, vowel length could distinguish words:

god ≠ *gōd* 'good'
hara 'hare' ≠ *hāra* 'grey'
mæst 'mast, pole' ≠ *mæst* 'most'...

In ME, vowel length is largely redundant (though not entirely), short vs. long vowels follow regular patterns, e.g.

nama > *nāme* (in VCV#, first vowels lengthens)

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Middle English: Internal history

Pre-cluster lengthening

V > VV / _mb, nd, rd, ld

OE *climban*, *findan*, *fēld* > ME *climben*, *finden*, *fēld*
(> MoE *climb*, *find*, *field*)

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Middle English: Internal history

Pre-cluster shortening

VV > V / _ other clusters

OE *cēpte*, *fēdde*, *clænsian*, *wīsdōm* > ME *kepte*, *fedde*,
clensen, *wisdom* (> MoE *kept*, *fed*, *cleanse*, *wisdom*)

see also OE *cild* ~ *cildru* > ME *chīld* ~ *children*
(with Pre-cluster lengthening blocked by three C's)

(cf. *convēne* ~ *convention*, *redeem* ~ *redemption*, *clean* ~
cleanse, *wise* ~ *wisdom*, *goose* ~ *gosling*...)

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Middle English: Internal history

Later on, final schwas are lost:

name [na:mə] > [na:m] (> *name*)
wode [wo:də] > [wo:d] (> *wood*)

And geminates are also shortened:

setten [settən] > [setən] (> (*to*) *set*)
kissen [kissən] > [kisən] (> (*to*) *kiss*)

This is why, in late ME and MoE spelling, final ⟨e⟩ has come
to indicate a long vowel and ⟨CC⟩ a short vowel before, e.g

home < OE *hām* (as in *name*, but not in *bear*!);
written < OE *writen* (as in *Debbie* ← *Deborah*)

(cf. *free* vs. *covered* position!)

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Middle English: Internal history

Trisyllabic shortening

VV > V / _ σσ

(that is, vowel gets shortened in third-last syllable)

OE *hālig dæg* > ME *holiday* (vs. *hōly*)
OE *sūþerne* > ME *sutherne* (vs. *south*) (> MoE *southern*)
OE *mōnandæg* > ME *monenday* (vs. *moon*) (> MoE *Monday*)

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Middle English: Internal history

Open syllable lengthening

V > VV / _ CV(C)#

(that is, vowel gets lengthened in second-last open syllable)

OE *nama*, *wudu*, *beran* > ME *nāme*, *wōde*, *bēren*
(> MoE *name*, *wood*, *bear*)

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