

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 69:  
FROM CONQUEST TO DOMESDAY**

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## EPISODE 69: FROM CONQUEST TO DOMESDAY

Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 69: From Conquest to Domesday. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the Norman settlement of England. We'll look at how most of the land in England passed into the hands of the French-speaking nobles. This process not only brought the feudal system to England, it also brought the French language to the peasants out in the country. And that development is fundamental to the story of English as we go forward. It meant that French wasn't going to be limited to a handful of retainers in the king's court, as was the case during the time of Edward the Confessor. It wasn't going to be restricted to a small group of people around Winchester or London. Instead, the French language of the nobles was destined to penetrate every nook and cranny of the country. And that meant that no one was exempt from the influence of French. Even the isolated peasants were going to have to pick up some French words to communicate with their new masters. So this time, we'll look at how that process came about.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can always reach me directly by email at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com). I'm also on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

Now last time, we explored the years immediately after the Norman Conquest. We saw that William the Conqueror initially tried to work with the existing Anglo-Saxon bureaucracy. But after the country rose in rebellion, he began to replace the native Anglo-Saxons with French-speaking allies. And we also looked at how this process played out within the English Church. But of course, it wasn't limited to the Church. It extended into almost every aspect of English society. And it extended into the English countryside. When historians say that the Normans brought the feudal system to England, this is really what they are referring to.

At the time of the Conquest, there were several thousand Anglo-Saxon landholders in England, probably somewhere between 2,000 and 4,000 landholders. And William didn't just walk in and confiscate their lands. He allowed them to remain in place at first. But it was Norman policy that any landholder who rebelled or challenged the king's authority automatically surrendered his lands to the crown. And that was really the process by which most of the Anglo-Saxon nobles lost their lands. As we now know, from the late 1060s through the mid-1070s, there were continuous rebellions. Through this process, most of the lands held by Englishmen had been claimed by William. William then turned around and granted those lands to French supporters in exchange for fealty oaths. So he basically re-created the feudal structure that had existed back in Normandy.

Within a couple of decades after the Conquest, the total number of landholders had been reduced from several thousand Anglo-Saxons down to around 180 barons, almost all of whom were French. Of course, those French-speaking barons then delegated that land to their own vassals. So once again, we see the same type of structure that was common in feudal Europe.

For the native Anglo-Saxon landholders, there were no good options. Some of them died in battle during the rebellions. Some fled the country and went into exile. Those who lived and remained in England had no choice but to become vassals of French lords. In those cases, they went from free landholders, to tenants bound to provide service and fees to their new masters. The feudal system had finally arrived in England.

This process not only shifted land ownership from Anglo-Saxons to Frenchmen, it also concentrated the land into the hands of a relatively few barons. And this new class of barons had a great deal of power based upon their massive landholdings. As was customary, many of those landholders were appointed to various government positions as well.

Now it is important to point out that the process of redistributing land from Anglo-Saxons to Frenchmen was a piecemeal process. It didn't happen in one fell swoop. When an Anglo-Saxon noble rebelled or challenged the William's authority, he surrendered his land, and it was then parceled out to one or more of William's supporters. And this process continued over several years as the rebellions continued. As a result, a baron might end up with parcel here and a parcel there. His lands were usually scattered all over the country. It wasn't exactly a clean and orderly process. Some historians have argued that William did that on purpose to prevent the barons from having large estates concentrated in one place. That way, they couldn't become mini-kings with a power base that might challenge his authority. But it is just as likely that the estates were spread out due to the piecemeal nature of the process.

Either way, this process occurred so quickly over such a large area that it wasn't always clear who got what. Sometimes various barons would lay claim to the same lands. And sometimes, when a baron received multiple grants, each grant might have been on different terms. So his obligations for one tract might have been different from those of another tract. And this started to become a problem for William. It was especially a problem for the collection of taxes. William continued to impose the land tax called the Danegeld, and the collection of those taxes depended on a good and accurate knowledge of what land was out there and who had the obligation to pay the taxes on that land.

So these competing claims had to be resolved. Local officials sorted through the mess and tried to resolve disputes when they arose. When the disputes were documented, they were recorded in Latin. And in Latin, these disputes were called *clamores*. That Latin word *clamores* produced the French word *clamer*. And English borrowed that French word as the word *claim* shortly after the Norman Conquest. So the word *claim* came from the Normans.

And those competing 'claims' sometimes got very heated, and that could lead to a lot a *clamor* – another French word from the same root that passed into English around the same time.

Now *claim* and *clamor* are both French words that came from Latin. And both words ultimately came from an Indo-European root word which was *\*kele*. And that root word meant 'shout' in the original Indo-European language. So if you have an argument with someone and your stating your case, you might shout or raise your voice. And if you make a 'claim' to something, you might raise your voice to be adamant about it. And if a lot of people are yelling, that might

create a lot of ‘clamor.’ So that’s the connection between the *claim*, *clamor*, and the Indo-European root which meant ‘shout.’

Now let’s explore the history of this root word a little further because it produced several of the earliest French words to pass into English after the Conquest. Going back to the time of the Romans, that root word meaning ‘shout’ produced the Latin word *calare* meaning to ‘call out or proclaim.’ And on the first day of each month, priests would shout out and ‘call’ the people together to announce the days on which the upcoming festivals would be held. Most people didn’t have a way to keep track of that otherwise. So that meeting on the first day of each month was important to let everyone know what important days were coming up. And that ensured that those holidays would actually be observed and kept sacred. From that Latin word *calare*, this day of gathering on the first day of each month came to be called the *calendae* or *calends*.

In Roman banking, monthly interest payments on loans were usually due on the *calendae* – the first day of the month. And the lender’s account book came to be called a *calendarium*. And that word passed into French where it referred to any list or register of items. The word then passed into English as *calendar*. And in fact, that word appears in one of the earliest documents written in Middle English around the year 1200. And just as today, it was used to refer to a document that listed the various days and months of the year. So *calendar* comes from the same root as *claim* and *clamor*, and it relates back to a time when Roman priests called everyone together on the first day of each month.

And speaking of the calendar, I should note that the Latin month names that we use today finally started to replace the Anglo-Saxon month names during this period. Some of those Latin month names had already filtered into a few Old English documents before 1066. And that isn’t really surprising given that most of the scribes spoke Latin, and probably used those Latin month names for Church business. But most of those Latin month names don’t actually appear in English documents until after the Conquest.

*January* was called *Æftera Geola* in Old English. It was literally ‘After Yule.’ So it meant the month after Yuletide. The month was also called *Wulf-monath*, which literally meant the ‘wolf month.’ After the Conquest, those terms were soon replaced with the Latin name *January*.

The second month was called *Sol-monath* in Old English. It meant ‘the mud month.’ No one is really sure what that name referred to. In Germanic tradition, this was the month in which cakes were offered to the gods. So one theory is that the cakes resembled ‘mud’ or had a gritty texture like mud, and that is why it was called the ‘mud month.’ But that’s just a theory. The month was also sometimes called the *Kale-monath* or ‘kale month.’ So it was named for a type of cabbage. But those names were soon pushed out and replaced with Latin name *February*.

March was *hreoð-monap*. Again, the exact meaning of the name is uncertain. One theory is that it is based on the name of the Germanic goddess Rheda, and this was the month in which sacrifices were made to Rheda – thus *hreoð-monap*. Again, it was replaced with *March* at the time of the Conquest. And *March* appears in the earliest Middle English documents.

The fourth month was called *Eostre-monath* – the ‘Easter month.’ But keep in mind that Eostre was a Germanic fertility goddess. Her name was later borrowed by the English Church for the Christian holiday. So the Germanic month name refers back to the goddess Eostre because sacrifices were made to her during that month. But after 1066, that Old English name was soon replaced with Latin name *April*.

The fifth month was *Thri-milce* – or ‘three milkings.’ This was the month when livestock were so well fed on spring grass that they could be milked three times a day. But that month was now replaced with Latin name *May*.

The sixth and seventh months occurred in the heart of summer. During those months, the weather was mild, so an Old English word meaning ‘mild or gentle’ was used to name those months. That word was *liða*. The sixth month was *Ærra-liða* – or ‘Before Mild.’ And the seventh month was *Æftera-liða* – or ‘After Mild.’ Those names were soon replaced with the Latin names *June* and *July*.

The next month was *Weod-monath* – the ‘weed month.’ It meant the plant month. And now it became Latin *August*.

The next month was *Haleg-monath* – literally the ‘holy month.’ It was the month for celebrations to offer gratitude for the harvest. It was also sometimes called the *Hærfest-monath* – literally the ‘harvest month.’ But now, it was replaced with Latin *September*.

The tenth month marked the beginning of winter in Anglo-Saxon culture. Winter officially began with the first full moon during that month. So the month itself was called the *Winterfylleth* – literally the ‘winter full’ meaning the ‘Winter Full Moon.’ But now, it became *October*.

The next month was *Blot-monath* – literally the ‘blood month.’ It meant the month of sacrifices when the cattle that couldn’t be fed during the winter months were killed and eaten. But now it became *November*.

The last month was the month before Yule or the winter festival. So it was called *Ærra Geola* – literally ‘Before Yule.’ But it now became *December*. And then the year started all over again with *Æftera Geola* or ‘After Yule’ – or *January* as we know it today.

So these Latin month names were some of the earliest words borrowed from French and Latin after the Conquest. Again, it is likely that some of the Latin month names were used before 1066. Since the Church used those names, some Anglo-Saxons may have used them alongside their native terms. But those Latin names didn’t really become widespread and accepted in English until after 1066.

So the word *calendar*, and all of the Latin month names in that calendar, became English words. And I began that digression by mentioning how the word *calendar* was related to words like *claim* and *clamor*. They are all cognate because they all came from the same Indo-European root

word meaning ‘to shout.’ And I noted that out in the countryside after the Conquest there was a lot of ‘clamor’ because there were many competing ‘claims’ to land.

Those new French nobles wanted to ‘clear’ up that confusion and get ‘clear’ title to their lands. And guess what, the word *clear* comes from that same Indo-European root as *claim* and *clamor* and *calendar*. Remember that the common root word meant ‘to shout.’ If you’re in a crowded room, you might ask someone to shout so you can hear them. That way, you can hear them ‘clearly.’ And that’s how we got the word *clear* meaning transparent and obvious. It’s another French word that entered English shortly after the Conquest.

And let’s extend that thought a little further. Sometimes, people might shout or speak loudly to convene a meeting and to be heard in front of a group of people. I noted earlier that that is how we got the word *calendar*, which referred back to the meetings called by Roman priests on the first day of each month. Well, when people are called together, they assemble. And another word for an assembly or meeting is the word *council*. And once again, the word *council* is a French word that comes from the same root as *claim*, *clamor*, *calendar* and *clear*. And *council* also entered English from French, at least as early as the 1100s. So it is one of the first attested French words which entered English after 1066.

And we have another French word from this same root which also entered English. It’s the word *class*. In early Rome, people were called to arms during times of conflict. This sometimes involved a literal ‘call to arms’ where Roman officials literally shouted to announce the impending danger or conflict. From this same ultimate root word meaning ‘shout,’ the Romans produced the Latin word *classis*, which meant a ‘group of soldiers who were assembled together.’ It later evolved to mean ‘a particular division of soldiers.’ And that sense as a distinct division or group gave us the word *class*. And with a new aristocracy in England, we started to see the emergence of two distinct classes – a French-speaking nobility and an English-speaking peasantry. But the word *class* didn’t actually enter English at this point. It came in later in the 1600s. But again, it is ultimately cognate with words like *claim*, *clamor*, *calendar*, *clear* and *council*. And they all relate back to that Indo-European word that meant ‘shout.’

So let’s put some of these words together and see how they relate to our theme. The new French upper ‘class’ often had competing ‘claims’ to land. And they wanted ‘clear’ rights to their new estates. So the Normans convened ‘councils’ to resolve some of these issues.

It was actually very important that these issues be resolved. These competing claims could lead to rivalries between nobles, and that increased the chances of a civil war between those nobles down the road. That’s what had tended to happen back in France. And William wanted to avoid that instability in England. But there was a more immediate concern as well.

England still relied heavily upon a land tax for revenue. And you couldn’t really have an effective land tax if you didn’t know exactly what was out there in the countryside, and you didn’t really know who was responsible for paying the tax on the land. And William and all of his new French nobles were new to this land, so they needed to sort out exactly what was there,

who had the rights to possess it, who held what lands from whom, and where the boundaries were from one tract to the next.

By the year 1085, William had been back in Normandy for several years dealing with issues there. But in that year, 1085, William returned to England to sort out some of these issues. At Christmas of that year, he held a meeting or council of the most important landholders in England, most of whom were now French. And at that meeting, he announced that he was ordering the preparation of a massive survey of all the land in England. The survey would identify every parcel of land. It would also identify the holder of the land, and the value of the land.

And to put all of this into some context, when William arrived back in England, the Danes were preparing another invasion of England. As it turned out, internal troubles in Denmark prevented that attack from ever occurring, but it shows that the Danes were still a threat out beyond the horizon.

Meanwhile, back in Normandy, William found himself in more or less constant battle with his neighboring provinces. The French king was also looking to take William down since he was now a king in his own right. And even his son Robert was rebelling against him in Normandy.

So as William announced plans for the English land survey, he was probably thinking about the tax implications and the need to raise revenue. But he was also probably thinking about the need to defend England from outside attack while at the same time pursuing his wars in Normandy. So some historians think all of this connected.

The survey was conducted and completed by August of the following year. And when the survey was complete, William held another meeting at Salisbury. And at Salisbury, William asked all of the landholders present to swear an oath of fealty, not only to provide military service to him in England, but also to provide military service in France. And that was really an expansion of the traditional duties owed by the barons. It was one thing for a baron to take land in England in exchange for an oath to provide service in England, but now they were being asked to fight in France as well. So two important events occurred at that Salisbury meeting. The land survey was completed and made public, and the barons swore this new oath of fealty to William. And it wasn't just the barons. A lot of the vassals who held land under the barons also swore that oath.

The British historian J.C. Holt has argued that these two events were connected – that the survey was prepared partly in exchange for that new fealty oath. So the survey was a way for William to basically kill two birds with one stone, so to speak. The survey identified all of the land in England so it could be taxed. And that allowed William to pay for the defense of England. But it also identified the persons entitled to possession of each tract. So it basically resolved most of those pending disputes among landholders. It cleared up any lingering confusion. And going forward, the barons and nobles could use that survey as the final, definitive record of all the landholdings in England. So the barons and the landowners finally secured clear rights to their lands. And in exchange for that clarity and certainty which William offered them, they swore a

fealty oath back to him. It was an oath to fight for him and defend him in both England and France.

Now we can't be absolutely certain that these pieces were connected in this way, but it makes sense. And in fact, this view helps to explain the name that was ultimately given to the survey. Like most official documents, the survey was written in Latin. And the name of the survey in Latin was 'Liber de Wintonia' – literally the 'Book of Winchester' because that is where it was maintained. But it wasn't just a survey. It was the final definitive word on land ownership in England.

If two landholders disagreed over the rights to a piece of land, they would appeal to this survey. And they were bound by the survey. It was the final word on the matter. And there are several surviving reports of this process at work. During the reign of William's son and successor, William Rufus, an abbey in Norfolk appealed to the survey seeking the return of certain lands. And the abbey got those lands back because it was identified as the owner in the survey book. Similarly, in the year 1111, the abbot of Abingdon appeared in Winchester to claim certain lands, and again, he proved his case by referring to the survey.

So this survey book rendered the final judgment on such matters. It was considered the legal equivalent of Judgment Day. In the Christian tradition, when a person died, the fate of his or her soul was determined on Judgment Day, and that was a final judgement. There was no appeal. So people began to make that connection between the final judgment rendered by this survey and the final judgments rendered on Judgment Day. But *judgement* was a French word – not an Old English word. The Old English word for 'judgment' was *domas*. We've seen that word before. It also gave us the word *deem* in the sense of making a judgment about something – to 'deem' it to be good or bad. And Old English had used that word *domas* to translate 'Judgment Day' into 'domes dæg.' And now, the 'Judgment Day Book' became known in English as the 'domes dæg book' – or 'Domesday Book.' And the Domesday Book continued to provide the final judgment in any dispute over land in England.

The Domesday Book was very unusual for its period. There was nothing else like it in western Europe. The amount of detail was incredible, and it remains an essential source for historians of Medieval England. In fact, the process by which the survey was assembled is mentioned in the Peterborough version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which remember was the only version of the Chronicle that was still being maintained in English at this point. And the scribe who recorded the entry indicates just how intrusive the survey was. And his tone suggests that the native people resented the whole process.

It wasn't enough that William sent out officials to record the land. They recorded almost everything else – cows, oxen, pigs. If it had value, the Norman surveyors wrote it down and recorded it for posterity. The scribe writes of William:

So very closely did he let it be traced out  
"Swa swyðe nearwelice he hit lett utaspyrian."



that there was not a single hide nor yard of land  
“þæt næs an ælpig hide. ne an gyrde landes.”

nor, further, it’s shameful to tell, though it seemed to him no shame to do it  
“ne furðon, hit is sceame to tellanne. ac hit ne þuhte him nan sceame to donne.”

that not an ox, nor a cow, nor a swine existed that was not set down in his writ  
“an oxe. ne an cu. ne an swin. næs belyfon. þæt næs gesæt on his gewrite.”

So that’s how detailed the survey was. No stone was left unturned. Now all of this does raise an interesting question though. If the Domesday Book identified the person entitled to possession each tract of land, how did the surveyors come to those conclusions? In other words, how did they resolve the disputes among the bickering nobles.

Well, as the surveyors proceeded from village to village, they called on the local lords and peasants to furnish them with information. And whenever there was a disagreement over a particular matter, it was Norman tradition to set up a panel of inquiry. They would often meet in open air in the village green. And there they would hear each side and then determine the boundaries and the rights and obligations of each estate. As each side presented their case, they had to swear that they were telling the truth. The Latin word for swear was ‘juro’ (/yoo-ro/) – now being pronounced ‘jur-ro’ in Medieval Latin. And the panel who heard and decided those completing claims was called the *jury*. And again, the word *jury* was one of the first French words to enter English after the Norman Conquest. In fact, the Normans often – but not always – used a twelve-person jury to decide disputes, just as we typically do today. Now the ultimate origin of the jury system is a matter of some debate. The Germanic tribes had used panels of people to decide disputes as well. But most legal historians agree that the jury system as we would come to know it came in with the Normans. And certainly, the word *jury* came with them. We’ll look a little more at juries next time, but I just wanted to note that one of the first roles of the jury in England was to settle these types of land disputes.

Of course, that word *jury* features the same root as words like *justice*, *judge* and *judgment*. And those words take us back to the name of that survey – the Domesday Book. The words *jury* and *justice* were attested very early on. But *judge* and *judgment* are not attested in English until the late 1200s and 1300s. So at the time the survey was completed in 1086, the word *judgment* had not yet passed into English. And that’s why English speakers didn’t call it the ‘Judgment Day Book.’ Instead, they used the Old English word *domas*, and they called it the ‘domes-daeg book.’

Now I noted that historians of this period salivate over the detail contained in the book. And I should note that it is actually two different books because there is so much information contained in the survey. So the survey tells us a great deal about the changes that had taken place in the countryside over the prior twenty years.

It tells us that about ninety percent of the people in England still lived in rural communities. So this was still mainly a rural society. It also indicates that the eastern part of the country was densely populated, but the population in the north was relatively small. This is believed to be the

result of the massive destruction which William had ordered in the north when the rebellions broke out there – the so-called ‘Harrying of the North.’

The survey doesn’t give an exact population of the country, but estimates suggest that it was somewhere between one to three million people. It is believed that a large number of Anglo-Saxon had died over the prior twenty years. Some were killed in uprisings and rebellions. Others died due to starvation when their land and livestock were seized. Some estimates suggest as many as 300,000 Anglo-Saxon died during this period. That would have been anywhere from ten to twenty percent of the total population. But again, no one knows the exact number.

During that same time period, many people from France had continued to migrate to England. Again estimates vary. Some suggest around 30,000 French immigrants, others put the number closer to 200,000. It is really difficult to put specific numbers on the migration. But it does appear that the significant loss of life among the Anglo-Saxons was somewhat offset by the large number of Frenchmen who were moving in. They still represented a distinct minority, but their language took on a greater and greater influence as more and more of them arrived.

And I should emphasize that not all the Frenchmen were Normans. They were coming from other parts of France as well, especially other parts of northern France. I noted a couple of episodes back that about one-third of William’s army at Hastings was made up of Bretons from Brittany. By the time of the Domesday Book, as much as twenty percent of England may have been held by Bretons – not Normans. There was an especially strong concentration of Bretons in southwestern England – in the Welsh border regions. These areas were geographically close to Wales, and so there was a lingering Celtic influence in some of these regions. And you might remember from earlier episodes that Brittany had been founded in part by native Celtic-speaking Britons who had fled Britain when the Anglo-Saxons arrived several centuries earlier. They had poured across the Channel to northwestern France. And this is why Brittany came to be called *Brittany* because many of the people who settled there came from Britain. And the Celtic connections were still strong there in the eleventh century. In fact, to this day, Brittany is the only place outside of the British Isles where a Celtic language is still spoken.

As I noted, a lot of Bretons had fought with William at Hastings. Many of the them were landless nobles back in Brittany. A lot of them were the younger siblings of prominent nobles or nephews of nobles. They didn’t have their own lands since they weren’t eldest sons. So they had supported William in hopes of acquiring estates in England. And now they had those estates, and they were being joined by other Breton relatives from Brittany.

Some of the new arrivals became vassals of existing Bretons and Normans. And when they arrived in England, many of them chose to settle in the region that many of their ancestors had abandoned several centuries earlier. That region of southwestern England near the Welsh border.

And you might remember that the Bretons brought tales of King Arthur with them. The legend of Arthur had begun in the Celtic tradition. He was originally a Celtic leader who had fought against the invading the Anglo-Saxons many centuries earlier. Those stories has passed with the fleeing Britons to Brittany and Wales. And now, the descendants of those original Bretons were

returning to England. And they were bringing those legends of Arthur with them. All of this culminated with Geoffrey of Monmouth's book, the 'History of the Kings of Britain.' It was written in Latin around the year 1136. So that was only 50 years after the Domesday Book. And Geoffrey's history is the work that really introduced King Arthur to the literate world. Geoffrey himself was likely of Breton descent.

And while I am referring to the Breton influence on England, I should note here that one particular Breton family became prominent in England after the Conquest. And they later found their way to Scotland where their descendants founded the House of Stuart. And if you know your British history, you know that the House of Stuart came to rule Scotland, and after the Tutors, they came to rule England as well. So the Stuart kings and queens could actually trace their ancestors back to Brittany.

Now the Domesday Book also tells us the extent to which the French-speaking nobles had replaced the native Anglo-Saxons nobles. As I noted earlier, the survey reveals that several thousand Anglo-Saxon landholders had been replaced with about 180 new barons – almost all of whom were French. Those barons had then parceled out their lands to their various vassals in the feudal tradition. Below these 180 barons, there were about 1400 medium-sized land holders or vassals. And out of that 1400, only about 100 were Anglo-Saxon. Under them were about 6000 sub-tenants. And here is where we actually find a large number of Anglo-Saxons. So many of the Anglo-Saxons were now leasing lands that they had once owned. To put it another way, they had been bumped down the social and economic ladder.

Now as I noted, the Domesday Book was completed by the time of that large meeting at Salisbury in August of 1086. The Conquest was now twenty years old, and William was nearing the end of his life.

It is probably fitting that the Domesday Book was his last great accomplishment as the King of England because it confirmed that the Norman Conquest had been completed. It legalized the massive changes which had wiped away most of the English landholders and put Frenchmen in their place. In incredible detail, it lists the names and holdings of each and every baron in England, but it is rare to find an English name listed among them.

I should note here that I have referred to these nobles as land-‘holders’ – not land-‘owners’ – and I have been very careful about that because technically none of these baron or nobles ‘owned’ the land. The only person who ‘owned’ the land was the king – William. Everyone else – even the 180 barons – ‘held’ their lands through him or through the lord above them. This is the basic element of the feudal system, and now the Domesday Book confirms that it had been transplanted to England.

I should note here that the Domesday Book indicates that those 180 barons actually held slightly more than half the land in England – 54% to be exact. William retained about 17% of the land for himself. About 26% was held by the Church, but the Church then parceled out its land to vassals just like the nobles did. That left about 3% that was held in some other type of tenancy. So William was French, and almost all of the barons were French, and the Church was

dominated at the highest levels by Frenchmen. So just about all the land in England was now under the direct or indirect control of Frenchmen.

So the Norman settlement was complete. England's nobility had been replaced. But what about their English language? Well, of course, it was still there. We're only twenty years removed from Hastings. So everyone who spoke English before was still speaking English. But now they were doing it beside French-speaking nobles and clerics.

At this point, in the late eleventh century, there was a clear divide between the new French-speaking aristocracy and the English-speaking commoners. Their languages were still distinct. So we don't have Middle English yet. But over the next couple of centuries, the two languages started to blend together, and a new form of English emerged. But ultimately, it was still English. Yes, a lot of French words came in, but the people who spoke English didn't give up on their native language. They didn't start to speak an Anglicized form of French. They kept their native language and they added a heavy dose of French vocabulary to it.

To emphasize this point, I want to look at a history of the Norman period that was written about 200 years later by a writer named Robert of Gloucester. He wrote a history of England that included the period after the Norman Conquest. And he noted the linguistic divide that existed shortly after the Conquest. He also wrote about the resiliency of English during that period – and the period that followed. Since he was writing around the year 1300, that means he was writing in a very early form of Middle English. So I want to take you through this passage. First, I want to focus on the substance of what he wrote. So here is a completely modern translation of his account. He wrote:

England came into the hands of Normandy. And at that time, the Normans could not speak any language but their own. They spoke French at home and they taught French to their children. As a result, all of the English nobles that descended from them now speak the same French language that they inherited. And if a man cannot speak French, people think very little of him. But the low men and commoners hold onto their native English. I think there is no other country in the world where people hold onto their own language like the people of England do. Because people know that is important to speak both languages, for the more a man knows, the more worthy he is.

Now I want to take you through that passage again and focus on the language itself this time – the language as it existed around the year 1300. So that about two centuries away from where we are now in the overall narrative. And I want you to see how familiar the language has become by the end of that period as we start to enter into the period of Middle English.

Now the language is still a little tough for modern ears, so let me give a more literal translation first. And then I'll go back through it in the original Middle English. That way, the Middle English may make a little more sense. So here is a translation that is very close to a literal translation using Modern English:

Thus came lo England into Normandy's hand  
& the Normans not could speak then. but their own speech.  
& spoke French as they did at home. & their children did also teach.  
so that high men of this land. that of their blood come.  
hold all the same speech. that they from them took.  
for but a man knows French. one tallies of him little.  
but low men hold to English. & to their own speech yet  
I think there be not in all the world. countries none.  
that not hold to their own speech. but England alone.  
But well men know that to know both - well it is  
for the more that a man knows. the more worthy he is.

So that's a more literal translation. Now let's go through it one more time in the original Middle English. By the way, you'll notice that it was originally composed in rhyming verse which was quite common in Middle English.

þus com lo engelond. in to normandies hond.  
& þe normans ne couþe speke þo. bote hor owe speche.  
& speke french as hii dude at om. & hor children dude also teche.  
so þat heimen of þis lond. þat of hor blod come.  
holdeþ alle þulk speche. þat hii of hom nome  
vor bote a man conne frenss. me telþ of him lute.  
ac lowe men holdeþ to engliss. & to hor owe speche ʒute.  
ich wene þer ne beþ in al þe world. contreyes none.  
þat ne holdeþ to hor owe speche. bote engelond one.  
ac wel me wot uor to conne. boþe wel it is.  
vor þe more þat a mon can. þe more wurþe he is.

Now a few things stand out about that passage. First, it's still a long way from Modern English, but it's starting to sound more familiar. The grammar is still a little odd, and there are still some strange words in there, but we're getting closer to Modern English.

One thing that stands out is the use of multiple negatives. The prohibition against double negatives had not taken hold yet. People still used double negatives for emphasis. In fact, Robert uses a triple negative. He writes:

I think there be not in all the world. countries none.  
that not hold to their own speech. but England alone.

Try getting that pass an English teacher today.

The other thing that stands out about that passage is that all the words but one are from Old English. And that one exception is the word *country*. The word *country* was an early borrowing from French. Old English just used the word *land*. Someone might be from another land. And in fact, Robert used that word early in the passage. He referred to 'high men of this land.' But

later he uses ‘country’s,’ primarily referring to foreign countries. So that’s interesting. And maybe the etymology of the word *country* helps to explain that. *Country* comes from the Latin root *contra* meaning ‘opposite or against.’ We still have that sense in the word *contrary*. So the original sense of the word was a foreign or new land. So it is interesting that Robert chose to use the word *country* – the only French word he used – to describe foreign nations.

Of course, today we use the word *country* in a different way. To refer to the ‘countryside.’ When we speak of rural areas, we speak of the ‘country.’ People might live ‘in the country,’ and listen to ‘country’ music. And I make that point because it shows that the nations of the Middle Ages was mostly rural societies. When people thought about a country, they thought about vast stretches of land. They thought about the countryside. It was the same way for Old English *land*. *Land* referred to the land you were standing on, and it referred to the nation you were living in. They were two sides of the same coin.

And that’s why the redistribution of land was so important to the history of England going forward. That fundamental connection between homeland and land, and country and countryside, was now broken. Over ninety percent of the English people lived in the country, but it wasn’t their country anymore. And the English peasants still worked the land. But their land now belonged to the French. And I think that’s the broken connection that Robert was getting at with that passage.

But despite that broken connection, Robert tells us that the English people held onto their native language. And Robert’s passage confirm that. Only *country* came from French. Every other word was native English. But make no mistake, those French words were starting to pour in.

So next time, we’re going to continue our look at the transition from Old English to Middle English. We’ll also look at William’s death and the sons who succeeded him. And we’ll see what life was like for all those English-speaking peasants out in the countryside who were now living under French-speaking lords.

So until next time, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.