The Reestablishment of English
13th century

A Social and Cultural History of English
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WS 09/10
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Historical Background

Political Changes after the Norman Conquest
Separation of France and England

- 1204: Loss of Normandy, after marrying Isabella of Angoulême in 1200
- Philip raises question of allegiance
- English nobility has to relinquish most estates in France
- 1214: Battle of Bouvines
- John allied with Otto IV of Germany and Count Ferrand of Flanders against Philip Augustus of France → Battle of Bouvines in 1214. Philip prevails, takes prisoners and land. John has to face nobility and tell them, that land is lost → nicknames like 'lackland' and 'soft sword'.
- 1215: John and his barons sign Magna Charta
- Rebellion of barons leads to meeting at Runnymede. At the meeting, Magna Charta or 'Great Charter' is signed.
- Culmination point: 1244
  - Louis XI makes French nobility decide:
  - Give up land in England and stay in France
  - Stay in England and not return to France
Magna Carta

- Originally “Magna Charta Libertatum” – “The great Charter of Freedoms”
- Written in 1215, Latin
  - Meeting at Runnymede on river Thames
- Consequence of loss of prestige throughout Europe
  → barons don't trust king
- Ensured rights of barons, limited John's power
- Early version of modern law
  → constitutional law in English-speaking world
- Of no real practical use during Middle Ages, but was strong symbol against unlimited powers
- Re-issued several times; its provisions still exist today
French Reinforcements
Southern French Domination

King John, married to a woman from southern France (Isabella), invited foreigners to England and provided them with important offices, e.g. Peter des Roche: bishop of Winchester, chancellor, justiciar

During reign of his son Henry III (1216-1272), who was French on his maternal side

Influx of foreigners:

1233: Henry dismissed native officers of his court from their offices, and appointed French men to take their places. Left them in charge of all the counties and baronies.

1236: Henry married Eleanor, daughter of Count of Provence; the queen generously helped her (French) relatives; e.g. Boniface was made Archbishop of Canterbury

1246: marriages with members of his Poitevin family branch and English noblemen were promoted
The Reaction Against Foreigners and the Growth of National Feeling

Seen as a consequence of Henry's policy of giving power to French relatives

“England for the English” – Hubert de Burgh (regent over England before Henry became king, was made justiciar for life)

In 1234, bishops demanded reform of clerical system in terms of French rule.

Opposition to foreigners unified the English nobility and middle-class and made the King less and less prestigious.
Outcome of the Rising Opposition

• Provisions of Oxford (1258)

  – Written in Latin, French, English
  – Regarded as England's first constitution
  – Council of 15 established → power
  – Revolutionary: crown had to accept power of parliament for first time
  – In fact: Anglo-Saxon monarchy abolished
• The Barons’ revolt (1258-67)

– Simon de Montfort as leader of the rebellious Barons’ forces
– Captured southern England by 1263
– Henry III defeated and taken prisoner 1264 (beginning of “war”)
– In 1265, Edward, Henry's son defeated and killed de Montfort in Battle of Evesham, rescued father
– In 1267, Henry and Barons agreed to peace, according to conditions stated in “Dictum of Kenilworth”
Linguistic Developments

The Reemergence of English in Public Life
The Re-emergence of English starting around 1250

By this time, the separation of English nobles from their estates in France had been about completed. The English royal house (Plantagenet dynasty) retained its links with the French, especially through intermarriages among the French and English nobility.

The earlier influx of foreigners from the south of France under Henry III had furthermore delayed the spread of English among the nobility. Edward I (1272-1307) is considered to be the first English king of the Plantagenet Dynasty with a good command of English.

With the growing resentment towards the French influence (cf. Baron‘s Revolt), English was being used more and more generally in the upper classes. Knowledge of French as a vernacular was declining.
Nevertheless, French was still in use. Predominantly in also in Parliament. Custom required bills or petitions to be in French.

At this time, [...] the adoption of French words into the English language assumed large proportions. The transference of words occurred when those who know French and had been accustomed to using it expressed themselves in English. (Baugh and Cable 2002: 135)

Declension and conjugation (in English) were often found to be incorrect or peculiar; writers made mistakes in gender such as using *le* before a woman’s name and *la* before a man’s.
Character of French in England

And Frensh she spak ful faire and fetishly,
After the scole of Stratford atte Bowe,
For Frensh of Paris was to hir unknowe.
   (Chaucer; qtd in Baugh and Cable 2002: 141)

Anglo-French not considered to be “good” French;
   [It] was possibly a mixture of various northern French dialectal
   features, but with Norman predominating, and under the influence
   of English linguistic tendencies, it gradually developed into
   something quite different from any of the continental dialects.
   (ibid.)

French as a spoken language was becoming increasingly artificial.
Attempts to retain French Language

Monasteries adopted regulations forbidding the novices to use English in school and required all conversation to be in French.

Parliament decreed in 1332 that all lords, barons, knights, and honest men of good towns should exercise care and diligence to teach their children the French language.

There were manuals for learning French as it was taught to the children of the upper classes. This shows that their native language must have already been English at that time.
French cultural ascendancy

French as a language still had prestige and was seen as an object of cultivation, representing chivalrous society in its best form.

French was used by the educated and in high society but was a matter of culture and fashion rather than an economic or political necessity as it had been before.
Continental literary models

Throughout the 13th and 14th centuries French served as the literary language in England and was generally written under the patronage of the court.

At the time when French was best understood by the upper classes; they drew upon continental French literature, which was supplemented by French poetry written in England. Adoption of the French tradition of verse.

Latin served as the language of written communication and record due to its fixed and international character.
English literature

English literature between 1150-1250 was almost exclusively religious or didactic/admonitory. (Period of Religious Record)

From 1250 there is growing body of literature in English, which is concomitant with the spread of English among the upper classes.

Types of literature that had appeared in French before now appeared in English. The most popular type at this time is the romance.

Adaptations and translations from French began to be made. Religious literature continued to be produced but there was a growing body of secular literature as well.
Cursor Mundi

Very long poem (~30,000 lines) from the north of England written around 1300.

Treats universal history, relates story of the world from the creation to the day of doom.

At that time French rhymes could be found everywhere but this poem was meant to be for the people who “na Frenche can.”

The large number of extant manuscripts proves its extreme popularity.
This same book is translated
Into the English tongue to be read
For the love of the English language,
The English people of England,
For the common people to understand.
French rhymes here I read
Commonly in the same places;
Most is written for French men,
What is for him who no French can (speak)?
In the nation of England,
English men are there in common;
The speech that one knows most may spread;
Most necessary it is to to speak with it.
Seldom was by any chance,
The English tongue praised in France;
Let us give to each theis language,
I do not think we do them any outrage.
To the ignorant and English man I write
Who understands what I say.

(Prologue, II, ll. 232-250, qtd in
Baugh and Cable 2002: 138f)
Arthur and Merlin

A romance written in the beginning of the 14th century and not later than 1325.

Right is that English people understand the English language
that were born in England;

Gentlemen use French,
As everybody knows English.

Many nobles I have seen
That no French could speak.

Right is, þat Inglische Inglische vnderstond,
þat was born in Ingłond;
Freynsche vse þis gentilman,
Ac everich Inglische can.
Mani noble ich have yseiʒe
þat no Freynsche couþe seye.
This is a non-final version of the presentation. An up-date will be posted.