



Looking for Interpreter Zero: Wealhstodas, Interpreters or Latimers*

After the Norman Conquest of England in 1066, persons able to communicate across various languages were in demand.

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Published: February 28, 2018 Last updated: February 28, 2018

If any man had need of interpreters, William surely had. [1]

Ansgot the Interpreter holds COOMBE from the King. Cola held it before 1066. Then it answered for 3 hides, now for 1 ½ hides. Land for 3 ploughs. In lordship 1; 6 villagers and 1 smallholder with 1 plough. Meadow 4 acres; for grazing 4 pigs. Value 60 s. [2]

1066 is a key date in British history, marking the beginning of the Norman Conquest that led to years of upheaval as William the Conqueror consolidated his rule, repressed rebellions, redistributed estates and built castles. This is one of the most studied periods of British history; our interest is in some details in the landscape, namely languages, communication and intermediaries. It is difficult to get a clear picture: many scholars acknowledge the need for interpreters, but they do not appear often in the record, except for the privileged few – royal servants or baronial tenants - listed in the land-holding records compiled for William I towards the end of his reign. “This problem has been strangely neglected for a long time.”[3] Solving it involves a fair amount of conjecture and speculation as the archive is largely silent.

The Normans introduced French to a land with many active languages. Bede’s Eighth Century *Ecclesiastical History of the British People* lists the languages used: English, British, Scots, Pictish and Latin. The Danes landed in the Ninth Century. Given this multilingualism,

*It is little wonder that we find in Old English literature clear proofs of the existence of professional interpreters, men to whom a special name was given, because their work was exclusively concerned with acting as intermediaries and translators between one race and another. The name was **wealhstod**. [4]*

At the time of the Conquest, English, Welsh, Scandinavian, Scottish, Cornish and some Irish and French were spoken, with the clergy using vernacular and Latin. It is assumed that professional interpreters were already well established in Britain. William’s early rule seems informed by some awareness of the use of different languages. When he was crowned by Bishop Ealdred of York on Christmas Day, 1066, he swore the traditional oath and undertook to rule well, after which those attending were asked if they accepted that rule, “a question that had to be put twice, first in English by Ealdred, and again in French by the Norman Bishop of Coutances”.[5] William apparently hoped to learn English “so that he might ... understand complaints at law without the need of an

interpreter”[\[6\]](#), but there were too many other claims on his time and attention.

The question is, then, how a culture used to multilingualism and interpreters adjusted to a new ruling class and a shift in official languages. One interesting feature of this invasion is that the conquering and the conquered had much in common: both England and Normandy were part of the western Christian world under the papacy, their aristocracies shared a culture and

... on both sides of the Channel, for all that in England Anglo-Saxon [English] was used extensively as the language of government, Latin stood at the head of the hierarchy of languages. [\[7\]](#)

This may have influenced the nature of the Normans’ settlement once the conquerors had dealt with resistance to their rule - rebellions were harshly dealt with, especially in the north of England. By 1075 the opponents to the Normans had been largely repressed, and there was a new ruling class largely made up of the thousands who had followed William across the Channel. French and Latin became the official languages of his new kingdom, with French spoken at the royal court and on the battlefield, and Latin in church and in court (though French was probably used there too).

The sense is that French, Latin and English became the main vehicles of communication across social classes and peoples, though local communities retained their vehicular languages. The church and armies needed interpreters, who also enabled exchanges between lords and vassals, rulers and the ruled. Upper-class French speakers learned some English, and wealthy native English speakers picked up some French, but the same is not true of less privileged people, including minor members of the clergy, who were largely monoglot and aware of the prestige and social power of French. [\[8\]](#)

We have an unlikely indication of the high status attached to French in the life-story of the recluse Wulfric of Haselbury (c. 1090-1125). Brihtric, the parish priest and rector of Haselbury, was incensed when Wulfric cured a deaf-and-dumb youth, enabling him to speak not just English but French too.

To a stranger, whose tongue it would have been enough to open, you have kindly given the use of two languages, while to me, who am forced to remain dumb in the presence of the bishop and archdeacon, you have never imparted a word of French. [\[9\]](#)

Unlike Brihtric, Wulfric could speak French and was literate. Lower down the social scale, French, and the Norman ruling class, were alien and inaccessible. That is why members of the upper clergy needed interpreters to communicate with the likes of parish priests.

In July 1114, Roger, Bishop of Salisbury, made a grant of land to the priory in Dorset. His witnesses included one Richard Latemarus who reappears in a later charter which mentions land he had been given by William de Londres and his son, Maurice, “no doubt for his service as their latimer”. [\[10\]](#) (The term is a corruption of ‘Latiner’ which came to mean ‘interpreter’.) The de Londres would have needed him because they had responsibilities for guiding the royal army through South Wales and could not have managed without an interpreter with Welsh, French and English. There were broader communication problems in Wales, where the barons were outnumbered by “their native vassals, by their servants and the underlings, with whom they could not hold communication except through interpreters.” [\[11\]](#) Such intermediaries were required in Wales and along the Welsh border for some 200 years.

Constance Bullock-Davies, who unearthed evidence of interpreters in Wales, did so because she had a literary project: her interest was in finding linguists in Wales who were responsible for the transmission of Celtic material to the authors of French and Anglo-Norman romances. This interest explains her focus on royal or baronial interpreters who would have met with major poets. Hirokazu Tsushurima took a broader view of the profession in post-Conquest England. Both consulted the

Domesday Book, the ambitious record of land and livestock holdings and their values that was produced for William I after a 1085-6 survey of much of England and parts of Wales carried out by royal officers. The main purpose of this exercise was to establish the tax liabilities of property owners, but the written account holds a wealth of information, albeit in a form that is opaque to the uninitiated. Over 250 000 people are listed, and reference is made not only to the wealthy landed institutions and people, but to other occupations and offices, including twelve interpreters. Two Latin terms are used to describe them: *latinarius* or *interpres*, translated as “latimer” or “interpreter”.

These men may have served as intermediaries in a number of ways: as military guides, Latin translators, interpreters in court, or assisting in the oral transactions of royal or seigneurial business. The *Domesday Book* commissioners themselves probably needed interpreters: those responsible for gathering information for the Domesday Survey worked with juries made up of French– and English– speakers. Some *Domesday Book* entries provide clues as to the lives of these interpreters: David the Interpreter in Dorset leased his land from Hugh of Ivry and other Frenchmen; he was a minor tenant-in-chief and interpreted for the king. [12] Gilbert Latimer, a Frenchman, held land of the Abbot of Abingdon in Oxfordshire; he served his lord, the abbot, as knight and interpreter. [13] Robert Latimer, an Englishman, differs from his fellow interpreters who were small landholders. He had significant holdings in Kent and served as an intermediary between the lord of the manor and the village community. [14] Then there is the intriguing case of undeclared occupation of land in Farnham, Essex, where “a free man held 30 acres. Now Ralph Latimer holds (them), but he concealed the fact so he has given a pledge.” [15] (Presumably he had undertaken to be honest thenceforth.)

These men and the few others who appear in other contemporary documents stand for the countless interpreters who provided language services under the Normans, following on from, or working alongside, intermediaries between other languages. They provided a channel of communication between rulers and the ruled until time and assimilation meant that one official language prevailed. That was never going to be French: some twenty thousand Continental settlers were not in a position to impose their version of French on people who could adjust to multilingualism when necessary. What they did instead profoundly affects the English language as it was and is spoken, which is another indication of the abiding significance of the Norman Conquest.

* With thanks to Paul Russell, Professor of Celtic, Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic, English Faculty, University of Cambridge.

You can find all chapters of *Looking for Interpreter Zero* [here](#).

References

[1] Bullock-Davies, C. 1966. Professional Interpreters and the Matter of Britain. University of Wales Press, Cardiff. p 8

[2] Morris, J. General Ed. 1983 Surrey. Phillimore, Chichester. 36 (8) (1 hide = 120 acres)

[3] Tsurushima, H. 1996. Domesday Interpreters. Anglo-Norman Studies, Vol 18, pp 201-22.

[4] Bullock-Davies. pp 7-8

[5] Morris, M. 2013. The Norman Conquest. Windmill Books, London. p 199

[6] Bullock-Davies. p 9

[7] Golding, B. 1994. Conquest and Colonisation: the Normans in Britain, 1066-1100. St Martin's

Press, New York; The MacMillan Press, London. p179.

[8] Short, I. 1980. On Bilingualism in Anglo-Norman England. *Romance Philology*, Vol XXXIII, No 4, pp 467-479, p 478.

[9] Mayr-Harting, H. October 1975. Functions of a Twelfth-Century Recluse. *History* 60, Number 200, pp 337-352, p 344.

[10] Bullock-Davies. p 13

[11] *ibid.* pp 12-13.

[12] Tsurushima. pp 204-205

[13] *ibid* p 212

[14] *ibid* p cit, p 204

[15] Morris. *Essex* 90 (42)

Recommended citation format:

Christine ADAMS. "Looking for Interpreter Zero: Wealhstodas, Interpreters or Latimers*". *aiic.net*. February 28, 2018. Accessed March 3, 2020. <<https://aiic.net/p/8523>>.