Beginning Old English

Carole Hough and John Corbett

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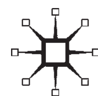

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1 Origins

The Anglo-Saxon invasion

Early in the fifth century AD, the Roman Empire in northern Europe was in terminal decline. Gaul, now France, was conquered by tribes whose barbarian languages were Germanic in origin. As a result, Rome stopped sending its governors and administrators to its northernmost outposts in the British Isles. The Britons, who over almost 500 years had become Romanised in behaviour and attitude, but were still Celtic-speaking, now had to look after themselves.

The Britons were in a weak position. Germanic tribes had also started attacking the south-east coast of the British Isles even before Roman rule came to an end. They seem to have come mainly from what is now Denmark and the north-east of Germany. In the 50 years after Roman administration ceased, three groups of these Germanic-speaking tribes – Jutes, Angles and Saxons – invaded and settled the eastern lowlands of what is now England. According to the account given by the Anglo-Saxon monk and historian Bede (*c.*673–735), the Jutes settled in the area around present-day Kent, the Saxons occupied and gave their name to Essex, Sussex and the ancient kingdom of Wessex, and the Angles took land principally in Suffolk and Norfolk. In the settled territories, different kingdoms gradually emerged – what was later described as the Anglo-Saxon 'heptarchy' of Northumbria, Mercia, East Anglia, Essex, Sussex, Wessex and Kent (see Illustration 1).

The nature of these 'seven kingdoms' and the relationship between them are now debated amongst scholars. What is beyond dispute is that the dominant language spoken in these territories shifted from Celtic varieties to the Germanic dialects spoken by the invaders and settlers. Celtic-speaking tribes remained in control of the mountainous country to the west – now Wales – and the lands north of the abandoned Hadrian's Wall. In both areas, the Celtic-speaking natives

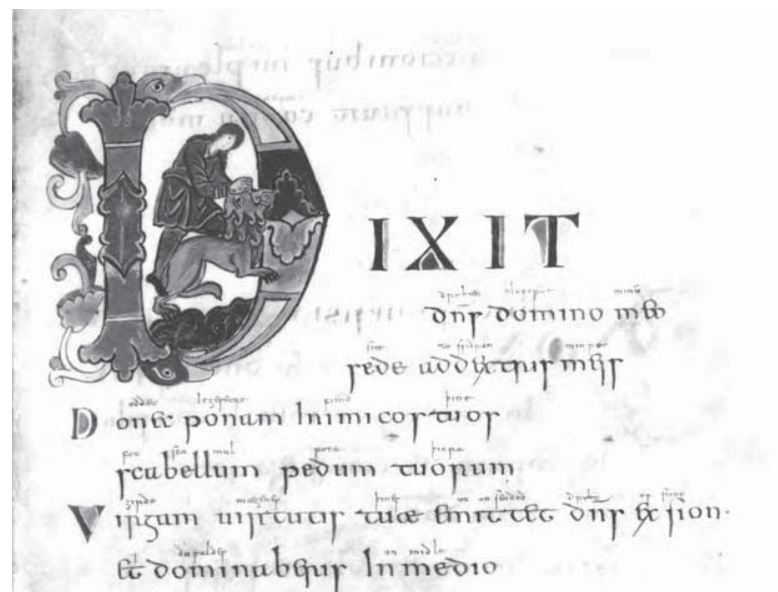
1 The Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy, *c.* 700

referred to the settlers indiscriminately as 'Saxons', or, in their own language, *sassenachs.* They still do.

The Germanic dialects spoken in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were distinct but mutually intelligible varieties that began to evolve from the tribal tongues spoken by the settlers' continental ancestors. The varieties can be grouped into four main types – Northumbrian, Kentish, Mercian and West Saxon. We refer to these dialects together as Old English. No-one, 1500 years ago, could have imagined that in these obscure Germanic dialects, spoken by warring tribes in the southern lowlands of an abandoned Roman colony on the very periphery of Europe, would lie the origins of today's global language.

From speech to writing

For several hundred years, little was written in any of the dialects of Old English. Although the Roman Empire had receded, the language of the Romans, Latin, remained the medium of scholarship and the Catholic Church throughout Europe. The Anglo-Saxon settlers in Britain were pagans, but were converted to Christianity by missionaries from Rome and Ireland. The process started in Kent, with the arrival in 597 of a group of monks sent by Pope Gregory the Great under the leadership of St Augustine. Missionaries and monks constituted a literate order in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, and they were primarily responsible for those valuable records of written Old English that survive in manuscript. Sometimes the monks interlaced their Latin texts with Old English, 'glossing' the Latin terms by giving their Old English equivalents, as in the tenth-century copy of the Psalms known as the 'Junius Psalter' (Illustration 2). In the first line, the Latin words for God are glossed by Old English *dryhten* and *hlaford*, both meaning 'lord'.



2 Oxford Bodleian MS, Junius 27, fol. 118r (*detail*)

Most of the Old English texts that are known to us today date from or after the reign of Alfred the Great, who ruled Wessex from 871 to 899. Indeed, it is because of Alfred that most surviving Old English texts are in West Saxon, the variety that we shall be studying in this book.

Alfred's adoption of Old English as a written language was the result of a crisis. In the century before his reign, a series of events occurred that was to shape the future of the English language. The northern and eastern Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were threatened by a new wave of pirates, invaders and settlers – Vikings from what is now Denmark and Norway. The language of the Vikings was Old Norse, a close cousin of Old English and in many ways similar.

The Viking invasion

The Viking raids began in the late eighth century: the Norsemen attacked Ireland, around what is now Dublin, sacked the holy island of Iona in western Scotland, and raided the English east coast. Then they began to stay longer. In 851 they wintered on the island of Thanet, and in 865–9 they conquered the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms of East Anglia, Northumbria, and Mercia. However, Alfred led the men of Wessex to a famous victory in battle, and the Vikings retreated, settling mainly in Northumbria and East Anglia, in a territory called the Danelaw (see Illustration 3). In this area, the merging of Old English and Old Norse would eventually shape the essential character of later English.

Meanwhile, the Anglo-Saxon territories now centred on Wessex, where Alfred began a literary project that shifted the focus of activity from Latin towards English. The centres of learning in the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been the monasteries, where Latin still reigned supreme, but the raids of the heathen Vikings had disrupted their activities. By Alfred's time, even the monks' knowledge of Latin had declined. Alfred established a court school, imported scholars, and began a translation project to which he himself significantly contributed. Anglo-Saxon literature had truly begun. Alfred's project ensured that, today, we know what Old English looked like, and we can even work out what it must have sounded like.

3 Britain and the Danelaw

Old English literature

It is a considerable task to create a written form of a language that for 400 years had mainly been spoken. The scribes who occasionally glossed difficult Latin words in Old English had used a mixture of the roman alphabet used for Latin, and the ancient runic alphabet used by Germanic tribes on the continent. Runes were straight-sided characters, suitable for carving on hard surfaces such as wood, bone or stone. If you visit the small church at Ruthwell in Dumfriesshire, you will see a sandstone monument, some six metres high – the Ruthwell Cross (Illustration 4). On the Cross, in runes, are inscribed some lines from, or related to, the Old English religious poem *The Dream of the Rood*. The Ruthwell Cross dates from the late seventh or eighth century; originally it would have stood in the open air and would have been used as the focus for worship.

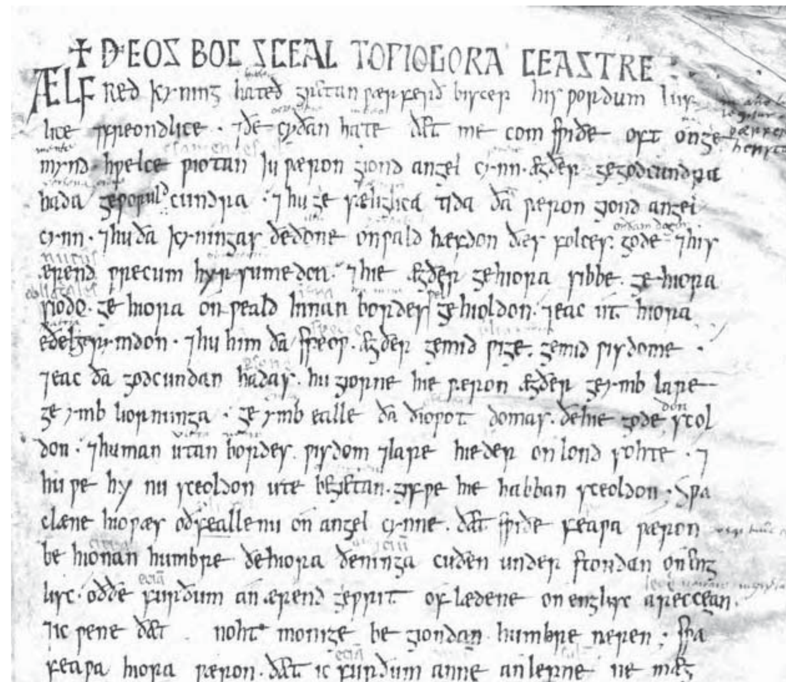
There are no surviving Old English manuscripts written entirely in runes, although occasionally Anglo-Saxon scribes made use of them for special purposes, for instance within riddles. By Alfred's time the Roman alphabet, with a few runic additions, had become adopted by most writers. Illustration 5, for instance, shows the opening lines of a letter sent by Alfred to each of his bishops in or soon after 890, announcing his educational project.

The heading reads ĐEOS BOC SCEAL TO WIGORA CEASTRE, 'This book shall (i.e. must go) to Worcester'. The runic letter 'wynn', shaped like an angular letter 'p', is used at the beginning of the place-name for the sound later represented by 'w'.

Using their extended alphabet and a spelling system that seems to have closely reflected pronunciation (unlike present-day English!), Alfred, his scholars and their successors began to produce both translations from Latin and original work in English. Due in large part to their efforts, we now have access to a rich variety of Old English literature, including religious prose (e.g. parts of the Bible, sermons, and saints' lives), histories (e.g. Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, and the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*), philosophical works, medical writings, religious and secular poetry (see Chapter 6), and laws. This book introduces you to some of the most important of these works.

The authorship of many Anglo-Saxon texts is a mystery. Some, like *Beowulf*, clearly draw on earlier oral tradition, captured by scribes whose own contribution to the works is unclear. Other early authors are known to us – Alfred himself, Caedmon (see Chapter 6), Cynewulf

4 The Ruthwell Cross


+ ÐEOS BOC SCEAL TO WIOGORA CEASTRE

5 Oxford Bodleian MS, Hatton 20, fol. 1^{r} (*detail*)

and Ælfric 'the Grammarian' (*c*.950–1010). Ælfric, typically for an Anglo-Saxon author, was educated in a monastery, the Benedictine monastery in Winchester, before becoming an abbot near Oxford. He wrote various religious works including sermons and saints' lives, and devised his *Colloquium* to teach his novice monks conversational Latin. We shall be looking at an adapted version of this in later chapters.

The Norman invasion

The literary activity sparked by Alfred the Great lasted for more than 200 years, until it was rudely curtailed and then entirely halted by the Norman Conquest of 1066 and its aftermath. The Norman French, themselves descendants of Vikings, led by William the Conqueror, over-ran the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and extended their territory

throughout the Danelaw as far as the northern kingdom of Scotland. In their vicious land-grab the Normans depopulated whole areas of Northumbria, carrying out an ethnic displacement later called 'the harrying of the north'. Refugees from the defeated Anglo-Saxon dynasty fled with their retainers and servants to the court of the Celtic-speaking Scots in Edinburgh. There the Anglo-Saxon Princess Margaret married the widower King Malcolm. The speech of Queen Margaret and the Northumbrian refugees would eventually spread out over the Scottish lowlands, and become the basis of the lowland Scots tongue. But south of the border, the language of the governing classes of England was now Norman French. English became the speech of peasants.

Even before the arrival of the Normans, Old English was changing. In the Danelaw, the Old Norse of the Viking settlers was combining with the Old English of the Anglo-Saxons in new and interesting ways. In the poem *The Battle of Maldon*, as we shall later see, grammatical confusion in the speech of one of the Viking characters has been interpreted by some commentators as an attempt to represent an Old Norse speaker struggling with Old English. The languages were closely related, and both relied very much on the endings of words – what we call 'inflexions' – to signal grammatical information. Often these grammatical inflexions were the main thing that distinguished otherwise similar words in Old English and Old Norse.[1] For example, the word 'worm' or 'serpent' used as the object of a sentence would have been *orm**inn*** in Old Norse, and simply *wyrm* in Old English. The result was that as the two communities strove to communicate with each other, the inflexions became blurred and eventually disappeared. The grammatical information that they signalled had to be expressed using different resources, and so the nature of the English language began to change. New reliance was put on the order of words, and on the meanings of little grammatical words, such as prepositions like *to*, *with*, *in*, *over* and *around*. Without the restraining influence of a written standard, based in Wessex, the pace of linguistic change began to accelerate.

The transformation of Old English

For around two centuries after the establishment of Norman rule in England, English was spoken but relatively seldom written. Even so,

the influence of English continued to spread. Although Scotland was a separate kingdom, King David, the heir of Malcolm and Margaret, established peaceful relations with many powerful Norman barons, granting them land in the Scottish lowlands. These barons brought with them many English-speaking retainers, mainly from northern England, where there was a strong Norse influence. A distinct variety of the language, first known as 'Inglis' and much later as 'Scottis', evolved. Today, the pronunciation and vocabulary of the lowland Scots language is often very close to its Old English (OE) origins, as in 'hoose', 'moose' and 'coo' (OE *hūs*, *mūs*, *cū*). Sometimes the sounds of Scots and English developed in different directions, as in 'hame/home', and 'stane/stone' (OE *hām*, *stān*). At other times, the Scots term derives from Old Norse (ON), where the Old English form derives from the dialects of the Anglo-Saxons, as in Scots 'kirk' (ON *kirkja*) and English 'church' (OE *cirice*).

In the south, though, England and France embarked on a war that would last, on and off, for over a hundred years (1337–1453). By the time it concluded, the political and personal links between the Norman aristocracy and France had been eroded. It was considered unpatriotic for an Englishman to speak or write French, and slowly there was a re-emergence of English as a written language. The character of the 'Middle English' dialects was considerably different from their Old English predecessors, however. The complex nature of contact and interaction between Norman French, Old Norse and the dialects of Old English resulted in new varieties whose pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary and grammar were greatly changed. These varieties would continue to change – and a form that was especially designed for writing began to be developed. This written form, originally intended for use by clerks in the Treasury (and known, consequently, as Chancery English), was finally fixed by dictionary-makers and popular grammarians in the eighteenth century. Today we call it 'standard English'.

Sister languages

English continues to evolve, still incorporating new words from different languages around the world, still changing its pronunciation and grammar from region to region. At first sight, Old English may look different from today's English, but there is a continuous line that links

the different varieties. For this reason, if no other, it is wrong to consider Old English a 'dead language', just as it is wrong to consider a butterfly a dead caterpillar. It has simply transformed. The echoes of Old English can still be heard in the speech and writing of millions of people around the globe. These echoes are also evident in other related modern languages – in German, Norwegian, Danish, and Frisian, a Germanic variety still spoken in the coastal areas of north-east Germany, where some of the original Anglo-Saxon invaders embarked.

One related, or 'cognate', modern language that still has some of the appearance of Old English is Icelandic, another Viking tongue, which, because of Iceland's geographical isolation, has changed little over the centuries. Like Old English, modern Icelandic employs an extended roman alphabet that includes symbols like <ð> and the runic symbol <þ>, both for 'th'. If the Norman Conquest had not occurred, tourist phrases in present-day English might have looked something like the following phrases in modern Icelandic!

I need to send a fax.	Ég þarf að senda fax.
I need to buy a map.	Ég þarf að kaupa kort.
Can you take us to the airport?	Geturðu farið með okkur á flugvöllinn?
Can you take us to our hotel?	Geturðu keyrt okkur á hótelið okkar?

The Icelandic phrases might seem incomprehensible at first glance. But a second look shows that English and Icelandic are indeed related. For example, *senda* is almost identical to 'send', and the two words translated here as 'take' – *farið* and *keyrt* – are not unlike 'ferry' and 'cart', which also have the sense of transporting something. Even the end of the expression *geturðu* ('can you'), when pronounced, is similar to the older English form for 'you', *thou*. A study of the oldest form of our language reveals the similarities between English and its closest relatives all the more clearly.

Old English scholarship

Old English studies were effectively begun during the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries by Protestant reformers aiming to demonstrate the historical independence from Rome of the Anglo-

Saxon church. Leading churchmen and scholars such as Archbishop Matthew Parker (1504–75), Sir Robert Cotton (1571–1631), and Francis Junius (1591–1677) compiled important collections of early manuscripts now held respectively at Corpus Christi College, Cambridge (the 'Parker Library'), the British Library in London (the 'Cotton Collection'), and the Bodleian Library in Oxford (including the 'Junius Psalter' – see illustration 2). Interest in the origins of English grew with the rise of 'philology', or the evolutionary study of languages, in the nineteenth century. One of the most influential Victorian scholars of English was Henry Sweet (1845–1912), an Oxford academic whose name became synonymous with Old English studies for generations of learners. Sweet became an expert in the history of English and was particularly interested in its pronunciation. He shared with the playwright George Bernard Shaw an interest in spelling reform, and Shaw claimed to have used Sweet as his model for Professor Henry Higgins in his play *Pygmalion*, which was subsequently turned into a musical and film, *My Fair Lady*. Sweet wrote a number of books designed to teach Old English to undergraduates, principally *An Anglo-Saxon Primer* (1882) and *An Anglo-Saxon Reader* (1876). These have been frequently revised, and are still in print. A relatively neglected work, however, was his *First Steps in Anglo-Saxon* (1897), which included a number of simplified texts such as a prose version of the famous Old English poem *Beowulf*. We have borrowed from several of Henry Sweet's simplified texts in the early chapters of this book.

Much recent popular interest in Old English has been stimulated by the success of J. R. R. Tolkien's novels, and their film adaptations. As an undergraduate, Tolkien (1892–1973) studied Old English at Exeter College, Oxford. There, he was particularly struck by two lines from the poem *Christ A*:

Ēalā Ēarendel engla beorhtast	*Hail, Earendel, brightest of angels,*
Ofer middangeard monnum sended	*On Middle Earth sent to men*

'Middle Earth' – *middangeard* – in Old English poetry refers to the human world between Heaven above and Hell below. In Tolkien's own novels, most famously *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Middle Earth became the site of struggles and quests involving creatures of his own imagination, inspired by the literature and languages of the Anglo-Saxons and Vikings.

Perhaps seeking to emulate the success of the screen versions of Tolkien's novels, producers and directors have returned to the most famous Old English poem, *Beowulf*, which has been adapted many times in many media (see Chapter 7). Recent film versions are *Beowulf and Grendel* (2005), which was shot in Iceland, and *Beowulf* (2007). Anglo-Saxon culture echoes down the centuries, in one form or another.

The study of Old English also remains strong today. It is sustained in part by the desire to engage directly with the oldest literary texts in English, partly by a desire to know how and why language changes, and partly by curiosity about the historical development of different aspects of the cultures of the people of Britain. Old English studies embrace topics such as the history of names and the development of English law. Above all, Old English invites us on a journey into a world that is both our own and unfamiliar. Like Henry Sweet's *First Steps in Anglo-Saxon*, this book is designed to start you off on your own quest.

We aim this book to appeal to those with an interest in Anglo-Saxon literature and culture, but with little background in language study. Chapter 2 focuses on the main initial obstacle to understanding – Old English spelling and vocabulary – and familiarises the reader with the look of Old English, giving guidance on how to learn sufficient words to become a reasonably fluent reader. Chapters 3–5 then explain how Old English grammar works, paying particular attention to how the grammatical resources of Old English communicate meanings. Throughout Chapters 2–5, we begin to look at simple and then gradually more sophisticated texts.

Chapters 6 and 7 turn from a language focus, to consider first the way our Anglo-Saxon ancestors composed poetry, and then how later writers have translated and adapted one of the greatest Old English poems, *Beowulf*, for page and screen. Chapter 7 also reflects on the role of translation in the teaching and learning of Old English. The book concludes with Part II, a selection of four key texts presented in unsimplified Old English, but with sufficient 'scaffolding' to allow the inexperienced reader to navigate his or her way through the texts. We believe that the richest experience of Old English literature is a direct and unmediated one. We hope that this book will help you on your way.