Beginning Old English

Carole Hough and John Corbett

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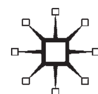

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1 Origins

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

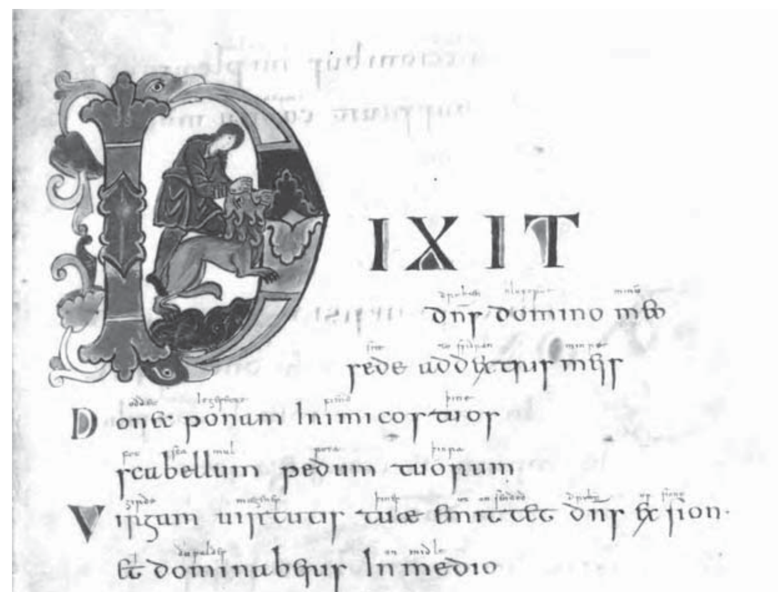
1 The Anglo-Saxon Heptarchy, *c.* 700

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.

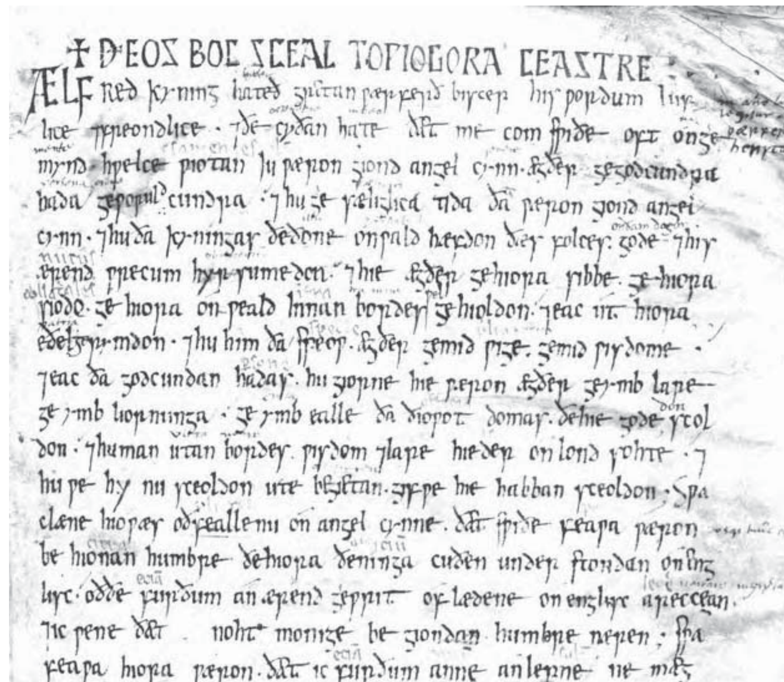
There are no surviving Old English manuscripts written entirely in runes, although occasionally Anglo-Saxon scribes made use of them for special purposes, for instance within riddles. By Alfred's time the Roman alphabet, with a few runic additions, had become adopted by most writers. Illustration 5, 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
ÆLFRED kyning hateð gretan wærferð biscep his wordum luf-
lice ond freondlice ond ðe cyðan hate ðæt me com swiðe oft on ge-
mynd hwelce wiotan iu wæron giond angel cynn ægðer ge godcundra
hada ge woruldcundra ond hu gesæliglica tida ða wæron giond angel-
cynn ond hu ða kyningas ðe ðone onwald hæfdon ðæs folces gode ond his
ærendwrecum hyrsumedon ond hie ægðer ge hiora sibbe ge hiora
siodo ge hiora onweald innan bordes gehioldon ond eac ut hiora
eðel rymdon ond hu him ða speow ægðer ge mid wige ge mid wisdome
ond eac ða godcundan hadas hu giorne hie wæron ægðer ge ymb lare
ge ymb liornunga ge ymb ealle ða ðiowotdomas ðe hie gode scoldon
ond hu man utanbordes wisdom ond lare hieder on lond sohte ond
hu we hy nu sceoldon ute begietan gif we hie habban sceoldon. Swa
clæne hio wæs oðfeallenu on angelcynne ðæt swiðe feawa wæron
be hionan humbre ðe hiora ðeninga cuðen understondan on englisc
oððe furðum an ærendgewrit of lædene on englisc areccean
ic wene ðæt noht monige begiondan humbre næren. Swa
feawa hiora wæron ðæt ic furðum anne anlepne ne mæg

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.

Note

1. A course on Old Norse for beginners is available at http://www.hi.is/~haukurth/norse.

2 Recognising Old English Words

It is likely that one of the biggest obstacles readers encounter when tackling Old English texts is the apparent unfamiliarity of the vocabulary. First of all, the spellings of many words have changed – so even if a word has survived from Old English into today's English, it might not be immediately recognisable. An example is *cwēn* 'queen'. A further issue to do with spelling is that some of the letters that are used in the Old English alphabet are no longer used in today's English, so 'forth', for example, is spelled *forþ* or *forð*, and 'was' is spelled *wæs*. A greater hindrance is that many Old English words have disappeared entirely from our active vocabulary, and simply have to be learnt as you would learn a word in a foreign language. Three words for 'spear', for instance, were *gār*, *ord* and *spere*. The third has survived, but the others have not. Finally, even if you do recognise a word and think you understand it, you might find that over the centuries the meaning of the word has shifted. An example of this is *dēor*, which in Old English means any wild animal, but in today's English means only one kind, a 'deer'.

This chapter aims to help you over the first hurdles by introducing you to some useful and quickly identifiable Old English words, and suggesting some strategies with which you can begin to build up your own 'word hoard' (Old English *wordhord*) of ancient expressions. With the minimum of effort, many Old English words are easy to recognise. They have not changed very much for over a thousand years. For instance, most if not all of the following words should be recognisable (their present-day equivalences are given at the end of this chapter). It often helps to say the words aloud.

and	*ēast*	*gold*	*help*	*blis*
god	*west*	*understandan*	*word*	*wundor*[1]

As you read through many of the texts given later in this book, therefore, some phrases here and there will be relatively easy to understand. Here are some examples, adapted from texts we shall encounter:

Cyneheard wæs Sigebryhtes brōþor.	Cyneheard was Sigebryht's brother.
Crist wæs on rōde.	Christ was on the cross ('rood').
Þæt wæs God æl-mihtig.	That was God almighty.
Hē fēoll on eorþan.	He fell to the ground ('earth').
Hit wæs ne riht.	It was not right.
Ic hæfde twā honda and twēgen fēt.	I had two hands and two feet.
Mīn tunge is heard.	My tongue is harsh ('hard').

It is not surprising that words for such basic concepts as relationships and parts of the body remain fairly stable in the language. Our task as language learners is to build on this shared vocabulary and to try to internalise the vocabulary that has been lost.

The Old English alphabet

One of the most noticeable characteristics of the Old English alphabet is that not all of its letters have survived into today's English. There are two extra consonants, *þ* and ð, which both represent the sounds now shown as *th*, whether voiced as in '*th*is' or unvoiced as in '*th*ing'. Occasionally, voiced *th* becomes pronounced as *d*. Knowing this, then, can you recognise the following words?

dēað   *þing*   *þis*   *norþ*

morþor   *ōðer*   *brōðor*   *eorðe*[2]

In later chapters of this book, you will find some words spelled with both *þ* and ð in different texts, and even within a single text. This reflects the variation in spellings in manuscripts of Old English. In Chapters 2–5, we have standardised the spellings somewhat in order to ease the initial encounter with the language, so here occurrences of ð have been regularised to *þ*.

There is one extra vowel character in the Old English alphabet: *æ* was pronounced *a* as in *cat*. It can be found in the following words:

æfter   *æt*   *wæter* (compare today's broad Scots pronunciation, 'watter')

Missing letters

Although the Old English alphabet contains a few extra letters, it does not use all the letters we are familiar with in today's English. There are some modern letters that are rarely if ever used in Old English:

Present-day English	Old English
k	c
v	f
z	s

Knowing this, the following Old English words should be a little more recognisable:

dēofol   *drinc*   *dysig*   *folc*   *ofer*   *weorc*[3]

Switched sounds

A common change in English over a thousand years is caused by people's habit of changing sounds around, for example saying *modren* rather than *modern*. This switching of sounds, technically known as 'metathesis', often happens with *r* but occurs with other sounds too. This is why modern English has *third* and *thirty* alongside *three*: all originally began with *thr-*. Can you recognise the following words?

beorht   *gærs*   *þrēo*   *þridda*   *þrītig*   *þurh*[4]

Changes in spelling and pronunciation

Over time, many Old English words changed their pronunciation (and spelling) in a regular way – so regular, in fact, that once you can identify the change, you can often identify the word.

Combinations of consonants are often easy to recognise:

Old English	*OE Example*	*Present-day English*	*PDE Example*
cw	*cwic*	qu	quick (i.e. 'alive')
sc	*biscop*	sh	bishop
hl and hr	*hlaford, hrōf*	l and r	lord, roof
hw	*hwǣr*	wh	where
ht	*niht*	ght	night

There are no 'silent' letters in Old English: all vowels and consonants are pronounced. Silent letters in today's English, such as 'gh' in 'night' and 'k' in 'knee', often represent sounds that were pronounced in Old English and have now become fossilised in the spelling system. Can you guess what these words might mean?

cwæð *scip* *æsc* *hlēapan* *hring*

hrefn *hwæt* *riht* *miht*[5]

It is also useful to learn some of the common changes that occur to 'long vowels', those vowels that are usually marked with a ¯ over the letter (as in ī, ū and so on):

wīf (pronounced something like 'weef') becomes 'wife'.
hūs (pronounced something like Scots 'hoose') becomes 'house'.
bāt (pronounced something like 'baht') becomes 'boat'.
tōþ (pronounced something like 'toth') becomes 'tooth'.
fēt (pronounced something like 'fate') becomes 'feet'.
brȳd (pronounced something like 'brüd', with the same vowel as in German *Füße*) becomes 'bride'; however, sometimes the vowel is shortened, so that *lȳtel* becomes 'little'.

Bearing these changes in mind, what do you think the following words mean?

wīf	*līf*	*mīl*	*hwīt*	*wīs*
hūs	*mūs*	*hlūd*	*sūþ*	*mūþ*
bāt	*hām*	*stān*	*bān*	*hlāf*
tōþ	*hrōf*	*stōd*	*blōd*	*bōc*
fēt	*hēr*	*hē*	*swēte*	*gēs*[6]

And how do you think the following words would look in Old English?

mine wine why good foot out town rope teeth[7]

Two tricky consonants

Some sounds are a little more complicated. The consonants *c* and *g* are pronounced differently in different positions and in different combinations of letters:

Old English *c* was usually pronounced *k* as in 'king'. However, before *e* and *i*, and at the end of a word, it can be pronounced *ch* as in 'chill'.

Old English *g* was usually pronounced as in 'girl'. However, before *e* and *i*, and at the end of a word, it can be pronounced like the *y* in 'yet'.

The combination *cg* was pronounced *j* as in 'judge'.

Knowing this, can you recognise the following expressions?

æl-mihtig	*benc*	*bysig*	*cræftig*	*dæg*
candel	*cirice*	*fæger*	*geong*	*manig*
ecg	*hālig*	*wērig*	*gēar*	*weg*[8]

Spelling variations

Some Old English words have a range of spellings, only one of which survives into today's English. For instance, some varieties of Old English have *a* where others have *o*, particularly before *m* or *n*, so that some texts have *ond* and *hond* rather than the more familiar *and* and *hand*. There is also variation between *a* and *ea*, particularly before *l*: for instance, the word for 'old' may be spelled *ald* or *eald*, and *fela* 'many' can also be spelled *feala*. Can you recognise the following words?

eall *fram* *mon* *strang* *lond* *lang* *weall*[9]

Changes in meaning

Sometimes, unfortunately, it is not enough simply to recognise a word. Sometimes its meaning has changed over the centuries. For example, two Old English words that could simply mean 'woman' were *cwēn* and *wīf*. Only their narrower meanings 'queen' and 'wife' (= 'married woman') survive in current standard English, although in some varieties, such as that of north-eastern Scotland, 'quine' still means a young woman more generally. Can you figure out the present-day meanings of the following Old English words? The first one is done for you.

Old English form	*Present-day English form*	*Old English meaning*
ǣrænde	errand	any kind of message
cræftig		skilful
dōm		judgement
gāst		spirit
sōna		immediately
winter		year[10]

100 Old English words you already know

One message of this chapter is that there are many Old English words that quickly become recognisable, especially once you take into consideration the changes in spelling and pronunciation explained above. See how many of the following words you recognise. Some have already been given in the examples above. Verbs end in *-an*, for example *lufian* 'to love'.

People (*cynn*)

bearn, brōþor, brȳd, cild, dohtor, fæder, frēond, mōdor, sunu, sweoster, widewe, wīf, wīfmann[11]

Professions (*cræft*)

scēap-hierde, fiscere, bæcere, cōc, smiþ, gold-smiþ, þēof, wrītere[12]

Animals and birds (*dēor and fugol*)

fisc, gōs, hors, mūs, oxa, scēap, wulf, wyrm[13]

6 Eighth-century helmet ('helm'), found at Coppergate, York

Food and drink (*mete and drinc*)

bēor, ealu, etan, hlāf, hungrig, hunig, medu, þurst, wæter[14]

Religion (*ǣ-fæst-nes*)

abbod, æl-mihtig, ærce-biscop, āþ, cirice, dēofol, engel, hālga, god, hǣþen, heofon, munuc, mynster, prēost, sāwol, scrīn[15]

War (*beadu*, *gūþ* or *hild*)

helm, sceaft, scyld, spere, swurd, wǣpen[16]

Time (*tīma*)

ǣfen-tīd, æfter, dæg, gēar, hwīl, mōnaþ, morgen, niht, nū, winter[17]

Numbers (*getæl*)

ān, twā, þrēo, fēower, fīf, siex, seofon, eahta, nigon, tīen, endleofan, twelf, twentig, þrītig, fēowertig, hund, þūsend[18]

To move (*āstyrian*)

ārisan, cuman, feallan, flēogan, gangan, hlēapan, rīdan, swimman[19]

To say and to write (*secgan and āwritan*)

andswarian, āscian, bōc, spell, word[20]

Compounds

Like present-day English, Old English tended to use compounds as a way of forming new words from existing ones. For instance, three words for 'hall' were *heall*, *reced* and *sele*. In the heroic society portrayed in much Old English poetry, the hall was the focal point for eating, drinking, and the distribution of wealth by the lord to his retainers. Hence we find compounds such as *dryht-sele* 'lord-hall', *gold-sele* 'gold-hall', *heall-þegn* 'hall-retainer', *wīn-reced* and *wīn-sele* 'wine-hall'. Similarly, words for 'battle', such as *beadu*, *gūþ*, *hild* and *wīg*, can combine with words for 'man' or 'warrior', such as *rinc*, to give compounds such as *gūþ-rinc* and *hilde-rinc* – both meaning 'man of battle; warrior' – and with *plega* 'play' or *rǣs* 'rush' to give compounds such as *beadu-rǣs* 'rush of battle', *gūþ-plega* and *wīg-plega* 'play of battle; conflict'. The following compounds all use vocabulary that we have already encountered. Can you work out what they mean?

dōm-dæg *medu-benc* *niht-weorc* *sǣ-man* *sǣ-rinc*[21]

Some useful words you should quickly learn

A small number of words occur many times in texts, and it is useful to learn and remember them, so that you do not have to look them up every time you come to read a new text. They are mainly grammatical words.

Questions		**Pronouns**	
hū	how	*ic*	I
hwā	who	*þū*	you (singular)
hwǣr	where	*hē*	he
hwæt	what	*hēo*	she
hwelc	which	*hit*	it
hwȳ	why	*wē*	we
		gē	you (plural)
		hīe	they, them

Question words and pronouns can be combined in a number of basic sentences, such as:

Hwā eart þū? *Hwæt dēst þū?* *Hwæt segst þū?*
Hwæt drincst þū? *Ne drincst þū wīn?* *Hwǣr slǣpst þū?*[22]

Two further small groups of grammatical words that occur frequently and are worth trying to memorise are conjunctions and common adverbs. Conjunctions link other words together, while adverbs often give information about time, frequency or manner (see further, Chapter 4). Some words, such as *þā* and *þonne*, can function as either conjunctions or adverbs, with slightly different meanings.

Conjunctions		**Adverbs**			
ac	but	*ǣr*	before	*oft*	often
for	before, because of	*ǣfre*	ever, always	*þā*	then
oþ-þæt	until	*ēac*	also	*þonne*	then
þā	when	*nū*	now		
þonne	when				

Learning unfamiliar vocabulary

The most effective way to learn vocabulary is to encounter it frequently, in different meaningful contexts. When learning a spoken language, like Arabic, Portuguese or Russian, there are opportunities to speak and hear the language in everyday conversations as well as to see it on the page. When learning languages that are no longer spoken, like Latin or Old English, we are normally restricted to reading texts, and so we meet particular words infrequently and in restricted contexts. If reading Old English is to become a pleasurable activity – which it should – then we have to make an effort to improve our reading fluency by enhancing our word-recognition skills. We have to make Old English vocabulary come alive.

The traditional way of engaging with an Old English text is to have a glossary (and perhaps an earlier translation) beside the original language, and to plough through each passage slowly, perhaps looking up most words in the glossary and comparing difficult passages with the translation. Generations of Old English scholars have been shaped by this process, and enthusiasts no doubt gain pleasure from the mental discipline required and the real sense of achievement when a particular work has been understood and appreciated. Readers with little earlier experience of learning another language perhaps need more support when approaching Old English for the first time, and the following advice is directed primarily at them.

Using dictionaries and glossaries

Dictionaries and glossaries are essential tools (and there is a good online dictionary of Old English at http://home.comcast.net/~modean52/oeme_dictionaries.htm). Many people plunder glossaries and dictionaries and make up their own list of useful vocabulary items, in a notebook or a computer file, and revise it periodically. This kind of activity is useful but it is best done systematically with frequent revision of the vocabulary, particularly in the early days. If you decide to make a vocabulary list, group the words according to their meanings, for example:

Parts of the body

bæc back
bān bone
blōd blood
cinn-bān chin bone
ēage eye
ēare ear

earm arm
eaxl shoulder
folme, hand, hond hand
fōt foot
hēafod head
heorte heart

līc body
mūþ mouth
nos-þȳrel nostril
tōþ tooth
tunge tongue

As you build up your word-list, try to put aside a little time each day to review it. We can only internalise new words when we see them frequently, in different contexts and when they mean something to us. So use your imagination when you are memorising the words – visualise a huge, sharp *tōþ* in the *mūþ* of a creature whose *līc* is also large and misshapen. The more you make the words meaningful, the easier it should be to recall them when required.

The process of really getting to *know* what a word means is a slow one, and it cannot depend simply on looking the word up in a glossary or dictionary. To comprehend a word fully, we need to know various things, for example:

- What the word looks like; how it changes its form in different contexts, e.g. *þū* 'you' is sometimes found in the form *þē*. Why? (The answer will be revealed in Chapter 3.)
- What the word means – which involves not just knowing the dictionary sense of the word, but also knowing which words it is normally found alongside, what associations it might have (with family, or war), how it fits into a pattern of words with similar or opposite meaning, and so on.
- How the word behaves in combination with other words; that is, how it behaves grammatically.

We suggested above that the best way to learn individual items is to arrange them in meaningful groups (like 'parts of the body'), and to revise them frequently. When noting a word, it is useful to give more than just the bare dictionary meaning: give some useful grammatical information, and, ideally, show how it works in the text you have

been reading. In this way you will build up a fuller knowledge of the word, how it behaves in sentences, and what other words it is associated with. For example, there are various words in Old English to express the concept of 'battle', including *hild* and *gūþ*. In your notebook, under a section such as 'War' you might note the words as follows:

hild, f. war, battle   Hē tō þǣre **hilde** stōp.
gūþ, f. war   Hē ongan þā forþ beran gār to **gūþe.**

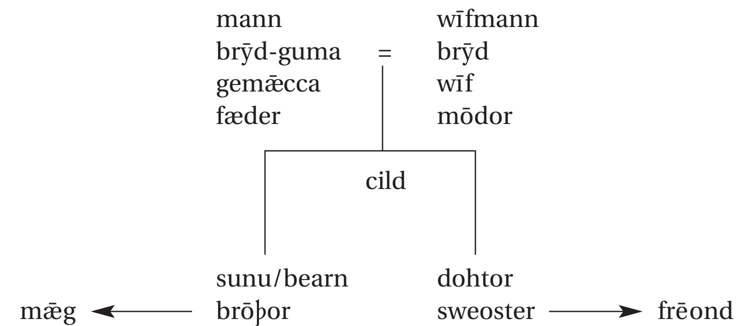
The example sentences used here are adapted very slightly from the opening lines of *The Battle of Maldon* (Text C), a poem which naturally uses a lot of words to do with war. The first example means 'He advanced to the battle', and the second means 'He began then to bear forth his spear to battle'.

Both *hild* and *gūþ* are nouns, and the *f.* shows that they are feminine. This affects the words around the noun; for example, *hilde* is preceded by the feminine form *þǣre* 'the', rather than the equivalent form *þǣm* 'the', which would be used if the noun were masculine (see Chapter 3 for further information on this topic). The example sentences also show that after a preposition like *tō* these nouns add an *-e* to their stem, *hilde* and *gūþe* (see Chapter 4 for more on this topic). Finally, the example sentences help us to begin to build up a network of words associated with battle, like *stōp* ('advanced') and *gār* ('spear').

Efficient readers gradually build up a set of familiar vocabulary items that they can quickly and easily recognise in texts. The more work you are prepared to put into actively developing your vocabulary, the greater the reward you will gain in increased reading speed and enjoyment. There are various strategies you can use to make vocabulary enrichment a more enjoyable process. A few examples are given below.

Using diagrams

A familiar way of grouping words expressing personal relationships is by a 'family tree'. The group of words denoting relatives can easily be expanded and shown in such a fashion:



By constructing a simple 'family tree' that here extends to *mǣg* 'relative' and *frēond* 'friend', we are forced to think about the relationship between the words used to express kinship in Anglo-Saxon times – which may not, of course, correspond to the ways in which modern society conceives of and expresses family relations.

Similar diagrams can be used to express concepts like social hierarchy and physical location. To take two examples:

1. How would you draw a map showing the following locations?

eorþe, folde	earth
middan-geard	middle-earth
heofon	heaven
hell	hell
rīce	kingdom
eard	homeland
sele	hall
hām	home
woruld	world
land	land
sǣ	sea

2. Old English has an abundance of vocabulary expressing degrees of social rank. Group the following words according to their position in the royal family, the nobility and the people who followed them.

aldor-mon, ealdor-man	nobleman, king's representative
æþeling	prince
beorn	man, warrior
ceorl	freeman, peasant ('churl')
cyning	king
cwēn	queen
dryhten	lord
ealdor	lord
eorl	nobleman, warrior
frēa	lord
hlāford	lord
rinc	warrior
þegn	warrior, retainer
þēoden	lord

Representing rank as a hierarchy, with royal family at the summit and retainers at the base, gives a visual sense of the Anglo-Saxon social order and encourages us to process the vocabulary used by the speakers themselves, a thousand years ago, to articulate their place in the community.

Affective vocabulary (emotion and evaluation)

Language teachers have long observed that learners quickly acquire those words that are personally meaningful to them. Into this category often fall those words that convey emotion or evaluations, for example, terms of praise and endearment, or insults and abuse. These are, in Old English, to do with the *mōd*, that is, the spirit or heart (it obviously gives us today's word 'mood'). In your developing word-list you can ask yourself which words you would apply to (a) the person you love, (b) your lord and master, and (c) the monster from the moorland who is terrorising your community. Possible expressions include:

lēof	dear	*æþele*	noble
grim	fierce, cruel	*frōd*	old, wise
ǣttren	poisonous	*mōdig*	spirited, daring
unearh	not cowardly, brave	*ælf-scīne*	beautiful (lit. elf-bright)
heard	hard, harsh	*cynelic*	royal

Of course, different people might wish to categorise these terms differently, depending on how they feel about monsters and masters. The point is to make these words – and the others you come across in this book – as meaningful to *you* as possible, so that you have a better chance of recalling them when you see them in reading passages.

Names

Old English personal names were made up of vocabulary words, often in compounds that do not make literal sense. The main characters in one of the texts we shall read in Part II are called Cynewulf and Cyneheard, names that translate as 'royal-wolf' and 'royal-hard'. The hero of the epic poem *Beowulf* has a name that literally means 'bee-wolf', but figuratively perhaps means 'bear' (bee = honey, wolf = fierce animal; fierce animal that steals honey = bear). This is an aspect of Old English on which J. R. R. Tolkien drew extensively when naming characters in *The Lord of the Rings*. For instance, the name of the villain, Saruman (Illustration 7), is taken from OE *searu* 'trickery' plus

7 Saruman from *Lord of the Rings*

'man', to give a compound with the sense of 'man of trickery'. Can you work out the meanings of the place-name Mordor, and the name of Tolkien's hobbit hero, Frodo?[23]

Summary

This chapter has reviewed some of the issues involved in recognising Old English words and their meanings, and offered advice on building up an active reading vocabulary. As anyone who has learned another language will know, knowledge of words alone is insufficient to understand texts. Readers also need to know how words behave in sentences and longer texts. In other words, readers need to experience how words combine into sentences and ultimately into stories, riddles and poems. The following three chapters turn to those basic aspects of Old English grammar that need to be understood in order to make sense of texts.

Answers

1 and, east, gold, help, bliss, god, west, understand, word, wonder
2 death, thing, this, north, murder, other, brother, earth
3 devil, drink, dizzy, folk, over, work
4 bright, grass, three, third, thirty, through
5 quoth (= said), ship, ash (= something made of ash-wood), leap, ring, raven, what, right, might (= power)
6 life, mile, white, wise; mouse, loud, south, mouth; home, stone, bone, loaf; roof, stood, blood (northern English pronunciation), book; here, he, sweet, geese
7 mīn, wīn, hwī or hwȳ, gōd, fōt, ūt, nū, tūn, rāp, tēþ
8 almighty, bench, busy, crafty, day, candle, church, fair, young, many, edge, holy, weary, year, way
9 all, from, man, strong, land, long, wall
10 crafty (= devious), doom, ghost, soon, winter (Old English *winter* can in fact mean either 'winter' or 'year')
11 child (Scottish 'bairn'), brother, bride, child, daughter, father, friend, mother, son, sister, widow, wife, woman
12 shepherd, fisher(man), baker, cook, smith, goldsmith, thief, writer
13 fish, goose, horse, mouse, ox, sheep, wolf, worm (= serpent)
14 beer, ale, eat, loaf, hungry, honey, mead, thirst, water
15 abbot, almighty, archbishop, oath, church, devil, angel, holy one (=

saint), god, heathen, heaven, monk, minster (= monastery), priest, soul, shrine
16 helmet, shaft, shield, spear, sword, weapon
17 evening ('eventide'), after, day, year, while, month, morning, night, now, winter (= year)
18 one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, twenty, thirty, forty, hundred, thousand
19 arise, come, fall, fly, go (Scottish 'gang', also gangplank, gangway), leap, ride, swim
20 answer, ask, book, spell (= story, message), word (= speech)
21 Judgement Day, mead bench, night's work, sailor, sailor
22 Who are you? What do you do? What do you say? What do you drink? Don't you drink wine? Where do you sleep?
23 Mordor, the Land of Shadows = 'murder'; Frodo = old, wise