

History of English

ENGLISH LANGUAGE HISTORY

Old English (c. 500 – c. 1100)



By Richard Barker | Updated: October 16, 2023

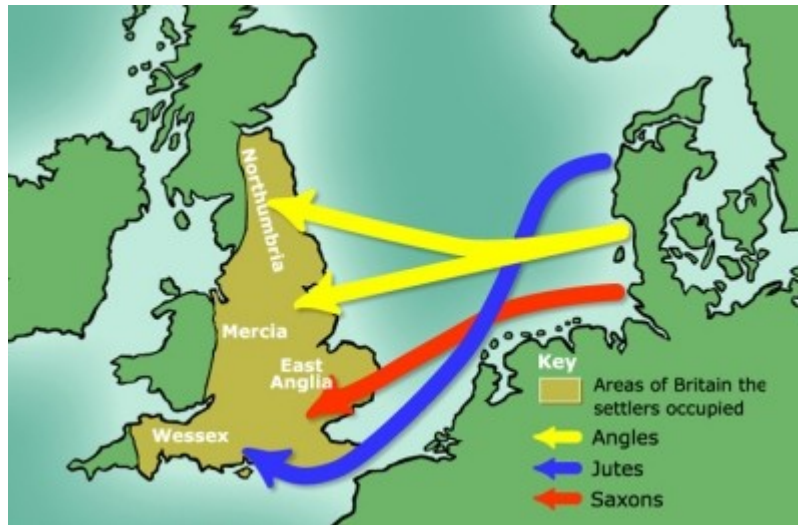


Table of Contents

- [Invasions of Germanic Tribes](#)
- [The Coming of Christianity and Literacy](#)
- [The Anglo-Saxon or Old English Language](#)
- [The Vikings](#)

- Old English after the Vikings

Invasions of Germanic Tribes



Settlement routes of Angles, Saxons and Jutes (from [BBC](#))

More important than the Celts and the Romans for the development of the English language, though, was the succession of invasions from continental Europe after the Roman withdrawal. No longer protected by the Roman military against the constant threat from the Picts and Scots of the North, the Celts felt themselves increasingly vulnerable to attack. Around 430AD, the ambitious Celtic warlord Vortigern invited the Jutish brothers Hengest and Horsa (from Jutland in modern-day Denmark), to settle on the east coast of Britain to form a bulwark against sea raids by the Picts, in return for which they were “allowed” to settle in the southern areas of Kent, Hampshire and the Isle of Wight.

But the Jutes were not the only newcomers to Britain during this period. Other Germanic tribes soon began to make the short journey across the North Sea. The Angles (from a region called Angeln, the spur of land which connects modern Denmark with Germany) gradually began to settle in increasing numbers on the east coast of Britain, particularly in the north and East Anglia.

The Frisian people, from the marshes and islands of northern Holland and western Germany, also began to encroach on the British mainland from about 450 AD onwards. Still later, from the 470s, the war-like Saxons (from the Lower Saxony area of north-western Germany) made an increasing number of incursions into the southern part of the British mainland. Over time, these Germanic tribes began to establish permanent bases and to gradually displace the native Celts.

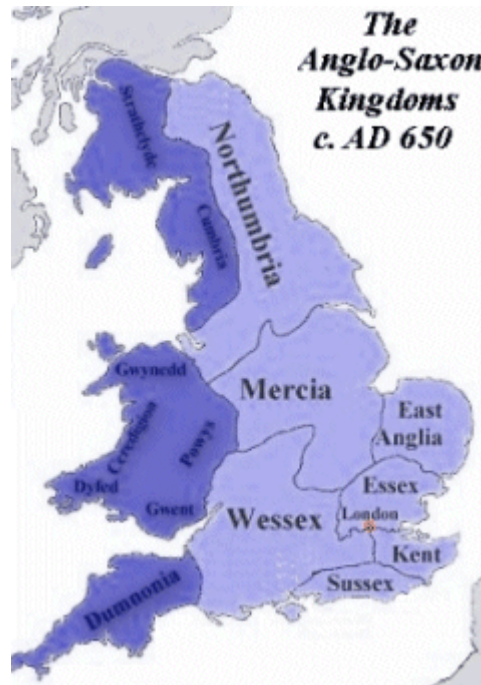
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Short poem (“Butter, bread and green cheese”) and numbers 1-10 in modern Frisian (16 sec). (from Peter Meijes Tiersma).

All these peoples all spoke variations of a West Germanic tongue, similar to modern Frisian, variations that were different but probably close enough to be mutually intelligible. The local dialect in Angeln is, at times, even today recognizably similar to English, and it has even more in common with the English of 1,000 years ago. Modern Frisian, especially spoken, bears an eerie resemblance to English, as can be seen by some of the Frisian words which were incorporated into English, like *miel* (meal), *laam* (lamb), *goes* (goose), *bûter* (butter), *tsiis* (cheese), *see* (sea), *boat* (boat), *stoarm* (storm), *rein* (rain), *snie* (snow), *frieze* (freeze), *froast* (frost), *mist* (mist), *sliepe* (sleep), *blau* (blue), *trije* (three), *fjour* (four), etc.

The influx of Germanic people was more of a gradual encroachment over several generations than an invasion proper, but these tribes between them gradually colonized most of the island, with the exception of the more remote areas, which remained strongholds of the original Celtic people of Britain. Originally sea-farers, they began to settle down as farmers, exploiting the rich English farmland. The rather primitive newcomers were if anything less cultured and civilized than the local Celts, who had held onto at least some parts of Roman culture. No love was lost between the two peoples, and there

was little integration between them: the Celts referred to the European invaders as “barbarians” (as they had previously been labelled themselves); the invaders referred to the Celts as *wea/es* (slaves or foreigners), the origin of the name Wales.



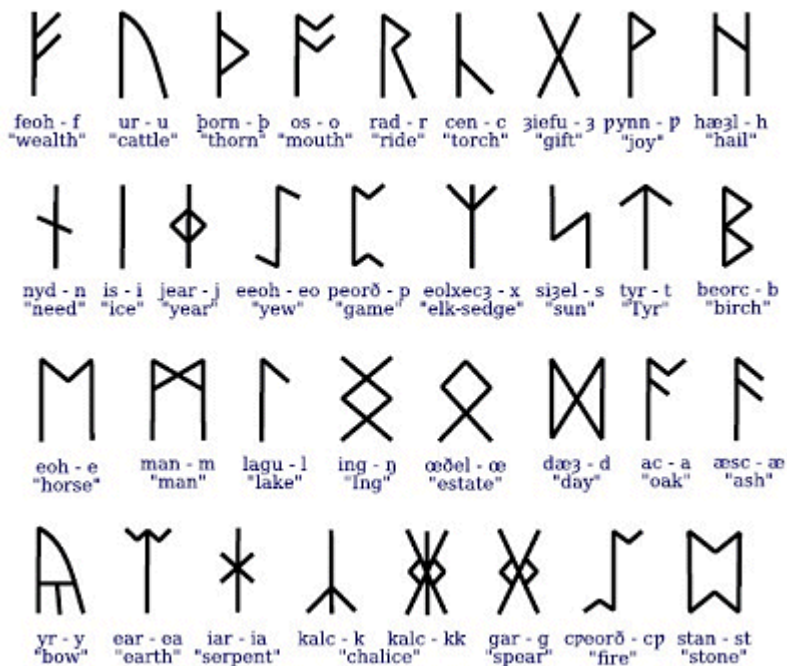
Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms
(Heptarchy) c. 650 (from [WNC](#)
[Coins](#))

Despite continued resistance (the legends and folklore of King Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table date from this time), the Celts were pushed further and further back by the invaders into the wilds of Scotland, Wales, Cornwall and Ireland, although some chose to flee to the Brittany region of northern France (where they maintained a thriving culture for several centuries) and even further into mainland Europe. The Celtic language survives today only in the Gaelic languages of Scotland and Ireland, the Welsh of Wales, and the Breton language of Brittany (the last native speaker of the Cornish language died in 1777, and the last native speaker of Manx, a Celtic language spoken on the tiny Isle of Man, died as recently as the 1960s, and these are now dead languages).

The Germanic tribes settled in seven smaller kingdoms, known as the Heptarchy: the Saxons in Essex, Wessex and Sussex; the Angles in East Anglia, Mercia and Northumbria; and the Jutes in Kent. Evidence of the extent of their settlement can be found in the number of place names throughout England ending with the Anglo-Saxon “-ing” meaning people of (e.g. *Worthing*, *Reading*, *Hastings*), “-ton” meaning enclosure or village (e.g. *Taunton*, *Burton*, *Luton*), “-ford” meaning a river crossing (e.g. *Ashford*, *Bradford*, *Watford*) “-ham” meaning farm (e.g. *Nottingham*, *Birmingham*, *Grantham*) and “-stead” meaning a site (e.g. *Hampstead*).

Although the various different kingdoms waxed and waned in their power and influence over time, it was the war-like and pagan Saxons that gradually became the dominant group. The new Anglo-Saxon nation, once known in antiquity as Albion and then Britannia under the Romans, nevertheless became known as *Anglaland* or *Englaland* (the Land of the Angles), later shortened to England, and its emerging language as *Englisc* (now referred to as Old English or Anglo-Saxon, or sometimes Anglo-Frisian). It is impossible to say just when English became a separate language, rather than just a German dialect, although it seems that the language began to develop its own distinctive features in isolation from the continental Germanic languages, by around 600AD. Over time, four major dialects of Old English gradually emerged: Northumbrian in the north of England, Mercian in the midlands, West Saxon in the south and west, and Kentish in the southeast.

The Coming of Christianity and Literacy



Anglo-Saxon runes (from [Wikipedia](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Anglo-Saxon_alphabet))

Although many of the Romano-Celts in the north of England had already been Christianized, St. Augustine and his 40 missionaries from Rome brought Christianity to the pagan Anglo-Saxons of the rest of England in 597 AD. After the conversion of the influential King Ethelbert of Kent, it spread rapidly through the land, carrying literacy and European culture in its wake. Augustine was made Archbishop of Canterbury in 601 AD and several great monasteries and centres of learning were established particularly in Northumbria (e.g. Jarrow, Lindisfarne).

The Celts and the early Anglo-Saxons used an alphabet of runes, angular characters originally developed for scratching onto wood or stone. The first known written English sentence, which reads *"This she-wolf is a reward to my kinsman"*, is an Anglo-Saxon runic inscription on a gold medallion found in Suffolk, and has been dated to about 450-480 AD. The early Christian missionaries introduced the more rounded Roman alphabet (much as we use today), which was easier to read and more suited for writing on vellum or parchment. The Anglo-Saxons quite rapidly adopted the new Roman alphabet, but with the addition of letters such as ƿ ("wynn"), þ ("thorn"), ð ("edh" or "eth") and Ʒ ("yogh") from the old runic alphabet for certain sounds not used in Latin.

þ later became “uu” and, still later, “w”; þ and ð were used more or less interchangeably to represent the sounds now spelled with “th”; and ȝ was used for “y”, “j” or “g” sounds. In addition, the diphthong æ (“ash”) was also used; “v” was usually written with an “f”; and the letters “q”, “x” and “z” were rarely used at all.

The Latin language the missionaries brought was still only used by the educated ruling classes and Church functionaries, and Latin was only a minor influence on the English language at this time, being largely restricted to the naming of Church dignitaries and ceremonies (*priest, vicar, altar, mass, church, bishop, pope, nun, angel, verse, baptism, monk, eucharist, candle, temple* and *presbyter* came into the language this way). However, other more domestic words (such as *fork, spade, chest, spider, school, tower, plant, rose, lily, circle, paper, sock, mat, cook*, etc) also came into English from Latin during this time, albeit substantially altered and adapted for the Anglo-Saxon ear and tongue. More ecclesiastical Latin loanwords continued to be introduced, even as late as the 11th Century, including *chorus, cleric, creed, cross, demon, disciple, hymn, paradise, prior, sabbath*, etc.

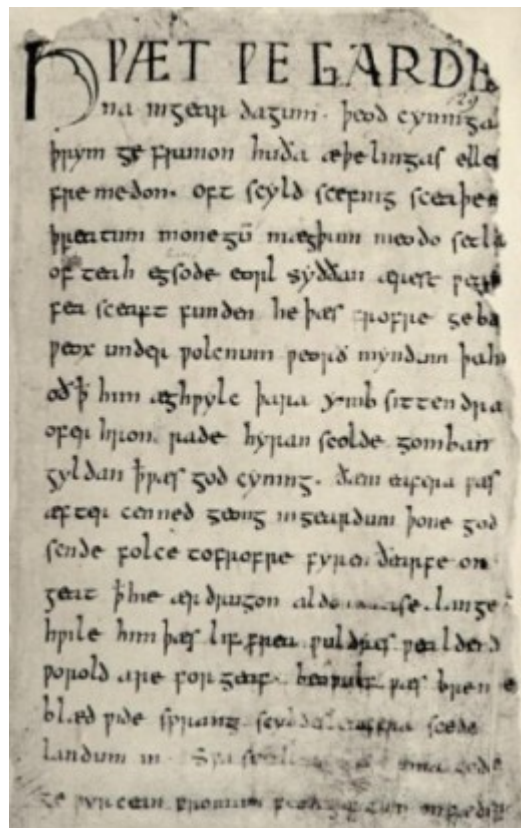
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[“The Lord’s Prayer” in Old English \(31 sec\).](#)

Old English literature flowered remarkably quickly after Augustine’s arrival. This was especially notable in the north-eastern kingdom of Northumbria, which provided England with its first great poet (Caedmon in the 7th Century), its first great historian (the Venerable Bede in the 7th-8th Century) and its first great scholar (Alcuin of York in the 8th Century), although the latter two wrote mainly in Latin. The oldest surviving text of Old English literature is usually considered to be “*Cædmon’s Hymn*”, composed between 658 and 680. Northumbrian culture and language dominated England in the 7th and 8th Centuries, until the coming of the Vikings, after which only Wessex, under

Alfred the Great, remained as an independent kingdom. By the 10th Century, the West Saxon dialect had become the dominant, and effectively the official, language of Britain (sometimes referred to as the *koiné*, or common dialect). The different dialects often had their own preferred spellings as well as distinctive vocabulary (e.g. the word *evil* was spelled *efel* in the south-east, and *yfel* elsewhere; *land* would be *land* in West Saxon and Kentish, but *lond* further north; etc).

The Anglo-Saxon or Old English Language



First page of "Beowulf" (from [Wikipedia](#))

About 400 Anglo-Saxon texts survive from this era, including many beautiful poems, telling tales of wild battles and heroic journeys. The oldest surviving text of Old English literature is "*Cædmon's Hymn*", which was composed between 658 and 680, and the longest was the ongoing "*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*". But by far the best known is the long epic poem "*Beowulf*".

"*Beowulf*" may have been written any time between the 8th and the early 11th Century by an unknown author or authors, or, most likely, it was written in the 8th Century and then revised in the 10th or 11th Century. It was probably originally written in Northumbria, although the single manuscript that has come down to us (which dates from around 1000) contains a bewildering mix of Northumbrian, West Saxon and Anglian dialects. The 3,182 lines of the work shows that Old English was already a fully developed poetic language by this time, with a particular emphasis on alliteration and percussive effects. Even at this early stage (before the subsequent waves of lexical enrichment), the variety and depth of English vocabulary, as well as its predilection for synonyms and subtleties of meanings, is evident. For example, the poem uses 36 different words for hero, 20 for man, 12 for battle and 11 for ship. There are also many interesting "kennings" or allusive compound words, such as *hronrad* (literally, whale-road, meaning the sea), *banhus* (bone-house, meaning body) and *beadoleoma* (battle-light, meaning sword). Of the 903 compound nouns in "*Beowulf*", 578 are used once only, and 518 of them are known only from this one poem.

Old English was a very complex language, at least in comparison with modern English. Nouns had three genders (male, female and neuter) and could be inflected for up to five cases. There were seven classes of "strong" verbs and three of "weak" verbs, and their endings changed for number, tense, mood and person. Adjectives could have up to eleven forms. Even definite articles had three genders and five case forms as a singular and four as a plural. Word order was much freer than today, the sense being carried by the inflections (and only later by the use of propositions). Although it looked quite different from modern English on paper, once the pronunciation and spelling rules are understood, many of its words become quite familiar to modern ears.

Many of the most basic and common words in use in English today have their roots in Old English, including words like *water, earth, house, food, drink, sleep, sing, night, strong, the, a, be, of, he, she, you, no, not*, etc. Interestingly, many of our common swear words are also of Anglo-Saxon origin (including *tits, fart, shit, turd, arse* and, probably, *piss*), and most of the others were of early

medieval provenance. Care should be taken, though, with what are sometimes called “false friends”, words that appear to be similar in Old English and modern English, but whose meanings have changed, words such as *wif* (wife, which originally meant any woman, married or not), *fugol* (fowl, which meant any bird, not just a farmyard one), *sona* (soon, which meant immediately, not just in a while), *won* (wan, which meant dark, not pale) and *fæst* (fast, which meant fixed or firm, not rapidly).

During the 6th Century, for reasons which are still unclear, the Anglo-Saxon consonant cluster “sk” changed to “sh”, so that *skield* became *shield*. This change affected all “sk” words in the language at that time, whether recent borrowings from Latin (e.g. *disk* became *dish*) or ancient aboriginal borrowings (e.g. *skip* became *ship*). Any modern English words which make use of the “sk” cluster came into the language after the 6th Century (i.e. after the sound change had ceased to operate), mainly, as we will see below, from Scandinavia.

Then, around the 7th Century, a vowel shift took place in Old English pronunciation (analogous to the Great Vowel Shift during the Early Modern period) in which vowels began to be pronounced more to the front of the mouth. The main sound affected was “i”, hence its common description as “i-mutation” or “i-umlaut” (*umlaut* is a German term meaning sound alteration). As part of this process, the plurals of several nouns also started to be represented by changed vowel pronunciations rather than changes in inflection. These changes were sometimes, but not always, reflected in revised spellings, resulting in inconsistent modern words pairings such as *foot/feet*, *goose/geese*, *man/men*, *mouse/mice*, as well as *blood/bleed*, *foul/filth*, *broad/breadth*, *long/length*, *old/elder*, *whole/hale/heal/health*, etc.

0:00 / 0:36

[Beginning of the Prologue of “Beowulf” \(36 sec\).](#) (from [University of Virginia](#)).

It is estimated that about 85% of the 30,000 or so Anglo-Saxon words gradually died out under the cultural onslaught of the Vikings and the Normans who would come after them, leaving a total of only around 4,500. This represents less than 1% of modern English vocabulary, but it includes some of the most fundamental and important words (e.g. *man, wife, child, son, daughter, brother, friend, live, fight, make, use, love, like, look, drink, food, eat, sleep, sing, sun, moon, earth, ground, wood, field, house, home, people, family, horse, fish, farm, water, time, eyes, ears, mouth, nose, strong, work, come, go, be, find, see, look, laughter, night, day, sun, first, many, one, two, other, some, what, when, which, where, word, etc*), as well as the most important “function” words (e.g. *to, for, but, and, at, in, on, from, etc*). Because of this, up to a half of everyday modern English will typically be made up of Old English words, and, by some estimates, ALL of the hundred most commonly-used words in modern English are of Anglo-Saxon origin (although pronunciations and spellings may have changed significantly over time).

The Vikings



Area of the Viking-ruled Danelaw

By the late 8th Century, the Vikings (or Norsemen) began to make sporadic raids on the east coast of Britain. They came from Denmark, Norway and Sweden, although it was the Danes who came with the greatest force. Notorious for their ferocity, ruthlessness and callousness, the Vikings pillaged and plundered the towns and monasteries of northern England – in 793, they sacked and looted the wealthy monastery at Lindisfarne in Northumbria – before turning their attentions further south. By about 850, the raiders had started to over-winter in southern England and, in 865, there followed a full-scale invasion and on-going battles for the possession of the country.

Viking expansion was finally checked by Alfred the Great and, in 878, a treaty between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings established the Danelaw, splitting the country along a line roughly from London to Chester, giving the Norsemen control over the north and east and the Anglo-Saxons the south and west. Although the Danelaw lasted less than a century, its influence can be seen today in the number of place names of Norse origin in northern England (over 1,500), including many place names ending in “-by”, “-gate”, “-stoke”, “-kirk”, “-thorpe”, “-thwaite”, “-toft” and other suffixes (e.g. *Whitby, Grimsby, Ormskirk, Scunthorpe, Stoke Newington, Huthwaite, Lowestoft*, etc), as well as the “-son” ending on family names (e.g. *Johnson, Harrison, Gibson, Stevenson*, etc) as opposed to the Anglo-Saxon equivalent “-ing” (e.g. *Manning, Harding*, etc).

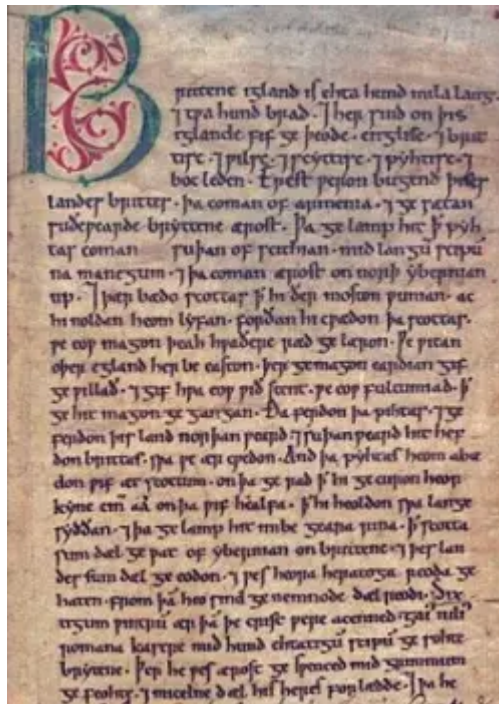
The Vikings spoke Old Norse, an early North Germanic language not that dissimilar to Anglo-Saxon and roughly similar to modern Icelandic (the word *viking* actually means “a pirate raid” in Old Norse). Accents and pronunciations in northern England even today are heavily influenced by Old Norse, to the extent that they are largely intelligible in Iceland.

Over time, Old Norse was gradually merged into the English language, and many Scandinavian terms were introduced. In actual fact, only around 150 Norse words appear in Old English manuscripts of the period, but many more became assimilated into the language and gradually began to appear in texts over the next few centuries. In all, up to 1,000 Norse words were permanently added to the English lexicon, among them, some of the most common and

fundamental in the language, including *skull, skin, leg, neck, freckle, sister, husband, fellow, wing, bull, score, seat, root, bloom, bag, gap, knife, dirt, kid, link, gate, sky, egg, cake, skirt, band, bank, birth, scrap, skill, thrift, window, gasp, gap, law, anger, trust, silver, clasp, call, crawl, dazzle, scream, screech, race, lift, get, give, are, take, mistake, rid, seem, want, thrust, hit, guess, kick, kill, rake, raise, smile, hug, call, cast, clip, die, flat, meek, rotten, tight, odd, rugged, ugly, ill, sly, wrong, loose, happy, awkward, weak, worse, low, both, same, together, again, until, etc.*

Old Norse often provided direct alternatives or synonyms for Anglo-Saxon words, both of which have been carried on (e.g. Anglo-Saxon *craft* and Norse *skill, wish* and *want, dike* and *ditch, sick* and *ill, whole* and *hale, raise* and *rear, wrath* and *anger, hide* and *skin, etc.*). Unusually for language development, English also adopted some Norse grammatical forms, such as the pronouns *they, them* and *their*, although these words did not enter the dialects of London and southern England until as late as the 15th Century. Under the influence of the Danes, Anglo-Saxon word endings and inflections started to fall away during the time of the Danelaw, and prepositions like *to, with, by, etc* became more important to make meanings clear, although many inflections continued into Middle English, particularly in the south and west (the areas furthest from Viking influence).

Old English after the Vikings



First page of the “Peterborough Chronicle” (one of the “Anglo-Saxon Chronicles”) (from [National Education Network](#))

By the time Alfred the Great came to the throne in 871, most of the great monasteries of Northumbria and Mercia lay in ruins and only Wessex remained as an independent kingdom. But Alfred, from his capital town of Winchester, set about rebuilding and fostering the revival of learning, law and religion. Crucially, he believed in educating the people in the vernacular English language, not Latin, and he himself made several translations of important works into English, include Bede’s “*Ecclesiastical History of the English People*”. He also began the “*Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*”, which recounted the history of England from the time of Caesar’s invasion, and which continued until 1154.

He is revered by many as having single-handedly saved English from the destruction of the Vikings, and by the time of his death in 899 he had raised the prestige and scope of English to a level higher than that of any other vernacular language in Europe. The West Saxon dialect of Wessex became the standard English of the day (although the other dialects continued

nonetheless), and for this reason the great bulk of the surviving documents from the Anglo-Saxon period are written in the dialect of Wessex.

The following paragraph from Aelfrich's 10th Century "*Homily on St. Gregory the Great*" gives an idea of what Old English of the time looked like (even if not how it sounded):

Eft he axode, hu ðære ðeode nama wære þe hi of comon. Him wæs geandwyrd, þæt hi Angle genemnode wæron. þa cwæð he, "Rihtlice hi sind Angle gehatene, for ðan ðe hi engla wlite habbað, and swilcum gedafenað þæt hi on heofonum engla geferan beon."

A few words stand out immediately as being identical to their modern equivalents (*he, of, him, for, and, on*) and a few more may be reasonably easily guessed (*nama* became the modern *name*, *comon* became *come*, *wære* became *were*, *wæs* became *was*). But several more have survived in altered form, including *axode* (asked), *hu* (how), *rihtlice* (rightly), *engla* (angels), *habbað* (have), *swilcum* (such), *heofonum* (heaven), and *beon* (be), and many more have disappeared completely from the language, including *eft* (again), *ðeode* (people, nation), *cwæð* (said, spoke), *gehatene* (called, named), *wlite* (appearance, beauty) and *geferan* (companions), as have special characters like þ ("thorn") and ð ("edh" or "eth") which served in Old English to represent the sounds now spelled with "th".

0:00 / 0:29

[Birhtwold's Speech from "The Battle of Maldon" \(29 sec\)](#) (from [Norton Anthology of English Literature](#)).

Among the literary works representative of this later period of Old English may be listed the "*Battle of Maldon*", an Old English poem relating the events of the

Battle of Maldon of 991 (the poem is thought to have been written not long after) and the *“Old English Hexateuch”*, a richly illustrated Old English translation of the first six books of the Bible, probably compiled in Canterbury in the second quarter of the 11th Century. Ælfric of Eynsham, who wrote in the late 10th and early 11th Century and is best known for his *“Colloquy”*, was the greatest and most prolific writer of Anglo-Saxon sermons, many of which were copied and adapted for use well into the 13th Century. A number of other Christian, heroic and elegiac poems, secular and Christian prose, as well as riddles, short verses, gnomes and mnemonic poems for remembering long lists of names, have also come down to us more or less intact.



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Richard is an English teacher with over 25 years of experience. He has dedicated his life and career to his passion for English, literature, and pedagogy, guiding multiple generations of students on their journey to discovery.

In this section

- Before English
- Old English
- Middle English
- Early Modern English
- Late Modern English

- [English Today](#)
- [English History Timeline](#)
- [How New English Words are Created](#)
- [Language & Geography](#)
- [English as a Global Language](#)
- [Glossary](#)
- [Sources](#)

Old History

English Language History Before English Old English Middle English

Modern History

Early Modern English Late Modern English English Today English History Timeline

Language Issues

How New Words are Created Language & Geography English as a Global Language

About This Site

This is a site a deep dive into the History of the English Language.

History of English