

**AN ELEMENTARY
HISTORY OF ENGLISH**

[Fascicle two]

By Marino Castrillón



OLD ENGLISH

INTRODUCTION

The formal study of King Alfred's speech demands considerable patience and painstaking devotion. For the limited scope of this sketch the discussion will be circumscribed to certain overall considerations, in order to acquire a basic grasp of what a language once spoken by men of flesh and bone looked like, and to have a point of departure for the ulterior evolution of the language.

The history of any language presents a twofold nature. Historical events per se, isolatedly considered, constitute what is called the external history of the language. The effects of these events upon the evolution of the language, viewed from a purely linguistic standpoint, make up the internal history of the language. For instance, the invasion of England by Jutes, Angles, and Saxons, in the 5th century, belongs to the external history of English; the implantation of their Teutonic speech on the island on the contrary, is a matter of internal history. The two aspects work together and bear upon any consideration concerning the development of the language. The distinction should

be borne in mind since further discussion will deal with both categories, either separately or in combination.

CELTIC BRITAIN AND THE ROMANS

From pre-historic times up to the year 43 A.D. Britain was dominated by Celtic tribes. The Celts did not arrive in the island at once but came in successive waves, starting in 900 B.C. In 55 B.C. Julius Caesar after conquering Gaul, tried to subdue the island and in fact arrived in the southern tip of England, with the purpose of exacting tribute from the conquered tribes, and with the hope of establishing a new Roman colony. The fierceness of the Celtic tribesmen proved to be a bigger match than he could deal with. Caesar was forced to retire with his legions; his short-lived domination of Britain was more theoretical than factual (the tribute was never paid for) and his conquest can hardly be accounted as such.

The Roman Emperor Claudius fared much better. With more adequate preparation than Julius Caesar's he

successfully invaded Britain in 43 A.D. With this event the Roman domination started and the pre-history of Britain ended. For a span of four centuries the Romans held the upper hand, until the attacks upon the Empire from the part of Teutonic tribes compelled the Roman forces to leave Britain once again in the hands of Celtic chieftains. This ephemeral interlude ended in the 5th century with a series of Teutonic inroads which culminated with the establishment of Angles, Saxons, and Jutes on the British island. This will be referred to more in detail in another section.

The Celtic remains in the English language are of minor importance; were it not for some place names, the Celtic influence would be altogether negligible. Such place names are Devon, Kent, York, London, Avon; the first element in Salisbury, Exeter, Gloucester, Worcester, Cumberland, Cornwall, and the name of the river Thames. Apart from such place names, modern scholarship has found only about a dozen words in English from Celtic origin (among which are counted *bin* and *mattock*, and the very useful term *ass*), though the Celtic ancestry of these words is still doubtful. According to André Maurois the terms *cradle* and *slogan* (which means "cry of war") come from Celtic; so does *whisky*, which is, in

the opinion of Charlton Laird, a corruption of Celtic *usquebaugh*, water of life (cf. Spanish *aguardiente* and French *eau de vie*). As a modern scholar has it, the Roman legionaries and Teutonic warriors cared for the Celtic speech as little as the English settlers did for the dialects of the North American Indian tribes.

THE FIRST LATIN INFLUENCE

Prior to their coming to Britain the Teutonic tribes had been in contact with the Roman civilization; their Germanic tongue, therefore, had been exposed to the influence of Latin, as spoken on the European homeland. As Albert C. Baugh remarks, the German tribesmen were found in all ranks and divisions of society in their condition of mercenaries or slaves. As mercenaries they were likely to adopt terms related to warfare; as laborers in the field they would pick up words common in the agricultural activities. Trade was also part of the everyday intercourse between the two races, a circumstance that also left its mark upon the English language.

Among the words that, according to scholars, entered English in this early period of borrowing from Latin (called pagan or pre-Christian by Otto Jespersen) are those in the following



list. (In most cases the Spanish equivalent is provided, by way of comparison.):

Latin	English	Spanish
vinum	wine	vino
catillus	kettle	
coquina	kitchen	cocina
cuppa	cup	copa
discus	dish	disco
gemma	gem	gema
caseus	cheese	queso
castanea	chestnut	castaña
cerasus	cherry	cereza
unio	onion	
pisum	pea	
mentha	mint	menta
moneta	mint	moneda
mola	mill	molino
mulus	mule	mulo
napus	turnip	nabo
episcopus	bishop	obispo
tegula	tile	teja
sigillum	seal	sigilo
strata	street	estrada
caulis	cole	col
vallum	wall	valle

Jespersen remarks that these loan-words are characterized by simplicity and concreteness, if compared with Latin borrowings of subsequent periods, they were easy to pronounce and to remember, and very quickly became part and parcel of the native

lexicon. It is interesting to mention here the word *church*, which also entered the language at this stage of a continental borrowing or “zero period”, as Baugh calls it; the term came through Latin from Greek *kyriakon*, which means “pertaining to the Lord.”

THE COMING OF THE TEUTONS

The period in world history from the 3rd century B.C. to 400 A.D. is called the Roman Era. By the 5th century the Roman empire succumbed before the attacks of the so-called Barbarians, among which are included several Teutonic or Germanic tribes; that is why Mario Pei suggests that the period be called Germanic century. The Teutonic hordes spread all over Europe and part of Africa; the Ostrogoths conquered Italy and Rome; the Franks invaded Gaul; the Vandals and Visigoths swept North Africa and Spain; and the Angles, Saxons, Jutes, took hold of Britain.

The main sources of information for this period are Bede's *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People) and *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, begun in the reign of King

Alfred the Great. According to Bede's report Vortigern, a Celtic chieftain, requested the help of the Jutes for his wars against Picts and Scots; the Jutes later on decided to stay on the island and settled in Kent and the island of Wight. By 449 two Saxon leaders, Hengist and Horsa, arrived at the island to make matters worse for the Celtic tribesmen who still tried to maintain their hold on the land. Finally, by 547 another tribe, the Angles set foot on the British coasts. Faced with this triple invasion, the Celts were forced to withdraw into Wales and Cornwall, thus “Roman Britain” came to a bloody end, and the stage was set up for the Germanization of the island.

Even if the above events and dates have been described and provided by most scholars, the period is rather obscure, and the historical sources not wholly reliable. At this point, we could say, history and literature go hand to hand. Hengist and Horsa, Cedric and Arthur, could very well be

the main characters of a medieval romance, or the heroes of the epic struggle that gave England to the Teutonic hordes. If posterity did not receive its full share on the historical side, on the literary aspect it was provided with one of the most beautiful pieces that the human invention has ever conceived, that



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is to say, that seemingly endless series of romances inspired by the factual or imaginary exploits of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.

THE INCEPTION OF ENGLISH

Angles, Saxons, and Jutes were closely related, both racially and linguistically. The three akin tongues that they carried from their continental fatherland to the British shores provided the skeletal structure for the English language spoken today. On the island their Germanic speech was freed from the influence of other Teutonic languages, until the coming of



the Danish invasions. The contact with the Celtic tribesmen, as said above, did not succeed at contaminating the purity of a simon-pure Teutonic language.

The three invading tribes came from three neighbouring areas; the Jutes came from the northern tip of present Denmark (Jutland); the Angles from the middle of the same peninsula (Schleswig); and the Saxons from the region between the Rhine and the Elbe rivers (Holstein). Although they could probably understand one another, they preferred to settle in different regions of Britain. The Jutes occupied Kent and the Isle of Wight; the Saxons settled in the rest of England, south of the Thames; and the areas north of the Thames were occupied by the Angles. As Professor Simeon Potter remarks, the term *Anglecynn* (Anglerace) was used before 1,000 A.D. to refer collectively to three Germanic peoples occupying Britain; likewise, their language was called from the very beginning *Englisc*.

THE DIALECTS OF OLD ENGLISH

The tripartite geographical distribu-

tion of the island by the conquering Teutons was reflected in the language and resulted in a fourfold dialectal division of Old English: Kentish, West Saxon, Mercian, and North-umbrian; Kentish and West Saxon were based on the tongues of Jutes and Saxons, respectively, whereas Mercian and Northumbrian emerged from the partition of the speech of the Angles into two distinct dialects. It is interesting to observe, in passing, that rivers have always been the dialectal boundaries in England; the Thames separated Kentish and West Saxon from Mercian, and the Humber separated the latter from Northumbrian.

THE PERIODS IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF ENGLISH

As formulated by the English philologist Henry Sweet, three distinct periods can be easily observed in the history of the English language. The Era of Old English, a language as heavily inflected as Classical Latin and Greek, can be called the period of *full inflections*; the Middle English period is one of *leveled inflections*, and Modern English is the period of *lost inflections*. To nail down some dates and to sum up what has been said:

English	Inflections	
Old	Full	450-1050
Middle	Leveled	1050-1500
Early Modern	Lost	1500-1700
Late Modern	Lost	1700-

important and widely read works of his day into West Saxon. Likewise, he started the compilation of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*, already mentioned as one of the principal sources for the history of Anglo-Saxon Britain.

GENERAL FEATURES OF ANGLO-SAXON

The study of Anglo-Saxon, or Old English, has been so far made on the basis of the West Saxon dialect, the language of King Alfred (871-901). Most of the literary documents remaining from the Old English period were written in West-Saxon. King Alfred himself translated or ordered the translation of five of the most

A full account of the phonetic, morphologic, and syntactic systems of Anglo-Saxon cannot be attempted here. However, a word must be said about the most salient characteristics concerning pronunciation, spelling, vocabulary, and syntax, and the somewhat regular development of sounds from Old to Modern English. To start with, the vowels, which underwent considerable modification, will be referred to first in the following table, which shows the normal development of stressed vowels:



King Alfred



Old English	Middle English	Modern English
stan /a/	ston /ɔ/	stone /o/
crabba /a/	crabbe /æ/	crab /æ/
þaet /æ/	that /a/	that /æ/
claene /æ/	cleene /æ/	clean /i/
swete /e/	swete /e/	sweet /i/
helpan /ɛ/	helpen /ɛ/	help /ɛ/
ridan /i/	ride /i/	ride /aI/
drincan /I/	drinken /I/	drink /I/
foda /o/	fode /o/	food /u/
oxa /ɔ/	oxe /ɔ/	ox /ɔ-a/
hus /u/	hous /u/	house /au/
sunu /u/	sone /u/	son /ə/
mys /y/	mis /i/	mice /aI/
fyllan /y/	fillen /I/	fill /I/
stream /æ/	stream /æ/	stream /i/
earn /æ/	arm /a/	arm /a/
deop /eo/	deep /e/	deep /i/
heorte /eo/	herte /ɛ/	heart /æ-a/
nama /a/	name /a/	name /e/
feaht /æ/	faught /au/	fought /ɔ/
feawa /æ/	fewe /yu/	few /yu/
sawol /a/	soule /u/	soul /o/
þuhte /u/	thoughte /ɔu/	thought /ɔ/ /α/
blind /I/	blind /I/	blind /aI/
sund /u/	sound /u/	sound /au/

In most cases the above paradigms can be applied to a series of examples. For instance, the change from Old English *stan* to Modern English *stone* also obtains in *gan* (go), *ban* (bone), *rap* (rope), *bat* (boat), *hlaf* (loaf), *halig* (holy).

With the exception of the so-called schwa /ə/, Old English had all the simple vowels of Modern English. The long vowel in *mys* (mice) was pronounced like the one in French *lune* or German *grün*; the short vowel in *fyllan* (fill) sounded like the one in German *müssen*.

Old English consonants were for the most part pronounced as they are in Modern English. Special cases which deserve notice are the following:

1. The sound /r/ was trilled.
2. C had the /k/ sound, except when it immediately preceded or followed a front vowel /i, I, e, ε/; in this case it had the palatal sound of Modern English *chip*.
3. F was voiceless /f/, except in medial position between vowels and voiced consonants, where it had the sound of /v/, as in *hlaford* (lord).

4. G was pronounced like in Modern English *go* only when doubled, as in *frogga* (frog). In other cases it was velar (as in German *sagen*) or palatal (as in English *you*).

5. The combination cg was pronounced as in English *edge*.

6. H was never silent. In initial position it sounded as in Modern English. In other positions it had the sound of German *nicht* /x/ or German *ich* /ç/.

7. X was pronounced /hs/ instead of /ks/ or /gz/.

8. The following Old English consonant clusters were reduced to one single sound in Modern English, even if the latter keeps in some cases the original spelling (not the sound):

- /kn/ - cneo (knee), cnafa (servant), cnawan (know).
- /fn/ - fneosan (sneeze), fnaeran (snort).
- /gn/ - gnaet (midge), gnagan (gnaw).
- /hl/ - hlahan (laugh), hlence (link), hlystan (listen).
- /hn/ - hnacod (naked), hnutu (nut).
- /hr/ - hraefn (raven), hrade (quickly), hrof (roof), hring (ring).
- /wl/ - wlite (beauty), wlatsam (loathsome).
- /wr/ - wraest (strong), wrist (wrist).



Old English spelling was at no moment absolutely standardized; even so, it had a much stabler spelling system than Middle English did. Furthermore, its writing system reflected actual pronunciation far more faithfully than Middle English did and Modern English does. Old English shared with Classical languages, such as Greek, Latin, and Sanskrit, that characteristic of having a more phonemic alphabet than those of medieval and modern tongues.

Old English was at first written in the Runic alphabet, of which the so-called *edh*, the *thorn*, and the *wynn* remained in the spelling system after the Christianization of the island. With the coming to Britain of Augustine and his monks (597) the Roman alphabet was adopted and the runes doomed to oblivion, except for the three characters just mentioned – which survived until approximately the beginning of the 15th century. Those three runic symbols and the graph *æ* make up the four Old English characters no longer in use today.

The sound /ʃ/ was represented in Old English by *sc*, as in *sceal* (shall), *scip* (ship), and *scir* (shire). The sound /k/ was only sporadically represented by *k*, and almost always by *c*, as in

folc (folk) and *cwen* (queen). The character *q* did not occur in Old English, except for extremely rare words taken from Latin, such as *reliquias* (relics). The modern combination *gh* appeared reduced to *ht*, as in *niht* (night), and *feohtan* (fight).

The curious student might inquire about the sources of information that enable scholars to determine the pronunciation of a language in its former stages. Pieces of evidence for such purpose are drawn from the consideration of the following items:

1. Spelling.
2. Contemporary treatises on pronunciation and spelling.
3. Prosody (especially rimes and alliteration). The language of poetry has always been more conservative than the language of prose, due primarily to the demands of poetic meter.
4. Dialectal and conservative usage.
5. Comparison with the phonetic systems of related languages.

The Old English word stock was overwhelmingly Teutonic, that is to say, monolingual, in contrast with that of Middle English which was fundamentally bilingual (English and French), and with that of Modern English,

which could be called multilingual. Old English stuck to the native words, whereas Middle English preferred the more sophisticated terms imported from France in most cases. Actually, if we give credit to Jespersen's opinion on the matter, Old English was self-sufficient in respect to lexicon, and its expensive resources were enough to cover the wide range of ideological background that the Anglo-Saxons possessed, including the somewhat alien doctrines introduced with the coming of the Roman missionaries. The existent literary documents, furthermore, attest to the fitness of the old language to serve the purposes of literature. When an Anglo-Saxon spoke or wrote he "unlocked the word-ward"; this remarkable Old English phrase (cited by Laird) was not precisely a linguistic brag; according to Jespersen, the unknown author of *Beowulf* had thirty-six synonyms for *hero* or *prince*, twelve for *battle* or *fight*, seventeen for *sea*, and eleven for *ship* or *boat*. In the light of such evidence we can safely conclude that the Old English "word-ward" had in its coffers enough word-jewels to express all the nuances that the literary art requires.

The examination of an Old English dictionary, Albert C. Baugh com-

ments, will show that about 85% of the old words are no longer in use. Terms that refer to basic and familiar concepts like *mann* (man), *wif* (wife), *child* (child), *hus* (house), *benc* (bench), *mete* (meat), *gaers* (grass), *leaf* (leaf), *fugol* (fowl), *god* (good), *heah* (high), *strang* (strong), *etan* (eat), *drincan* (drink), *slæpan* (sleep), *libban* (live), *feohtan* (fight) are survivals from Old English. Likewise, most function words, such as prepositions, conjunctions, pronouns, articles, *to be*, *to have*, and auxiliary verbs are native words which, naturally enough, were not ousted from the language in spite of the diverse affluence of foreign terms resulting from successive invasions of the British island. Even if these native words constitute a minority if compared with the greater number of foreign loans, their frequency of appearance in the spoken and written language is what makes English a Germanic language at the core.

Since the richness of Old English vocabulary depended primarily on a generous use of affixes (prefixes, suffixes, and infixes), as it is the case with Modern German, too, a word must be said about these interesting parts of morphology. The root *wit* (akin to Latin *videre* and Spanish *ver*)



largely meant wisdom, sight, or knowledge. From such stem were derived, among others, the following words: *wita* (wise man), *witan* (to know), *witedom* (prophecy), *witega* (ser, prophet), *witegian* (to prophesy), *bewitan* (to oversee), *be-witigan* (to observe), *gewita* (witness), *gewitt* (intelligence, understanding), *inwit* (guile, wickedness), *un-wit* (foolish); with the negative prefix **ne** (ne witan) was formed the verb *nytan*, not to know (Cf. Latin *volo*, I want, *nolo*, I do not want). The prefix - **wip** had the meaning of “counter” or “against”, as in *wip - ceosan* (literally “counter-choose”), reject. The only survival from O. E. in this sense is *withstand*; the verbs *withdraw* and *withhold*, which also fit the pattern, entered the language during the Middle English period. Other prefixes of O.E. are the ones in this list with examples.

•a-drifan	drive away
•be-settan	beset
•for-laetan	leave off, abandon
•fore-staeppan	precede
•mis-daed	misdeed
•ofer-cuman	overcome
•on-findan	find out
•un-laered	unlearned
•under-beginnan	undertake

As for O.E. suffixes, in the following list appear some of the most common, with examples:

- had cild-had (childhood)
- dom laece-dom (medicine, remedy)
- full georn-full (eager, desirous)
- ig wind-ig (windy)
- leas wuldor-leas (inglorious)
- lice self-lice (selfish)
- nes heft-ness (heaviness, weight)
- scipe freond-scipe (friendship)
- ung blets-ung (blessing)
- wis rith-wis (righteous)

The language of literature made use of the so-called kennings, which were compound metaphors or periphrastic formulas frequently introduced by the scops or poets to adorn their poetry. Anglo-Saxon poetry is perhaps oversaturated with this kind of rhetorical device which enormously increased the richness and variety of Old English diction. A boat was a “sea-wood” or the “foamy-necked ship”; the ocean and the sea were described by means of several circumlocutions among which “sea monster’s home”, “whale-road”, “gannet’s bath”, and “water’s back”; a king was a “victory-lord” and a prince a “ring-giver”; a saddle was a “battle-seat”, the sun the “world-candle”, a warrior a “shiled-bearer”, and a dragon a “twilight-spoiler”.



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English has changed more than any other Germanic language. This is reflected, above all, in the syntactic evolution which transformed a synthetic O.E. into an analytical Mn. E. Synthetic languages are those which indicate the function and relation of words within the sentence primarily by means of inflections; analytic languages, contrariwise, achieve the same results by means of circumlocutions and word-order, depending largely on prepositions, auxiliary verbs, and the like. The rather intricate syntactic system of synthetic tongues like Classical Latin and Greek gave way to the simpler if less elegant system of analytic languages like English and Spanish, following the accepted principle that languages tend to move from complexity to simplicity. What Classical Latin “synthetically” expressed with the single word *miravisse* Modern English and

Spanish express “analytically” with that I had admired and que yo hubiera admirado, respectively; word order did not affect the meaning of a Latin sentence, as it definitely does in the case of Modern English or Spanish. Thus Brutus interfecit Caesarem would mean the same regardless to the order in which we could arrange the three elements of the sentence. Brutus murdered Caesar is not equivalent to Caesar murdered Brutus. We cannot change the word order in the analytical Modern English without interchanging the roles of the killer and the victim, because English must necessarily rely on word order to indicate the specific function of words within the sentence, something that Latin and Old English accomplished by means of inflections.

The various forms of the word stone will give us an idea of the declension system of the O.E. noun:

	<u>Singular</u>	<u>Plural</u>
Nominative:	stan	stanas
Genitive:	stanes	stana
Accusative:	stan	stanas
Dative:	stane	stanum

The adjective possessed a strong and a weak declension. The use of one or the other depended on the surround-



ing elements. In god mann the adjective is strong; in se goda mann it is weak. Modern German, a language more akin to Old than to Modern English, still preserves this two-fold declension of the adjective; thus in ein guter mann (a good man) we have the strong form of the adjective; whereas in der gute Mann (the good man) we have the weak form. Personal pronouns are an interesting case, since in this aspect most languages are extremely conservative, and English is no exception to the rule. The constant use of these parts of speech constitutes a barrier for any fundamental change or simplification. However, English did away with the rather unnecessary use of the so-called dual number (for two persons), as in O.E. wit (we two) and yit (you two). The substitution of the Scandinavian **th** forms in the third person plural for the **h** form of O.E. (which will be dealt with more properly below) does not constitute a simplification in itself, though it helped to eliminate an uncomfortable ambiguity existing in O.E. between forms of the singular and plural in the third person; him, for instance, meant indistinctly to him and to them. In the order nominative, genitive, dative, accusative, these are the forms of O.E. pronouns, the dual number excluded:

Singular I:	ic, min, me, me (mec).
You:	ðu, ðin, ðe, ðe.
He:	he, his, him, hine.
She:	hec, hiere, hiere, hie.
It:	hit, his, him, hit.
Plural We:	we, user (ure), us, us.
You:	ge, eower, eow, eow(eowic).
They:	hie, hiera, him, hie.

A peculiar feature of Germanic tongues is the twofold division of verbs into “strong” and “weak”. Strong verbs are those which have force enough to indicate the past tense and the participle by twisting around themselves, so to say; the verb *drive*, for example, needs only a vowel alternation within the base to indicate the past *drove*. Weak verbs must resort to suffix inflections to indicate changes in tense, as in *want*, *wanted*. Most grammars prefer the term irregular and regular to refer to strong and weak verbs, respectively. The vast majority of O.E. verbs were weak, as it is the case with Mn. E., too. O.E. has two forms for the past tense, one for the 1st and 3rd persons singular, the other for the second person singular and all the persons in the plural. A paradigm for this system is the modern verb *to be*, with its forms *was* and *were* in the past tense, which constitutes an interesting remainder of

the O.E. pattern. To illustrate the point, the verb *helpan* (help) had the forms *healp* (1st and 3rd persons singular in the past tense), *hulpon* (2nd singular and all the persons in the plural), and *holpen* (past participle).

Gender in O.E. was rather complicated, having distinct forms for the masculine, feminine and neuter. The gender of nouns did not by any means depend on the real or supposed “sex” of beings or things, a grammatical nicety that modern German preserves, and not precisely to its advantage. A noun could be arbitrarily masculine, as *mona* (moon), or feminine, as *sunne* (sun), or neuter, as *wif* (wife). Albert H. Marckwardt aptly sums up the situation by saying that “a masculine knight rode a neuter horse into a feminine battle.”

Fortunately, the evolution of the language reduced the original three genders to only two, masculine and feminine, and the basis for the division is now natural instead of grammatical. This simplification is more apparent in the case of the definite article, for which O.E. had a full system of inflections including different forms for the three genders. Perhaps one of the reasons for the simplification in this aspect is that English built in time a

system of relative pronouns, which did not exist in O.E.; instead of relative pronouns, O.E. used the definite article itself, as Modern German still does. The articles in O.E. (*se*, *seo*, *ðæt*) had the meaning of modern **the** and at the same time worked as demonstrative pronouns and adjectives, as indicated by the survival of the neuter *ðæt* in the modern **that**. (At this point it is interesting to observe that the modern Spanish definite article — *el*, *la*, *lo*, *los*, *las* — is the product of the evolution of the Latin demonstrative *ille*, *illa*, *illud*.)

(To be continued)

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