

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 11:  
GERMANIC ANCESTORS**

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## EPISODE 11: GERMANIC ANCESTORS

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. In this episode, we’re going to look at the emergence of the Germanic tribes, the early Greek-speakers, the first Latin-speaking tribes in Italy, and the Celtic tribes in central and western Europe. So we are going to begin a shift from the original Indo-Europeans to the various daughter languages which directly influenced the development of English.

But before I begin this episode, let me address a couple of housekeeping matters. First, I have not mentioned the website or the email address for the podcast lately, so let me do that. The website address is “[historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com)” and my email address is “[kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com)”. And I have also started a twitter account for the podcast, and that is [@englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod).

Also, you may have noticed that I recently re-posted Episode 8 of the podcast. And if you are a subscriber, you may now have multiple copies of that episode and you will notice that Episode 8 is out of sequence now on the iTunes listings. The reason for that is because I revised a portion of that episode, and in podcast world, you have to delete the original episode and re-post the updated version. So that is what happened.

By the way, the change I made to that episode was to correct a term I used. I talked about the inflexive endings of the original Indo-European language as well as in Old English. And, while it is correct to refer to inflexive endings and inflexive languages, the actual endings themselves are called inflexions – not inflexives. I realized the mistake after I posted the episode and I felt that I needed to correct that. So I did. By the way, from time to time I may mis-pronounce a word in the podcast – whether it be a word in Latin or ancient Greek or sometimes even Modern English – because I do have a bit of an accent and that may happen from time to time, but I am not inclined to correct an episode simply because of a mispronunciation. As I said in the very first episode of this podcast, this is not a podcast about English phonetics or grammar. I am not intending to teach anyone how to speak or pronounce English. It is ultimately a history podcast. It just happens to be about the history of a language. But in this case, it wasn’t really a pronunciation issue, I actually used the wrong term. And while the difference between inflexive and inflexion may not seem like a big deal, it was big enough that I felt the episode needed to be correct the episode. So that’s what I did.

So with all that out of the way, let’s turn to this episode. Last time, I looked at the factors which led to the emergence of the first Indo-Europeans in Eurasia and the early expansion of some of those people into modern-day Turkey and western China. I now want to focus on the early linguistic ancestors of the Germanic languages, and also the ancestors of early Greek and Latin, and the Celtic languages.

As you may recall from earlier episodes, I have discussed the distinction that many linguists make between the so-called Centum and Satem languages within the larger family of Indo-European languages. This distinction actually has very little relevance today other than

identifying an early division within the original Indo-European tribes. But if you will recall, the Centum languages are generally spoken in the west, and they include the Germanic languages, Greek, Latin, and the Celtic languages. And as I have mentioned previously, these are the languages which have directly impacted the history of English. So in many respects, the history of pre-English – the period before the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain – is the history of the Centum languages.

You may also recall that there are two Centum languages which were not spoken in central and western Europe, but instead were spoken far to the east in modern-day Turkey and China. These are Anatolian languages including Hittite and the Tocharian language of western China. But those languages represent a very early split within the Indo-European tribes. So let's do a quick re-cap from the last episode.

Last time I discussed the emergence of the Indo-European tribes in the Eurasian steppe region north of the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. And I noted that these people were nomads and herders who mastered horse domestication and horse-riding very early. Perhaps they were the first humans to accomplish those feats. And I noted that to the west of the Black Sea in the Balkans were some of the first agricultural settlements in Europe. And whereas the Indo-Europeans in the steppes were herders and nomads, these Balkan settlements were based around farming and cereal cultivation. But around 4000 BC, Indo-European herders swept southwestward from the steppe region into the Balkan region and apparently overran these Balkan settlements. And these were likely the ancestors of the Hittites who eventually found their way to central Anatolia south of the Black Sea.

It appears that all of the Indo-European tribes at this point spoke the so-called Centum dialects with the 'k' sound as the initial consonant in words like *hundred*. So Hittite is classified as a Centum language.

And a short time later, maybe around 3600 BC give or take a few centuries, some linguists believe the ancestors of the Tocharian speakers separated in the steppe region and moved eastward across the steppes eventually passing east of the Caspian Sea and into the region where the Tocharian languages were discovered in the early 1900s in northwestern China. Again, the Tocharian language is a Centum language, and this fact seems to confirm the early split of the Tocharian branch from the main group.

Around this same time, a new culture began to emerge in the northwestern corner of the Black Sea in the region between the Indo-European homeland north of the Black Sea and the area of those Balkan settlements which I mentioned earlier west of the Black Sea. Remember that those Balkan settlements had been abandoned and overrun about 4000 BC by early Indo-European herders. But now, around five centuries later, a new culture had started to emerge in this region. This culture is known as the Usatovo culture. And many modern linguists and historians believe that the Indo-European dialect which they spoke is the direct ancestor of the original Germanic language which eventually emerged in northern Europe. So that makes this Usatovo dialect the ancient ancestor of English as well.

So let's take a look at what we know about these people. First, let's get a handle on the specific area I'm talking about. If you think of the Black Sea as a clock, these people lived at around 10 or 11 o'clock near the mouth of the Dniester River in and around modern-day Odessa. This puts them near the southernmost portion of modern Ukraine and in and around modern-day Moldavia and eastern Romania. Now, as you move westward from the Black Sea, the elevation rises as you move toward the Carpathian Mountains. And this Usatovo culture extended from the low-lying steppe region near the Black Sea westward into some of those higher elevations of the eastern Carpathian mountains.

As I said, this culture began to emerge around 3500 BC, a few centuries after the first group of Indo-Europeans – believed to be the ancestors of the Hittites – swept through the area on their way to modern-day Turkey. And not surprisingly given the location of this region, this new culture appears to have been a bit of a hybrid culture – a kind of mixture between the Balkan farmers to the south and the Indo-European herders to the north. Based upon archaeological research, the people who lived closer to the Black Sea in the lowland steppe region were herders much like the other Indo-Europeans to the north. But inland, in the upland regions of the Balkans, it appears that those people practiced grain farming.

There are about 50 known Usatovo sites which have been excavated in this region. Based upon artifacts found in graves, archaeologists have confirmed that these people used bronze daggers and axes. So this was a Bronze Age society.

And based on bone evidence, it appears that their economy depended on sheep and goats, but especially sheep. And this suggests that they were raising sheep for wool. Evidence of looms appears more predominantly in the upland areas, suggesting that the steppe farmers closer to the sea were raising the sheep and the upland people converted it to textiles. And pottery impressions also indicate the presence of wheat, barley, millet, oats and peas. Archaeologists have also unearthed tools used in harvesting cereals. So this is the first evidence of cereal cultivation this far north in this region of the steppes. So as I said, we do have some basic agriculture in place here. And this was likely an extension of the Balkan farming settlements to the south. The pottery made by the Usatovo culture has the shape of the upland region, but it was often decorated like the steppe pottery. And a white glass bead found at a Usatovo site is the oldest known glass object in the Black Sea region and perhaps the entire ancient world. It was almost certainly imported though. In fact, some of the pottery and other objects have been unearthed in the area have been identified as being from the Aegean region and Anatolia including perhaps the original site of the ancient city of Troy. And this suggests that trade was also very important for these people.

Now I mentioned earlier that as you move westward from the Black Sea, you encounter the Carpathian Mountains. But I should mention one other thing about that particular mountain range, notably the way that mountain range is shaped. Again, this is one of those points when reference to a map would probably help, and you can find one at [HistoryofEnglishPodcast.com](http://HistoryofEnglishPodcast.com). Just click Episode 11. But if you look at a map of the Carpathian Mountains in relation to the Black Sea, something very obvious will appear. The mountain basically forms a wedge shape just to the west of the Black Sea. It basically means that any westward moving tribe has to either

move northwestward around the north side of the mountain range or has to move southward underneath the south side of the mountain range through the Balkans and into the Aegean region.

And this basic fact of geography probably accounts for the ultimate split of the various Indo-European tribes as they moved westward.

So as we look at the Usatovo Culture, I mentioned that the culture existed near the mouth of the Dniester River. And the Dniester River extends northwestward along the northern side of the Carpathian Mountains. And this appears to be the avenue for the spread of the Usatovo dialect into central Europe.

Over time, the Usatovo dialect spread up the Dniester River along the northern side of the Carpathian Mountains. It eventually spread into the region where modern-day eastern Poland and western Ukraine meet – basically the middle of Eastern Europe. But the exact manner in which this happened is not known for certain. Trade was probably a factor because rivers were the ancient highways for trade, and that is true even to a certain extent today. And of course trade routes also often became migration routes. So the Dniester River helped to export these people and their dialects northwestward into northern Europe.

So as we turn our attention westward into the heart of central and western Europe, we should consider what was happening there around this same time period around 3500 BC. And the answer, unfortunately, is that there doesn't appear to be very much going on at all – at least as it relates to towns or civilization. Keep in mind that, compared to the Middle East and Egypt, most of central and western Europe was always a little late to the party when it came to things like agriculture, the Bronze Age, the Iron Age, cities, and so forth. So at this very early point, what little is known about most of central and western Europe comes from archaeological research.

Now archaeologists who have studied the earliest European cultures tend to divide Europe into two general groups during this period. In the far western parts of Europe, including modern France and Britain, they have identified a type of pottery shaped like beakers, and these people are often called the beaker people or 'bell beaker' people. And these people likely included the people who constructed Stonehenge in Britain, as well as many similar henges and monuments throughout this region. And that is actually an important point because I think we often associate Stonehenge with Celtic people, including the druids who were part of the Celtic culture. But remember that Stonehenge was built long before the Celtic people arrived. We've not even gotten to the Celtic speakers yet. So when the Celtic people eventually arrived in Britain many, many centuries later, they sort of adopted Stonehenge for religious and other ritual purposes. So the original construction of that monument dates all the way back to this original period of the bell beaker people.

Now in central, eastern and northern Europe, archaeologists have identified a completely different type of pottery which has cord-like designs wrapped around the outside. And these cultures are called the 'corded ware' cultures. Now the significance of these general groupings of pottery into separate cultures – the bell beaker people and the corded ware people – is that these particular types of pottery were spread over such a large region. And that suggests that there

was some general trade and communication amongst people over vast areas of Europe very early on. And that is why the same type of pottery exists over such a large area. And as I said, the cultures of central and eastern Europe are called 'corded ware' cultures. And it appears that the westward moving Indo-Europeans of the Usatovo culture which I mentioned earlier encountered the people of these early corded ware cultures in central and eastern Europe. And historians believe that the trade and migration routes which linked these corded ware communities also enabled the spread of these Usatovo people as they entered into and spread throughout this same region. Now, the exact nature of these links and the precise manner in which these pre-Germanic dialects spread throughout this region is not known for certain.

As is generally the case with the early Indo-European migrations, it is difficult to say how much of this represents a spread of a language and how much involved the actual migration or spread of people. As we know, or should know by now, language can expand by virtue of people learning the language. And economic power or trading power can be a factor in this spread. We see it in modern English today. So did these eastern European people learn this Usatovo dialect, or did people from this Usatovo region migrate westward into this territory. The answer is probably some combination of both. Trade was probably a major factor at work here. And these people migrated and traded up the Dniester River, and they probably established settlements along the way. And the language spread throughout this region as these people spread.

So while we have the Usatovo dialect spreading northwestward into northern Europe, we need to turn our attention back to the Black Sea for a moment. Because around this same time period, we may be able to trace the emergence of the first Indo-European tribes which eventually produced the Latin and Celtic languages.

Some linguists and archaeologists believe that a group of Indo-European-speaking herders began to move from the steppe region north of the Black Sea down through the Usatovo territory we just talked about during its earliest phases of existence. And these herders continued this trek southwestward around the Black Sea eventually settling around the Danube on the western Black Sea. This migration stream then continued up the Danube Valley into the Carpathian Basin.

Remember that the Carpathian Mountains created this wedge shape which I mentioned earlier. And that tended to force migrating tribes either northwestward or southward from the Black Sea region. And whereas the Usatovo dialects took the northern trek into northern Europe, these other migrating tribes apparently took the southern route around the southern side of the Carpathian Mountains and then westward along the Danube. The general time frame here is around 3100 BC to 2800 BC. As I said, some linguists and historians believe these tribes may have been the ancestors of the Italic-speakers in Italy (including Latin) and the later Celtic branches of the Indo-European family tree.

Again, there is no consensus here. Other experts believe the early Italic and early Celtic branches separated much later, perhaps as an offshoot of the early Greek tribes who eventually settled into Greece. But regardless, it does appear that these three groups – the early Greeks, the early Latin-speakers and the early Celts – they all took a southward track along the Danube in contrast to the pre-Germanic Usatovo people who took the northwestern track along the Dniester River. And

this may help to explain why the early sound shifts that we know as Grimm's Law, which I discussed in an earlier episode, are found in and throughout the Germanic languages, but they are not present in the Latin, Greek or the Celtic languages. So again, this early split and division may account for some of that.

Now is a good time for a quick look around to see what else was going on. And around this same time frame, say around 3100 BC, we start to see the earliest Egyptian civilization starting to emerge from farming settlements along the Nile. So again, we are at the cusp of civilization here.

Now you may have also noticed that all of the various Indo-European groups that I've mentioned up to this point are Centum-speaking groups. The Hittites in Turkey, the Tocharians in western China, the early Germanic dialects spreading into northern Europe, the ancestors of the Latin, Greek and Celtic dialects which were moving into the Danube valley south of the Carpathian Mountains. All of these are Centum languages.

Within a couple of centuries, say around 2800 BC, linguists think we finally get the split between the Centum and Satem language groups. And it probably happened when a division occurred within this same western steppe region near or around where the Usatovo culture was located. It appears that one group began a migration northward and eastward. This was the Satem branch, and the speakers of this branch soon developed a sound shift from the 'k' sound to the 's' sound which marks the distinction between these two general groups. And the tribes within this Satem-speaking group soon divided again with some of the Indo-Europeans remaining in northern Europe as the ancestors of the Baltic and Slavic languages.

Meanwhile, some of the tribes within this group migrated eastward along the steppes and eventually migrated around the Caspian Sea and settled in modern Iran and northern India. These were the ancestors of the tribes who brought the Indo-Iranian languages to central Asia, all of which are Satem languages as you will recall.

So we have now accounted for all of the major pieces of the puzzle. And let me reiterate this is one view of those events. Once again, I am relying in part on David Anthony's book, *The Horse, The Wheel and Language*, for part of the sequence and time frame that I'm discussing here. But there is really no consensus of opinion as to the exact timing and order of these events.

Now as we look at northern Europe, remember we have the so-called Corded Ware people who made a particular type of pottery with cord-like designs. And these corded-ware cultures existed throughout northern Europe in the region north of the Carpathian mountains. But from the east, we are getting migrations of Indo-Europeans. And this includes the pre-Germanic people from the Usatovo region. And now it includes the ancestors of the Baltic and Slavic speakers which are part of that original Satem group.

All of these northward and westward moving Indo-European people met and traded with the Corded Ware people in the Carpathian foothills, and that facilitated the spread of those Indo-European dialects throughout this region. And eventually these dialects coalesced into the Slavic and Baltic languages in the east and the original Germanic language in and around Scandinavia.

Archaeologists have noted that during this period many of these Corded Ware people began to adopt many of the cultural and economic features of the Indo-Europeans. For example, they adopted a pastoral, herding economy like the Indo-Europeans. And they began to adopt certain funeral rituals associated with the Indo-Europeans. So what we are seeing here is likely a blending of cultures and peoples. But the language and dialects of the Indo-Europeans would emerge as the dominant languages. And other native languages tended to disappear.

We may never know exactly why this happened. But I alluded to some of the possible factors in the last episode. Indo-European speech might have been emulated because the chiefs who spoke it had larger herds of cattle and sheep, and they had more horses than the peoples of northern Europe. The Indo-Europeans also had growing populations due to more efficient herding and the invention of dairy farming. Remember that most of Europe was very sparsely populated at this time, so even modest population advantages could overwhelm many of the native cultures in Europe.

But beyond the economic and population advantages, there was a definite military advantage as well. The culture of the Indo-Europeans allowed and embraced territorial expansion. When it came to raiding and warfare, the Indo-Europeans had major advantages because they had domesticated and could ride horses. And they appear to have blended their mastery of horses and wheeled wagons into the creation of chariots for use in warfare and raiding. In fact, chariot technology is generally considered to be another innovation of these Indo-European herders around this same time period. If they didn't actually invent the chariot, and there is some dispute about that, they certainly perfected it.

At around 2500 BC, horses were still rarely found in much of central Europe, the Middle East and the Indian subcontinent. So the Indo-European tribes who were migrating into new areas had massive advantages due to their ability to ride horses and especially their ability to engage other tribes with horse-drawn chariots. This technology made the Indo-European tribes a formidable force. Horse-drawn chariots could literally run circles around their opponents with one person driving the chariot and another launching arrows. Of course, the chariot technology was quickly adopted throughout the western world, but initially it gave the Indo-Europeans a major military advantage.

Again the exact details of the spread of the Indo-Europeans are not entirely known, and may never be completely known. But we can say with some certainty that the dialects of these people were spreading throughout Europe and Central Asia during this time period.

So to the north, we have the early ancestors of the Germanic-speaking tribes taking position in northern Europe around Scandinavia. And the early ancestral Baltic and Slavic languages are settling in and taking over most of eastern Europe.

And the eastern branch of those Satem-speaking tribes continued to migrate eastward around the east side of the Caspian Sea into central Asia. The ancestors of the Indo-Iranians brought their horse-drawn chariots with them and that was definitely part of the reason why they spread so far



and so fast over this region. And they eventually established the Persian Empire and the early Indus civilization in India.

So that leaves us with those tribes which I mentioned earlier who traveled southwest around the Black Sea to the region south of the Carpathian Mountains in the Danube Valley. They had made this trek a few centuries before. And it appears that they had settled in this region for a while. And these appear to be the ancestors of the Celtic-speaking tribes and the Italic-speaking tribes which will eventually produce Latin. There are some strong linguistic similarities between Latin and Celtic and, as a result, many linguists have always believed that the early ancestors of those language families were either part of the same group or they lived in close proximity to each other. And it was around this time, around 2800 BC, that some of the tribes within this group in the Danube Valley began to spread northward from modern Hungary into modern Austria and Bavaria. And these were the ancestors of the Celtic speakers. And their linguistic descendants would eventually come to dominate much of central and western Europe.

Meanwhile, some of those Indo-European speaking tribes remained in Hungary, and they did not make the trek into Austria and Bavaria. These tribes eventually migrated westward and then southward down into Italy. And these Italic tribes were the ancestors of the Italic branch, and thus were the ancestors of Latin-speaking tribes which will eventually emerge in Italy.

And also around this same frame, say around 2500 BC, the ancestors of the Greeks separated from the main group of Indo-Europeans and began to migrate southward toward modern Greece. So by this point, all of the actors have either taken the stage or they're on the way to the theater.

The next step here is the actual emergence of the various dialects in the areas where they would become known to the modern world.

By 2000 BC, the Hittites had penetrated into Anatolia where they soon established the Hittite Empire. And within a century or so, the early Hittite language and other Anatolian languages were being spoken in Anatolia – modern-day Turkey.

Around the same time, the first ancestors of the Greeks began arriving in Greece where they encountered an existing non-Indo-European civilization on the island of Crete which was the Minoan civilization. But within a couple of more centuries, the earliest Greek dialect – the Mycenaean Greek dialect – was being spoken throughout mainland Greece and the small islands surrounding it. But the Minoan civilization was still in place in Crete. But eventually, those Mycenaean Greeks settled in and overtook the Minoan civilization in Crete. At which point, we have the early Indo-European Greek language spread throughout the entire territory of Greece.

A century or so later, say around 1500 BC, Sanskrit writing had appeared in northern India, and the Balto-Slavic languages were being spoken in eastern Europe.

By about 1200 BC, the early Iranian languages were being spoken east of the Caspian Sea. And over in Italy, the earliest Italic languages were being spoken including the early versions of Latin.

But it is not until around 500 BC, several centuries later, that we can finally confirm that the earliest Germanic dialects were being spoken in and around Scandinavia in Northern Europe.

So now all of the players are in place. And interestingly, those early Germanic dialects are some of the last attested Indo-European languages – certainly in Europe. Like I said, the date at which we can actually confirm that Germanic dialects were on the ground and being spoken in Scandinavia is around 500 BC. But the Germanic dialects didn't just pop up around that date. There was a continuous evolution of the original Indo-European language into that Usatovo dialect, then mixing with the languages of the Corded Ware people, and eventually emerging as the Germanic dialects in northern Europe. But beyond those general statements, there is just not enough evidence to give any specific time frame or exact sequence of events to describe how we got there. Like much of the story of the Indo-European migrations, historians think they know where it all began, and they know where the languages ended up, they just have to fill in the middle part as best they can. So we'll just have to leave it at that for now.

So with all of the pieces in place, we can now start to focus in on each of the language families which directly influenced English. In the next episode, I am going to start with the Hittites and the Greeks. Now the Hittite language didn't really have any direct impact on English, but Greek certainly did. And the early history of these two people are intertwined. So next time we are going to focus on the eastern Mediterranean. And we will see how the early Greeks emerged to establish a culture and a language which heavily influenced the entire Western world. And they also did something very important to all language historians. They reduced their language to writing and wrote extensively in an alphabet that we still use today, albeit in a modified form. So next time we will look at the Greek influence on English. And we'll jump back into the language itself and see how Greek is still reflected in Modern English.

So until next time, thank for listening to the History of English Podcast.