THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 25: GERMANIC MARKINGS AND THE RUNES

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Welcome to the History of English podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 25: Germanic Markings and the Runes. In this episode, we're going to continue to look at the early Germanic tribes. But this time around, we're going to focus on events in southern Germania. We're going to look at the southward migration of Germanic tribes to the Danube region – where they met the Romans and eventually met the alphabet. So for the first time, we can begin to examine the language of the early Germans in their own written words.

But before I begin, let me remind you that the History of the Alphabet series is still available. You can get it through iTunes, Amazon.com and the website for the podcast, HistoryofEnglishPodcast.com. And also, I wanted to confirm that you can use a credit card to purchase the alphabet series through the website. At check out, there is a 'Checkout with PayPal' button, but if you click that, you have the option of paying with a credit card if you prefer.

And speaking of the alphabet, let's talk about Germanic writing. Because in this episode, we're going to move the story of the Germanic tribes forward a century or so – to the time when the early Germanic languages met the alphabet.

But before I jump into this topic, I wanted to mention that I am going to take about the Goths in the next episode. I had planned on discussing them this time, but I'm just not going to have time to do it. And the Goths are so important to the overall story of the Germanic tribes that they really need their own episode anyway. So next time, we'll talk about the Goths.

But this time, we're going to focus on the Germanic runes which is the earliest known type of writing in the Germanic languages. And that means we have detailed written evidence of the Germanic languages which allows us to explore how they were using their words.

But in order to understand how writing was adopted by the early Germans, we have to turn our attention southward – down to the region around the River Danube. Because it was in this region where the illiterate Germans met the literate Romans and Greeks. And just as we've seen before, writing was an acquired skill, and it was almost always acquired through trade and contact with people who had already mastered it. And that was what happened here as well.

Now geography is kind of important to this episode, so I think its helpful to begin by looking at the general location of the Germanic tribes in the first couple of centuries AD because the movement and migration of these tribes is a big part of this story.

So let's get the lay of the land, and let's begin by looking to the south to the River Danube. The Danube originates in the Black Forest region in southern Germany, and from there it flows north of the Alps in an eastward direction though modern Austria, Hungary, Bulgaria and Romania, and several other countries, before it eventually empties into the Black Sea. The name ***Danube*** actually originated from an Indo-European root word – ***Danu*** – which probably meant 'river' in the original Indo-European language. And of course the river takes us back to the Balkan region near the origin of the original Indo-European tribes.

The importance of the Danube for our story is that it generally marked the northern border of the Roman Empire, and it was therefore the northern border of the literate world. The area north of the Danube was 'barbarian' territory as far as the Romans were concerned. And we also know that this region north of the Danube was initially occupied by Celtic-speaking tribes. In fact, the Celts are the Indo-European-speakers who gave us the name ***Danube***. The original Indo-European word ***Danu*** passed through the Celtic languages and became the name of the river. But now, during the first century AD or Common Era, many of these Celtic tribes had been overtaken or displaced by Germanic tribes from the north.

And the best evidence we have of this comes from our old friend Tacitus. The last portion of Germania is a general description of the various Germanic tribes, including the general location of the tribes. And this description provides a nice snapshot of the tribes at this point late in the first century.

Tacitus begins his description in the west where he describes the various tribes along the Rhine. And that's kind of important to us because that's the area where the later Anglo-Saxons lived. Specifically, this is the West Germanic region of the Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Franks and the Jutes. But what's really interesting about Tacitus is that he barely mentions those names at all. So it appears that during the time of Tacitus the names of the tribes in this region were quite different from the names that would emerge just a couple of centuries later. For example, he doesn't mention the Franks or the Saxons at all. And those will soon become two of the most important and powerful Germanic tribes in the north. So it appears that the smaller tribes described by Tacitus later coalesced into larger tribes, including the Franks and the Saxons.

Tacitus does make one passing mention of a tribe called the Anglii in this general region, and the Anglii were probably the ancestors of the later Angles. But that's about it as far the Anglii are concerned. Tacitus also briefly mentions the Frisii which was the tribe that occupied the region that came to be known as Frisia along the coast of the modern Netherlands. And as you may recall, the later Frisians were neighbors of the Anglo-Saxons, and there were probably a significant number of Frisians who joined in the later Anglo-Saxon migrations to Britain.

But at this early date, the tribe known as the Frisii may not have been the same tribe which would later be called the Frisians. The early Frisii tribe had came under Roman rule by this point. And eventually the Romans expelled many of the Frisii from the region, and later flooding displaced most of the rest. So this area of Frisia was largely abandoned for a while. But shortly before the Anglo-Saxons migrations to Britian, this area began to be repopulated. It was these later inhabitants who became known as the Frisians, and their name was probably taken from this early Frisii tribe mentioned by Tacitus We don't know if any of the original Frisii stuck around to become part of the later Frisian tribe. It actually appears that most of the members of the later Frisian tribe came from neighboring tribes, especially the Angles and Saxons. And that's part of the reason why the language of the Frisians was so closely related to the language of the early Anglo-Saxons. And it's also why we can still consider the modern Frisian language in the Netherlands to be the closest thing we have to a sister-language of English. But as far as the original Frisii tribe is concerned, they're probably the source of the name ***Frisia***. But beyond that, we really can't say very much about them.

Now after looking at the tribes along the Rhine, Tacitus turns his attention to the south – to the tribes along the Danube. And according to Tacitus, there was a mixture of Celtic and Germanic tribes in this region during the later portion of the first century. As we know, all of central Europe had once been dominated by Celtic tribes. But as the Germanic tribes moved southward, they displaced the Celtic tribes. And by the time of Tacitus, some of those Germanic tribes had already settled in the southern portion of Germania along the Danube, and therefore along the border with the Romans.

But Tacitus tells us that there were still Celtic-speaking tribes in the western portion of the Danube Region in the region which contains the source of the Rhine and the Danube, so basically southwestern Germany. And he also mentioned that Celtic-speaking tribes further east along the Danube nearer the Black Sea, so basically the region of modern-day Hungary and Romania. So we still have Celtic tribes hanging on in those regions of the Danube.

But in between those tribes, the Germanic tribes had taken over. Specifically, the two tribes in this region were called the Marcomanni and the Quadi. In terms of location, this was the region north of the Danube – in the Bavarian region of southeastern Germany and in the western Czech Republic.

Now these two Germanic tribes – the Marcomanni and the Quadi – were amassing a great deal of power around the time of Tacitus. The Marcomanni were the dominant tribe, and the Quadi were a smaller tribe in the same region. The name of the Marcomanni was a combination of two early Germanic words. The word ***marko*** meant borderland. And ***manni*** meant 'men,' which is actually the same root as the modern word ***men***. So ***Marcomanni*** literally meant 'border men' or 'people of the borderlands or frontier.' And that's exactly what they were. They were living at the edge of the German frontier in the south along the Danube.

Now the Germanic word ***marko*** meaning 'borderland' can still be found in modern English if we look for it. For example, we see it when we refer to 'the Welch Marches.' And it is also the root of the name of the later Anglo-Saxon kingdom of ***Mercia***, which we'll talk about when we get to the Anglo-Saxons. It's also the root of the Modern English word ***mark***, as in 'to place a mark on something.' It probably originated in the sense of marking or labeling a boundary between one side and another side. And it later took on a much more general sense meaning any kind of impression. And the noun ***mark*** later became a verb, as in 'to mark something up or down' like sales prices. In Middle English, the sense of the work ***mark*** shifted again and it came to mean a 'target,' as in 'hit the mark' meaning 'hit the target.' And someone who could do that was a ***marksman***. And if I make a verbal note about something, I make a ***remark***. And of course we have ***earmarks***, ***bookmarks***, ***watermarks***, ***birthmarks*** and ***question marks***. An object which was set up on the land near the border was called a ***landmark***. A line which marks a border is sometimes called a line of ***demarcation*** from a Spanish borrowing of the same Germanic word. The home of Danish people who lived in the border region of northern Europe came to be called ***Denmark*** meaning the 'Danes in the border region.'

So all of these words come from that original Germanic word ***marko*** meaning 'border.' By the way that Germanic word has Indo-European roots, and the original Indo-European root word produced a Latin word ***marca*** and a later variation ***margo***. Those Latin words give us English words like ***margin***, again meaning the 'border or edge of something.'

The later French gave titles of nobility to the people who rules the frontier regions. This was the title of ***Marquis*** which later came to England as ***Marquess***. The French also used that term ***marquis*** to describe a linen canopy placed over an officer's tent. American English later borrowed the use of that term to refer to a canopy placed over the entrance to a theater or hotel.

So that Germanic word ***marko*** and it's Latin cognate ***marca*** have given us a lot of words in Modern English. And it gave us the name of this ancient Germanic tribe – the ***Marcomanni*** – which meant 'frontier people.' And that meant they were living at the southern edge of the Germanic world near the Danube.

Now at the time of Tacitus, the Marcomanni and the Quadi had only been in this region of the Danube for a short period of time. They had actually forced out a native Celtic tribe when they arrived. The Celtic tribe was called the Boii.

And as these Germanic tribes moved in from the north, they began to call this land the ***Boio-heim***, which meant the 'home of the Boii.' And the name ***Boio-heim*** eventually became ***Bohemia***. And of course, from ***Bohemia*** we get the later term ***bohemian***. That term ***bohemian*** was actually coined by the Medieval French, and it was used in reference to the people who were called ***gypsies*** which is now generally considered a pejorative term. But the French thought that these people originated in this region known as ***Bohemia*** along the Danube. And that is the context in which the term ***bohemian*** came to mean someone who is unconventional or is a nonconformist. So the word ***bohemian*** ultimately comes from the name of this Celtic tribe – the Boii. And that word reflects a time when Celtic tribes were still living north of the Danube.

But now, this region of Bohemia was occupied by Germanic tribes – the Marcomanni and the Quadi. And the Marcomanni weren't really interested in stopping at the Danube. They had their sights set on the Roman territory across the river to the south. And they got their opportunity around the year 166. In that year, Roman legions were returning from fighting in the Eastern Mediterranean. But when they returned, they brought a deadly plague back with them. This wasn't the later Bubonic Plague. It was an earlier plague of either smallpox or measles. But it was devastating nevertheless. At one point, it was killing 2,000 people a day in Rome. Estimates are that about 5 million people died from this plague over a period of 14 years. The plague didn't discriminate. It killed Roman soldiers as well as Roman civilians. It probably caused the death of the Roman Emperor Lucius Verus. And one of the consequences of all of this death was a severely weakened Roman army along the Danube and elsewhere.

It was at this point that that Germanic tribe on the north side of the Danube – the Marcomanni – saw their opportunity to take advantage of the situation in Rome. They formed a very loose alliance which included that other tribe – the Quadi – as well as some other Germanic tribes. And at various times over the next several years, those tribes began to cross the Danube into

Roman territory. From around the year 166 until 180, the Romans fought back under the leadership of Marcus Aurelius. Today, these are known as the Marcomannic Wars. And the Romans were ultimately successful in turning back those Germanic tribes.

Years later, these Germanic tribes migrated out of this region known as Bohemia, and they traveled westward along the Danube into what is today southeastern Germany. As these people arrived in the upper Danube region, they were called the ***Bojovares***, which meant 'Bohemians' or 'people from the land of the Boii.' The land where the Bojovares settled in southern Germany became known as ***Bajovaria***. And eventually it came to be called ***Bavaria***. So the word ***Bavarian*** is actually cognate with the word ***Bohemian***. Both names come from the name of a Celtic tribe – the Boii. And so, just like the terms ***Teutonic*** and ***Germanic***, ***Bavarian*** also has its roots in the name of a Celtic tribe that once occupied the region along the Danube.

Now the events which I just described – the Marcomannic Wars – were extremely important in the ultimate relationship between the Germans and the Romans. Ever since their defeat at the Battle of Teutoberg Forest over a century and half earlier, the Romans had allowed the Rhine and the Danube to serve as the border between Rome and Germania. But now, the Germans had shown that those rivers weren't enough to prevent an invasion into Roman territory. The Marcomannic Wars exposed a major weakness in Roman defenses. And afterwards, the Romans stationed half of their legions along the Rhine and the Danube to try to contain the Germans. But as we know, this was only the beginning. The Romans would spend much of the next 3 centuries trying to repel those invading Germanic tribes. And in order to do that, the Romans had to withdraw their forces from far-flung places like Britain. And of course, that opened the door for the Anglo-Saxons to fill the power vacuum left by the departing Romans. So all of these pieces are connected, and they ultimately play a part in the arrival of Anglo-Saxon dialects in Britain in the fifth century.

So after the Marcomannic Wars, the Romans attempted to shore up their defenses along the Rhine and the Dunube. And since the Roman army had been severely weakened by disease, they began to rely more and more upon the service of mercenaries. And many of these Roman mercenaries were Germans from the other side of the border. Occasionally, the Romans even allowed Germanic tribes to cross the border and settle in Roman territory in exchange for their agreement to defend the border against other Germanic tribes. This was basically the later agreement between the Romans and the Franks in the northern Rhine region. So from this point on, the relationship between the Romans and Germans becomes more complicated, and it also becomes more intimate. The Romans weren't just fighting the against the Germans, they were now routinely fighting with them as well. And of course they were actively trading with the Germans at the same time.

So we're now seeing more and more contacts between the Romans and the Germans. And as these contacts increased, we see more and more goods passing back and forth between them. And as I mentioned in earlier episodes, we see words passing between them as well. But we also start to see certain skills passing back and forth. And one of those skills was writing.

Just as the Greeks had borrowed the alphabet from the Phoenicians, and then the Etruscans borrowed it, and then the Romans borrowed it, now it was time for the Germans to borrow it. But this time, it happened in different ways, at different times and at different places.

No one knows exactly when the alphabet first passed to the Germans. But it probably happened very early on in the region between the Danube and northern Italy.

A few episodes back I mentioned a helmet that was discovered in modern-day Slovenia in an area between Northern Italy and the Danube. It contained the first known Germanic inscription, and it was apparently written in a version of the later Etruscan alphabet. A version of that alphabet had begun to spread north into the Alps and the surrounding areas. And this helmet which dates to the second century BC probably represents the earliest contact between Germanic speaking peoples and alphabet. But the inscription on the helmet is in a later version of the Etruscan alphabet, so it is not runes. Now some scholars believe this inscription represents an early version of the runic symbols. But that has never been definitively confirmed.

Even if the inscriptions on this particular helmet are not runes, it seems likely that that northern Etruscan alphabet was gradually being borrowed by Germanic tribes in this region between northern Italy and the Danube. The Etruscan alphabet was being used by people in this region. And it appears that the early Germans picked up this script through trade and other contacts around the first couple of centuries BC. The letters of this alphabet were already angular, but the Germans made some modifications to make the script even easier to carve into wood and bone. Specifically, they straightened the lines to make them easier to carve. And this was the beginning of the collection of symbols which we know today as the Germanic runes.

In addition to certain similarities between the Etruscan letters and the Germanic runic symbols, there is also a similarity in writing-style. Many runic inscriptions used the back-and-forth writing style which was common among the later Etruscans. So for example, some inscriptions go from left to right on one line, and then right to left on the next, and then back to left to right, and so on. This style of writing was also used for a period of time by the Greeks and the Romans. It basically represents a transitional period of writing as these early people were shifting from the right-to-left style of writing use by the Semitic people to the left-to-right style which we use in the west today. So given that these early Germanic runic inscriptions often did the same thing, that suggests that the symbols were borrowed from one of these alphabetic scripts – with Etruscan being the most likely source.

I should also note that some historians have noted similarities between the runic symbols and the early Greek and Roman versions of the alphabet. So even though the Etruscan alphabet is the most likely source given the geography and the archaeological evidence, we can't rule out the possibility that the early Greek or Roman alphabet was either the original source or a contributing source.

Now even though it appears that one or more early Germanic tribes began to borrow the Etruscan alphabet during the pre-Christian era, we don't actually find evidence of the actual Germanic runic symbols until the second century AD – a few decades after the time of Tacitus.

So the fact is that we have this gap of two or three hundred years between the Slovenian helmet and the first runic inscriptions in Europe. The fact that we have this gap means that there is no physical evidence which enables historians to follow the evolution of the script during this period. And that's why there is still some debate as to the ultimate origin of the runes.

But why does this a gap exist? Why haven't archaeologists been able to find the missing link between the Etruscan script and the runes. Well, the answer probably lies in the material which was used and also in the fact that runic inscriptions were used on a very limited basis.

The early runes were mostly written on wood. And over time, the wood rotted and decayed. So very few runic inscriptions survived. And most of the ones that did survive come from a later period when they were engraved on stone or metal objects. About 5,000 runic inscriptions survive today, most in Scandinavia. Only about 70 survive from Anglo-Saxon Britain. But over 95% of all surviving inscriptions date from a period after 550 AD. Scholars have estimated that there are no more than 125 surviving inscriptions from before this date. And most of those only contain one or two words.

Interestingly, the first inscriptions which can be clearly identified as runes appear in northern Europe, not in the Danube region. So the thought is that the earlier runic inscriptions from the Danube region were mostly carved on wood and therefore haven't survived the centuries. Over a period of several centuries the runic writing spread northward. And eventually, it became more common to carve runes into stone and metal. So these later stone and metal inscriptions in the north survive, but those earlier wooden carvings in the south are largely gone.

Now ***rune*** is a Germanic word which meant either 'secret' or 'scratchings.' And as we know by now, they were originally markings on wood or stone. And we know where the word ***mark*** comes from thanks to our earlier discussion about the Marcommani tribe. So the runes were 'markings' consisting of specific 'marks' which were derived from contacts with literate people on the 'marches' or 'margins' of the Germanic world. And this contact may have included Germanic tribes like the 'Marcomanni.' And since this was the beginning of Germanic writing, that makes it a landmark event. All of that thanks to the original Germanic word for borderland or frontier.

Now as I noted, the early runes were used to write inscriptions consisting of one or two words. And scholars have noted that some words occur over and over again. One of those words is ***alu***. This word probably derived from the Indo-European root word ***al*** which meant to 'grow or nourish.' That Indo-European root word passed into Latin, and you might remember from an earlier episode that it produced the word ***alescere*** meaning 'to grow or nourish' in Latin. Well, that word produced later English words like ***adolescent*** and ***adult***. But that some Indo-European root word ***al*** also passed into the Germanic languages where it eventually produced the modern English word ***old***. So ***adolescent***, ***adult*** and ***old*** are all cognate thanks to that common Indo-European root. Well it is believed that this common runic inscription ***alu*** is derived from the same root. And in this context, it was probably used to refer to something 'strong' or 'powerful' like a fully grown person, as opposed to a child. And linguists think that this word connotes a sense of security or protection when it is used in these early inscriptions.

Another common word found in these runic inscriptions is the word ***lauka***. And this was a word which meant onion or garlic. And we still have that word in modern English in the word ***leek***. It is also part of our modern word ***garlic***. The ***gar*** part meant 'spear,' and it comes from the fact that a garlic clove is pointed like a spear. And of course the second part is ***lic*** which comes from that same root ***lauka*** which also gives us the word ***leek***.

So why would the Germanic inscriptions regularly use this word ***lauka*** meaning onion or garlic?

Well, apparently the early Germans thought onions and garlic had magical properties. It could fend off evil spirits. So they would often wear a clove of garlic around their neck. But in later times, they would simply engrave the word for garlic – ***lauka*** – on a piece of wood or metal or bone. And they would wear that around their neck instead. After all, it didn't go bad like actual onion or garlic, but apparently it had the same mystical properties since it was the word for 'onion or garlic.' And that's kind of amazing in itself – the fact that a written word for an object had the same properties as the object itself. And it shows a very advanced use of the written language by the early Germans. Of course, the idea that garlic fends off evil spirits has passed down to us today thanks to the stories vampires like Dracula and, more recently, Edward Cullen. And where was Dracula from? Transylvania – in modern-day Romania just north of the Danube River.

And if I had two hours for this episode, I would point out the connections between dark, brooding vampires and the so-called Goth look. Which takes us back, at least linguistically, to the Goths. And the Goths also controlled this same region of Romania along the Danube. So there are lots of connections here if we look for them. But we'll have to save the Goths for next time.

Now let's focus on the actual runic symbols. There were 24 symbols in the early runic 'alphabet' – if we can call it that. And in fact, this collection of symbols is named in the same manner that we name our alphabet. The word ***alphabet*** is named after the first two letters in the Greek alphabet – alpha and beta. Sometimes we also call it the ABCs. So we use the first few letters for the name of entire collection of letters. And the name of the collection of runic symbols is derived the same way.

The first six symbols represent the F sound (/f/), the U sound (/oo/), the TH sound (/th/), the A sound (/ah/), the R sound (/r/), and the K sound (/k/). And when we put those together, it produced the word ***futhark***. And that's the name of the runic alphabet. By the way, the specific order of the runes is established by later runic poems and runic lists which have been discovered.

As linguists have analyzed the early runes from that period before 550 AD, they've concluded that the runes are very uniform as far the sounds they represent. In other words, they don't really observe regional variations . And that suggests that the languages of the Germanic tribes during this early period was still very common and uniform. Though regional dialects were almost certainly starting to emerge during this period, the runic inscriptions don't pick up on any of those differences. The one exception to this rule is the Gothic language in the eastern part of Germania.

Now as I noted earlier, I'm going to focus on the Goths and their language next time. But for now there is one aspect of the Gothic language that I want to look at. You may recall from the episode on Germanic Grammar that the original Germanic language had a sound that was somewhere between a sibilant 's' or 'z' sound and the 'r' sound. There was an earlier 'z' sound which eventually shifted to an 'r' sound. And this sound was right in the middle of that change during the early Germanic period.

And you might remember that we see remnants of that change in English in words like ***was*** and ***were*** – and ***most*** and ***more***. Well, that sound shift never happened in the Gothic language. The Goths retained that original 'z' sound, and it never shifted to an 'r' sound. And that's part of the reason why we know the eastern Germanic tribes like the Goths separated from the western and northern tribes pretty early on. Their language has some unique characteristics.

But when we look at the runic alphabet, we see two runic symbols which represent the 'r' sound. There is one symbol for traditional 'r' sound (and that's the 'r' sound in ***foothark*** which is the name of the runic alphabet). And there is also a separate symbol for a sound between the 'z' and the 'r' sounds which is called 'algiz.' This second symbol represents that in-between sound that was in transition between the original Germanic 'z' sound and the later 'r' sound. And the fact that this sound has its own rune is important for two reason. It tells us that that sound was in transition when the first Germans developed the runes. But it also tells us that the runes were developed by Germans speaking the western or northern dialects where this in-between sound existed. And so, we can reasonably conclude that the Gothic dialect had become distinct from the western and northern dialects by the time runic writing was developed. Because the runes reflect a sound shift that never happened in the east among the Goths.

By the way, there are two different runic symbols for the 'i' sound as well. And, from this, linguists have concluded that the early Germanic language had two separate 'i' sounds which later merged into a single 'i' sound by the middle of the first century, so around the time of Tacitus. And this is another piece of evidence that the first runes must date from this earlier period when the sounds were still distinct.

So these early runic inscriptions were very limited, consisting of only a word or two. Now the runes were basically an alphabet. So, theoretically, they could have been used to write anythin from complicated legal codes to religious texts to detailed histories. But they were never really used in that way. They were only used short marking and inscriptions. However, they did become more advanced over time. But by the time we get to the Anglo-Saxons around the seventh or eighth century, we can see much longer inscriptions.

One of the best examples of this is a runic inscription on an Anglo-Saxon cross called the Ruthwell Cross. It is located in modern-day Scotland , but during the time of the Anglo-Saxons the region was part of the Anglican Kingdom of Northumbria. The cross is a large stone cross which dates from the seventh or eighth century. And it contains inscriptions in both Latin and Germanic runes.

The runic symbols follow along the edges of the vertical base of the cross. The runic inscription is actually part of an Anglo-Saxon poem called "The Dream of the Rood." The poem describes the crucifixion of Christ from the perspective of the cross itself. And to get an idea of how detailed this inscription is, let me read a modern translation of the inscription. By the way, this translation comes via the BBC's website. And it reads:

God almighty stripped himself,
when he wished to climb the cross
bold before all men.
to bow I dared not,
but had to stand firm

I held high the great King,
heaven's Lord. I dared not bend.
Men mocked us both together.
I was slick with blood
sprung from the man's side.

Christ was on the cross.
But then quick ones came from afar,
nobles, all together. I beheld it all.
I was hard hit with grief; I bowed to the warriors' hands.

Wounded with spears,
they laid him, limb-weary.
At his body's head they stood.
There they looked to heaven's Lord

So from this inscription, you can see what the runes were capable of. Now Modern English is more 'wordy' than Old English. And by that I mean that Modern English translations often require a lot more words to express the same idea as the original Old English words. That's partly because English has lost a lot of those inflections which used to do so much work in Old English. So the actual inscription on the Ruthwell Cross is not as long as it may seem from the translation I just read to you. But it is still quite long nevertheless, and it is certainly much longer than those original one or two word inscriptions.

One last note about the runes before I conclude this episode. You may be wondering why all of this discussion of runes is so important to English. After all, we don't write with runes today. Well, the answer lies in the fact that the original Anglo-Saxons did use the runes. But more importantly, the original Old English alphabet mixed in letters derived from runes with the letters borrowed from the Romans. And that is another reason why it is so difficult to read Old English texts. They used a lot of letters which we don't use anymore. It wasn't until the Norman French arrived after 1066, that the runic letters began to be purged. The Normans had no use for the Germanic letters, so over a period of several centuries, they got rid of them. So you can still see some of these runic letters well into the Middle English period.

But those old runic letters do sometimes show up in Modern English in funny ways. For example, the Anglo-Saxons had two separate runic letters for the TH sound. They recognized certain differences in the TH sound. For example, the difference between ***the*** and ***thank***. The TH sound in ***thank*** is more pronounced, and the tongue moves forward between the teeth to achieve that sound. Well, this resulted into two different Old English letters. One of those letters was called ***thorn***. And it looked sort-of like a modern letter P. Just take the loop at the top of the P and slide it down the stem about half-way.

So the Old English version of the word ***the*** (T-H-E) was actually spelled 'thorn (þ) – E.' But after printing was developed in Europe and spread to the British Isles, the Medieval printers didn't have a letter for thorn. By this point the shape had evolved a little bit – becoming a little more angular and curvy. And the early printers thought it looked a lot like the early letter 'y.' So they just used the letter 'y' for the Old English letter 'þ.'

And we still see that when we see places named 'Ye Olde Shoppe' or whatever. The fact is that English never used the word ***ye*** as an article to mean ***the***. That's simply as mistake people have made through the years when they see the spelling 'Y-E'. They don't realize that the 'y' is supposed to represent the 'th' sound, and it's only there because printers didn't have that runic letter - þ.

So with that I'm going to conclude this episode about the Germanic runes. Next time, I'm going to finally focus on the Goths and their language. And I'm going to explore the Gothic language by comparing it to Old English. So I'm going to have to practice my Old English pronunciations before next time.

So until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.