

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 32:
THE OLDEST ENGLISH**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 32: The Oldest English. Over the past few episodes, we’ve looked at the gradual conquest of southern and central Britain by the Anglo-Saxons. This time, we’re going to begin looking at the Anglo-Saxons in the years at the end – or near the end – of the conquest. By the end of the sixth century, the Anglo-Saxons had established several independent kingdoms throughout southern and central Britain. And they were speaking a common language. So in this episode, we’ll look at these earliest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and their language which is the Oldest form of English.

Before I begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And a quick note about the other website – the podbean website – historyofenglispodcast.podbean.com. That site is still up, and I’m going to leave it up for now, but eventually I am going to discontinue that site. So I wanted to give you a ‘heads up’ if you happen to subscribe to the podcast through the podbean site. Of course, you can always subscribe through iTunes. And you can always listen through the main website which again is historyofenglishpodcast.com. So again, just a little note about that as we move forward.

OK, so let’s turn to this episode – to the earliest Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. And let’s begin by looking at the landscape of Britain at the end of the sixth century. For over a century and half, the Angles, Saxons, Jutes and Frisians had fought the native Britons for control of much of the island. The period from around the year 450 until around the year 600 was a transitional period in which the Anglo-Saxons killed, expelled and subjugated the native Britons. They began to farm the land. They built permanent settlements. And they established their own kingdoms in the process.

Early on, there were many different kingdoms – at least a dozen. But as we know, written sources from that period were so scarce that we can’t say very much with any certainty about the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms during that period. But by the beginning of the seventh century, the various kingdoms had begun to coalesce into seven distinct kingdoms. Modern historians refer to these seven kingdoms as the ‘heptarchy’ based on the Greek word for seven.’ In reality, the actual number of kingdoms varied a little bit over time since they often fought each other, and in the process, some of them were conquered or they fractured.

But for the most part, these kingdoms endured from the sixth century until the arrival of the Vikings late in the eighth century. At that point, all of this changed, and the various kingdoms began to coalesce into a single kingdom known as *Anglelond* – literally ‘Angle land’ – or as we would later now it, *England*. But for now, a few centuries earlier, the Anglo-Saxons were divided into several separate kingdoms.

As we look at these early kingdoms, we can use the River Thames as a landmark. The Thames runs in an eastward direction across southern Britain. Of course, along the way, it flows through London. As a very general rule, the Saxons settled in the region south of the Thames and the Angles settled in the region north of the Thames. And the Jutes settled in a small region around

the mouth of the river in the southeastern corner of Britain. Of course, the earliest settlements were not that precise. But those general settlement patterns meant that those specific groups were the dominant groups within those respective regions. So for example, there may have been a mixture of groups south of the Thames, but the Saxons were the dominant group there. So Saxon kings emerged as the leaders there. And the Saxon names and dialects dominated those regions as well. So over time, later people just thought of it as the Saxon region. And the same basic process happened north of the Thames with respect to the Angles.

So when we speak of the regions of the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes, we have to keep in mind that this is a bit of an oversimplification, and it reflects the long-term dominance of those particular groups within those regions over time.

And this is also very important from a linguistic perspective. Because it helps to explain why the language of the Anglo-Saxons was so uniform early on. No particular Germanic tribe or group remained in isolation long enough to preserve their own unique dialect. A blended language emerged very quickly, even though regional dialects did also exist. So the language of the Anglo-Saxons blended together, and it became distinct from the original languages back on the continent. This process also helps to explain how a common culture emerged very quickly on the island, even though the immigrants were composed of different Germanic tribes.

So let's look more closely at the various Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which emerged early on.

The Saxon region south of the Thames was divided into three separate kingdoms. The kingdom of the East Saxons was Essex. The kingdom of the South Saxons was Sussex. And the kingdom of the West Saxons was Wessex. Very early on, there was also likely a kingdom Middle Saxons in this same region. And that's ultimately the origin of the name *Middlesex* which still exists in the region today. Of course, all of these places had one thing in common – that ending 's-e-x' ending which meant 'Saxons,' and that is a strong indication that all of these were regions mainly settled and occupied by Saxons.

Throughout these various Saxon kingdoms in the south of Britain, it appears that a more or less common dialect was spoken. This is sometimes called the West Saxon dialect because the West Saxons eventually emerged as the most dominant group within this region. And in fact, the West Saxon dialect became the standard written dialect of Old English.

Now whereas the Saxons tended to settle south of the Thames, the Angles tended to settle to the north of the river. In the east were the Eastern Angles in the region which was called, appropriately enough, East Anglia. The East Angles were divided into two groups – the northern folk and the southern folk. And those terms eventually evolved into Norfolk and Suffolk – terms which still exist today.

Other Angles settled further inland in the central part of the island. The kingdom which emerged there was called Mercia. In Old English, it was called *Mierce*. The name was derived from the Germanic root word *marko* which meant 'border land'. And as we've seen in earlier episodes, that root word gave us modern words like *mark* and *marker*. And in the last episode, we saw

that the Franks gave us the word *march* from the same root word. And you might also remember that the early Germanic tribes called a tribal group along the Danube the *Marcomanni* meaning the ‘border men.’

Well, here the Angles used the same root word in the same way again. As the Angles gradually spread westward into central Britain, they came to be known as the *Mierce* (/me-air-kuh/) which meant ‘border people.’ But the ‘K’ sound changed in Old English. It shifted to a ‘C-H’ sound in a lot of words. So this region of central Britain came to be known as *Mierce* (/me-air-chuh/), and then later *Mercia* (/mer-see-ah/). But again, even though this was a border region from the perspective of the early Angles who had settled in the East, it was actually located in the center of the island between the Eastern Angles and the Welsh in the west. About a century or so later, this particular kingdom of Mercia would emerge as the dominant Anglo-Saxon kingdom in the period before the Vikings arrived.

Now linguistically, Mercia and East Anglia were very closely related. And historical linguists think that the people within the two kingdoms spoke a common dialect which is usually called *Mercian* because of the later dominance of the Mercians. So as the Angles spread westward from East Anglia, they took their dialect with them.

Now north of Mercia and East Anglia was another region settled by Angles. This region was located north of the River Humber. And accordingly, it was called *Northumbria* which meant ‘the people living north of the Humber.’ At one time, the term *Southumbria* was used to refer to the people who lived south of the Humber in northern Mercia, but that term eventually fell out of use. Early on, the kingdom of Northumbria was divided into even smaller kingdoms. But early in the seventh century, those separate kingdoms began to combine into a single entity.

Now even though the kingdom of Northumbria was settled by Angles, the dialects spoken in that region were distinct from the dialects spoken down in Mercia and East Anglia. So linguists refer to that particular Old English dialect as the Northumbrian dialect. But in situations where all of the Anglian dialects are the same, linguists will sometimes lump them together and refer to them collectively as the Anglian dialect.

So those were the kingdoms of the Angles and Saxons – three of each. But there was one other kingdom along the southeastern coast of England – near the mouth of the Thames. It was called Kent which was a name derived from an earlier Celtic name.

Now the later historian Bede attributed the settlement of Kent to the Jutes. And as I discussed in an earlier episode, many modern historians aren’t entirely sure if the people of this region came from the land of the Jutes in Denmark. The archaeological evidence shows a lot of Frankish influence in the region. So it could have been settled by Jutes who came directly from Denmark as Bede suggests. Or it could have been settled by Jutes who originated in Denmark but had settled in Gaul for a while before moving on to Britain. Or it could have simply had a ruling family which originated in the homeland of the Jutes, but the actual population could have been a mixture of peoples. This last option would make some sense because the location of Kent made it a center for trade and immigration. It was the closest point to northern Gaul being only about

50 miles or so across the channel. And since it was near the entrance of the Thames, which was the primary route to London and other places further inland, there was a lot of traffic through the region. And that traffic probably accounts for some of the continental artifacts found in that region.

Linguistically, Kent was somewhat unique. The dialect spoken there was distinct from the dialects spoken in the other regions, but it was definitely part of the same overall language which being spoken throughout the various kingdoms by this point in the early seventh century. The Old English dialect spoken in Kent is simply known as Kentish.

Now you may be wondering how modern linguists know that there were four distinct Old English dialects during this early period. Well, as writing was gradually introduced into these regions, various written documents began to pop up throughout the regions. And early on, there were no dictionaries. So there were no standard spellings. Words were spelled phonetically – exactly like they were pronounced. And since a lot of these early writings were religious in nature, we have different versions of the same text written in these various languages. And by comparing these texts, linguists can discern clear and consistent spelling differences between these various regions. And these differences reflect the variation in the dialects between these regions. And some of those differences persist to this day. In fact, Modern English dialects within Britain can vary tremendously from one region to the next. And some of that modern variation can be traced all the way back to these original dialect differences.

This was the basic state of things through the seventh and eighth centuries. Over time, the balance of power shifted from one kingdom to the next. But all of that changed with the arrival of the Vikings in the ninth century. The Vikings destroyed many of these kingdoms. It was kind of like knocking all of the pieces off the game board. But the West Saxon kingdom held on under its king Alfred. And afterwards, the various Anglo-Saxon people coalesced under the leadership of Alfred's successors. At that point, we finally have a single unified Anglo-Saxon kingdom. And since the West Saxons were the rulers, all of the government documents were written in the West Saxon dialect. And as a practical matter, the West Saxon dialect became the standard written version of Old English.

But the Mercian dialect dominated central England, including the areas around London. So Modern English pronunciation and grammar actually owes more to the Mercian dialect, but the written version of the language evolved out of the West Saxon dialect. This is just one of the weird aspects of English.

Now in reality, the reason why one dialect would serve as the root of spoken English and the other dialect would serve as the root of written English is because both of those dialects were so similar to each other. So it didn't really create any problems.

So for example, the original version of the word *old* was slightly different in the Anglian dialects north of the Thames and the Saxon dialects south of the Thames.

The Anglian version was *ald* – spelled A-L-D in documents from the Anglian regions. But the Saxon version was *eald* with a slightly different vowel pronunciation at the beginning. The Anglian version has a single vowel sound – ‘ah’. But in the Saxon version, the vowel is broken into two separate vowels – ‘ay’ and ‘ah.’ So instead of ‘ah,’ you get ‘ay-ah.’ And instead of ‘ald,’ you get ‘ay-ald.’ Linguists call this type of vowel a diphthong. And they were much more common in the West Saxon dialect than in the other dialects of Old English. And Old English spelling reflects that feature of the West Saxon dialect.

So for another example of this aspect of the West Saxon dialect, consider the original version of the word *next*. In the Anglian dialects, it was *nesta* (/nay-stah/). But in the West Saxon dialect it was *niehsta* (/nee-ay-stah/). So *nesta* (/nay-stah/) - *niehsta* (/nee-ay-stah/). You can hear that diphthong in the later West Saxon version. It’s subtle, but it’s there.

How about the word *well* as in a drinking well. The Anglian version was *welle* (way-luh), but the West Saxon version was *wielle* (we-ay-luh). So *welle* (way-luh) and *wielle* (we-ay-luh). Again, the difference is subtle, but the Anglian version is closer to Modern English because it doesn’t have that diphthong in it. But the standard Old English spelling reflects the West Saxon pronunciation.

One of the best examples of this is the word *yea* – as in the short form of *yes*. Now parents hate to hear their children say *yea* instead of *yes*, but *yea* is an old form of the word which has been around since these very first Anglo-Saxons. And it was once used very prominently. The Anglians pronounced it *ye* (/yay/), but the West Saxons pronounced it *yea* (‘yay-ah’).

Another good example of that is the word *year*. Our pronunciation today is closer to the Anglian pronunciation of *ger* (/yair/), but the West Saxon pronunciation was *gear* (/yay-arr/). But again, the Modern spelling has that E-A- in the middle – Y-E-A-R – and that reflects the diphthong in the West Saxon dialect.

And the word *milk* was pronounced almost exactly the same in the Anglian dialects as it is pronounced today. But the West Saxons pronounced it as *meoluc* (/may-oh-luc/).

The word *seventh* in the Anglian dialects was *seovunda*, but in the West Saxon dialect it was *seovotha*. So each had a different ending. And it was actually the West Saxon version which had the ‘TH’ sound which we still have today.

Another type of difference between these dialects was the vowel sound before an M or N sound. The Anglian dialects would sometimes precede those consonants with an O sound, but the West Saxons rarely did that. So the original version of the word *land* was *land* (/lahnd/) in the West Saxon dialect. And it was spelled just like we do today – L-A-N-D. But the Anglian dialects to the north pronounced the word as *lond* (/loh-nd/), and it was spelled L-O-N-D there.

Now in prior episodes I have given the Lord’s Prayer as an example of Old English. But the example I read previously was the West Saxon version. So I thought it would be interesting to

read the first line of the Lord's Prayer in each dialect so you can hear the very subtle differences between them.

Of course the passage is "Our father who art in Heaven" in Modern English. But the word order was different in Old English. So in Old English, it was literally 'Father our, thou art in heaven.'

In West Saxon, it was "faeder ure thu the eart on heofonum."

In Northumbrian, it was "fader urer thu art in heofnum."

In Mercian, it was "feder ure thu eart in heofenum."

Now there isn't much difference there. You have to listen very closely for the differences. For example, the word *father* is slightly different in each case. The first vowel sound changed in each case. In West Saxon it was *faeder*. In Northumbrian, it was *fader*. Very close to our Modern English *father*. But in Mercian, it was *feder*.

Also in the Anglian dialects, the passage simply reads "thou art" or "thou eart" – meaning 'thou art.' But the West Saxon version uses "thou the eart." And that extra "the" in the middle meant 'which.' So the West Saxon version literally read 'thou which art' in heaven - but the others were simply 'thou art in heaven.'

OK, so the main point of all of that was help you see that there were some specific, noticeable and consistent differences between the various dialects. And the examples I gave were intended to illustrate some of the differences, so they were all pretty similar. But if you read entire passages in the different dialects, the differences actually become much more apparent. Nevertheless, the differences were manageable, and despite the differences, they all apparently had the same name for their respective dialects. That common name which they all used was *English*.

The Mercians, the Northumbrians, the East Anglians, the Saxons, the Kentish – they all called their language *English*, a term which was clearly derived from the name of the Angles. So why did that all apparently use the same name? Well, all we can do is make some guesses.

First, we know that they all used the term *English* by looking at the earliest writings around the island. For example, the King of Wessex named Ine issued a set of laws around the year 694. This was within the first century that the Anglo-Saxons had adopted writing. And his laws refer to the various Anglo-Saxon tribes as *Englisc* – not *Saxons*. It appears that the term *Englisc* was in common use throughout the island long before the word *England* existed. *England* didn't really exist until much later when there was a unified nation. At this early point, there were separate independent kingdoms. So the people didn't refer to a single unified political entity yet.

But they did refer to themselves as the *English*. And they referred to their language as *English*. In fact, *Englisc* was the only term used by Anglo-Saxon writers from the very beginning to describe the language of the Germanic invaders, including the Saxons and others.

So a lot of people today think that the word *England* came first, and that the word *English* came later – meaning the language of the people of England. But in reality, it was the opposite. The word *English* came first as the name of the people and their language. And the word *England* came later as the various kingdoms began to coalesce into a single nation.

But this raises an interesting question. Why did the early Anglo-Saxons all call themselves *English*? Why didn't they call themselves the *Saxon*? After all, that was what they called by everyone else. Remember the 'Saxon shore' and all the other early writers who used the term *Saxons* to refer to all of the North Sea invaders?

Well, in the last episode, I actually mentioned part of the answer to that question. When the Anglo-Saxons started to arrive in the fourth and fifth centuries, the Saxons were a much more powerful tribe in northern Europe. The Angles were their smaller and weaker neighbors to the east. So there was a natural tendency to refer to all of these early invaders as *Saxons*.

Both the continental writers and the native Romano-British writers – both of whom wrote in Latin – they all used the term *Saxons* initially.

But remember that only a portion of the Saxons migrated to Britain, but virtually all of the Angles migrated. So within Britain itself, the early Anglian kingdoms north of the Thames emerged as the dominant kingdoms. Initially, the center of power was in Kent in the southeast, but very quickly thereafter the power shifted to the north. First to East Anglia, then to Northumbria and then later Mercia. The Saxon regions never really enjoyed the same degree of power and prestige, at least early on. As I've mentioned, the Viking invasion changed all of that. The Vikings destroyed most of the Anglian regions, and that left the West Saxons in Wessex as the dominant kingdom by default. By that didn't happen until much later in the ninth and tenth centuries.

So early on, the Saxons kind of took a back seat to the Angles. And to the extent that there were actual differences between the Angles and the Saxons, the Anglian culture tended to dominate at first.

There is evidence that the early Anglo-Saxons began to use the term *Angli* very early on as a general term for all Anglo-Saxons without distinction between the Angles and the Saxons. This suggests that from the very beginning, they tended to see themselves as part of the same overall ethnic group speaking the same languages and worshiping the same Gods. And that was in contrast to the people who they considered the 'foreigners' – the Welsh – who spoke a completely different language and worshiped different Gods and who they now lived among. So within Britain, the invaders increasingly saw themselves as part of a larger common group very early on.

This Anglian influence began to be noticed back on the continent. And the writers there began to shift their terminology from *Saxons* to *Angles*. You might remember that the Byzantine writer Procopius writing around the year 553 described the inhabitants of Britain as 'Angles, Frisians,

and Britons.’ He didn’t use the term *Saxons* as all. So he was reflecting this increasing tendency to use the term *Angles* in place of the earlier term *Saxons*.

About a half a century later in the year 597, Pope Gregory sent Augustine to Britain to convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity. He sent that initial mission to Kent whose King, Aethelbert, was the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king at the time. And Pope Gregory addressed Aethelbert in writing with the term ‘rex Anglorum’ which meant ‘King of the Angles.’ But Aethelbert was the King of Kent, which wasn’t technically Anglian, nor was it Saxon. But by this point, the term *Angles* was applied to all of them.

Around this time, the native Anglo-Saxons sometimes used the term *Angelcynn* which was literally ‘Angle kin – or Angle kindred.’ It meant ‘the English race.’ Sometimes the context suggests it was used solely in reference to the Angles, but sometimes it was used to refer to both the Angles and the Saxons.

I think there is actually an analogy here to the modern term *Yankee* in the United States. People outside of the United States use the term *yankee* or *yank* as a general term for all Americans, but within the United States, it can have different meanings. It can be used as a general term as in *Yankee Doodle Dandy*. It can also be used as a specific term for people from New England. And within many part of the South, it can refer to anyone from outside of the South. But even there, it isn’t always consistent. Pretty much everyone in the South would agree that a New Yorker is a Yankee. But what about someone from Iowa? Or someone from California? What about Arizona or New Mexico? The answer would probably depend on who you ask. So these terms can have many different meanings depending on how their being used and whose using them.

Well, the term *Angles* was kind of the same way. It had different meanings early on depending on the context.

By the eighth century, that Latin term *Anglorum* was in very broad use as a term all of the Anglo-Saxons. During that period, the Northumbrian monk Bede wrote his History of England. It was titled in Latin ‘Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum.’ The title literally meant ‘The Ecclesiastical History of the English People.’ And it was the history of all of the Anglo-Saxons.

So by this point, we have the native Old English word *Angelcynn* and the Latin term *Anglorum*. Both referred to all of the Anglo-Saxons. And around this same, we start to see the first use of the term *Anglo-Saxon* which was generally used in the context of distinguishing the Germanic people of Britain from their relatives back on the continent in Old Saxony.

Up to this point, all of these terms were used in reference to the people themselves. And the term *English* was used in reference to their language, but it wasn’t really used in a unified political sense yet. There were still separate kingdoms. During Bede’s time, he lived in what he called one of the ‘districts of the English’ – in other words in one of the regions where the English lived. So the term *English* was still used as a term for the people and their language, but it wasn’t a geographic term.

But shortly around the time of Bede, the Viking Invasions began. And it's at that point as I mentioned earlier that we see the first references to a nation or country of Angles. The term was *Englaland* – literally the 'land of the Angles.' But there was still no such unified political entity. But by early in the tenth century, the region finally had a king named Aethelstan who could legitimately claim to be the king of all of 'Engla-land.' And by the year 1000, *Englaland* was the standard name for the country. Of course, the name evolved over time and eventually became *England*.

So the point of that discussion was to see how the term *Angles* initially applied to a specific tribe, then it came to refer to all of the Germanic people of Britain and their languages, then it was applied to the land where they lived, but that process took many centuries.

As I noted earlier, during those intervening centuries, the real power in Anglo-Saxon England shifted from one kingdom to the next. While this sometimes happened by force when one kingdom invaded the other, sometimes it may have actually been a product of mutual consent.

Bede tells us that the earliest Anglo-Saxons kingdoms would select one of the kings as something akin to an overlord. This process died out over time, and we don't have good records from the time when it was a common practice. But it reinforces the view that these early Anglo-Saxons may have lived in different kingdoms with different kings but they recognized a commonality between them. They had shared interests, and they selected an overlord to protect these interests. It is probably not a coincidence that this overlord was in place during the time in which the Anglo-Saxons were busy fighting the native Celtic Britons. That probably tended to bring them together somewhat, but when that conquest was complete, the position of overlord kind of died out and the in-fighting between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms began to increase.

Bede used a Latin term to describe this early type of overlord. He used the term *imperium*, But the later Anglo-Saxon writers used the old English term *bretwalda*. The etymology of this word is unclear. *Walda* meant a 'ruler' in Old English. We also see it in the name *Oswald* which combined the Old English word *os* meaning 'God' and the word *weald* meaning 'ruler.' So it meant 'divine ruler.'

Now some linguists thought that the *bret* part in *bretwalda* referred to 'Britain.' So *bretwalda* meant 'British ruler.' But Old High German in southern Germany had basically the same term, so the *bret* part apparently didn't mean 'Britain.'

Whatever the title meant, it was not hereditary. It was apparently applied by common consent. Earlier I mentioned that King of Kent named Aethelbert was the King who Pope Gregory and Augustine approached when they wanted to convert the Anglo-Saxons. Well, one of the reason why they contacted Aethelbert first is because he was the *bretwalda* at the time, and they knew they would need his support if they wanted to convert the Germanic pagans.

After Aethelbert, the *bretwaldas* were the king of East Anglia, then the kings of Northumbria. And even though the term fell out of use, the decline of the Northumbrians was immediately followed by the rise of the Mercians kings especially the king Offa. Now before Aethelbert, there

were a couple of *bretwaldas* from the Saxon regions, but note that all of the later *bretwaldas* were in the Anglian regions north of the Thames. And that reflects the general shift in power to the Anglian regions during the early centuries of the Anglo-Saxons.

I want to conclude this episode about the Oldest English, but making a couple of quick note about the Oldest English Kings. Specifically, their names. You may have noticed by now that the Anglo-Saxon king has some funny sounding names. We're accustomed to king names like William, Henry, John, James and Charles, but these names came with the arrival of the Normans after 1066. In earlier episodes, we saw how names like William and Charles were French names with Germanic origins. And Henry was originally the French 'Henri.' But the Anglo-Saxon king names reflect their Germanic language. And obviously they were quite different.

So we've already seen names like Aethlertbert, Offa, and Aethelstan. We can add names like Aethelfrith, Raedwald, Oswy, Aethelbald, Aethelwulf and Aethelred. Many of these names were simply combinations of a small handful of Anglo-Saxon root words. So for example, *Aethel* was a common prefix and it meant 'noble.' Interestingly, it is also the ultimate origin of the feminine name *Ethel* today.

Wulf was a common suffix. Of course, it meant 'wolf' And we see it in the name *Aethelwulf* meaning 'noble wolf.' And we also see it in the fictional name *Beowulf*. The *beo* part originally meant either 'bee' or 'bear.' There is some dispute about that.

The name *Wulfric* combined *wulf* with that word *ric* which we keep coming across. Remember that *ric* meant 'wealthy, powerful or kingdom.' So *wulfric* meant 'powerful wolf.'

The name *Godric* meant 'powerful God.'

The name *Godwin* combined *God* with the word *win* which meant 'friend' in Old English.

Another Old English word for God was *Os*. Earlier, we saw that the word was combined with the word *weald* to produce the name *Oswald* meaning 'God-ruler' or 'divine ruler.' And that name *Oswald* has survived into Modern English.

The prefix *Os* also gave us the name *Oscar*. *Oscar* combined the word *Os* with the Old English word '*gar*' which meant spear. You might remember that we saw that work back in the episode about Germanic mythology. That word *gar* was combined with the word *leek* to produce the word *garlic* because a clove of garlic is shaped like a spear. Well, *Osgar* meant 'God spear.'

And some other Anglo-Saxon names have survived the centuries as well – names like *Edward*, *Edwin*, *Alfred*, and *Harold*.

Edward combined the word *ead* meaning 'blessed' with *weard* meaning 'warden or guardian.' Again, we saw that word in the last episode. So *Edward* meant 'blessed guardian.'

Edwin combined *ead* with *win* which we saw earlier in Godwin. Remember it meant ‘friend.’ So *Edwin* was ‘blessed friend.’

The name *Alfred* used the word *aelf* meaning ‘supernatural.’ We still have it in the modern word *elf* and *elves* as in Santa’s helpers. The second part of *Alfred* was ‘ræd’ meaning ‘advice or counsel.’ So *Alfred* literally meant ‘supernatural-advisor.’

So that word *red* at the end of *Alfred* meant ‘advice or counsel.’ That process meant you had to review and consider things. And it is in this sense that we get the modern version of the same word which is *read*. And something that you have to review and consider and figure out is sometimes called a *riddle* – another word which came from this same Old English word ‘*red*’ meaning ‘advice or counsel.’

So as you can see, some of those Anglo-Saxon names have survived the centuries. And they reflect this Anglo-Saxon tendency to combine two words together to make a new word or in this case a new name. This process is called compounding, and the Anglo-Saxons loved to do it.

It gave use modern words like *rainbow* and *butterfly*. *Butterfly* supposedly because its excrement resembled ‘butter.’ OK

The word *husband* combined the Old English words for ‘house’ which was *hus* and ‘dweller’ which was *bonda*. So a ‘house dweller’ was a *husbonda*, or *husband* today.

The word *woman* combined the words for ‘wife’ and ‘man.’ Remember that *man* originally had a more general sense as ‘person.’ So a *woman* was a ‘wife person.’

Another Old English word for man was *guma*. Way back in an earlier episode, I mentioned that the original Indo-European language had an aspirated /g/ sound. That sound became a regular ‘G’ sound in the Germanic languages, but the aspiration led to an ‘H’ sound in Latin. So the Indo-European word *ghosti* gave us *guest* from Old English and *host* from Latin. Well here is another example of that. The original Indo-European root word gave us the Latin word *homo* meaning ‘man’ as in *homo sapien* and probably the word *human*. But the Old English version had the Germanic ‘G’ sound and was pronounced *guma* – also again meaning ‘man.’ Well, a man who was getting married was a ‘bride’s man’ – a *bryd-guma*. And that word eventually became *bridegroom*, and today it basically been shorted to just *groom*. So that means *groom* is cognate with *human*. But the point here is that the Anglo-Saxons loved to make these compounds, and *bridegroom* is another example of that.

Earlier I mentioned the word *garlic* which is another example of this – meaning ‘spear leek’ or ‘spear onion.’ We’ve also seen words like *mermaid* meaning ‘sea-maiden’ or ‘sea-girl.’ And *werewolf* meaning ‘man wolf.’

This process also created some words with funny imagery that we don’t have anymore.

So a ‘skeleton’ was a *banhus* – literally a ‘bone house.’ And the ‘body’ was a *flaeschama* – a flesh home. A library was a *bochord* - a ‘book hoard.’

And we’ll see a lot more examples of this compounding as we continue to look at Old English.

And speaking of ‘book hoard’ or library, we’re now at the point where we need to explore how the Anglo-Saxons began to write down all of these words.

And next time, we’ll do just that. And interestingly, this process was directly tied to the spread of Christianity because the Roman religion was accompanied by the Roman alphabet. So next time we’ll look at the arrival of Christian missionaries and the beginning of written English.

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