# THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

# EPISODE 33:
# MISSIONARIES AND MANUSCRIPTS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 33: Missionaries and Manuscripts. Last time, we looked at the first kingdoms established by the Anglo-Saxons and the earliest English dialects. But up to this point in our story, those early versions of English weren't actually written down except for an occasional runic inscription.  But a series of events took place at the end of the sixth century and early in the seventh century which changed all of that.  And as a result, for the first time, documents were written down in the language of Anglo-Saxons.  So in this episode, we'll explore those events, and we'll see the very beginning of English as a written language.

But before I begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com.  And my email address is kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can follow me on twitter at englishhistpod.

So let's look at the advent of English writing.

Now way back when I began this podcast, I began the story in India with the discovery of the original Indo-European language.  And we saw how the ultimate roots of English could actually be traced to far away places.  So it might not be surprising that I'm going to begin this episode about English writing in another distant place, in this case Egypt.  And Egypt is good starting point for two reasons.  First, as we already know, that's where the alphabet began sometime around 2,000 BC.  But I'm not going to go back that far.

Instead, I want to begin in the late third century at a time when the Roman Empire was still the dominant power in the Mediterranean and much of Europe.  And this was a time shortly before Constantine became the first Christian Emperor.  So it was a time in which Christians were still being persecuted in parts of the Empire.  And late in the third century, a devout Christian named Anthony decided to head out into the Egyptian desert to live by himself and practice his religion. His intention was to live a simple and devout life in solitude.  But soon, he was joined by others who sought to live in the same manner.  And a community of Christian hermits developed there, and in the process, this community became the very first monastery – in the deserts of Egypt.

In earlier episodes we discussed how Greek was basically the language of the very early Christian Church because it was the dominant language in the eastern Mediterranean at the time.  And the words *monastery* and *monk* reflect that.  Both words derive from the Greek word *mono* meaning 'one' which we have in modern English words like *monopoly*, *monogamy*, and *monogram*. Well the Greek word *monazein* meant to 'live alone.' And that produced the word *monastery* and also the word *monk*.

Well this monastic idea was soon picked up by others, and these first monasteries began to spread throughout Egypt, and then it spread into the Mediterranean.  And this process coincided with Constantine's conversion to Christianity, and the Roman Empire's acceptance of the religion.

Over time, as these early monasteries spread into the Near East and the Mediterranean, they encountered the formal structure of the early Christian Church in Rome. The Church embraced the expansion of monasteries, but it also sought to regulate what had previously been a largely independent movement. Those early monasteries were actually self-sufficient, and they existed outside of the formal structure of the early Church. But now, the Church began to exercise a degree of control over the movement. It began to formulate rules for monasteries. Each monastery was subject to the authority of a local bishop. So technically, the authority of the bishop came first, then the abbot or head of the monastery. And all of this becomes very important later on, but for now, it's just important to know that this burgeoning monastic movement was embraced and consumed within the formal structure of the Church in Rome.

By the fifth century, monasteries had been built throughout the Mediterranean, especially the eastern Mediterranean where the eastern Roman Empire was still very strong and organized.

Ironically, at the same time the Western Roman Empire was collapsing in Europe, the religion of the Empire was continuing to expand. And these two trends converged in Britain in the 4$^{th}$ and 5$^{th}$ centuries.

In Britain, Christianity had been well established under the Romans, especially where Roman rule was at its strongest in the urban areas. But when Rome abandoned the island, large portions of Britain reverted back to paganism. The native Celtic religions experienced a comeback, and the Anglo-Saxons brought their Germanic Gods – Wodan, Thor and the others.

Meanwhile, along with the Anglo-Saxons and the Picts, raiders from Ireland also ventured into Britain. These raiders included the groups which became known as the Scots. And one of those raids in western Britain took place around the year 400. During the raid, the family of a local Christian deacon and dignitary was taken into captivity, and they were taken back to Ireland. The family included a son who was about 16 years old at the time. In Ireland, he was sold into slavery and he became shepherd. Several years passed, but one day he decided to escape. He made his way to the Irish coast and found a port. And he convinced a ship's captain to take him aboard. After making his escape, he made his way back home to Britain, and from there, he then traveled to the southern coast of Gaul. And there, he encountered that monastic movement which was spreading throughout the Mediterranean at the time. He joined the movement, and he later returned to Britain where he envisioned himself taking the Christian message back to the Celtic pagans in Ireland – to the very people who had taken him captive as a boy.

In case you haven't figured it out by now, that former slave boy's name was Patrick, and we know him today as St. Patrick. In the year 431, Patrick was appointed as bishop of Ireland. He established the Christian Church there, and he began the process of converting Ireland to Christianity.

Now Patrick carried out his mission by fusing Christianity with elements of the native Celtic culture. He was a well-respected and well-liked figure in Ireland. And he became so

synonymous with Ireland that he is still a symbol of Ireland to this day. And of course, he even has his own day which we celebrate each year by wearing green.

After Patrick's death, his successors continued to spread Christianity throughout the island, and this led to the spread of monasteries. But Ireland had never been part of the Roman Empire, so there was no Roman culture there. And in fact, Roman power was collapsing in Western Europe. So the Irish monasteries retained their independence from the Catholic Church in Rome.

In Ireland, there were no formal Churches, so the Irish monasteries assumed many of the traditional roles of the Bishop in other parts of the Christian world. The abbots who oversaw the monasteries were basically the equivalent of bishops in the Roman Church. They had a great deal of power and autonomy.

These monasteries also emphasized reading and writing in Latin. Irish monks were expected to learn Latin so they could read Christian texts which were written in Latin. They were also encouraged to learn and teach Greek. They also developed a rich artistic tradition which included illuminated manuscripts – basically manuscripts with fancy, elaborate paintings. The Irish monastic schools were so highly-regarded that they began to attract students from throughout Europe. And the Irish monasteries soon began to look beyond the shores of Ireland to spread their unique form of Christianity to Europe. The Irish missionaries actually carried their message to Gaul and Italy.

In fact, there is a fascinating story regarding one of these Irish priests named Brendan – or St. Brendan as he is known today. According to a later manuscript which was written down several centuries later, Brendan set out into the Atlantic to discover the Garden of Eden. He was blown off course, and he discovered an island covered with vegetation. He also encountered a sea monster and had all kinds of adventures on his journey. Now there are some people who think this legendary story was based in fact – that St. Brendan was really blown off course, and the island discovered was actually North America. And I mention this because there is actually a group called the 'St. Brendan Society' which celebrates the Irish discovery of America in the sixth century long before the Viking Leif Erickson and almost a thousand years before Columbus. Now while we have to take Brendan's story with a huge grain of salt, there is no doubt that Irish missionaries were expanding their view of Christianity throughout this period. And one place they definitely reached was northern Britain – to the east.

In the middle of the sixth century, an Irish priest named Columba traveled to northern Britain. This was a time when the Anglo-Saxons were already well-entrenched in southern and eastern Britain. Columba and a group of followers established a church and monastery on the island of Iona on the southwestern coast of Scotland. And from there, more monasteries were built throughout northern Britain. And those monasteries were overseen by that first monastery in Iona.

So by the end of the sixth century, vestiges of Roman Christianity were still holding on in Cornwall and Wales. And thanks to St. Patrick, Christianity had spread throughout Ireland and

modern-day Scotland.  But the Anglo-Saxon regions of Britain remained Germanic pagan, and they remained illiterate as well.

While the Irish Church was expanding throughout Ireland and northern Britain, the Roman Church had been pushed out of places like Gaul and southern Britain as the Empire collapsed and Germanic tribes poured in.  The only hope for the Roman Church was to convert the Germanic pagans. And they actually had a great deal of success doing just that.  I mentioned a couple of episodes back that the Frankish king Clovis converted in the year 496, and that led to the conversion of the Franks.

After the death of Clovis, the Frankish kingdom had become divided between his sons and grandsons.  And during this period, it had become completely fractured.  One of Clovis's grandsons ruled a  kingdom which extended northward from Paris and encompassed most of northern France.  And he had a daughter named Bertha.  And there is a very interesting family connection here.  Her great-grandparents were Clovis and his wife Clotilda.  Clotilda was a Christian before her husband Clovis, and she played a big part in getting Clovis to convert. So in many respects, Clotilda was indirectly responsible for the conversion of the Franks to Christianity.  And now, a few generations later, her great-granddaughter Bertha was about to play the same role in the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.  So Christian France and Christian England can both be traced back to these two women – a great-grandmother and her great-granddaughter.

Around the year 560, Bertha, the Frankish princess, agreed to marry the King of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom of Kent.  His name was Aethelbert.

Now the important thing to understand about Aethelbert is that his kingdom of Kent was the most powerful and important Anglo-Saxon kingdom at that time.

You might remember that Kent was located directly across the Chanel from northern Gaul, and that meant it was located directly across from the Frankish kingdom ruled by Bertha's father.  But is also meant that Kent was located at the point of the shortest sea route from continental Europe to Britain. The crossing is less than 50 miles, and from the very beginning it had been an area of concentrated settlement by the Anglo-Saxons.  So the location of Kent meant that a lot of the early Saxon invaders arrived there first. And it also meant that as later Anglo-Saxons began to pour in, many of them probably passed through this region.  Archaeological evidence confirms the existence of items from locations throughout continental Europe.  This was the kingdom that had supposedly been settled by the Jutes, and as I've noted previously, historians still aren't sure about that because the archaeology in the region shows so many artifacts from the Frankish kingdom and other places. Well, one of the reasons why there are so many artifacts from other places is because of the location of Kent meant that a lot of people and goods passed through the kingdom.

Around the year 560, about a century after the Anglo-Saxon invasions began in earnest, Aethelbert became the King of Kent.  And as I noted last time, the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms typically had an overlord called a *bretwalda*.  And Aethelbert was the overlord during the time that he ruled.  So he was the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king at the time.

Because of its location, Kent had traditionally maintained the most contact with continental Europe.  And there appears to have been a very close relationship between Kent and the Frankish kingdom across the channel which was ruled by Bertha's father.  So around the year 560, a marriage alliance was entered into between the Anglo-Saxon King Aethelbert and the Frankish king.  Aetherlbert would marry the Frankish king's daughter Bertha, and she would travel to Britain to become the Queen of Kent.

But there was one very important condition imposed by the Frankish King.  Bertha would marry Aethelbert if she could continue to practice Christianity which was her personal religion and was also the religion of the Franks. Aethelbert agreed to this condition, and they were married sometime very early in Aethelbert's reign. The exact date of the marriage is unknown.

Now I should make one quick note about this couple – Aethelbert and Bertha. And that note concerns their names.  They both have the same Germanic root word in their names.  Last time, we say that the name *Aethel* meant 'noble.' Well *bert* was the Old English version of the word 'bright.' So *Aethel-berth* meant 'bright noble.'  Well, *Bertha* was a feminine name based upon that same word *bert* meaning 'bright.'

So they were married, sometime between the years 560 and 570 based upon the best evidence, and Bertha traveled to Kent to become the Queen.  And she was accompanied by a priest who was to conduct Christian services for her and any other person who she might happen to bring with her.

There was an old Chapel in Kent which had been built in Roman times, but it had fallen into disrepair.  So Aethelbert fixed it up, and he gave it to Bertha and her Frankish priest.  Bertha dedicated the Church to St. Martin –  a Saint and former bishop who had lived in Gaul a couple of centuries earlier in the region near Bertha's home.

By the way, that church – St. Martin's Church in Kent – it still exists today, and that makes it  the oldest Christian Church in England, and for that matter, in the English-speaking world.

Now one other quick note about that Church before we move on.  I mentioned that it was dedicated to St. Martin. Well, I should tell you a little more about St. Martin because we get a couple of Modern English words from him indirectly.

Martin lived in the fourth century, and he was the Bishop of Tours in Gaul. He later became St. Martin – one of the most well-known and revered Christian saints.  But as a young man, he had been a Roman soldier in Gaul.  One day, according to legend, he came across a beggar and he gave half of his cloak to a beggar. And Martin kept the other half.  Well, the half of the cloak which Martin kept became a holy relic.  And since Martin had been a soldier who later became a bishop and saint, he was highly revered by Frankish and later French kings.  During the Middle Ages, the supposed relic of St. Martin's cloak was carried into battle, and it was used as a holy relic upon which oaths were sworn.

The Latin word *cappa* meant 'cloak.'  It derived from the Latin word *caput* meaning 'head.' We saw that word a long time ago in the episode about the Romans.  Well, *cappa* meant a garment that had a head-covering like a hood.

And the priest who cared for Martin's cloak was called a *cappellanu*, and ultimately all priests who served the military were called *cappellani*. In later French, the initial consonant shifted from a 'K' sound to a 'CH' sound. And in French, the word became *chapelains*, from which we get the English word *chaplain*.

Now Martin's cloak was sometimes housed in small temporary churches built for the relic. People called these churches *capella* which meant 'little cloak.'  But eventually, these small churches lost their association with the cloak, and all small churches began to be referred to as *capella*, and thanks to that later 'CH' sound change in French, *capella* became *chapel*.  So the words *chapelain* and *chapel* both came from words associated with St. Martin's legendary cloak. And, as I noted, the new Kentish Queen Bertha chose to name her new chapel after St. Martin as well.

So by this point, the pagan Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were increasingly surrounded by Christians. To the south, the Franks were Christian.  To the west, the Welsh, Cornish and Irish were now Christians.  And to the north, in modern Scotland, the Irish monasteries had spread in there as well.  And now the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king had a Christian bride.

The stage was set for the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons.  And that final step came from Rome. In fact, this last part of the story begins with a young monk strolling through the market-place in Rome sometime in the later half of the sixth century, probably around the time Aethelbert and Bertha were married. The monk's name was Gregory, and while strolling through the market-place one day, he came across two Anglo-Saxon slave boys – described by the way as 'beautiful' slave boys by later sources like Bede.  Gregory asked the merchant who the boys were. And the merchant told him that they were Angles and that they were heathens.  Gregory's supposed response was actually a pun. He responded in Latin by saying, "Non Angli sed angeli," which literally meant 'Not Angles, but Angels.'  Gregory the Monk was apparently very fascinated by these young slave boys.  And apparently he never forgot them because Gregory the Monk became Pope Gregory I in the year 590.

Gregory is still very highly regarded as one of the most important early Popes.  In fact, the chants associated with the Catholic Church known as 'Gregorian Chants' are named after him.  And shortly after he became Pope, Gregory decided to fulfill a personal commitment to convert all those Angles – or Angels – who lived beyond the Franks.

Gregory knew that the way to convert the Angles or 'Anglo-Saxons' was to send missionaries, but he also knew that he couldn't just send them into Britain randomly.  The Anglo-Saxons were still perceived as barbarians down in Rome. Remember this was at the end of the period in which the Anglo-Saxons were defeating the Romano-Britons.  So Gregory had to develop a strategy for the conversion.

The plan he developed was very simple. It was basically the same plan used for other barbarians. Convert the leaders first – the kings and queens and their royal courts. And then let the religion filter down. Once the kingdom officially embraced Christianity, the missionaries would have an ally, and they could then begin to focus on the regular people. At worst, the missionaries would be able to pursue their work without government interference, and at best the government might even help them in the process.

Gregory knew that he had to have the cooperation and support of local Anglo-Saxons kings, and he also knew who that first king had to be – Aethelbert.

It was really a no-brainer for all the reasons I've already mentioned. He was the most powerful Anglo-Saxon king at the time – the overlord or bretwalda. He was already allied with the Christian Franks. His kingdom was the most accessible from continental Europe. And he was already married to a Christian. Furthermore, Aethelbert was a shrewd leader. He understood that the conversion to Christianity during this period wasn't just a religious decision, it was a political decision as well. And converting to the Roman religion would result in an alliance with the Church in Rome, and that would have its own benefits.

There was still a close association between the Roman Church and the prestige of Roman civilization. Christianity was seen as a religion of the civilized world. And part of that association with Roman civilization included the fact that it was a literate religion. It was based around a written book and had written prayers. The monks and missionaries could read and write. And this fact shouldn't be ignored. The written word was largely foreign to the Anglo-Saxons, but they realized the value and importance of writing. In the Anglo-Saxon world, everything you knew about the world was based on our own personal experiences and what other people told you. There were no written sources to turn to for information. There were no permanent records or histories which survived from one generation to the next. There were no 'how to' guides. If the people you knew didn't know something or know how to do something, you probably didn't know it either, unless you discovered or invented it. So society was more fluid – less permanent. Whatever the elders or the powerful said, that was the way things were. And that could change depending on who was in charge.

But the introduction of writing led to certain immediate advancements. Complicated records could be maintained for trade and other purposes. Laws could be written down. Histories could be documented. The written language imposed a sense of order and permanency, and the only written language in Western Europe was Latin – the language of Rome and the language of the Church. So all of these things were connected: the power and prestige of Rome, the religion of Rome, and the literacy and civilization of Rome. And Aethelbert's strong diplomatic ties to the Christian Franks meant he was well aware of the advanced culture there as well. So he understood all of these connections. And he was apparently receptive to Pope Gregory's requests to send a mission to convert the people of Kent.

Gregory selected a monk named Augustine to lead the mission. And in the year 597, Augustine and a group of 40 monks landed on an island in Kent called Thanet.

Now a couple of quick notes about Augustine before we move on.  First, Augustine is typically pronounced /a-GUST-in/ in Britian, but I'm going to use the other pronunciation – /AU-gu-steen/.  And also, Augustine eventually became known to history as 'St. Augustine.' But there were actually two very famous St. Augustines. The other one was St. Augustine of Hippo in Northern Africa, and this other Augustine was the saint whose name was used for the city in Florida which was founded by the Spanish.

But our Augustine – the one sent by Pope Gregory to Kent – is also an important figure because he was the key figure in converting the first Anglo-Saxons to Christianity.  When he arrived on the island of Thanet, he asked for a meeting with Aethelbert.  And it appears that Aethelbert's wife Bertha encouraged her husband to meet with Augustine.  Aethelbert was still a little unsure about the whole situation though.  He didn't want to meet Augustine inside of a building because he thought Augustine might use magic to influence him.  Remember that the Germanic pagans believed in magic and mysticism.  So King Aethelbert traveled out to the island of Thanet, and he met Augustine there in the outdoors. At their meeting, Augustine asked for permission to enter into Kent and to preach to the people of Kent.  The king concluded that Augustine's mission was sincere, and he agreed to let Augustine proceed with his missionary work in Kent.

Augustine was then allowed to travel to the capital of Kent, and Augustine and his monks were permitted to worship in that church dedicated to St. Martin which Queen Bertha has been using as her church.   This capital city bore a name which was derived from the name of Kent itself.

The Old English version of the name 'Kent' was *Cant*.  And we know that the Old English word for 'man' was *were* as in *werewolf*.  Well, when you put those two words together, you get *Cant-ware* which literally meant the 'Kentish People.'   Now the word *buruh*  meant a 'fortified town.'  And we still have that word in the Modern English word *borough*. So the fortified town of the Kentish people was called *Cant-ware buruh*, or as we know it today – *Canterbury*. That was the name of the capital of Kent.  And that is where Augustine established his first church.  Augustine was the very first Archbishop of Canterbury.  And to this day, the head of the modern Church of England is still called the 'Archbishop of Canterbury.'

Aethelbert had given the missionaries the freedom to preach throughout Kent.  And in Canterbury, Augustine started training native clergy to assist with his mission. In other parts of Kent, new churches were built, and old ones from the Roman period were repaired.  Augustine built the monastery of St. Augustine and he founded the church that later became Canterbury Cathedral.

Once he had established himself in Canterbury, Augustine continued to encourage King Aethelbert to convert to Christianity.  And there is little doubt that he was aided in that effort by his ally Queen Bertha who was a strong proponent of Christianity. Within three months, Aethelbert had converted to Christianity, and by the end of that first year, 10,000 of his people had been baptized as well.  At least with respect to Kent, Augustine's mission went pretty much according to plan.  The conversion of the kingdom took place very quickly and easily.  No blood was shed and no martyrs were created.

Outside of Kent, things were a little more complicated.  As the Roman Church spread northward, it encountered that Irish monastic movement which was spreading southward. And there were some fundamental differences between those two movements.  And that part of the story also impacted early English in some interesting ways, but I'm going to save that discussion for the next episode.  For now, I want to focus on what happened within Kent once the king had converted to Christianity.

As I noted, the new Christian missionaries under the leadership of Augustine were busy building and repairing Churches. But unlike what happened in some other places, the existing pagan temples weren't destroyed. They were simply consecrated as Christian Churches.   An old Temple of Woden now became a Christian Church.  The old pagan idols were taken down, and the Christian Cross was erected in their place. And as we saw in the episode about Germanic mythology, the existing pagan festivals and holidays were simply converted to – or incorporated within – Christian holidays.  The Christian festival celebrating the resurrection of Christ – a type of re-birth – was named after the Spring fertility goddess Eostre. And in the process, the pagan spring festival was blended into the Christian holiday and took on the Germanic name *Easter*. And based on existing traditions in the Western Christian Church, Christmas was celebrated on the day of the old pagan midwinter feast. And this too was adopted by the Anglo-Saxons as the date of the new Christian holiday of 'Christ's Mass' – or *Christmas*.

All of those Germanic pagan elements were simply incorporated into the new Christian faith in part so the new religion seemed familiar to the native peoples.

So Kent was home to a new Christian clerg and lots of new Christian churches, but the success of Augustine's mission was contingent upon the protection of that clergy and those churches. Christianity was still a brand new religion in Kent, and even though Aethelbert was now a supporter, there was no guarantee that Aethelbert's successor would continue that support. Augustine needed to ensure that his clergy and the Church's property would be protected.  And they knew from Roman tradition that the best way to ensure that protection was to follow that sage advice of all good lawyers – put it in writing.

And this is where the story of those first Christian missionaries intersects with the story of English.

Augustine knew that the best way to impose law and order was to actually have a written legal code. Germanic legal customs were fine for dealing with traditional crimes like murder, theft and dismemberment, but those customs didn't really apply to the clergy or to the property of the Church.   So Augustine saw the need for a written legal code – one that specifically protected the Church and its missionaries.

And those missionaries from Rome didn't just bring the Roman religion to Britain, they also brought the Roman alphabet.  So they were fully capable of rendering a legal code in writing. And very shortly after Augustine convinced the king to convert to Christianity, the king decided to issue a legal code which gave the Church the protection which it needed.

While this was a brand new idea for the Anglo-Saxons, it wasn't a new or novel idea in other parts of Europe. Since the fall of Rome, the emerging Germanic kingdoms in Europe had begun to adopt legal codes. These codes were typically a combination of established Roman law and the traditions of each Germanic tribe.

The Visigoths had compiled a legal code called the Code of Euric over a century earlier in the year 471. The Alamanni had prepared a legal Code around the year 500. And about a decade later, around the year 510, the Franks had adopted their first written legal code.

But in all of those cases, those early legal codes had been written in Latin. Those Germanic tribes ruled over formerly Roman territory in continental Europe in areas that had been thoroughly Romanized. And in many cases they ruled over people who spoke Latin. And they often saw themselves as an extension of the previous Roman civilization. So they wrote their Germanic version of a Roman legal code, but they wrote it in Latin.

But the Anglo-Saxons were not Romanized. They didn't speak Latin – nor did their kings. And they didn't really see themselves as an extension of the prior Roman civilization. So Aethelbert did something completely unique and unheard of at the time. He authorized a legal code in the native language of the Anglo-Saxons – Old English. And that made Aethelbert's legal code the very first written document in the English language.

And that code is also the oldest written document in all of the modern Germanic languages. As we know, the Gothic language had been attested a few centuries earlier with the Gothic Bible, but the Gothic language died out and became extinct. So with respect to all of the Germanic languages which are spoken today, English is the oldest attested language thanks to several early documents including Aethelbert's Laws of Kent. The other Germanic languages, including Old High German, weren't written down for at least another century, and in some cases several centuries after that.

So all of that makes these particular laws of Kent very important, not only in the History of English, but in the history of all of the Germanic languages. So I want to spend the remainder of this episode looking at those laws and the language of those laws.

[MUSICAL INTERLUDE]

Aethelbert's Laws of Kent represent many firsts. It is the first Anglo-Saxon legal code. It's the first document written in the English language. And it's the first document written in any of the modern Germanic languages. Unfortunately, none of the original manuscripts survived the centuries, but we do have a copy of the code, thanks to a later copy contained in an anthology of Anglo-Saxon laws compiled in the twelfth century.

Historians aren't exactly sure what year the laws were issued, but the best evidence suggests that they were issued around the year 602 or 603.

The code consists of 85 specific laws. The laws themselves are basically an extension of the wergild concept which the Germanic tribes had used for centuries. You might remember that *wergild* meant 'man money' or 'man payment,' and it was an amount of money which had to be paid by a criminal to his victim or to the family of his victim. And if this amount was not paid, then the victim or the victim's family was entitled to seek retribution against the criminal.

Well Aethelbert's laws are basically a long list of specific offenses and the amount of money which had to be paid as compensation for each offense. So it is very Germanic in its basic structure.

But interestingly, the very first offenses listed, and the one's which require some of the largest payments, are crimes against the Church, specifically the clergy and Church property. And when you combine this fact with the timing of the laws shortly after Aethelbert's conversion, you can see why so many scholars believe that Augustine and the Church were heavily involved in the preparation of these laws. Furthermore, the Anglo-Saxons weren't literate at the time. So it is almost certain that these laws were actually written down by monks who spoke English well enough to render the document in the local vernacular.

In an upcoming episode, I'm going to explore how the monks adapted the Roman alphabet to English, but for now we just need to understand that the monks were really the only ones capable of producing this type of document at this very early date in Anglo-Saxon Britain.

It should also be noted that since these laws were written in the local vernacular, they represent the Kentish dialect, which was distinct from the much more pervasive West Saxon and Anglian dialects which I discussed in the last episode.

So let's take a closer look at the laws. And the first thing to note is that they were not actually called 'laws.' The word *law* was borrowed from Old Norse when the Vikings arrived. So it did exist in later years of Old English, but it didn't exist at this early point around the year 600. By the way, the term *legal* comes from Old French after the Normans arrived. And the Latin term *legal* is not actually cognate with the Old Norse word *law*. In fact, *law* doesn't really have a clear Indo-European root, so it appears to be one of those words which was unique to the Germanic languages.

Now the original Old English word for 'law' was *domas*. And *domas* literally meant 'judgment or law.' We actually still have that word in Modern English as the word *doom* and in a related version of the word – *deem*. If we 'deem' something to be good or bad, we are making a judgment about it. And as I said, the other version of the word – *doom* – originally meant 'judgment.' In later English translations of the Bible, it was used to translate the term 'Judgment Day,' and the resulting term was 'domas daeg'– or *Doomsday*. And it was in this sense that the term *doom* came to mean something 'dreaded' or 'feared.' So if we say that someone 'met their doom,' it literally means that met their fate or judgment, but it has an obvious negative connotation today.

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The word *doom* also appears as the suffix of certain old words in English. The realm of a king's judgment or laws was a *kingdom*. In actuality the word for king was *cyning*. So a king's realm was a *cyning-dom*.  And that later evolved into *kingdom*.

Now here's something really interesting.  Even though the Anglo-Saxon word *domas* and the Norse word *law* aren't cognate, they both came form original root words that meant the same thing.  The original root of *domas* is an Indo-European word that meant 'to set or put something in a particular place.'  So within the Germanic languages it came to mean a law which had been put in place.  And that same root word produced the related Germanic word *do* in English. So in its original sense, the word *do* meant to 'put something in place.'  And something that had been put in place – like a law – was a *domas*.

Now the word *law* from Old Norse also meant 'to put something in place.' And it also has a related verb in Modern English – the word *lay*.  So if you 'lay down the law,' you're actually being somewhat redundant. Both *lay* and *law* come from the same Old Norse root word, just as *do* and *domas* come from the same Indo-European root word.  And both of those original root words meant to 'put something in place.'

So let's go back to Aethelbert's Laws, which were actually called 'Aethelbertes Domas.'

The first sentence of the laws, which is therefore the first sentence in an English document, is an introduction to the laws:

And here is the sentence in Old English: "þis syndon þa domas þe Æðelbirht cyning asette on Agustinus dæge."  In Modern English, the sentence reads, "These are the laws which King Ethelbert established in the days of Augustine."

Now like most Old English, that original version probably seems completely foreign today. But let's break it down, and it actually starts to make a little more sense.

The first part reads, "þis syndon þa domas." "þis syndon" is 'this is' or 'these are.' "þa domas" is 'the dooms' or 'the laws'  So "þis syndon þa domas" is 'These are the laws.'

The next part of the sentence is, "þe Æðelbirht cyning asette."  "þe Æðelbirht cyning" is 'that Aethelbert the King' – or 'King Aethelbert.'  And "asette" is 'set up' or 'set in place.'  You can hear the root of 'set' in "asette."  So "þe Æðelbirht cyning asette" is 'that Aethelbert the King set up or set in place.'

And the last part of the sentence is, "on Agustinus dæge."  And that is literally 'in Augustine's days' or 'in the time of Augustine.'

So one more time the whole thing – first in Modern English then in Old English. 'These are the dooms that Aethelbert the King set in Augustine's days.' "þis syndon þa domas þe Æðelbirht cyning asette on Agustinus dæge."

So if we break it down, it starts to sound a little bit familiar.   But we should keep in mind that this is the first sentence written in an English document, and it's about 1,400 years old – written only about a century after the fall of the Western Roman Empire. Yet if we work with it a little bit, it can still make sense today.

Now after the introduction, the laws are listed in numerical order from 1 through 85.

And the very first law illustrates the overall influence of the church on the preparation of the laws. The first law reads, "Godes feoh and ciricean XII gylde." In Modern English, the sentence reads, 'The property of God and of the Church shall be compensated twelve-fold.'

So if someone damaged Church property, it wasn't good enough to simply reimburse the Church for the damage. The person had to pay back the damage twelve times over.  This is largest amount of compensation or wergild required by Aethelbert's laws.  And it is the very first law. So the influence of Augustine and the Church is very apparent.  This was part of the reason for implementing a written legal code in the first place – to protect the Church and its property.

So let's take a closer look at that law I just read.

Here it is again: "Godes feoh and ciricean XII gylde."  The first word is "Godes" which is 'God's.' The second word is "feoh" which meant 'property.' So "Godes feoh" meant 'God's property.'

That word *feoh* meant both property and money in Old English.  The original Old English word died out, but the French borrowed the same Germanic root word from the Franks. And it eventually came back into English after the Norman Conquest as the word *fee* meaning 'property or estate.'  We still have that word in the word *fiefdom* meaning 'the estate of a feudal lord.' And in fact that word *feudal* came from the same word.  Even in modern real estate law, if you own property in 'fee simple,' it means you have absolute ownership of the property.  But the word could also be used to mean 'money.' And it's in this sense that we typically see the word *fee* today as the amount of money you have to pay for something.  But again, the Old English version of the word was *feoh*, and in the context of Aethelbert's legal code, it meant any property belonging to the church or God – "Godes feoh."

The next part of the law is "ciricean," and that is the Old English word for 'church,' and we saw that word way back in Episode 5 about the letter C.

So the first part of the law reads again, "Godes feoh and ciricean" – literally 'God's property and church,' but the context makes it clear that passage means 'The property of God and the Church.'

The last part of the law was "XII gylde" which meant 'twelve-fold.'

So the law read 'God's property and church twelve-fold.'   Interestingly, the law doesn't actually use a verb.  The law doesn't say 'shall be paid twelve- fold' or 'shall be compensated twelve-fold.' It just lists the type of property and the amount to be paid. And this is typical for

Aethelbert's legal code, and it shows just how rudimentary the early written language was in some respects.

So let's take a closer look at those last two words – "XII gylde." "XII" (/twaylf/) was the original version of the word *twelve*. In Aehtelbert's laws, the scribes used Roman numerals, but we know that the Anglo-Saxons pronounced the word as /twaylf / from other sources.

So this raises an interesting question which you may have thought of before. When we are counting and we get to the teens, we have 'thirteen,' 'fourteen,' 'fifteen' and so on, and each of those words basically combines the root number with the word 'teen' – which meant 'ten more than.' And *teen* is obviously derived from the word *ten*. So *thirteen* literally means 'ten more than three.' And *fourteen* literally means 'ten more than four.' And we do that all the way up to nineteen. But why don't we do that for *eleven* and *twelve*? We don't have 'one-teen' or 'two-teen.'

Well these two numbers use a different way of saying the same thing in Old English.

*Eleven* was *endleofan*, where *end* meant 'one' and '*leofan*' was an early version of the word *left*. So *endleovan* literally meant 'one-left.' And it's meaning was implied as 'one left over ten.' So when you count to 11, first you count to 10, and then you have 'one left' – in Old English *endleofan*. So that's what *eleven* means.

But what about *twelve*? Well, it meant the same thing – in this case 'two left.' And from 'two left,' we get the contracted word /twaylf/ – or *twelve* in Modern English.

The last word of the law was *gylde*, and it meant 'payment or compensation.' It is basically the same word found in the word *wergild*, meaning 'man money' or 'man payment' – the amount that a criminal had to pay if he injured someone. The word *gylde* eventually evolved into the word *guild* in the Middle Ages – as in a 'trade guild.' Those associations were called *guilds* because members had to make a payment to join. In Old English, the 'G' sound shifted to a 'Y' sound in some words. You might remember the connection between *garden* and *yard*. Well *gylde* was another one of those words, so a separate Old English word developed which was *yield*. And we still have that word in the sense of a 'crop yield,' but can also mean an 'investment yield.'

So when Aethelbert's laws use the phrase "XII gylde," it literally means 'twelve payment,' but in this context, it means a 'twelve-fold payment.'

So that's a look at the first couple of sentences from the laws of Aethelbert. Some the very first words written in the English language.

As I noted earlier, there are 85 total laws in the code. Beyond the protection of the Church property, it provides specific protections for the clergy and other Church officials. It also provides specific rates of compensation for a long list of offenses like hitting someone in the nose with a fist, or abducting a virgin, or committing an evil deed while the king is drinking in

your home.  And the list is incredibly specific in some respects – 50 shillings if you cut off someone's foot, 10 shillings if you cut off their big toe, 5 shillings for any of the other toes, even less if you cut of a toenail.  By the way the nail of the big toe was worth more than the nails of the smaller toes.

But it is the relationship between the law and the Church that is probably the most important part of the document because it illustrates the close relationship between the church and the state in the early Middle Ages.  These laws reconciled the brand-new church into the existing social order of the Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

In the next couple of episodes we will explore this relationship even further. We'll look at how Church monks adapted the Latin alphabet for English. And we'll explore the explosion of literacy and writing in and around the monasteries in Northumbria and northern Britain.  And we'll look at what happened as the Roman Church in Southern Britain began to encounter the Irish monastic movement in the north.  Those events provide a backdrop for the expansion of English from law codes to literature. And in fact, those events are directly connected to the first poem written down in the English language.

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