THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 37:
SEAFARERS, POETS AND TRAVELING MINSTRELS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 37: Seafarers, Poets and Traveling Minstrels. In this episode, we're going to hitch a ride with the first Old English poets and minstrels, and we're going to take the history of English on the road. This is an episode about journeys, traveling minstrels, and the importance of Anglo-Saxon poetry.

Before I begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is Historyofenglishpodcast.com. And after receiving several requests from listeners, I recently added a donate button to the site. And several of you have been kind enough to make a donation to the podcast through the site. So let me take this opportunity to thank those of you who have done that. Those donations help to offset some of the expenses and costs of putting this podcast together and the cost of maintaining the podcast, so thanks again to all of you who have been kind enough to support it.

Now let's turn to this episode. And let's explore the culture of the Anglo-Saxons and how that culture impacted the work of Anglo-Saxon poets and minstrels.

A good place to begin is with the sea because the early Anglo-Saxons were ultimately a maritime people. And that aspect of their culture is reflected in the names of some of the earliest poems composed in the English language – poems like 'The Seafarer' and 'The Wanderer.'

In fact, sea-travel is one of the most common recurring themes in Old English literature. The original Anglo-Saxons lived along or near the North Sea coast in northern Europe. They were a maritime people even then. In fact, it is believed that coastal flooding may have been a factor which contributed to the original migrations from their homeland. They then traveled by sea to Britain. Of course, Britain itself is an island. And many of the early Anglo-Saxon settlements were along on near the eastern coast of Britain. And even in death, Germanic tradition held that there was a kingdom of the dead at the bottom of the sea. You might remember that when prominent tribe members or leaders died, a special ship was sometimes prepared for the deceased's final voyage.

So given the importance of the sea in early Anglo-Saxon culture, it is probably no surprise that the sea features very prominently in early Anglo-Saxon writings. Some scholars have noted that it is almost impossible to find a poem written in Old English which doesn't mention the sea or traveling by the sea in some way. Even the most famous Anglo-Saxon poem of all, Beowulf, begins with Beowulf's arrival by sea from the homeland of the Geats. And as we'll see, the ocean and sea-travel features prominently in several other passages of the poem.

So I wanted to begin this episode by introducing that very important theme. And I also wanted to begin with that subject because it is the source of some great etymology. And in exploring this etymology, it provides a good review of the some of the sound changes and spelling conventions which I've discussed in the past few episodes.

So let's begin with the original Indo-Europeans. That had at least two words which meant 'to move or transport' – ***wegh*** and ***per***. And those two simple root words ultimately gave us lots of modern English words associated with travel.

The Indo-European word ***wegh*** ultimately made its way into the both Latin and the Germanic languages. The Germanic version passed into Old English as ***weg*** (/way/) meaning a road or path. Of course, we still have the word today as in ***highway***, ***hallway***, ***doorway*** or 'get out of the way.'

The sense of movement associated with the word ***way*** was also applied to the up and down movement of scales which was how amounts were measured and balanced. So this process produced the verb ***weigh*** (W-E-I-G-H) as in ' how much does it weigh.' And from that verb, we got the noun ***weight*** (W-E-I-G-H-T). Of course, today we pronounce both versions of ***way*** the same way, but they each have completely different spellings except for that initial W. Originally the word had a consonant sound at the end which was represented by the letter G. As we saw over the past few episodes, the 'G' sound evolved into several different sounds over time. And the two early versions of the word ***way*** each had a different 'G' pronunciation during the period of Old English. In one version, the G shifted to the 'Y' sound, and that ultimately gave us the word ***way*** spelled W-A-Y. In the other version, the G shifted to that Germanic fricative sound in the back of the throat. And that sound was usually spelled with a GH by the time of Middle English. And that version gave us the word ***weigh*** which is spelled W-E-I-G-H. And like most of the words spelled with GH, the GH eventually became silent. So both versions of the modern word ***way*** end in the 'ay' sound today. Neither of them retained the original Germanic 'G' sound at the end.

But within the other Germanic languages, their version of the word did retain its 'G' sound at the end. And when English later borrowed the Dutch and Old Norse versions of the word, those other Germanic versions came in with that original Germanic 'G' sound. So the Dutch version came in as ***wagon*** and also as ***wiggle***. Both versions have retained that 'G' sound, and both relate to some aspect of movement.

The Old Norse version came into English as ***wag*** and ***waggle***. Again, they retain their Germanic 'G' sound. So ***wiggle*** comes from Dutch, and ***waggle*** comes from Old Norse.

So those are the Germanic versions of the word, but I noted that the original Indo-European word also passed into Latin. And as we know by now, the 'W' sound often shifted to a 'V' sound in Late Latin and early French. So that original Indo-European word ***wegh*** became ***via*** in Latin. And we still have that Latin word in English in pretty much in its original form. And of course, ***via*** means 'by way of.'

And if we take off the original 'G' sound which once existed at the end of that word, and we replace it with a French 'G' sound, we would get /voy-ahhge/ – as in 'bon voyage.' And of course that produced the word ***voyage*** in Modern English. And again, that's yet another synonym for traveling or moving around.

A variety of Latin prefixes were also added to the word ***via*** to create many new words. The prefix 'con' meant 'together,' and 'con' plus 'via' produced the word ***convey***. The prefix 'in' meant 'on,' and 'in' plus 'via' produced the words ***envoy*** and ***invoice***. The prefix 'de' meant 'off,' and 'de' plus 'via' produced the words ***deviate***, ***deviant***, and ***devious***. The prefix 'ob' meant 'against,' and 'ob' plus 'via' produced the word ***obvious***. The prefix 'pre' meant 'before,' and 'pre' plus 'via' produced the word ***previous***. The prefix 'tri' meant 'three,' and 'tri' plus 'via' produced the words ***trivia*** and ***trivial***.

So ***trivia*** is literally 'tri-via' or three roads. And that connection makes sense in the word ***trivial*** because a place where three roads meet is a well-traveled intersection. So a place that is well-traveled is very familiar or commonplace. Thus the word ***trivial***.

But what about the word ***trivia***? What's the connection to three roads? Well, the answer lies in the academics of the Middle Ages. In Medieval education, there was an introductory course of liberal arts and an advanced course of math-related subjects. The introductory course of liberal arts consisted of three subjects: grammar, logic and rhetoric. These were called the ***trivium***, and that term meant the three-fold way of learning. So that is the origin of the modern term ***trivia*** related to knowledge. By the way, the advanced course consisted of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music, and it was called the ***quadrivium*** because it consisted of four subjects. So as you can see we get lots of word from the Latin word ***via***.

And in addition to the word ***via***, Latin also derived another word from that same original Indo-European root word. That other word was ***vehere***, and it meant 'to carry something from one place to another.' That word gives us the English word ***vehicle***. And when that Latin prefix 'con' is added to the beginning of the word, it gives us the word ***convection*** as in 'convection oven' – an oven which typically has a fan to move the air around.

So all of those Modern English words come from a single Indo-European root word which meant 'to move around.' But the Indo-European language had another word which also meant 'to move back and forth.' That word was ***per***. And once again, the word passed into both Latin and the Germanic languages.

The word barely changed at all in Latin. Latin also had it as ***per***. It was often used as a preposition meaning 'by, through, or by means of.' So ***percent*** means 'by the hundred.' ***Per capita*** meant 'by the head.' ***Per diem*** 'by the day.' And the combination ***per ager*** meant 'by land' or 'through land.' The Germanic version of ***ager*** is ***acre***. So we can see the connection to land there. Now, you're probably saying, I've never heard of ***per ager*** before. Well, you have, in a later version of the word. ***Per ager*** meant 'someone who traveled across land,' and it came into English as ***pilgrim*** – another kind of traveler.

The word ***per*** in its original sense of 'moving' also produced the Latin word ***port*** which originally meant a 'passage or crossing,' and later came to mean 'a point of passage or crossing.' Not only do we have the word ***port*** in Modern English, we also have it in compound words like ***seaport*** and ***airport***. And of course we have it in the word ***portable***. And thanks to all of those Latin prefixes, it's also the root of words like ***deport, export, import*** and ***transport***.

And believe it or not, it is also the ultimate root of the word ***sport***. The word ***sport*** was ultimately derived from the word ***deport***. 'De' meant 'away from.' So ***deport*** meant 'away from the normal path or course.' In other words, it was a 'diversion.' And games were considered a type of diversion – a diversion from your normal work. In Old French, the word ***deport*** became ***desport*** – spelled D-E-S-P-O-R-T. And when the prefix 'de' was later dropped, the word retained that 'S' sound which had developed in the middle in French. So now the 'S' became the initial sound, and English took the word as ***sport***. But if we think of sports as a diversion, we can see the connection to the root which meant to 'move or travel.'

So English got a lot of words from the Latin and French versions of the word ***per***, but that original word ***per*** also passed into the Germanic languages. And remember that the Germanic vocabulary was affected by Grimm's Law. And under Grimm's Law, the 'P' sound became an 'F' sound in a lot of words. In the same way that ***pater*** became ***father***, ***per*** became ***fær*** and ***feorr***. That gave us several native Old English words. For example, the word ***far*** means 'remote or distant' – where a traveler ends up after along journey. And of course, we can combine that word ***far*** with the other Old English word ***way*** which I discussed earlier, and we get 'far away.'

Or we can reverse those roots and get ***wayfarer*** – another Old English word. We can also add in the Old English word ***seafarer***. Remember that that is also the name of a famous Old English poem.

The Old English word ***gefera*** meant a traveling companion. It was later replaced by the French word ***companion*** after the Norman Conquest.

That same root also gave us the word ***ferry***. ***Ferry*** was both a native Old English word and an Old Norse word. So the original Old English version was reinforced by the later introduction of the Old Norse version after the Vikings.

So the P to F sound change caused the word ***per*** to evolve into the later English words ***far*** and ***ferry***. Well the same thing happened to the Germanic equivalent of the Latin word ***port***. The Anglo-Saxons had the word as ***ford***, and of course Old Norse had it as ***fjord***. Today, we see the Anglo-Saxon version of that word most often as a suffix in place names like Stafford and Oxford. Oxford was literally the place where Oxen crossed the river – the 'ox ford.' You might remember that the Germans had their own version of the same word which was ***furt***. The ***furt*** where the Franks crossed the river and established a permanent settlement was – and still is – Frankfurt, Germany.

So as you can see, just a couple of basic Indo-European root words can produce a huge number of common English words. The point of this exercise was to explore how our vocabulary expands and grows over time. And it was also to examine the related etymology of many of our modern traveling words.

But it was also intended to make a basic connection between travel and literacy. I noted in the very first episode about the alphabet that scholars believe the alphabet was invented once – in Egypt. And from there it passed to the Phoenicians. And thanks to traders and seafarers, it passed to the Greeks, then to the Etruscans, and then on to the Romans. As people traveled and traded, they carried literacy with them.

And the story was similar in Britain. Travelers also brought the alphabet to the Anglo-Saxons. Thanks to those first missionaries, the alphabet found new people in Britain eager to learn it and apply it to their own language. And as we've seen, the place where that alphabet was first applied to the English language was in Kent in the laws issued by King Aethelbert.

So let's take a look at what happened in Britain as Aethelbert neared the end of his reign. After he issued his laws in English early in the seventh century, Aethelbert continued to be the overlord or 'bretwalda' of the Anglo-Saxons kings for more than decade. But during the later period of Aethelbert's rule, other powerful kings began to emerge to his north. And this foreshadowed the eventual shift of power to the north after the death of Aethelbert.

In the northernmost part of Anglo-Saxon Britain, a king named Aethelfirth unified the separate kingdoms of Bernicia and Deira into the single kingdom which became known as 'Northumbria.' It appears that he combined the two kingdoms by conquering the kingdom of Deira. I say 'it appears that he conquered that kingdom' because the exact circumstances are unknown, but we do know that the son of the king of Deira was on the run during Aethelfrith's reign, and Aethelfrith was constantly pursuing him in an effort to eliminate any potential rival to the throne.

That fleeing prince's name was Edwin. And once again, we can return to our theme of traveling because, in an effort to avoid Aethelfrith, Edwin traveled all over southern Britain. He ventured west to Wales for a while. And then traveled back east into the Mercian kingdom in the center of Britain. But eventually, he ended up in the Kingdom of East Anglia in eastern Britain. That was the kingdom located between Aethelbert's kingdom of Kent to the south and Aethelfrith's kingdom of Northumbria to the north. So East Anglia was strategically located between those two powerful kings. And the leader of East Anglia was another powerful king named Raedwald. Raedwald took in the fleeing Edwin, and he gave him protection and refuge.

So as we look at the landscape of Anglo-Saxon Britain around the year 615, we have three very powerful kings located in eastern Britain, but that landscape was about to change dramatically. Early in the year 616, Aethelbert died in Kent after a long reign. And with his death, his position as bretwalda or overlord also went away. So the balance of power in Anglo-Saxon Britain was in flux.

Around this same time, Aethelfrifth up in Northumbria became aware that the fleeing prince Edwin had taken refuge in East Anglia with Raedwald. So Aethelfrith offered a bribe to Raedwald. He offered to pay Raedwald a large sum of silver and gold if he would kill Edwin. But rather than taking Aethelfirth's bribe, Raedwald ultimately decided to take the initiative.

Rather than cooperate, Raedwald decided instead to attack. The decision was very shrewd. If he could defeat Aethelfrith, he could then place the fleeing prince Edwin on the Northumbrian throne. Edwin would then acknowledge Raedwald as the new overlord of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, thereby allowing him to become the new bretwalda.

And that's exactly what happened. In the same year that Aethelbert died – 616 – Raedwald defeated and killed the Northumbrian king Aethelfrith. And the fleeing prince Edwin returned home to become the new king of Northumbria. And Raedwald became the new overlord of the Anglo-Saxons. The net effect of all this was a gradual shift of power to the north. From Aethelbert's Kent, power now shifted to the north to East Anglia.

For the time being, Edwin up in Northumbria deferred to the power of Raedwald, but as we'll see next time, Edwin was destined for his own day at the top of the heap. But if there was ever a tendency to look past Raedwald as merely a transitional figure, all of that changed with a discovery in Eastern Britain in 1931.

In that year, workers at a place called Sutton Hoo in eastern Britain discovered a ship buried in the ground. But it wasn't just any old buried ship. It was an Anglo-Saxon ship loaded with ancient, priceless artifacts. As I noted earlier, ship burials were common in the Germanic culture. They ensured passage by sea to the afterworld. And these types of burials were known to exist in many parts of continental Europe, but nothing like it had ever been found in Britain itself. The story of Beowulf had mentioned and described an elaborate ship burial, but even though Beowulf was written down in English, the story itself was actually set in Scandinavia. So there was no evidence that the Anglo-Saxons themselves actually engaged in elaborate ship burials for their kings. But the discovery at Sutton Hoo confirmed that the Anglo-Saxons did indeed use ship burials, at least in the region where it was found, in what had once been the Kingdom of East Anglia.

As archaeologists excavated the site, they retrieved many artifacts – including a jeweled sword, a sceptre, elaborate shields, a battle-axe and an Anglo-Saxon helmet. They also found a broken harp-like instrument called a lyre. And I recognize that there are different pronunciations of that instrument, but lyre appears to be the most common pronunciations, so that's what I'm going to use here. In addition to that lyre, they also found silver bowls, drinking horns, silver spoons and jewelry. And they found 40 coins from the Frankish kingdom. And those coins were really the key because, based on the coin inscriptions, it was determined that the coins were minted between the years 620 and 640. And based on all of that, scholars concluded that the ship burial was probably intended for the East Anglian king Raedwald. It was obviously intended for a king, and Raedwald would have been the king during the early part of that period. In fact, he was the only East Anglian bretwalda or overlord. So even though there is no definitive evidence to confirm the identity of the person being commemorated, most scholars believe that it was probably Raedwald.

But did they actually find Raedwald or some other king buried inside the ship? Well, that depends on who you ask. No actual body was found. The soil in the region is very acidic and human remains tend to be consumed by it – even the bones. Soil tests have been conducted, but

they've never provided a definitive answer, or the answers which have been provided have been disputed. Typically, when a body is buried like that, the person would have been wearing rings, or clothing with buttons. And some of those artifacts typically survive even when the body itself doesn't. But no such rings or buttons were found.

But in 1979, the original excavator's notes were re-examined, and those notes revealed that a complete set of iron coffin fittings had been found there early on. They had actually been overlooked in most of the subsequent research, but they seemed to confirm the presence of a coffin.

Either way, Sutton Hoo remains the most important archaeological discovery from the early Anglo-Saxon period. And it shows just how sophisticated these early Anglo-Saxon civilizations were. And it shows how mobile people were during this era. The artifacts in the ship came from all over Europe, including the Frankish kingdom and Sweden, and they actually came from as far away as Egypt and the Byzantine Empire. So once again, we see the importance of travel, and especially travel by sea, in early Anglo-Saxon culture.

Though the Sutton Hoo ship burial did contain Frankish coins and a couple of spoons with Greek inscriptions, it didn't contain any artifacts with English inscriptions. But that doesn't mean we can ignore Sutton Hoo. It actually is relevant to our story in some interesting ways.

As I noted, the Beowulf poem contains a description of a ship burial. And the poem's description is remarkably similar to the burial at Sutton Hoo. And the weapons and other artifacts described in Beowulf also tend to match those found at Sutton Hoo. Since it doesn't appear that ship burials of this nature were common or wide-spread in Anglo-Saxon Britain, there are some scholars who believe that the original Beowulf poet must have been familiar with the Sutton Hoo burial. Perhaps the poet lived during the time of the ship burial or shortly afterwards, and that event influenced certain passages of the poem. Again, this is just a theory. No one really knows for certain when Beowulf was composed, but the best guess is that it was composed in the seventh or eighth century. So the early part of that time frame would be within the living memory of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. So there may be a connection between the Sutton Hoo burial and the most famous of all Old English poems.

The Sutton Hoo ship burial also reminds us how limited Old English writing was in the early seventh century. Despite the extravagant burial, there are no inscriptions or other written references to the person who was being commemorated. Early in the early seventh century, English writing was still somewhat of a novelty. It was primarily confined to Christian monasteries. And it was still limited to the region around Kent in the south and parts of modern-day Scotland up in the north. So it is very likely that English writing hadn't really infiltrated East Anglia by that point. And even if it had, it's unlikely that a Christian monk would participate in a pagan ship burial with all of its associations with Germanic pagan religions. So that may also account for the lack of Old English inscriptions at the burial site.

Sutton Hoo also provides a convenient link between the two major themes of this episode – the importance of sea travel and the importance of poetry to the Anglo-Saxons. The ship burial illustrates how the Anglo-Saxons saw life and death in relation to the sea. Even in death, a prominent king needed a ship to take him to the afterlife. But that ship also contained a very important artifact.

In addition to the things we would expect to find in an Anglo-Saxon ship burial – things like weapons and armor and valuables like coins and jewelry – we also have something that may be a little bit of a surprise. We have a musical instrument. Remember that the burial included the fragments of a broken lyre. So why would the East Anglian king need a lyre for his journey? The answer is actually quite simple – poetry.

The lyre was the tool of the poet – the traveling minstrel. And to understand Old English poetry, you have to understand the role of this instrument.

Traditionally, poems we're either sung or recited to music. The Germanic poet was a performer – not a writer. There wasn't really a concept of a fixed written text because there was no writing. So poets were kind of like jazz musicians. They worked off a basic theme or storyline, but they improvised along the way. And they probably never performed the same poem the exact same way twice – especially the longer poems. And we'll explore how those poets composed their poems later in this episode because that process explains how and why Old English poetry is structured the way it is.

So let's begin with that lyre and it's closely-related cousin the harp. Those instruments are some of the oldest instruments known to man. Archaeologists have found lyres and harps at the site of the first civilizations in Mesopotamia. The remains of a 2300 year old lyre have been discovered in Scotland, making it Europe's oldest surviving stringed musical instrument.

The instruments were also used very early on in Greece. In fact, they probably pre-date the arrival of the first Indo-European Greeks because the remains of a lyre have been among the ruins of the Minoan civilization on the island of Crete.

The word ***lyre*** actually comes from Greek, and the word passed from Greek into Latin. In Latin, something that was suitable for singing to a lyre was ***lyricus***, and that word passed from French into English as ***lyric***. So a poet might compose ***lyrics*** to the sound of a ***lyre*** – both words being cognate.

In Greek, the string of a lyre was a ***khorde***. And that Greek word gave us the English word ***cord*** (C-O-R-D) meaning a thick string or rope. It also gave us the word ***chord*** (C-H-O-R-D) as used in music meaning three or more strings or notes played in unison.

That Greek word ***khorde*** actually came from an original Indo-European word which meant 'gut or intestine or entrails.' And that word was used for musical strings because the strings of a lyre or harp were actually made from animal entrails. Middle English developed a similar word for the strings of an instrument. They called it 'catgut,' and it's still called that today. In fact, even

though some modern strings are made from steel and synthetic polymers, animal entrails are still used for some modern musical strings – especially those used by classical musicians.

The original Indo-European word which meant 'gut or entrail' not only gave the Greeks the word ***khorde***, it also passed though the Germanic languages and it gave us the English word ***yarn***. And while we tend think of yarn in the context of knitting, let's not forget the phrase 'to spin a yarn' to mean to tell a story. So even the English word ***yarn*** has an association with story-telling and lyrical poetry.

Now the reason why instruments like harps and lyres can be found in ancient civilizations throughout Europe and Asia is because they were a key part of the ancient oral tradition. As we know, before writing, people passed on histories and stories and morality lessons in the oral tradition. And when we think of works like the Illiad and the Odyssey in Greece and Beowulf in Britain, those are very long works. And even though the ancient poets had very good memories, they had to develop a technique to help them remember those very long stories. And that technique was the poem.

A poem was a type of word play, and when used as originally designed, it was a mnemonic device. It was a tool of the poet just as much as the lyre itself. So once upon a time, poems had a much more practical use beyond simply conveying emotion or sentiment.

The unique way in which these poems were structured enabled poets to remember and recite long detailed passages. And that's because it's much easier to remember poetic verse than it is regular ordinary speech. Regular speech doesn't really have a specific structure other than the basic rules of grammar, so there is no particular order to it. But most traditional poetry – or 'verse' – had a specific structure, and that structure was intentional.

Most people today think of poems as rhymes, and that is one type of poetic structure. It's the way many of us learned to remember things as children. You probably learned something as basic as the alphabet by converting it into a poem:

ABCDEFG
HIJKLMNOP
QRSTU and V
WXY and Z

And we learned nursery rhymes the same way. "Jack and Jill went up the hill to fetch a pail of water, Jack fell down, broke his crown and Jill came tumbling after." We learned it as kids, and we remember it word for word as adults in part because of the specific way in which the words are arranged. The rhyme helps us to remember it.

Now those example use rhymes, but the rhyming poem was not the standard type of poem in ancient history. Other techniques were often used. As we'll see, alliteration was a very common technique. And it was the standard technique used by Germanic poets, including Old English

poets. That meant that certain sounds were repeated in a given line, and that's just a different kind of mnemonic device.

So 'Peter piper picked a peck of pickled peppers. How many pickled peppers did Peter Piper pick?'

It doesn't rhyme, but we remember it because of alliteration. Now obviously that is an extreme example, so extreme that it is intended to be tongue-twister. But you get the idea. And as I said, that was really the basic technique which Old English poetry used – alliteration – or repeating sounds.

Old English actually used the same basic structure as all Germanic poetry. Scholars even have a specific name for it. They call it 'four-stress, unrhymed, alliterative verse.' That sounds very fancy, but it's actually quite simple, and it was a very effective way to remember long passages.

With this type of poetry, each line of the poem was divided into two separate halves – what are sometimes called two half-lines. And the sound at the beginning of the second half had to have a corresponding sound in the first half. So the way the second half-line began was really the key because it dictated at least one of the sounds that had to be in the first half-line. Or to think of it the other way, at least one of the sounds in the first half-line had to be the initial sound in the second half.

Now just to make one clarification, I say the first sound of the second half-line is the key. To be precise, it is really the first 'stressed' sound in the second half line, but you don't have to worry about that technicality right now.

So in order to illustrate how this worked, I want to give you some examples. And remember, almost all Old English poetry uses this structure – even Beowulf.

So let's take that poem I used earlier – Jack and Jill. And let's convert it from a modern nursery rhyme with rhyming verse into an Old English poem with this type of alliteration.

So let's start with the first line – "Jack and Jill went up the hill."

Remember that in Old English poems, each line was divided in half. So if we do that, the first half is "Jack and Jill," and the second half is "went up the hill." Now the first word of the second half is ***went*** which begins with a 'W' sound. And under the rules I just mentioned, at least one of the words in the first half also needs a 'W" sound.

But the line is "Jack and Jill - went up the hill." So we don't have names with a 'W' sound. We have names with a 'J' sound. So it doesn't work as an Old English poem. In order to make it work as an Old English poem, the first word in the second half line needs to begin with a 'J' sound because then it would match the 'J' sound in the names 'Jack and Jill.' So if we change the verb ***walked*** to ***jogged***, now we have a perfectly good Old English opening line: "Jack and Jill - jogged up the hill."

Jack - ***Jill*** - ***jogged***. Remember, that first stressed word of the second half – ***jogged*** – has to match one or both of the stressed sounds in the first half. And the J of ***jogged*** now matches the J's in ***Jack*** and ***Jill***. That is Germanic and Old English alliteration.

So, while we're at it, let's complete the poem. The second line is "to fetch a pail of water." We split that into two halves, and we get "to fetch" and then "a pail of water." So ***pail*** is really the first stressed syllable of the second half. ***A*** is just an article. So the first half line needs a word with a 'P' sound to match the word ***pail***. But the first half is "to fetch." So once again, we need to change the words.

So if we play around with words a bit, we can change it from "to fetch" to "in playful pursuit of," and now that works just fine. So we get "in playful pursuit of - a pail of water." Now we have a perfectly good line of Old English poetry. The P's in ***playful*** and ***pursuit*** match the P in ***pail***.

And using this same approach, we can change "Jack fell down and broke his crown" to "'Jack did drop - damaging his crown." ***Did*** - ***drop*** - ***damaging***. That's our alliteration.

And lastly, we have the line, "And Jill came tumbling after." So if we re-phrase it a little, we can use a line like "Jill tripped too - tumbling after him."

So here's our new Old English version of Jack and Jill read in the manner of an Old English poet with an emphasis on the repeating sounds:

Jack and Jill	Jogged up the hill
in playful pursuit of	a Pail of water
Jack did drop	Damaging his crown
Jill tripped too	tumbling after him.

After a while, your ear actually starts to adjust to the specific rhythm of the poem. And I didn't really read it in the precise manner with all the rhythms of an Old English poet, but hopefully you get the idea. And after a while, you actually start to anticipate the first sound of the second half line. It's basically the same process that we use with rhyming poems, except that the stress has been shifted forward to a different place.

If you think about it, rhyming and alliteration are actually quite similar. When we rhyme words, we're basically just repeating the sounds at the end of words. When we use alliteration, we are repeating sounds at the beginning of words. So rhyming and alliteration are really the same thing – repeating certain sounds. It's just a matter of whether we repeat the sounds at the beginning or the end of words. So why did Germanic poets prefer to repeat words at the beginning of words?

Well, the answer lies in the way Germanic words were pronounced and the way inflections were used in Germanic grammar.

You might remember from the episode about Germanic grammar that the pronunciation of Germanic words always required an emphasis on the first syllable, except for the occasional prefix. So at least in the context of pronunciation, the natural tendency was to emphasize initial syllables and not final syllables.

But that's not to say that the final syllables were unimportant. As we know, Germanic grammar used a lot of inflexive endings on words to indicate things like tense and case. And those endings had very specific meanings. So you used one ending for a noun when it was the subject of a sentence, and you used a different ending for a noun was it was the object of the sentence. But if you wanted to rhyme those two words, you had to use the same or a very similar ending. And you couldn't just do that. That would have changed the entire meaning of the sentence. Instead of a subject and an object, you would have two subjects and no object.

So Germanic grammar inhibited the use of rhyming poetry where the emphasis is on repeating sounds at the end of words. And Germanic stress meant that the emphasis was always on the first syllable of words. And when you put those two facts together, you can see why Germanic poetry tended to use alliteration which emphasizes the initial sounds rather than rhyming verse which emphasizes final sounds.

Also, Germanic word order was much more flexible than Modern English word order. Those inflections on the end of the words told what you needed to know, so it didn't really matter what order you put the words in. So that also made it easier to use alliteration in the specific way it was used in Germanic poetry. Since the alliteration patterns required those repeating sounds to appear in very specific places, you could do that in Old English and the sentence still made perfect sense. And that is also why it is so difficult to do a word-for-word translation from Old English into Modern English.

So the bottom line is that Germanic poets worked within the confines of their language. And the Germanic alliterative poem was a natural extension of that language.

So let's listen to an actual example of Old English poetry. And I'm going to use what is probably the most famous Old English poem of all – Beowulf. Beowulf is a very traditional Germanic poem, and it follows the same alliterative format which I've just described.

The first three lines of the poem are:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum
þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,
hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

In Modern English, this passage can be translated as

Listen! The Spear-Danes in days gone by
and the kings who ruled them had courage and greatness.
We have heard of those princes' heroic campaigns.

So let's break it down line by line, and see how the original poet constructed those lines.

Again, the first line read with the traditional Old English pronunciation is:

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum

Remember that Old English poetry was divided into two halves. The first half is "Hwæt wē Gār-Dena." The second half is "in geār-dagum."

Now if we do a word-for word translation of the first half of the line, we have the word ***Hwæt***. That is actually the original version of the modern word ***what***. But here, the word doesn't actually mean 'what.' It was actually a standard word which was used to introduce a poem in Old English, and in this context it means 'listen' or 'listen up' or 'listen closely.' And the fact that this word meant 'listen' is kind of important because it reminds us that these poems were originally intended to be sung or recited. They weren't intended to be written down.

The next word is ***we*** (/way/) which is the original version of the modern word ***we***. And we can actually see some alliteration in those very first two words – "Hwæt wē." Both words begin with the 'W' sound.

Then that first half-line concludes with the word ***Gār-Dena*** which literally means 'spear-danes.' ***Dena*** is 'Danes' meaning the early tribe of Danes in Scandinavia. But the Beowulf poet described them in this line as ***Gār-Dena***. ***Gar*** meant 'spear.' So the name literally meant 'Spear-Danes.' We have actually seen the word ***gar*** before. You might remember that the word ***leek*** meaning 'onion' comes from Old English. And a leek that was spear-shaped was called a ***gar-leek*** – a 'spear leek.' And we have that word today as ***garlic***. So here is that word again – ***Gar-Dena*** – 'Spear Danes.' So why does the poet call them the 'Spear Danes' and not just the 'Danes'? Well, the answer probably has to do with alliteration, but we'll come back to that in a minute.

But next , let's look at the second half of that opening line of the poem. The second half is "in geār-dagum." ***In*** (/een/) means 'in.' But the first stressed word is the next word ***geār*** (/yay-er/) which meant 'year,' and we've also seen that word before. And then we have ***dagum*** which meant 'days' in Old English. So ***geār-dagum*** literally meant 'year-days,' but think of it as more like 'days of yore' or 'days gone by.' So "in geār-dagum" meant 'in the days of yore' or 'in the old days.'

By the way, ***dagum*** retains its original 'G' sound in the middle here. As I noted a couple of episodes back, the German word for 'day' is ***Tag*** as in "Guten Tag." And in Old English it was originally ***dag***. So here we see that original version with an inflexive ending – 'um' – giving us ***dagum***.

And the entire term is ‘gear dagum’ (/yay-er dagum/). So let’s consider that word ‘gear’ (/yay-er/) or ‘year’. It was spelled G-E-A-R. So that spelling tells us that the word was originally pronounced /gay-er/. But as we’ve seem before, the ‘G’ sound shifted to a ‘Y’ sound in early Old English. And when the Normans arrived, they changed that spelling to reflect the later pronunciation, so it became Y-E-A-R. So which pronunciation did the original Beowulf poet use?

Well based on what we know about Old English poetry, we can reasonably conclude that the original poet pronounced the word with a ‘G’ sound when he sang it to his audience. So it was /gayer- dagum/ – not the later and more traditional /yay-er dagum/. And the reason why we know that is because that word is the first stressed word in the second half line. In other words, it is our key word. And therefore, it is the word that has to alliterate with one or more words in the first half line. But if it was pronounced with its later ‘Y’ sound – /yay-er/ – then there would need to be a word with that same ‘Y’ sound in the first half – but there isn’t. Remember the first half is “Hwæt wē Gār-Dena,” and it doesn’t have a word with the ‘Y’ sound. But it does have a word with the ‘G’ sound – ***Gar-Dena***. So given the requirements of Germanic alliterative verse, we know that the word for ‘year’ still had its original ‘G’ sound when the poem was first composed because ***Gar-Dena*** and ***gear dagum*** alliterate perfectly. In fact, they not only have the same initial ‘G’ sound, they also have the same ‘D’ sound in second part – ***Gar-Dena*** and ***gear dagum***.

So by giving the word for ‘year’ its original pronunciation, the Germanic structure of the poem is maintained. And as you can see, there is a lot more going on in these poems than you might have realized.

So once again, here is that first line. Listen for the repeating ‘W’ sounds at the beginning and the repeating ‘G’ and ‘D’ sounds in the rest of the line.

Hwæt wē Gār-Dena in geār-dagum

So I hope you can hear that alliteration. And using that kind of deductive reasoning, we can not only make certain assumptions about the original pronunciation of a word like ***year***, but we can also start to estimate when the original poet composed the poem. Since scholars have determined that the word for ‘year’ switched from /gay-er/ to /yay-er/ within the first half of the Old English period, that is actually a clue that the original oral version of the poem was composed during this earlier period before the sound changed.

Before we move on, let’s take a quick look at the next couple of lines. And here, the alliteration is more obvious. The second line is:

þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,

So in this case, each half-line begins with the same ‘TH’ sound.

þēod-cyninga þrym gefrūnon,

And the third line of the poem is

hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

So between the word ***æþelingas*** in the first half and ***ellen*** in the second half, we have the same 'E' sound. So again:

hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.

So as we go through the poem line by line, we can see and hear the structure of Old Enlgish poetry. And we can hear how the poets constructed those passages according to a specific formula. And if you continue throughout the entire poem, you will see this same type of pattern.

Now the reason for this exercise, was two-fold. First, I wanted to introduce the basic structure of Old English poetry. But more importantly, I wanted you to see the impact that that poetic structure had on the overall history of the English language. One of the consequences of that structure is that it forced the creation of new words and compounds. And some of those words entered the general vocabulary of the language. So let me explain what I mean.

Given the required structure of Old English poetry, poets had to make sure that the words alliterated in the right way. So the poet had to make sure that a word in the first half of a line began with the same sound as the first stressed word in the second half. That's the basic formula of Old English poetry. Now in Modern English, that wouldn't really be a problem. Depending on how you count them, Modern English has nearly a million words at its disposal, but Old English only had about 50,000 words. So it wasn't as easy being an Anglo-Saxon poet. Sometimes, you had to be creative. In order to express a particular thought or idea, there wasn't always a word available which began with the specific sound which you needed. So poets often had to make up new words, and they did that by creating compound words.

I noted a few episodes back that the Anglo-Saxons loved to use compound words. Well, one of the reasons why they used a lot of compound words is because that's how they made new words with their limited vocabulary. And those words created by poets actually filtered into the general vocabulary of the language.

So as we've seen, sea travel was a common theme in Old English poetry. So the poets had to find new ways to describe ships and the sea so that the words would alliterate within the required structure of Old English poetry. So some of the compound words they created as euphemisms for the ships included 'wave floater,' 'sea goer,' 'water wood,' 'sea steed,' 'sea horse' and 'wave horse.' And to describe the sea, poets would use words like 'seal bath' and 'fish home.'

These types of euphemisms were adopted as stock phrases. In the course of reciting a poem, the poets could use them spontaneously when they needed to find a word which would alliterate in the right way. So it was kind of like a jazz musician who uses certain stock phrases or riffs based on a particular chord. Many musicians rely on a handful of riffs which they use over and over.

They just combine them and shift them around to make them fit a particular song. So when the musician needs to improvise over a particular chord, he or she can simply use one of those stock phrases or riffs. And that's what Old English poets did too. They used these same type of stock phases, and when they needed to express a particular idea with a word which began with a specific sound, they just relied upon that stock phrase.

So for example, in Beowulf, the poet repeatedly needed to express the idea that something was crossing the sea. And to express that idea, the poet used a stock phrase or formula. He would use the phrase "ofer ___-rade" which literally meant 'over ____ road.' And the poet would just fill in a word in the blank space so that he could get the right alliteration.

So when the poet described how the Danish king could command his men from across the sea, he wrote that the men obeyed him "ofer hron-rade" which meant 'over the whale road.' And the poet used that phrase because the second half line began was the phrase "hyran scolde" which literally meant 'hear shall,' but can be translated today as 'had to listen to." And since that second half line began with the word ***hyran*** meaning 'hear,' the poet had to find a way to express the idea of crossing the sea with a word or phrase which used the 'H' sound. And in Old English, a whale was sometimes called a ***hron*** – H-R-O-N. So the poet called the sea the "hron-rade" – the 'whale road.'

Later in the poem, the poet says that the Danish king Hrothgar sent out over the sea for someone to help him. In the passage, the second half line is "secean wolde" which literally means 'seek want' but meant 'wished to seek' or 'looked for.' So it began with an 'S' sound – ***secean***. So the poet needed to express the idea that Hrothgar was seeking someone to cross the sea to help him, but the poet had to make sure that the phrase used a word with the 'S' sound. So the poet went back to his stock phrase ''ofer ___-rade," and in this case, he decided to use the word ***swan***. And he ended up with the phrase "ofer swan-rade secean wolde." So it meant 'over the swan's road the king sought help.'

Later in the poem, the Beowulf poet refers to the sea as the ***segl-rad*** – literally 'sail-road.' 'The road of sailing ships.' So this stock phrase was used several times. And it wasn't just the Beowulf poet who used this kind of phrase. In the poem 'The Seafarer,' that poet described the sea as the ***hwæl-weg*** – literally the 'whale-way,' very much like the Beowulf poet's 'whale road.'

So even though some of these words were likely made-up for a particular poem, others were probably in more or less common use in the language.

But the key point here is that Old English poetry resulted in lots of new compound words in the language. The poet had to create these words and phrases to fit the required alliterative patterns of the poem. This process was sometimes called 'word weaving' because the poet's job was to weave words together into a specific pattern. And that also explains the term which the Anglo-Saxons used for poets. The word ***poet*** actually comes from French after the Norman Conquest, but before the Normans arrived, an Anglo-Saxon poet was called a ***scop***. And the word ***scop*** comes from the same English root as the word ***shape***. So a ***scop*** was literally a 'shaper.'

Someone who shaped words. And those words had to be shaped to fit the particular pattern of Old English poetry.

When a poet needed a way to describe a spider with a 'G' sound, the poet created the word ***ganglewaefre***, which literally meant a 'going weaver,' usually translated as 'walking weaver.' When a poet needed to describe a battle with an 'S' sound, the poet created the word "sword play" – one of many Old English poetic compounds that still exists in Modern English.

To describe the Sun, poets used the stock-phrase 'heofan _____' – literally 'Heaven's _____. And they filled in the blank with a word which satisfied the required alliteration. So they came up a words like "heofon-candel" – literally 'Heaven's candle' or 'sky-candle.' And sometimes they used "heofones gim" – literally 'Heaven's gem' or 'sky's jewel.'

And when the Beowulf poet needed a word for 'body,' the poet used the stock phrase "ban-_____" – literally 'bone-_____.' So the poet used words like "ban-hus" – literally 'bone house.' And other times, he used "ban loca" – literally 'bone locker.' In another line, the poet used "ban cofa" – literally 'bone chamber.' So in each case, the poet selected a term with the required sound which he needed. And all of those compound words for 'body' are also found in at least one other Old English poem. So these type of stock phrases apparently became common enough that some of these compound words began to filter into the general language.

The words of poets had the ability to influence ordinary speech because the poets themselves were so influential. The scops and minstrels were the entertainers of their day. They were the rock stars or pop stars of the early Middle Ages. They traveled the country, and sometimes traveled the world, reciting poems.

The important role of the poet in early Anglo-Saxon culture is reflected in what some scholars think may be the oldest documented poem in Old English – a poem called 'Widsith.' And I say 'may be' the oldest poem because the poem itself is like most Old English poems. The only written verison comes from a manuscript which was written down in the tenth century called the Exeter Book. No one knows when the poem was originally composed, but the content suggests that it was composed in very early Anglo-Saxon Britain. It was likely composed in the seventh century, but it was probably an even older Germanic poem which had evolved over the centuries.

The poem is basically the story of a traveling minstrel or scop. It describes his travels as a poet throughout Europe. It contains a long detailed list of all the peoples and tribes who he met and performed for along the way. And many of those names date from the fourth and fifth centuries. So that suggests that the poem either originated at a much earlier date in continental Europe, and traveled with the Anglo-Saxons to Britain, or it was a completely fictional account composed at a later date in early Anglo-Saxon Britain. Either way, it survived all the way to the end of the Anglo-Saxon period to be written down in the Exeter Book.

The name 'Widsith' meant 'far wanderer.' It was literally 'wide traveler.' ***Wid*** was 'wide' and ***sith*** meant 'journey' coming from the same root as the word ***send***. It was also given as the name

of the minstrel. And in the poem, we get a sense of the status held by the poet or minstrel in Germanic society.

Remember that the poets or scops came from a time before writing. So their poetry was the only historical record. And the kings of that period wanted to ensure that their legacy was preserved for future generations. So many kings had their own poets who documented all of the great things about that particular king. And those poets or minstrels would then travel to various other courts to recite their poetry. In addition to being entertainers who composed and performed their own works, the minstrels also served as reporters and historians. They would bring stories about the people and events in other kingdoms. So those performances were a combination of news, history and entertainment.

And so these minstrels were the preservers of the oral history and tradition of the Germanic peoples. And they preserved that history in the specific poetic structure that we looked at earlier because it was the way in which the poets memorized and retained all of those stories. And sometimes those poets borrowed from each other. If one minstrel had an interesting story to tell, other minstrels might incorporate that story into their own work. So that over time, some of the poems developed into a collection of bits and pieces from various poets. And Widsith appears to be an example of that.

In Widsith, the poet describes his far-flung travels, but the Kings and tribes which he references existed over a period of more than two centuries. So no one poet could have actually experienced the events of the poem first-hand.

The first line of the poem is "Widsith matholade, wordhord onleac." That line literally reads: 'Widsith spoke, Word hord unlocked.'

So Widsith unlocked his hoard of words when he began to speak or sing to the audience. He then described the people that he has heard about in his travels. He mentions Alexander the Great, Julius Caesar, and Atilla the Hun. He also mentions a long list of Germanic tribes throughout Europe.

In the middle of the poem, Widsith describes the life of the traveling minstrel. In one Modern English translation which I like because it preserves much of the original alliteration, the passage reads:

So I **f**ared through many	a **f**oreign realm
this **w**ide earth o'er	as **w**eal or ill
came to my **k**en;	of my **k**in bereft
far from my **f**olk	I **f**ollowed onward.
Wherefore I can **s**ing	and **s**ay my tales,
to **m**en in the **m**ead-hall	**m**ake my lay,
how **h**igh-born **h**eroes	**h**eaped me with gifts.

He then mentions more tribes which he encountered. Some of those names – like the Swedes, Goths, Danes and Geats – are well-documented. Some of the other tribe names which he mentions have completely disappeared from history. But one of the tribes which he mentions is particularly interesting. He mentions a tribe in Scandinavia called the '***Wicings***. And this is generally considered to be the first documented reference to the Vikings. And given the fact that the poem was likely composed in some form around the time the Anglo-Saxons were settling in Britain, it's a fascinating historical nugget because the Viking Age didn't really begin until very late in the eighth century. So two or three centuries earlier, we have this passage referencing them. And even though the term ***Viking*** was later used as a general term of all of the Scandinavian invaders, in the context of this particular poem, it appears that the Vikings were originally a specific tribe.

After listing some more tribes, Widsith describes how he and his traveling companion sang their songs to the accompaniment of harp. Probably the same kind of instrument found at Sutton Hoo.

And the poem concludes with a passage which reflects the important role of the traveling minstrel in early Germanic societies and the fame which those poets offered to their patrons. It describes how prominent kings would often seek out minstrels to secure their legacy. This particular translation uses a more contemporary version of Modern English. And the passage reads:

Wandering like this, driven by chance,
minstrels travel through many lands;
they state their needs, say words of thanks,
always, south or north, they find someone
well-versed in songs, generous in gifts,
who wishes to raise his renown with his men,
to do great things, until everything passes,
light and life together, he who wins fame
has everlasting glory under the heavens.

And this passage may actually help to explain why a minstrel's lyre was buried with that ship at Sutton Hoo. After all, how else would the king's legacy be preserved in the afterlife? Every king needed a minstrel or scop to spread the word of his good deeds.

But minstrels were only needed when there was no one who could write down that legacy. So as the Anglo-Saxons gradually began to adopt writing, the role of the minstrel began to decline. Minstrels were no longer needed to secure the fame of kings at that point. Kings could now record their own legacies in writing – written documents that would survive for centuries. So the oral tradition gradually began to wane.

And when the Norman French arrived in 1066, the traditional Germanic minstrel with his alliterative verse all but disappeared. About a generation after the Normans arrived, a passage was written down by an anonymous scribe, and it was preserved in a manuscript in the library of Worcester Cathedral.

The passage is a specific reference to Old English poetry and literature, and it laments the loss of that tradition in the wake of the French dominance. The original passage was written in Germanic alliterative verse, perhaps as an ode to a dying art form. In Modern English, the passage reads:

These taught our people in English.
Their light was not dark, but shone brightly.
Now their teaching is abandoned and the people are lost.
Now our people learn other languages,
and many of the teachers are perishing
and the people with them.

So Old English poetry gradually faded into history. The advent of writing meant that long passages didn't need to be remembered for oral delivery. Now they could simply be written down and read later. And as English became less and less Germanic, the structure of the Old English poem didn't really fit the language as well as it once had. And not surprisingly, the first examples of rhyming poetry in English came near the very end of the Old English period as Old English transitioned into Middle English.

So that seems like a fitting conclusion to this episode about traveling and Old English poetry.

Next time, we're going to move the story forward and explore the rise of Northumbria as a center of literacy and leaning. And we'll explore some of the early English writings which emerged from that kingdom. Then we'll look at how the rise of literacy in monasteries brought about the first great deposit of Latin words into English.

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