THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 38: NOBLES, NUPTIALS AND A COWHERD POET

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 38: Nobles, Nuptials and a Cowherd Poet. In this episode, we're going to explore the how the kingdom of Northumbria became the center of learning and scholarship in early Anglo-Saxon Britain. We'll also explore the political and religious developments which led to that shift of power to the northernmost Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

And before I begin, let me make a quick note about the growth of the Church in the early Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. I recognize that at times some of these episodes about early Old English sound more like a history of the English Church than a History of English Language, but it is very important to keep in mind that these two themes are fundamentally linked for the next few centuries. To fully explain how English developed within Britain, we have to understand how the Church developed. We've already seen how missionaries brought the alphabet to Britain. And we've seen how monks applied that alphabet to English and gave us some of our modern spellings. And we're going to continue to see those connections in this episode and many of the remaining episodes in the story of Old English. The fact is that most of the literacy in Anglo-Saxon Britain was confined to these monasteries. So in order to trace the history of the language, we have to dig through those monasteries. But once we get into the later periods of Old English, the landscape will start to change a little bit. We'll soon turn our attention to the Vikings and the Norse influence on English. Then we can look at the rise of the English language under King Alfred and his successors. And then we can start to focus on the Normans. But before we get to all of that, we need to focus on the rise of Northumbria, and what is sometimes called the Northumbrian Renaissance. We'll start to explore that period in this episode. And this early period is really essential to our overall story because it's the first great period of Anglo-Saxon culture and literature. And that literature captured English when it was still a very young language. So over the next few episodes we're going to explore this crucial period, and this story is bound together with the story of the early Church.

So let's turn to this episode, and let's begin where we left off last time – with Old English poetry. And poetry is going to continue to be a part of the next couple of episodes. And there is a reason why I am focusing on poetry at this point in the story of English. As it turns out, when language scholars study the history of languages, they notice that the earliest literature in most languages is almost always poetry. As we know, the first works written in the Greek alphabet were epic poems like the Iliad and the Odyssey. So why is that? Well, it's because people relied upon the oral tradition before writing existed. And stories were passed along in the oral tradition through the technique of poetry. As we saw last time, poetry was a technique used by minstrels to help them remember long passages. So when ancient cultures first adopted writing, those poems were typically the first works to be captured for posterity by the alphabet.

In most languages, you have an extended period of poetry before you actually get to what is called prose – basically works in normal speech like legal codes, histories and chronicles. English is actually a little bit of an exception to that rule because we have a pretty large body of

Old English prose, including legal codes like Aethelbert's Code of Kent and Ine's Code from Wessex.

We also have Bede's history of the English Church which I have mentioned from time to time. And after the Viking invasion, we actually have a lot more texts in prose or normal speech. But with respect to this earliest period of Old English in the seventh and eighth centuries, Old English is like most languages in that much of what survives, survives in the form of poetry.

Now the problem with those early poems is that most of them only survive in later manuscripts which were written down and compiled at later dates. So as we look at those poems, we don't generally know when they were originally composed or for that matter who composed them. So it makes it difficult to establish any kind of chronology or order.

So let's begin this episode by considering the actual sources of Old English poetry which have survived to this day. And as it turns out, that's a subject which can be explored very quickly because most Old English poetry survives in just four manuscripts. And collectively, those four manuscripts give us about 30,000 lines of poetry including the entire Beowulf poem. And that's it. That is all that has survived from the Anglo-Saxon period until today. And to put that into some perspective, the Iliad and the Odyssey together have almost that many lines.

But the fact is that it's somewhat amazing that we have as many surviving poems as we do. The four manuscripts which do exist are really anthologies of multiple works which were compiled around the year 1000. So thankfully, a few scribes around that time decided to write down a lot of the more common and familiar poems. But in order for those poems to get from the Anglo-Saxons to us today, they had to overcome two main hurdles. First, they had to be written down, and then they had to survive centuries of political, religious and social turmoil.

Today, it seems like almost everything is documented is some form, but in early Britain, writing was reserved for only the most important texts. There was still no paper. So books were still being made from vellum, and vellum was incredibly expensive. It took the skins of many animals to produce a single book. About 500 calf skins were required to make a single copy of the Bible. And when a book was produced, very few people could read it. It was usually housed in a monastery with only a few people having access to it. And there was no printing press, so it had to be completely written by hand which would take many, many hours. So books were rare and incredibly expensive. They were luxuries. And even when books were produced, they were usually written in Latin which was still considered the language of scholarship and the language of the Church. And that didn't really change until the events described later in this episode. So it is believed that only a few of those Old English poems were considered worthy of preservation in a rare and expensive manuscript.

But fortunately, a few scribes around the year 1000 saw fit to write down and preserve some of those poems, but then those books had to survive centuries of turmoil. The first big hurdle came from Scandinavia. A substantial portion of Old English literature was destroyed by the Vikings when they plundered and looted the monasteries. And as if that wasn't bad enough, the Normans came along shortly afterward and destroyed a lot of what was left over. As we know by now, the

Normans had little or no respect for the language of the Anglo-Saxons. They didn't see any need to preserve Old English writing or literature.

But as bad as the Vikings and the Normans were, one of the biggest culprits in the destruction of Old English poetry was actually an English king – a very famous English King – Henry VIII. As you probably know, Henry broke with the Catholic Church in Rome and established the Church of England. Well, he also dissolved the monasteries. And in the aftermath, many priceless manuscripts were burned and destroyed. Some of the vellum pages were used as drumskins and roof insulation. They were even used to line beer barrels. And the net result of all of this devastation and destruction was the permanent loss of a lot of Old English literature.

But fortunately, between the time of the Vikings and the Normans, the English language had experienced a renaissance. This was the period of Alfred the Great who was one of the most important figures, not only in the history of England, but also in the history of the English language. He really made it key part of his reign to preserve the language of the Anglo-Saxons. And most Old English literature which survives comes from this period in the tenth and eleventh centuries. And it was during that period that those four manuscripts which survive today were compiled.

The largest of the four surviving manuscripts was donated to Exeter Cathedral by a bishop named Leofric in the year 1072. It contains poems like 'The Wanderer,' 'The Seafarer,' and 'The Ruin.' It also contains over 90 short poems in the form of riddles. Since the book was donated to Exeter Cathedral, it is known today as the Exeter Book. Like most of the surviving poems, we don't really know when the Exeter Book poems were originally composed. So we'll look at them a little more closely when we get to the period when the Exeter Book was actually compiled – around the end of the Anglo-Saxon period.

Another of the four surviving manuscripts was donated to Oxford University by an early owner of the book named Franciscus Junius. This book is actually named after him. It's called the 'Junius Manuscript.' It contains four (4) poems which all relate to Christian subjects. For reasons which I will discuss later, this collection is also sometimes called the 'Caedmon Manuscript' after the first known English poet. But as we'll see, that title is a little misleading because we don't really know who composed those four religious poems.

The third manuscript was maintained in the personal library of Sir Robert Cotton who was a member of Parliament during the reign of Queen Elizabeth and her successor King James I. Now when I say it was in his personal library, I don't mean a couple of bookshelves in his personal study. His library is generally considered to be the richest private collection of manuscripts ever amassed. It even outranked the Royal Library. Remember that Henry VIII had dissolved the monasteries a few years earlier. So some of the manuscripts in those monasteries found their way into the hands of private collectors like Cotton. His massive library included a book which contained five different works in Old English. Two of those works were poems. One was a poetic fragment which is called 'Judith' today. The other poem was an epic poem of over 3,000 lines. So this one poem comprises about ten percent (10%) of all Old English poetry. Again, it didn't have a title, so it was originally identified as "3,182 lines of alliterative verse, beginning

'Hwaet we gardena in geardagum'." Of course, if you listened to the last episode, you know that that poem is known today as 'Beowulf.' And we are very lucky to have this particular manuscript because in the year 1731, a fire broke out in Cotton's library.
The fire actually destroyed several manuscripts. And this particular book of Old English literature was left charred and scorched.

Of the five texts in the book, Beowulf actually suffered the worst damage. In addition to the fire, the ink has faded on many of the pages to the point where large portions of it are no longer legible. Shortly after the fire, the book was deposited with the British Library which is the national library of the UK. And thankfully, two transcriptions were made shortly after the book arrived at the British Library. Were it not for those transcriptions, we wouldn't be able to read the Beowulf poem in its entirety today due to the faded ink.

By the way, this particular book of Old English literature is called the 'Cotton Vitellius A. XV.' You might think that name reflects some very sophisticated way of indexing the book by the British Library, but the real story isn't quite that impressive. The Cotton part comes from the name of Robert Cotton who had the book in his library. In his library, Cotton catalogued his books according to the busts of Roman Emperors that stood over each of his bookcases. And this particular book which contained the Beowulf poem was kept in a book case that was topped by a bust of the Roman Emperor Vitellius. So that's where the 'Vitellius' part comes from. And it was the fifteenth book on the first shelf of the bookcase. And that's where the A-XV comes from. So the names of these old manuscripts from Cotton's library are really just based on what shelf it was found on and which Roman Emperor's bust was on top.

So those are three of the books of Old English poems – Exeter, Junuius and Cotton Vitellius. The fourth book probably has a interesting story as well because it is actually located in Italy – not Britain. Unfortunately, we don't know very much about the early history of the book. It's called the Vercelli Book because it is located in a cathedral in Vercelli, Italy. And no one knows exactly how it got there. It is generally believed that it was taken to Italy in the eleventh century by a group of pilgrims who were on their way to Rome. So that is the last of the four primary manuscripts which contain most of the poetry of Old English.

Now there are a few Old English poems which pop up in other places like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle or Bede's History of the English Church. But as you can see, when we talk about Old English poetry, we could pretty much put the entire collection in a small box. So that's part of the reason why modern scholars sometimes seem to obsess over every word of it.

Now in terms of poetry, there are different kinds of poems. Some of the later poems are religious in nature. Some of them are riddles. But a small group fall into a category known as 'heroic poetry.' And heroic poetry draws on the traditional warrior culture of the Germanic tribes. These poems usually include themes of courage and honor. And they typically reflect the Germanic notions of loyalty to one's lord and the importance of maintaining a good reputation. Only five of the surviving poems fall into the category of heroic poems, and Beowulf is certainly the best example of that style. The heroic poems also include that poem Widsith which I discussed in the last episode.

Now since this small group of poems reflect the Germanic warrior tradition, it is generally believed that those poems were composed very early on – before Christianity had spread throughout the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. As a general rule, the older the poem, the lesser the Christian influence, but at some point a transition began to occur. As Christian influences became more prevalent, Old English poetry started to become Christian as well. Instead of using poetic verse to praise Germanic warriors, the Anglo-Saxons began to use poetry to praise God.

And part of what's so fascinating about this transition is that we can actually pinpoint exactly when it occurred. It occurred in a monastery in Northumbria around the year 670. And in the rest of this episode, I'm going to explore the events which led to that important event in the history of English. And these events were really an outgrowth of the emergence of Northumbria as a center of learning and scholarship in the seventh century. This was a period which is sometimes called the Northumbrian Renaissance, and it's an essential period in the history of the English language.

So let's turn our attention back to Anglo-Saxon history, and let's see how this kingdom of Northumbria became such an important cultural and literary center.

In the last episode, I discussed how the East Anglian king Raedwald became the bretwalda or overlord of the Anglo-Saxons when Aethelbert died down in Kent. And I mentioned how he assumed that position in part by defeating the King of Northumbria Aethelfrith and helping the exiled prince Edwin to take the throne there. Well, when Aethelfirth died in battle, his sons fled the kingdom and headed north into modern-day Scotland. And they will become very important to this story a little later. So we already have a developing theme when it comes to Northumbria, and that's the theme of exiled princes. Edwin had been on the run ever since his father was killed by Aethelfrith. And now that Edwin had returned home, the dead king's sons were now on the run.

And the reason why all of these 'princes in exile' are so important to this story is because eventually each of them returned. And when they returned, they each brought something very important with them – something which shaped and changed the history of the kingdom.

So the first prince to return was Edwin. And as we saw last time, Edwin returned with the support of Raedwald down in East Anglia. There was actually a great deal of mutual support between those two kings. Edwin's support helped to Raedwald's to become overlord of the Anglo-Saxons, but Raedwald's reciprocal support of Edwin allowed Edwin to become a strong king in his own right up in Northumbria. And that support, combined with Edwin's own political shrewdness, meant that Edwin was in a prime position to become the new overlord when Raedwald died. And when Raedwald died in the year 624, that's what happened. Edwin quickly emerged as the new leader of the Anglo-Saxons.

But even though Edwin was a powerful king, there were other kings out there who were potential rivals. One of those potential rivals was Aethelbert's son who had succeeded Aethelbert as king down in Kent. So in order to manage any claims which might stem from that potential rival,

Edwin did what many kings of the Middle Ages did. He formed a marriage alliance. It turns out that Aethelbert and his wife Bertha down in Kent had a daughter as well as a son. The daughter's name was Aethelburg. And Edwin realized that a marriage to Aethelburg would likely prevent her brother – the King of Kent – from causing any trouble. So the marriage was promptly arranged. And as it turns out, Edwin's calculated move worked. Even though Edwin's authority as bretwalda never extended down to Kent, the Kentish king never gave any Edwin any problems up in Northumbria.

Now it is important to keep in mind how important marriages were in the political history of Europe. Marriage alliances were crucial when forming political alliances. And we've also seen how marriages were crucial to the spread of the Church throughout Europe. Remember that the Frankish King Clovis married a Christian, and she played a big role in his conversion. And Aethelbert married Clovis's great-granddaughter. And she played a big role in the conversion of Aethelbert and the Kingdom of Kent. And they had this daughter – this daughter Aethelburg – who was now married to Edwin up in Northumbria. And as you might have guessed, history was getting ready to repeat itself. Aethelburg had agreed to marry the pagan king Edwin on the condition that she could continue to practice Christianity and she could bring a priest with her to Northumbria. Edwin had agreed, and this was the first step in the ultimate conversion of Northumbria.

So from Clovis, to Aethelbert, to Edwin – they all married women from the same maternal family line. And those women really changed the religious landscape of Western Europe. And I wanted to make that point because history often focuses on the contribution of kings and princes and male lines of descent, but here we have a female line of descent who contributed to history in their own way.

So as you can see, in terms of history, marriages were sometimes more important than wars. A defeated king was defeated, but that didn't mean he would convert. And a dead king couldn't convert. But a pagan king married to a Christian bride was 'ripe for the pickin'.

So since marriages are key part of this story, I thought it might be a good time to digress a little bit and talk about marriage, at least the English words associated with marriage, because many of our Modern English words associated with marriage can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxons. And that should tell you something. Marriage tends to be a very conservative institution. The same traditions are honored from one generation to the next. So, not surprisingly, the terminology tends to remain basically the same over time.

Let's start with the word ***wed***. It's an Old English word which has changed very little over the centuries. The early Anglo-Saxons sometimes used the word ***aþwedd*** which literally meant 'oath-wed' because a wedding was a type of oath or promise.

Wed originally had a sense of a pledge or covenant to do something. And we have to keep in mind that in many older cultures, and even some modern cultures, marriages were often arranged even among the commoners. So it was in part a financial and an economic transaction. They didn't always have the romantic elements that they have today. So we see that the word ***wed***

meant more of binding covenant in Old English. It was basically a contract. By the way, the word ***wed*** is a Germanic word which is cognate with the word ***wage***. We get ***wage*** from the Franks – via French. And in the word ***wage***, we see another type of contract or promise – in that case a promise to pay someone a specific amount of money in exchange for services.

Now the process of making an agreement to be married was ***wedd-lac*** – the original version of ***wedlock***. A lot of people today think the ***lock*** part of that word actually means 'lock' as in 'to lock someone up,' but that is not actually the case. ***Lac*** was an Old English word which meant 'activity.' And it is completely unrelated to our modern word ***lock***. It was a common suffix, but ***wedlock*** is the only surviving word in Modern English which still has that suffix. So ***wedd-lac*** literally meant 'pledge activity,' but it referred to the general state of being married. And I've noted before how the Anglo-Saxons loved to combine words together to make new words since their vocabulary was very small compared to today. And ***wedlock*** is one of those compounds which has survived into Modern English.

The original sense of ***wed*** as a 'binding promise or oath' can also be seen in a related word – ***betroth***. And ***betroth*** is another word from this early period. First of all, we have a big clue that this is a very old English word here thanks to that prefix ***be-***. It was a much more common prefix in Old English and Middle English. And we still have it in words like ***behold***, ***befriend***, and ***behead***. The ***-troth*** part of ***betroth*** is actually cognate with the word ***truth***. And it reflects the original sense of a marriage as a relationship formed by a binding oath and covenant. So if you were 'betrothed,' you were 'being truthful' in your promise to be married to someone.

The idea of a marriage as a type of covenant or contract is also reflected in another Old English word. When a man proposed to a woman, and the woman accepted the man's proposal, it was customary for them to shake hands to bind their agreement. In Old English, this was called ***handfaestan***. It literally meant 'hand fastening.' And again, this was the specific word used to describe an accepted marriage proposal. So the Anglo-Saxons accepted a marriage proposal in the same way that people today seal a business deal – with a handshake.

The analogy of a marriage to a business deal is also represented by the way money often changed hands when two people got married. In order to protect the financial interest of the wife, Anglo-Saxon men would make a payment to their new wife. But this wasn't done until the morning *after* they were married – in other words, after the marriage was consummated. So this payment was called the 'morning gift' – pronounced 'morgen-gifu.' This was akin to the later concept of dower.

A ***dower*** was a payment to the bride's family, and the Anglo-Saxons did have a similar concept called a ***weotuma***, but dower and dowry are really concepts introduced by the Normans after 1066. A ***dower*** was a payment to the bride's family, and a ***dowry*** was a payment from the bride's family. But you can see that there was a definite financial component to marriages early on, and that is probably why a word like ***wed*** has an original sense of 'promise or covenant or contract.'

Now today we call the actual wedding ceremony a ***wedding***. Old English had the word as ***weddung***, but it originally referred to the general state of being married. So it was basically the

equivalent of the modern word ***marriage***. And that's because Old English didn't actually have the word ***marriage***. Words like ***marry***, ***marriage*** and ***nuptial*** are actually words borrowed from French after 1066. So they weren't used in Old English. So instead of French ***marriage***, there was Old English ***weddung*** – or ***wedding*** today. But after the term ***marriage*** was borrowed into English, ***wedding*** became more restricted to the actual marriage ceremony itself.

Before that happened though, the Anglo-Saxon word for the marriage ceremony was ***brydlop*** – literally 'bride run.' ***Bryd*** was 'bride,' and ***lop*** meant 'run.' ***Lop*** is actually cognate with the word ***leap***. That term 'bride run' appears to be a very old term which may have originated in ancient times where the bride was basically kidnapped and wisked away. But it came to refer to the process of a bride leaving her family home to join the husband's home.

That word ***lop*** meaning 'run' is also found in another Modern English word related to marriage – ***elope***. After the Normans arrived, they took that Old English word ***lop*** meaning 'run' and applied it to describe a wife who left her husband for a new lover. In Middle English, that process was called ***aloper***. Today, we have that word as ***elope***, and the meaning has changed to mean the process of a man and woman running away together to get married. But the term still has that sense of running found in the original word ***lop*** which remember is cognate with ***leap***.

Of course, the sense of marriage as a 'big leap' is also reflected in the modern phrase 'take the plunge' for getting married.

Now when a man and woman got married, it was customary to have a big wedding feast. In Old English, a feast or festival was sometimes called an ***ale***. Of course, ***ale*** also meant 'beer,' and we still have that word in Modern English. And a lot of ale was consumed at those Anglo-Saxon feasts. So over time, the feast itself came to be called an ***ale***. And there were actually lots of ales at the time. A 'cuckoo ale' was an annual celebration held in the spring when the first song of a cuckoo was heard. And a 'clerk-ale' and a 'give-ale' were sometimes held during the Easter holidays to raise money for the church.

And when two people got married, they would have a 'bride-ale.' So that was another one of the Anglo-Saxon compound words which they liked so much, and it is actually the root of the modern word ***bridal***. And that may seem a little surprising at first. ***Bridal*** looks like a lot of words we have in Modern English where we convert a noun into an adjective or an adverb by adding an ending to the end of the noun.

So we can change the word ***man*** from a noun into an adjective by adding the suffix ***-ly***, and we get ***manly***. And we do actually use the suffix ***-al*** to convert a word like ***fate*** into the word ***fatal***, and a word like ***mort*** from French meaning 'death' into the word ***mortal***. So ***bridal*** looks like the word ***bride*** with that same ***-al*** suffix. But that's not actually the case. ***Bridal*** is actually a compound word formed by putting to nouns together. So it was the 'bride ale' or 'bride's feast' originally. And again, it was basically the equivalent of our modern-day wedding reception. But over time, the term has evolved into an adjective to describe things associated with weddings in general.

After two people were married, the following period was called the ***flitter-wochen*** – literally the 'fleeting weeks.' And that was basically the equivalent of our modern-day ***honeymoon***. The word ***honeymoon*** is a much more recent word dating from late the Middle English or early Modern English period.

After marriage, it was customary for spouses to wear rings to commemorate their bond, but you didn't wear that ring on just any finger. You had to wear it on your third finger – the one which the Anglo-Saxons called the ***ring finger***. And of course, we still use that term today. And that is another one of those Old English compound words. The term ***ring finger*** appears in many Germanic languages, so it was an even older term – older than Old English, but it was likely borrowed from the early Romans. It appears that the tradition of wearing the wedding ring on the third finger started with them. And that term passed to the early Germanic tribes. So the phrase ***ring finger*** is probably a really old phrase going all the back to the late Roman Empire. Since the Romans often used gold for those rings, that finger was sometimes called the ***golden-ring finger***, or if you're a James Bond fan, the ***gold-finger***.

So if the tradition of putting the wedding ring on the third finger came from the Romans, why did they pick that finger? Well, that tradition stems from certain ideas which the Romans picked up from the Greeks. The Greeks and the later Romans thought that the third finger had a special nerve which extended from that finger to the heart. And they thought that finger had a special palpatory sense which enabled doctors to detect and identify diseases. It was a type of sixth sense. So in Latin, it came to be called the ***digitus medicus*** (literally the 'medical finger'). And it was this special aspect of that third finger – its supposed connection to the heart – that led to the tradition of wearing the wedding ring on that finger. Over time, the Anglo-Saxons borrowed that idea from the Romans since the Romans were considered to be more advanced when it came to medicine. So the Anglo-Saxons also borrowed that Latin term which meant 'medical finger' – and they translated it into Old English as ***læc-finger***. ***Læce*** was the Old English word for doctor or physician. So the Anglo-Saxons actually ended up with two different names for that third finger – ***ring-finger*** and ***læc-finger***. And because of its Latin roots, ***læc-finger*** actually became more common after 1066 when the Normans arrived.

Before I wrap up my look at marriage terms, I should remind you that I have mentioned words like ***wife***, ***husband***, ***bride*** and ***groom*** in earlier episodes. ***Wife*** was ***wif*** in Old English, and it was a general word for a woman originally as in the word ***midwife***. But by the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, it was starting to take on the more specialized sense of a married woman.

By the way, there is some evidence that the word ***wife*** comes from the same ultimate root as the word ***weave***. If that etymology is correct, a ***wife*** was originally a word which meant 'weaver' – someone who weaves and makes clothes and other fabrics. This etymology is further supported by archaeological evidence. In the graves of many Anglo-Saxon women, it is quite common to find things like spindles, needles and thread. So this is considered analogous to burying men with swords and other weapons.

So that's ***wife***. But what about a young wife – a ***bride***? Well, ***bride*** is another old Germanic word which has actually changed very little since the time of Old English. Some scholars trace it back to the original Indo-European word ***bru*** which meant 'to cook,' and which gives us words like ***brew*** and ***broth*** in Modern English. So those words may be cognate with ***bride***. So just as ***wife*** may have originally meant a 'weaver,' a ***bride*** may have been a 'brewer' – someone who made brews and broths.

By the way, we've seen the words ***husband*** and ***groom*** before. ***Husband*** was a compound word – ***husbonda*** – which literally meant 'house dweller.' And ***groom*** or ***bridegroom*** comes from that compound word – ***brydguma*** – literally 'bride's man.' ***Guma*** being another word for 'man' in Old English.

So as you can see, most of our modern words related to marriage can be traced back to the Anglo-Saxons. And it shows how little the institution of marriage has changed over the centuries.

So having look at marriage words, let's turn our attention back to the marriage of Edwin of Northumbria to the Kentish princess Aethelburg. I noted earlier that when Aethelburg married Edwin and traveled from Kent up to Northumbria, she was accompanied by a monk. The monk's name was Paulinus. And he was also consecrated as a bishop around this same time. And together, Aethelburg and Paulinus really put the pressure on Edwin to convert to Christianity, but Edwin held out for a while.

Shortly after the marriage of Edwin and Aethelburg, they conceived a child together. And as the due date drew nearer, Edwin experienced a life-changing – and almost life-ending – event. Edwin's rivals down in Wessex decided that Edwin was becoming a little too powerful. So they sent an assassin to kill him. The assassin arrived in Northumbria with a plan to stab Edwin. The dagger was dipped in poison so that the poison would kill Edwin if the dagger itself didn't. According to Bede, the assassin was granted an audience with Edwin, and as the assassin approached Edwin he pulled out the dagger, but one of Edwin's thegns or attendants saw the weapon and threw himself in between the assassin and Edwin. The attendant was killed in the attack, and Edwin was wounded, but it was a minor wound.

Bede tells us that this attack occurred on Easter of the year 626. And Bede also tells us that this was the same day that Aethelburg gave birth to a daughter. So needless to say, it was an eventful day for Edwin. Bede also tells use that the wife's monk Paulinus met with the injured Edwin, and he told Edwin that Christ had protected him and ensured the delivery of a healthy daughter, and he encouraged Edwin to convert to Christianity. Edwin reportedly told Paulinus that if he recovered from his wounds and defeated the enemies who had sent the assassin, he would convert.

Ultimately, Edwin did recover, and he did lead an army all the way across Mercia into Wessex to slay the kings who had conspired to kill him. He also expanded the kingdom of Northumbria westward into the Celtic regions. And as we'll see, this was ultimately his downfall.

After his military excursions, Edwin returned to Northumbria, but he still didn't convert right away. But eventually, after much deliberation, he did make that decision. In the year 627, Edwin became the first Christian king of Northumbria. And under his leadership, the various independent kingdoms of Northumbria became completely consolidated under his rule.

But Edwin had made many enemies along the way. When Edwin plowed through Mercia to seek revenge on the leaders in Wessex, he had infuriated the Merciains. And as he expanded the territory of Northumbria to the west, he had made enemies of the Welsh as well. So all of this culminated in a fascinating alliance. Up to this point, we have stories of Anglo-Saxons fighting against the Celtic Britons – otherwise known as the Welsh. But now, the Anglo-Saxon leader of Mercia named Penda actually entered into an alliance with the Welsh leader Cadwallon. It may have seemed like a strange alliance, but they each had a common enemy in Edwin. And this alliance ultimately proved to be devastating for almost everyone involved.

In the year 632, the new allies – Cadwallon and Penda – invaded Northumbria together. They faced off against Edwin and they totally defeated his army. But more importantly for our purposes, they killed Edwin in battle. And they then laid waste to Northumbria.

Edwin's wife Aethelburg and his young daughter fled back to Kent, together with the monk Paulinus. By this point, Edwin also had sons. And they remained in Northumbria, but they were also eventually killed, and that ensured that there was no immediate successor to the Northumbrian throne.

Now earlier in this episode, I noted that this story was partially about princes in exile. Each one returned to Northumbria and brought something very important with them. Edwin had returned and brought a Christian wife and bishop and eventually Christianity itself, specifically the Roman version of Christianity practiced down in Kent. And now it was time for another fleeing prince to return.

With Edwin and his sons now dead, that opened the door for Aethelfrifth's sons to return home from Scotland. Now, one of the son's named Oswald saw an opportunity to return home. Oswald returned and gathered an army, and he led that army against that Welsh king Cadwallon about a year later. Oswald emerged victorious, and Cadwallon was actually killed in that battle. And as a result, Oswald was able to firmly establish himself as the new ruler of Northumbria, and he also emerged as the new bretwalda or overlord of the Anglo-Saxons.

So we're moving the story forward. We're now around the year 633 or so. And under the leadership of Oswald, Northumbria quickly rose back to power as the dominant Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

I said that each of these princes brought something very important to Northumbria when they returned home. Edwin brought Roman Christianity. And Oswald brought the Irish Celtic form of Christianity practiced in the north – in modern-day Scotland. And that's because Oswald had been living in the north while he was in exile. Specifically, he had been living at the monastery up in Iona which the first Irish missionaries had established about a century before. That

monastery had given the Celtic Church a foothold within Britain. And while he was living there, Oswald was baptized and became a Christian. And when Oswald returned to Northumbria at Edwin's death, he wanted to bring that northern monastic tradition with him. And this is really where all of these various pieces Church history, and political history, and language history start to come together.

You see, that monastery up in Iona wasn't just any monastery. It served both a religious and an educational purpose. Back in continental Europe, the traditional Roman educational system had broken down when the Empire collapsed. As we know, Germanic tribes rushed in and took over. And that ushered in the so-called 'Dark Ages.' The classical Roman education largely disappeared there. But one place where it survived was in Ireland. Ireland had never been invaded by Germanic tribes, so the early Church there was able to maintain many of the Roman educational traditions. They continued to use many of the classical Latin manuscripts and texts, and they continued to copy those manuscripts. So while manuscripts were destroyed and lost back on the continent, they survived in Ireland. And when the Irish Celtic Church spread over to northern Britain to Iona, what they brought was both a religious movement and a scholarly movement. And that made it somewhat unique. And that was the tradition which Oswald now wanted to bring with him down to Northumbria.

After becoming king, he sent a request to Iona for a bishop to come and establish a monastery in his kingdom. And that missionary was Aidan – later to be known as St. Aidan. When Aidan arrived in Northumbria, he decided to establish himself on the island of Lindisfarne. And that's where he built a monastery. And that monastery eventually became one of the most important monasteries in all of Anglo-Saxon Britain. You may have heard of the Lindisfarne Gospels – an incredible illuminated manuscript which was produced there a couple of generations later around the year 700. The illuminated letters and patterns in the manuscript mixed Celtic and Anglo-Saxon designs. But it wasn't just a book, it was a work of art. And like most religious texts from this period, it was written in Latin. But around the year 950, another monk named Aldred translated the Latin text into Old English. And that Old English translation is the oldest surviving version of the Gospels in the English language.

The Lindisfarne Gospels tend to get most of the attention, but it is important to keep in mind other illuminated gospels were also produced there. And Linsdisfarne quickly became a center of learning and scholarship as much as a center of religious study.

And it wasn't just the monastery at Lindisfarne that's so important. Other monasteries were soon built throughout Northumbria. A few years later, a monastery was built at a place called Jarrow. That's the monastery where Bede lived. And it also became a center of Anglo-Saxon learning. Other monasteries were built in other Northumbrian towns like Durham, York and Whitby. And those monasteries began to change the culture of the region. And over the following decades, people from throughout Western Europe began to flock to Northumbria to study at those monasteries. The kingdom became one of the most important and influential cultural centers in all of Europe.

A key part of the scholarship provided by those monasteries was advanced training in the skill of reading and writing. And so those new monasteries meant that literacy also spread throughout Northumbria. And those monks were using the Irish version of the alphabet which I discussed a few episodes back. So initially they were writing in Latin – the language of the Church. But as I've noted before, the scribes began to write notes and translations in the margins in Old English. So our first body of Old English literature originated in those Northumbrian monasteries.

And that process of creating illuminated manuscripts gave us some new words in the English language as well. One word which it gave us is the word ***miniature*** and its shortened form ***mini*** as in ***minivan*** and ***miniskirt*** and ***iPad mini***. At first glance, that seems like a word which might have originated with the Greeks. After all, we get common prefixes like ***mono*** and ***micro*** from Greek. But ***mini*** developed around this time in the early Middle Ages, and it derived from the ink used in monasteries throughout Europe.

In many of those early monasteries (*EDITOR'S NOTE: the term should be 'manuscripts'*), the titles and headings were written in red ink to contrast with the black ink of the rest of the text. Red ink was also used in the drawings of those illuminated manuscripts. The Latin word for that red pigment was ***minium***. And that produced the verb ***miniare*** meaning to color with red pigment. And that term was later applied to the general process of illuminating a manuscript. That word was then borrowed into English, and since the pictures in illuminated manuscripts were smaller that full-size portraits, the term ***miniature*** came to mean any small portrait or painting. And over time, ***miniature*** came to mean any small version of something else. And that word was later shortened to ***mini***. So both ***mini*** and ***miniature*** both come from the word for red ink used in illuminated manuscripts.

In the later Middle Ages, church calendars also used red ink to signify religious holidays. This technique of using red ink to mark holidays and Sundays is still used in many modern calendars handed out by churches and other religious groups. Those days came to be known as 'red letter days.' And that term still exists in Modern English. Again, a 'red letter day' is directly related to this particular use of red ink by church scribes.

Now it's important to keep in mind that the literary impact of these monasteries didn't happen over night. It took several decades for the full impact to be felt in Northumbria. But once that first monastery was established at Lindisfarne, the whole thing sort of snowballed, and it ushered in the first great period of Anglo-Saxon culture. And as we'll see in an upcoming episode, it was even a model for Charlemagne when he became King of the Franks a short time later.

So having said that, let's turn our attention back to the political history of Northumbria. Oswald continued as the king of Northumbria for about a decade, and he maintained the legacy which his predecessor Edwin had established. The kingdom remained politically powerful, but it also continued to have old enemies on its borders. Even though the Welsh king Cadwallon had been killed by Oswald, the Mercian King Penda was still the king next door in Mercia. And he also remained a staunch pagan.

And so it's not really surprising that the rivalry between Mercia and the Northumbria didn't end with the death of Edwin. The circumstances are unclear, but in the year 641 or 642, Penda's Mercian forces and Oswald's Northumbrian forces met in battle again. And the sometimes brutal Anglo-Saxon history repeated itself. Oswald met the same fate as his predecessor Edwin about a decade earlier. Oswald died on the battlefield, and Penda's forces once again emerged victorious.

Now I noted earlier that Oswald had a brother. There were two sons of Aehtelfrith who had fled into exile way back when Edwin became king. One of them – Oswald – had returned when Edwin died. And now the other son – Oswy – was about to make his return. This is the third of our fleeing princes who returned home to Northumbria. So if Edwin brought Roman Christianity, and Oswald brought Irish Celtic Christianity, what did Oswy bring? Well ultimately, he brought a resolution to the conflict between those two movements.

After Oswald's death, it took his brother Oswy a little while to secure his position as the King of Northumbria. Originally, Oswy was only the King of the old region of Bernicia – part of the larger kingdom of Northumbria. But then he tried to reunite the entire region. One thing Oswy did to secure his claim to the entire territory of Northumbria was to strengthen his ties to the former King Edwin. Edwin had been a well-respected and beloved King, and his death had only strengthened his reputation, so to establish a link to Edwin, Oswy decided to marry Edwin's daughter who had been in exile down in Kent. Remember that this is the daughter who was supposedly born to Edwin on the same day in which he survived that assassin's attack. She and her mother had fled back to Kent when Edwin was killed, but now she was an adult. And once again, we see the importance of a strategic marriage alliance.

Let's also keep in mind that this daughter of Edwin named Eanflæd was yet another descendant in that same line of important women who had converted kings throughout France and Britain. But this time, Oswy was already Christian, so no conversion was necessary. But Enflad had been raised in the Roman Catholic tradition with its base down in Kent. Her father was Edwin, and her grandparents were Aetherbert and Bertha – the first Christian couple to rule an Anglo-Saxon Kingdom. So she was strongly Roman Catholic. But Oswy was part of the Irish Celtic Church tradition which his brother Oswald had introduced. So both versions of Christianity were mixing together in Northumbria, and the new King and Queen personified the conflicts between those traditions. Those differences would continue to fester, but Oswy had more pressing concerns – specifically that king Penda next door in Mercia – the one that had killed his brother and was partially responsible for the death of Edwin. Oswy knew that he was going to have to deal with Penda eventually, but that marriage to Edwin's daughter had secured his position within Northumbria – and it also gave him an ally in Kent.

As Oswy's power grew, he inevitably drew the ire of Penda who saw Oswy as growing threat. And that threat ultimately culminated in another invasion by Penda. But this time, the result was different. To the surprise of many, Oswy not only fought bravely against Penda, but Oswy's forces actually defeated and killed Penda in battle.

With the death of Penda, Oswy finally emerged as the dominant Anglo-Saxon king. And he succeeded his bother Oswald and the last bretwalda or overlord mentioned by Bede.

Needless to say, this was a monumental event in the history of the region. Part of the reason why Northumbria was able to flourish for much of the next century is because the constant looming threat of Penda was removed. And with Penda's death, Mercia itself was ripe for conversion. So Oswy encouraged missionaries from Northumbria to travel to Mercia. And by the year 700 the entirety of what would become known as England was Christian. But what kind of Christian? A Roman Catholic Christian or an Irish Celtic Christian? This divide had been lingering in the background for a while, but as long as their was a regional divide between the groups, the differences weren't really that much of an issue. But now that they were mixing together in the middle in places like Northumbria, and this was becoming more a problem.

Some of the differences between the groups were cosmetic – literally. Roman monks shaved a bald patch in their hair on the top of their heads, but the Irish monks followed the tradition of the druids and shaved across the top of their head from ear to ear and left the hair growing in the back. But beyond the differences in appearance, there were also some structural differences. The Roman-oriented Christians in the south looked directly to the Pope in Rome, but the Irish-oriented Christians in the north had developed their own organization. The Roman Church emphasized powerful bishops, whereas the Irish Church emphasized monasteries and powerful abbots.

But the most practical difference was the calculation of the date of Easter. The northern monasteries followed the Irish tradition and calculated Easter was a week ahead of the Roman Church. And this created lots of problems, especially for married couples who each followed a different tradition – married couples like, well, the King and Queen. So while King Oswy celebrated Easter, his wife Eanflæd was still observing the fast of Lent. And this was increasingly common as these type of mixed marriages were on the rise. So we're back to our theme of marriage. Because it was actually marriages like Oswy and Eanflæd's that motivated the need to resolve some of these conflicts.

So the Roman monks persuaded Oswy to summon both sides to a big summit meeting called a synod at the new abbey in Whitby in the year 664. Oswy chaired the debate. The Romans had most of Europe on their side, and the Celtic Christians had part of the British Isles on their side. Oswy heard both sides of the argument and ultimately came down in favor of the Roman Church. This was a major turning-point in English history because it ensured that the English Church would follow the Roman model going forward, not the Irish Celtic model. And many scholars actually put this date of 664 right up there with 1066 in terms of the overall impact on the history of England.

Thereafter the Anglo-Saxons had one Church view which served as a galvanizing force and helped to unify them over time.

Now that one world view may have ensured that everyone used the same date to calculate Easter and everyone wore the same hairstyle in the monasteries, but those northern monasteries continued to mix religious training and scholarship in a way that was still unique in much of Britain and Europe. And that monastery at Whitby where the synod was held was really ground

zero for this movement. That monastery produced the first English poet who we know by name. And it produced an abbess who was one of the first people to advocate the use of English to spread the Christian message. So let's turn our attention to that monastery.

Whitby is a small town along the northeast coast of England. Outside of the importance of its monastery, the town may be most famous as a key setting in Bram Stoker's Dracula. The ship which runs aground along the English coast near the beginning of the novel does so at Whitby. But long before Bram Stoker, the town of Whitby was famous for its monastery. It was actually founded by Oswy shortly after he defeated and killed the Mercian King Penda.

At a time when Oswy was still trying to establish connections to the earlier King Edwin, he decided to appoint Edwin's grand-niece Hilda as the abbess of the monastery. So Hilda was the cousin of his wife, Eanflæd. And she will emerge as one of the key figures in the early history of English.

One thing to note about Hilda is that she was an abbess — not an abbot. And that was really not that unusual at the time. Several monasteries, like the one at Whitby, were designed for both men and women. They were called 'double monasteries.' The monks and nuns lived in different areas, but they were all under the rule of the same person, and that person was often a woman – not a man. And Hilda was one of the most influential of those women. Her monastery became a training school for church statesmen. Bede tells us that her wisdom was so great that bishops, kings and ordinary people traveled to Whitby to speak with her. And her influence was so great, that King Oswy selected Whitby Abbey to host that synod to decide which version of Christianity was going to be used going forward.

But for our purposes, the most significant thing about Whitby is that it was the home of a poor cowherd named Caedmon. And thanks to Bede, we have his remarkable story. Caedmon was an elderly man who took care of the monastery's cows and horses, so he slept in the stables. And it appears that he was somewhat embarrassed to speak in front of others. The name Caedmon is a Celtic name, so it is very possible that English wasn't his first language, and that may be why he was so shy. During meal times, he would eat with the monks. And very often, the monks would pull out a lyre or harp, and they would start singing songs and reciting poems. They would pass the harp around, but Caedmon always excused himself before the harp got to him. He was too shy to try to sing or compose poems in front of the monks.

One night this happened and Caedmon left and went back to the stables. He fell asleep, and while he was dreaming, a figure appeared to him and asked him to sing a song. Caedmon asked what he should sing about, and the figure said, "Sing about the Creation."

Caedmon then spontaneously sang a song about the biblical creation story. And this is the song or hymn which Caedmon sang in his Northumbrian English dialect:

Nu scylun hergan hefaenricaes uard,
metudæs maecti end his modgidanc,
uerc uuldurfadur, sue he uundra gihuaes,

eci dryctin, or astelidæ.
He aerist scop aelda barnum
heben til hrofe, haleg scepen;
tha middungeard moncynnæs uard
eci dryctin, æfter tiadæ
firum foldu, frea allmectig.

In Modern English, it reads (somewhat awkwardly) as:

Now we should praise Heaven's guardian,
the Creator's might and his mind's thought,
the work of the wonder-father, how each of the wonders,
the eternal Lord, established the beginning.
He shaped for the children of men,
heaven as a roof, the Holy Creator;
then Middle-Earth mankind's Guardian,
the eternal Lord, afterwards made,
the earth for men, the Lord almighty!

The next morning Caedmon told his superior at the monastery about his dream, and he even recited the hymn which had come to him in the dream. The superior sent him to see the Abbess Hilda. And Hilda assembled a group of scholars at the monastery, and they listened to Caedmon's hymn. Everyone assembled was stunned. They then decided to give Caedmon a little test. They told him some stories from the Bible – stories which he had never heard before. And they asked him if he could compose poems based around those stories. He returned the next morning and, sure enough, he had composed more poems which were considered just as beautiful.

Everyone assembled concluded that Caedmon had received a gift from God. And Bede tells us that Hilda embraced his gift and told him that he should join the monastery as a monk. And from that point on, Hilda encouraged Caedmon to compose his religious poems in English – what we would call 'Old English poetry' today – the same kind of poetry we looked at in the last episode. Bede says that Caedmon's songs and poems were so beautiful to hear, that his teachers themselves wrote and learned from him. And we're told that he composed poems covering the entire story of Genesis, the story of Exodus, and large portions of the New Testament. Unfortunately, all that has survived from Caedmon was the original hymn. And that hymn survives thanks to Bede. Actually Bede recorded it in Latin, but fortunately later monks translated the poem into English in several copies of Bede's manuscript. So we actually have that hymn in several Old English dialects.

Now I noted near the beginning of this episode that one of the four surviving manuscripts of Old English poetry was a collection of religious poems called the 'Junius Manuscript.' It turns out that all of the poems cover the same subjects which Caedmon supposedly wrote about – or composed poems about. And some scholars concluded that these were in fact Caedmon's other poems, and that's why this collection is also sometimes called the Caedmon Manuscript. But

later scholars have generally rejected this theory. The only poem which we can definitely attribute to Caedmon was that original poem which I read earlier known as Caedmon's Hymn. And next to Beowulf, it is arguably the most important poem composed in Old English.

So why is it so important?

First, it is important to keep in mind that up to this point, Latin was the language of the Church. By tradition, all things holy had to be said and written in Latin. Church services were conducted in Latin. And the Bible was written in Latin. So if you quoted scripture, you quoted Latin. The bottom line – if you didn't say it in Latin, it wasn't holy. No one dared to sing Christian poems or recite Christian texts in English. English was considered the language of the pagans. But all of that changed with Caedmon. And give Hilda credit for recognizing and encouraging that gift. She concluded that anyone – even the humblest cowherd – could understand the teachings of the Church in their own language. They didn't have to learn or speak Latin.

And since Caedmon's gift was considered miraculous, it appeared that God had sanctioned English as an alternative to Latin. The door was now opened for English to take its place beside Latin within those monasteries. And it's not surprising that after Caedmon and Hilda, we start to get more and more texts in Old English.

So in Hilda, we see the various themes of this episode come together. She illustrates the important role of women in this early period of Anglo-Saxon history. She also illustrates the important role of monasteries in encouraging the use of English. And lastly, she represented the strategic importance of a good marriage alliance, but in this case, it was a marriage of two languages. From now on, both Latin and English would be used together to spread the message of the Church. The language of the Romans and the language of the Anglo-Saxons would start to mix together to serve the same ultimate purpose. And along the way, the English language started to embrace Latin words and Latin concepts, and as we'll see, this process was well under way long before the Normans arrived.

So I'm going to conclude this episode on that note. Next time, we're going to continue to explore this period of Northumbrian culture known as the Northumbrian Renaissance. And we're going to see how English was increasingly adopted and used by monks in religious literature. And it wasn't just a matter of using the English language. It was the way they used the language. It was the way they took Germanic words and themes and poetic styles, and they adapted it to Christian concepts. And it was also the way they began to weave Latin words into English sentences, thereby making English a much more versatile and expressive language.

So over the next couple of episodes we're going to examine this early marriage of English and Latin.

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