THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 42:
BEOWULF AND OTHER VIKING ANCESTORS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 42 - Beowulf and Other Viking Ancestors. In this episode, we're going to explore the ancestors of the Vikings. And we're going to examine a period of Northern European history which has relatively few reliable sources and a lot of mythology. So we're going to try to distinguish myth from reality as much as we can. This place and time period also coincides with the setting of Beowulf. And since Beowulf was likely composed during or shortly after this period of Scandinavian history, it is one of the few somewhat contemporary accounts of the people of that region. So we're going to see what information Beowulf can tell us about this history as well.

And let me begin by explaining why this is a good time to turn our attention to Scandinavia. In our overall story of English, we're somewhere in the middle 700s. So we're basically half way through the Anglo-Saxon period.

The period in the mid-700s is significant because is marks a brief period of time after the Church arrived, but before the Vikings began to arrive. The Viking invasions really began in earnest at the very end of the 700s and lasted for several centuries. When they arrived, the Vikings looted, robbed, killed and plundered. And eventually, they began to settle in large portions of Britain. And with that settlement, a large portion of eastern and northern Britain called the Danelaw passed into the control of the Danes. And the Old Norse language of the Danes began to find a home in Britain.

But just as English was assimilating the influences of Old Norse, the Normans arrived from France in 1066. So within a period of about three centuries, English experienced the dual impact of Norse and then French. And it was really this back-to-back period of invasion and conquest which changed English so fundamentally between Old English and Middle English.

And I think this point sometimes gets overlooked. From the ninth century through the eleventh century, England was racked by invasions and turmoil. The invaders brought foreign languages. And in the process, the English language was battered and beaten. It was twisted and pummeled – it was broken down and put back together again. And it was the back-to-back invasions of Old Norse and Old French which produced those changes. Had there been a greater interval between the invasions, English probably would be a very different language today. But together, Old Norse and then Old French radically changed English, and it produced an early version of the language which we speak today.

So as we consider this period of the mid-700s, we're in a period in which the original form of English was still being spoken throughout Anglo-Saxon Britain. And we're in a narrow window in which Britain was post-Christian and pre-Viking. And for that reason – along with others – many scholars think this was the period in which the Beowulf poem was likely composed. And that's because there are definite Christian influences in the poem, and there are specific references to parts of the Bible.

So scholars are confident that it was composed after Christianity had spread across the island. But the poem praises the Scandinavian roots of the Germanic people, and specifically it praises the Danes. It describes a heroic period in which the Danes and the Scandinavian Geats were honorable warriors adhering to the traditional Germanic warrior code. And given that the Scandinavians are generally portrayed in a positive light, many scholars think that Beowulf had to be composed before the Vikings began to loot and ransack the island.

Now not everyone agrees with this theory. There are some scholars who argue that the poem was composed later near the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, and I'm not going to delve into all of those arguments right now, but the traditional view has been that Beowulf is post-Christian and pre-Viking. So that leaves this narrow window from the late 600s through the 700s.

And, if that view is correct, Beowulf foreshadowed the arrival of the Vikings a short time later. So at this point in the story of English, we need to turn our attention away from Britain to examine those outside influences which were about to arrive on the British shores. Remember that this is ultimately a podcast about English – not Britain, and in order to understand English, we have to occasionally turn our attention elsewhere.

We'll begin by looking to the east to Scandinavia to examine the origins of the Vikings and the ultimate origins of Beowulf. And a couple of episodes from now, we're going to briefly look at developments in the Frankish kingdom, and we'll examine the origins of Old French.

But let's begin by looking at the ultimate ancestors of the Vikings in Scandinavia.

And let's remember that linguists traditionally divided the Germanic languages into three groups. There were the East Germanic languages which included the Gothic language, but all of those languages eventually died out. Then there were the West Germanic languages which include most of the Germanic languages which we have discussed so far in the podcast. That included the languages of the Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Franks and the ancient tribes which produced the modern German language. But up in the north in Scandinavia were the North Germanic languages. And up until the period of the Vikings, these North Germanic languages were so closely related that linguists believe they represented a common language. We know that language today as Old Norse.

We actually know very little about the early form of the language because the Scandinavians were still largely illiterate. They did use runic symbols, so a little bit can be discerned from those inscriptions. But the alphabet was still several centuries away. And that means that the Scandinavians weren't writing their own history. So very little is known about those early tribes with any certainty.

As with the other Germanic tribes, much of our information about those early tribes come from the people who were literate and who were keeping histories – people like the Romans and Greeks. And while those writers had some knowledge of the tribes located along the Rhine and Danube, they didn't know as much about the Germanic tribes further north.

And these Scandinavian tribes were the most remote and distant tribes from the perspective of the Romans and the Greeks. So not surprisingly, early written accounts of these northernmost tribes are very limited.

Now we do have Nordic sagas, legends and chronicles. And those also provide some history, but those legends weren't documented until many centuries later, and they often mix history with mythology. So those sagas are helpful and provide a few answers, but they often raise just as many questions.

And all of this helps to explain why the Beowulf poem is so important to this part of history. It is one of the rare detailed written accounts of life in the region during this early period. And if we accept the view that it was written in the pre-Viking period, it is actually a contemporary account of the people of this region. And the Beowulf poet clearly had a good knowledge of Scandinavia. He describes weapons and artifacts which resemble the types actually used there. And he mentions obscure leaders and tribes whose existence has been confirmed from other sources, including later legends and sagas. And of course the poem centers around Beowulf and his tribe the Geats, who were an actual and somewhat obscure – tribe from Scandinavia. So there does appear to be some bona fide history mixed in with the battles against monsters.

So let's turn our attention to Scandinavia. And as always, geography is kind of important to this story. Once again, Louis Henwood has been kind enough to prepare a map which shows the region and the general location of the tribes around the time of the Beowulf story. Just go to Episode 42 at the website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. You can also go to the 'maps' tab for all of the maps mentioned in the podcast.

Now I know a lot of you are listening and don't have access to the maps. And if you only have a vague sense of the geography, let me try to set the scene for you. The region of Scandinavia is really based around two peninsulas. One large peninsula extends southward from the Arctic Circle, and that's the Scandinavian Peninsula. And it is the home to modern-day Sweden and Norway. The other much smaller peninsula is the peninsula which we've discussed in prior episodes. It's the Jutland peninsula which extends northward from northern Germany into the North Sea and the Baltic Sea. And as we know, the Jutland Peninsula was the ultimate home of the Angles and the Jutes – the tribes which settled in Eastern and Northern Britain. So all of the kingdoms which we have been discussing in the first half of the Anglo-Saxon period – kingdoms like East Anglia, and Kent, and Northumbria and Mercia – they all have their origins in this peninsula. So those tribes were ultimately of Scandinavian origin. And that's why a poem like Beowulf reflects that heritage.

Now today, the Jutland Peninsula and the large islands to the east of the peninsula comprise modern-day Denmark. But the key is the fact that these two peninsulas extend towards each other and are only about 50 miles apart. And the large island of Zealand largely bridges the gap between the two peninsulas. And fact, today you can drive between the two peninsulas via Zealand thanks to bridges which link the island to the two peninsulas.

So its important to understand that these various land masses were distinct from each other, but they were close enough that they could be accessed via boat or ship. So from the very beginning, the people of Scandinavia were very adept at building ships and traveling by sea. And that helps to explain why the Angles and the Jutes were able to migrate in such large numbers to Britain. Sea-faring was really second-nature to the them. And as the Angles and Jutes migrated westward out of the Jutland Peninsula, the Danes rushed into fill the vacuum. So historically, the Danes were neighbors of the Angles and Saxons. And again, that helps to explain why the first two-thirds of Beowulf is set in the land of the Danes.

When we think of Viking ships, we often think of long-ships with a dragon-head protruding from the front. And in fact, dragons and sea serpents were a common feature of Scandinavian mythology. So again, that helps to explain why Beowulf concludes with a fight against a dragon. But it is also relevant as we examine the geography of the region.

If you look at the Scandinavian Peninsula, as it protrudes southward out of the Arctic Circle, it actually resembles a dragon's head or a sea serpent. The tip of the peninsula splits in half as it approaches the continent, and it resembles the open mouth of a dragon. The eastern half is modern Sweden, and the western half is modern Norway. But this interesting geographical feature is almost poetic given the later association between the Vikings and dragons. And if one thinks of the Scandinavian Peninsula as a dragon's head extending southward with its mouth open, the Jutland Penisula is the land mass which is about to be consumed by it. The Jutland Peninsula actually extends right into the open mouth of the much larger Scandinavian Peninsula. And if you can keep that image in your mind, the geography discussed in this episode may make a lot more sense.

So let's turn our attention to the early history of this region. The first detailed source of information about these northern Germanic tribes is a source which we've explored before – Germania by Tacitus. As you may recall, the Roman historian Tacitus wrote his description of the Germanic tribes around the year 98. And in Germania, he specifically mentions the Swedes. He refers to them as the 'Suiones.' And he states that they live on an island in the ocean. But scholars generally agree that what Tacitus was describing was the Scandinavian Peninsula. And in fact, later Greco-Romans writers during this early period also called it an island. So why did they do that?

Well, again, the answer is a matter of geography. The peninsula extends southward out of the Arctic Circle. And from the perspective of the Romans, you didn't really travel from Eastern Europe, up into Finland, through the Arctic Circle, and then down into the Scandinavian Peninsula. In fact, most of them may not have been aware that you could even do that. So from their perspective, there was this large land-mass out in the North Sea and the Baltic Sea that extended up into the ice and snow of the Arctic Circle. You had to travel by ship to get there from the Jutland Peninsula or northern Germany. So they just assumed that it was a large island. But today, we know that Tacitus was referring to the southern tip of the Scandinavian Peninsula – basically southern Sweden.

Tacitus also notes that the Swedes – or 'Suiones' – were known for their powerful fleets, and their unusual boats which have a prow at each end so the boat can move in either direction. So what he is describing here is an early version of the Viking longship – a shallow boat that was capable of crossing a sea or traveling up and down rivers. It could be propelled by sails or oars. And it was very strong, yet it was light enough that the crew could get out and carry it over land if necessary.

And because of its unique design which is mentioned by Tacitus, the longship could travel in either direction without having to turn around. So a raiding party could cross an ocean, sail up a river, conduct a raid, and then flee very quickly without having to turn the ship around. So these innovations gave the Vikings some huge advantages in later years. And Tacitus suggests that some of these innovations were in place very early on.

So these ships represent both a design and a technological innovation. In the past, we've seen how small technological advances often led to military superiority and rapid expansion. The Indo-Europeans mastered horse-riding and wheeled-wagons, and that led to their expansion. The Huns mastered the stirrup on both side of the horse, and that led to their expansion. Well, the early Scandinavians mastered this new type of naval technology, and that ultimately led to their expansion out of Scandinavia and into much of Europe.

And it's not surprising that they developed advanced maritime technology. Much of the Scandinavian Peninsula is mountainous, so most of the villages and settlements were located along the islands and inlets near the coast. And south of the Scandinavian Peninsula were all of the islands associated with modern Denmark. So the best way to travel from one village to another was by boat. So the Scandinavian culture evolved into an advanced maritime and shipbuilding culture.

And so it might not be surprising that we get several words related to ships from Scandinavian sources. The word *keel* meaning the lowest part of a ship and the word *bow* meaning the front of a ship are both usually attributed to Scandinavian origins.

And its important to keep in mind that the Germanic languages in Northern Europe were all very closely related early on. So very often when we compare Old English and Old Norse words, many of the words are almost identical. And even by the time of the Viking invasions of Britain, it is believed that both languages were still similar enough that the Viking settlers and the Anglo-Saxons could communicate with each other – at least on some basic level – without the need for a translator.

So as we look at Old English and Old Norse, it shouldn't be surprising to see very similar words in both languages. So as it relates to maritime activity, both languages had the Germanic word *mast* meaning the long pole that supports the sail.

To describe a body of water or flowing water, Old English used the word *flod* and Old Norse used the word *floð*. Of course, the Old English word produced our modern word *flood*, and it's

cognate with the words *flow* and *float*. And the only difference between the English word and the Norse word was a slightly different ending.

To describe the 'sea shore,' Old English used the word *strand* and Old Norse used the word *strönd*. Again both words were derived from the same Germanic root word. The English version ultimately gave us *strand* still meaning seashore. And we still use it that way as in the 'Grand Strand' to refer to the beaches around Myrtle Beach, or the 'Silver Strand' for an area of coastline near San Diego. When a ship ran ashore, it was stuck on the strand. So it produced the word *stranded*, originally meaning shipwrecked, but today meaning any situation in which someone is left helpless.

And even the words *boat* and *ship* were almost identical in early Old English and Old Norse. Both words were derived from common Germanic words shared by both languages. And it appears that both words derived from Indo-European root words which meant 'to cut, split or divide something.' The connection here is apparently that ancient people originally made boats and ships by splitting a tree truck into two halves, and then they would hollow out the trunk to make a primitive boat.

Again, the original Indo-European word for 'boat' meant to 'split, strike or bite.' So think about the Modern English words *boat* and *bolt* – as in 'lightning bolt.' They're very similar and they're both cognate. The word *bolt* comes from the fact that it strikes something with great force. So if a lightning bolt strikes a tree, and it splits in half, then your boat is half way done. All you have to do is hollow it out. So that's the ultimate connection between *boat* and *bolt*.

But what about when an animal strikes at something trying to eat it. Well, we get the word *bite* from the same ultimate root as *boat* and *bolt*. And when you get in your boat to go fishing, you have to bring something for fish to bite. In other words, you have to bring *bait*. Another word from the same root. In fact, Old English and Old Norse both had similar versions of that word, and *bait* is actually the Old Norse version. It eventually replaced the English version – *bat*.

By the way, one type of insect that bites is *beetle* – another word from that same root. And if you bite something and it doesn't taste very good, you might say that it is *bitter*. Another word from that root. So *bite, bitter, beetle, bait, bolt* and *boat* are all cognate. They all relate to some aspect of striking, splitting or biting something.

As for the word *ship*, the story is very similar. It comes from the original Germanic word *skipam* – which ultimately gives us the words *skiff* and *skipper*. But as I noted in an earlier episode, the 'SK' sound shifted to an 'SH' sound during the period of Old English. So the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons had the same word – *skip* in Old Norse and *ship* in Old English.   And just like with boat, some scholars – not all – but some scholars trace that Germanic root back to an original Indo-European root word which meant to 'cut or divide' as in cutting or splitting wood to create a ship. And if this ultimate etymology is correct, it means that *ship* – or its original version *skip* – is cognate with the word *scrape* which was very similar in both Old Norse and Old English, but Modern English actually uses the Old Norse version – *scrape*. It also means that

ship and *scrape* are cognate with the Germanic word *scoop* – borrowed from Dutch. And all of that actually makes sense if we think about the process of hollowing out a tree trunk.

You might *scoop* out the middle and *scrape* the contours to make an early *ship* or boat. And thanks to that 'SH' sound shift in English, we have the English word *shape* – another word derived from that same root if that ultimate etymology is correct. That means that *ship* and *shape* are cognate, and once again we see the connection between 'shaping' a tree trunk and making a ship.

So I wanted to make two points with that digression. First, I wanted to show the ultimate origin of words like *boat* and *ship*. And secondly, I wanted to show how similar some words were in Old English and Old Norse.

Words like *flood*, *strand*, *boat* and *ship* were very similar in both languages. And the Norse influence was so great after the Viking invasions, that English occasionally gave up its native English word, and elected to use the Norse version of the word going forward. That's what happened with a word like *bait* which replaced the native word *bat*. And both Old English and Old Norse had the word *skrapa* or *scrapian* meaning to 'scrape.' But English developed that 'SH' sound shift. So the English version later became *shrapen* in Middle English. Now obviously, that word died out. But the Norse version, with its original 'SK' sound survives, as the word *scrape*. So the Norse version ultimately won out over the English version. And as we'll see in an upcoming episode, that happened a lot.

The relationship between Norse and English was different from the later relationship between French and English. When it came to French, English would borrow French words, but it also tended to keep the original English words. So English was often left with two words for the same thing. But with respect to Norse words, it was more a case of 'either-or.' Since English words and Norse words were so similar, they didn't both survive into Middle and Modern English as a general rule. So one was selected and the other disappeared from the language. But what is so interesting, is that it was often the Norse word which was selected. And that shows how great the Norse influence was in Britain after the Viking settlers were in place there. And again, we'll examine the Norse influence on English vocabulary in much more detail in the future.

So let's return to the story of the original Scandinavians – the ancestors of those Vikings. Tacitus told us a little bit about them in the first century. But about 50 years after Tacitus around the year 150, we have the writings of the Greco-Roman mathematician and geographer Ptolemy. Like Tacitus, he mentions a big island in the region called *Scandia*. Again, as we know, it wasn't really an island. It was actually the tip of a large peninsula. And that name *Scandia* stuck. It later came to refer to a small region near the tip of the peninsula. And it later centuries, it produced the term *Scandinavia* – a term used for the entire region, and later applied to the name of the peninsula itself.

Ptolemy also mentions a variety of tribes living on the islands east of the Jutland peninsula. The tribal names he mentions are obscure, and they generally disappeared from history over the following centuries. Surprisingly, he doesn't mention the Swedes at all, and they were apparently

the dominant tribe in the region. So it shows how sketchy the reports were from those Greco-Roman sources in the first couple of centuries.

In fact, with maybe a couple of exceptions, the tribes which Ptolemy mentions can't be connected with later groups, but he does mention a tribe called the 'Goutai.' And this is where the story of the early Scandinavians starts to get complicated, and where we have as many questions as we do answers.

The first thing to understand is that there are two parts of southern Sweden which have very similar names. The southern portion of the actual Scandinavian Peninsula is called 'Gotaland,' and it's spelled G-O-T-A-L-A-N-D which reflects an earlier pronunciation with an initial 'G' sound, so it would have been more like /got-a-lond/. But there is also a large island to the east of the peninsula called 'Gotland' spelled G-O-T-L-A-N-D. So even though the names of the two regions are pronounced differently today, they have almost identical spellings. So historically, the names were very similar.

Now add to that the fact that we have two historical tribes who apparently originated in this same region. One is the Goths and the other is the Geats which was supposedly Beowulf's tribe. And the big question is how to connect all of these pieces.

Historians generally believe that the Goths originated in of these two regions, probably 'Gotaland' in the southern peninsula – basically the southern part of mainland Sweden. And this is in part because the first real historian of the Goths – Jordanes – said that. He said they came from Scandza. Remember that's that another name for southern Sweden. So this region of southern Sweden is considered to be the original home of the Goths before they began their migration into eastern Europe.

But what about the Geats? Well, the Geats are much more mysterious than the Goths who had a long and well-attested history throughout Europe. The Geats are mentioned in occasional sources, and of course Beowulf focuses heavily on them. Well, the name of that southern region of Sweden – Gotaland (/yee–ah-teh-lond/) – is generally interpreted as 'Land of the Geats.' And there seems to be a general consensus today that the Geats were a distinct tribe, and they lived in this same region of southern Sweden.

And modern linguists have studied the etymology of the name *Geats* and the name *Goths*. And many linguists are convinced that both tribal names derive from the same ultimate root. So many scholars put all of these pieces together and conclude that the Geats and Goths were once the same tribe in southern Sweden. And at some point very early on, one portion of the tribe broke away and migrated across the Baltic Sea into eastern Europe, and they became the Goths. And the other portion of the tribe remained in southern Sweden as the Geats. Now again, this is one theory. And we may never be able to confirm it with any certainty, but it reflects a modern trend which recognizes the Geats as a distinct tribe in this region.

Now mixed in with the view that the Geats were a distinct tribe in southern Sweden, there's another view that holds that the Geats weren't necessarily a single tribe, but they were more like

a group of independent but related tribes. And that may explain why many of the early sources cite tribal names which can't be matched with any specific tribe. We've seen how the Franks and the Saxons emerged when several smaller tribes joined together and coalesced into a single tribe. So this may have been a similar situation, but perhaps that various groups never fully coalesced in the way that the Franks and the Saxons did. However, many historians think these Geatish tribes were pretty powerful – especially if they fought together. It appears that they even challenged the power of the Swedes to the north.

So at this point in our story, we have the Swedes in the central part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the Geats in the southern part of that peninsula. And over in Jutland, we have the Jutes to the north, and the Angles in the south.

And as far as the contemporary written sources are concerned, that's about it until the middle of the sixth century. We have about a 400 year gap without a contemporary historical source. But in the sixth century, the Roman historian Jordanes wrote his 'History of the Goths.' As I noted earlier, Jordanes also refers to the supposed island of 'Scandza,' and he says that the Goths originated from that region.

He then mentions the Suehans, and later the Suetidi, which is generally considered to be two different names for the same tribe – the Swedes. Much of his information was based on other sources, and he apparently confused two variations of the same name in some of the other sources.

Now with respect to the Swedes, he seems to confirm that they were the dominant power in Scandinavia. He notes that they were the source of the black fox skins which were sold in Roman markets, and this is evidence of their extensive trade across the Baltic and deep into southern Europe. This trade had apparently made the Swedes very prosperous, and it contributed to their early dominance of the Scandinavian Peninsula.

Jordanes also says that the Swedes were famous for their horses. And this reference to horses is also notable. The English term *filly* meaning 'a small female horse' was borrowed from the Vikings. And it's actually related to the Old English word *foal* meaning 'a young horse.' So *filly* and *foal* are cognate – one is the Norse word and one is the native English word.

But what about the word *horse*? Well, you might remember that it was a common Germanic word, but it was one of those Germanic words which can't be traced back to the original Indo-Europeans. The original Indo-European word gave us the words *equine* and *equestrian*. So the word *horse* was picked up from somewhere else, perhaps from people who were native to the region when the first Indo-European speakers arrived. But it became part of the standard Germanic vocabulary.

Both Old Norse and Old English had the word *horse*. But they also had another word which also meant 'horse.' In English, that word was *hengest*, and in Old Norse it was *hesta*. The English version *hengest* eventually died out. But the Viking settlers in Britain used their version of the word in the term *hesta-maðr* to mean a horse-boy or horse attendant. It appears that the latter

Anglo-Saxons took that term from the Vikings, and they substituted the English word *hengest* for the Norse word *hesta* and it became *hengest-maðr.* And that term eventually produced the term *henchman* – originally meaning a horse-attendant or servant, and later meaning a bully or enforcer – like a gangster's henchman.

But those two terms *horse* and *hengest* are closely tied to Germanic mythology. According to Bede, the first two Germanic leaders who were 'invited' to Britain were two brothers named 'Hengest' and 'Horsa.' Supposedly those two brothers were Jutes, and they established the kingdom of Kent. And scholars have always been intrigued by this story because both names mean 'horse' – 'Hengest' and 'Horsa.' And since horses were so important and prestigious, it was apparently an honor to have a name which meant 'horse.' But I mention this here because that name 'Hengest' also pops up in Beowulf. So there are some interesting connections here, but we'll explore those connections in the next episode.

So let's go back to Jordanes. He tells us that the Swedes were famous for their horses, and that they were extensive traders. But then he tells us something else very important. He provides one of the first mentions of the Danes. He says that the Danes were an offshoot of the original Swedish tribe. So apparently the Swedes had become so large in number that the Danes split off from the main branch. And Jordanes says that the Danes had since migrated and displaced other tribes in the region.

Now we know that the Danes eventually settled in the southernmost part of the Scandinavian Peninsula and the islands to the south and west of the peninsula. So putting these pieces together, it appears that the Danes broke away from the main group of Swedes somewhere in the central part of modern-Sweden. They then migrated southward. The timing is uncertain, but it was apparently during this 4-century gap in our sources. So perhaps in the third and fourth centuries.

As the Danes spread southward, they took over most of the islands between the two peninsulas. That included the large island of Zealand which is the island that bridges the gap between the peninsulas. And that island was the traditional home of the Danish kings, and its still the home of the modern Danish capital – Copenhagen.

Even though the Danes had migrated southward and occupied a large portion of modern Denmark, they hadn't yet reached the Jutland Peninsula. That's where the Angles and the Jutes lived.
But as we know, in the middle of the 5th century around the year 450, the Angles and the Jutes were headed west to Britain. This was the period of the early Anglo-Saxon migration. And according to that legend which I just mentioned, they were led by two Jutes named Hengest and Horsa. And we know from later sources that much of southern Jutland was soon abandoned. So as the Angles and Jutes moved out, the Danes moved in, and they soon filled the vacuum.

The expansion of the Danes into Jutland is reflected in a story which is recorded in slightly different versions in a couple of Danish texts which were composed many years later in the twelfth century. The story involved an early Danish king whose power extended to Jutland. This

king designated two brothers as his rulers there. The Danish king was so impressed with one of the brothers, that he gave his daughter to the brother in marriage. And the two of them had a son named 'Amleth.' But the other brother named Feng became jealous. And he killed the first brother and took his wife. But the young son Amleth later avenged his father's death by killing his murderous uncle Feng. Now if that story sounds vaguely familiar to you, imagine the young Amleth wrestling with the decision of whether or not to kill his uncle. Imagine him pondering this dilemma with the line 'to be or not to be.' Because Amleth was the original Hamlet. His story was the inspiration for Shakespeare's famous play.

So at this point, we have the Danes in Jutland. And this basically takes us to the point in time described in Beowulf. In Beowulf, the Danes are a distinct tribe living in modern Denmark. The Danish king is Hrothgar. He builds a great hall called 'Heorot.' And it's believed that this hall was probably based upon an actual hall built by the Danes on the island of Zealand – not far from modern-day Copenhagen.

As we survey the surrounding region during this time, we've seen that the Danes were filling the vacuum left by the departing Angles and Jutes in the Jutland Peninsula. But there were probably some remnants of the Jutes and Angles still on the ground.

To the north of the Danes was the Scandinavian Peninsula. It appears that the Danes may have also occupied part of the southern tip of that peninsula. But much of the southern peninsula was occupied by the Geats. That was Beowulf's tribe. In fact, Beowulf's first appearance in the poem is his journey 'by sea' from the land of the Geats to Hrothgar's Danish kingdom. So it basically describes Beowulf traveling from Southern Sweden to the island of Zealand – near again modern-day Copenhagen.

The first two-thirds of the poem is actually set in Denmark, and then Beowulf returns home to Geatland. So he returns to southern Sweden. And the poem suggests a good and stable relationship between the Geats and the Danes.

In fact, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between the two groups. A good example of this problem is the story of Hygelac.

There is actually very little in Beowulf which can be used to date the poem with any certainty, but there is one historical event mentioned in Beowulf which has been confirmed and dated by several other independent sources.   And that is a raid by a leader named Hygelac on Frisia around the year 520. That raid is mentioned multiple times in Beowulf, so we know that the poem was composed after that date. And that raid is significant because it is one of the first documented raids by a Scandinavian tribe into Western Europe. So this raid as been cited as one of the very first Viking excursions. This raid is documented in several other historical sources from around the same time – most notably Gregory of Tours' 'History of the Franks.' He says that Hygelac and his men crossed the sea in ships and attacked northern Gaul – so basically Frisia. They ransacked the region and took captives and valuables. Then they loaded their ships and started to head home. But the Frankish king's army arrived just in time to defeat Hygelac and his men. And Hygelac was killed in the resulting battle.

Now the significance of this raid is that Gregory of Tours says that Hygelac and his men were Danes. And this was a Danish raid. But in Beowulf, Hygelac is King of the Geats. In fact, he is Beowulf's king, and he is actually Beowulf's uncle. And according to the poem, Beowulf accompanied Hygelac on that raid in Frisia. And even though Hygelac and the other Geats were killed, Beowulf was able to escape, and he was able to swim all the way back to the homeland of the Geats. This is presented as another example of Beowulf's superhuman strength. And with Hygelac's death, it sets the stage for Beowulf to eventually become the King of the Geats.

So we see how the Beouwulf poet mixed history and with legend. But it leaves us with a mystery. Was the real-life Hygelac a Dane or a Geat? Gregory of Tours and at least one other contemporary sources says Dane. The Beowulf poet says Geat. So this illustrates how closely connected those two groups were. And again, the Beowulf poem emphasizes the friendly relationship between the Danes and the Geats.

But the story is different with respect to the Swedes. Throughout the poem, there are references to conflicts between the Geats and the Swedes, so these two tribes were apparently vying for power in southern and central Sweden. The Swedes were located to the north of the Geats in central Sweden.   And when Beowulf dies at the end of the poem, the poem suggests that the Geats are doomed without their great leader. And it ends with an ominous prediction that the Swedes will soon sweep in and overpower them. Well, since we know that the poem was composed a few centuries later, it is obvious that the poet knew of the ultimate fate of the Geats. By the late 600s, the Swedes did in fact move southward, and they did overtake the Geats. And in the process, the Geats were lost to history as a distinct tribe, and the Swedes came to occupy most of the region of modern-day Sweden.

I say the Geats were 'lost to history,' but their name still survives in the name of that region – 'Gotaland' – Land of the Geats.

But what happened to the Geats? Were they simply assimilated into the Swedish kingdom? Or did a large portion of them flee and go somewhere else?

Well, the possibility that a large number of Geats fled elsewhere raises some interesting questions. And one proposed scenario provides some intriguing links between the Geats, the Angles, and the Sutton Hoo ship burial, and ultimately the poet who wrote Beowulf. This theory proposes that the Swedes swept in and conquered the Geats in the southern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula. And then, a significant number of Geats fled the peninsula and followed the same westward path as the Angles and the Saxons and the Jutes. In other words, they headed to Britain.

This theory suggests that they settled in East Anglia, and it proposes that the emigrating Geats mixed in with the Angles in East Anglia, but the Geats soon emerged as the early rulers of the kingdom. And the first East Anglian dynasty was in fact of Geatish origin. So what is the evidence to support this theory?

Well the strongest evidence lies in the names of the family dynasties who ruled East Anglia and the Geats. The original East Anglian royal family was called the 'Wuffingas' – or 'Wuffings.' And according to later Norse sagas, the ruling family of the Eastern Geats at the time of the conquest by the Swedes was the 'Wulfings.' So between the 'Wuffings' and 'Wulfings,' the names are almost identical. And given the tremendous variation with which many of these names appear in these old chronicles and sagas, they type of similarity is actually striking.

And we have to combine this evidence with the fact that many scholars have long assumed some connection between the East Anglian court and Scandinavia. Remember this is where the Sutton Hoo ship burial occurred. That type of ship burial is closely associated with Scandinavia. And it's the only known ship burial of its kind in Britain. So that suggests some type of unique link between the East Anglian kings and the Scandinavian kings.

And we should keep in mind that the story of Beowulf begins with a ship burial which is amazingly similar to the Sutton Hoo ship burial. And so, many scholars believe that the Beowulf poet likely had some knowledge of the Sutton Hoo ship burial. Maybe it was second-hand or third hand knowledge, but he was definitely aware of the details of these types of burials.

But more than that, the poem describes objects and artifacts of the type normally found in Scandinavia. For example, the poem repeatedly mentions objects with curvy-interlaced patterns. And several objects unearthed at Sutton Hoo have those same type of patterns. And the poem also mentions 'boars' on helmets, and the Sutton Hoo burial also has objects with boars on them – including a helmet. So we also have an archaeological connection between East Anglia and Scandinavia.

Perhaps a group of Geats migrated from Scandinavia and brought some of these artifacts with them. And those Scandinavian artifacts or heir looms were buried with that ship. And somehow, the Beowulf poet was aware of those objects. And the timing actually works. Sutton Hoo occurred in the early 600s, and if we assume the probable date of Beowulf was the late 600s or 700s, then that means that the poem was composed within the living memory of Sutton Hoo.

We also have to consider that the Geats are a somewhat obscure tribe in the historical sources. Not a lot is known about them. But Beowulf is really the story of the Geats – at least a famous Geatish warrior who eventually becomes King of the Geats. And more importantly, the poem praises the Geats and the Danes. Both groups are generally portrayed in a flattering light. But the Swedes are portrayed as an ominous threat. So that suggests that the poet may have had some connection to the Geats or at least to Geatish mythology and legends.

So how did the poet know so much about the Geats? And why was he so interested in them? And why would he assume that his audience would be interested in them? And the poem makes lots of passing references to Geatish and other regional leaders – many of whom are obscure. But it's very clear that the poet expects his audience to know who these figures were. So again, this suggests that the poem was composed at an early date when the Anglo-Saxons would have known about those fifth and sixth century figures, but it also suggests that the audience had an historical connection to those people. So some scholars have proposed that the Beowulf poet

was in fact a poet in the East Anglian court, and if the East Anglian court was connected to the Geatish court in Scandinavia, then all of that would start to make sense. It would certainly connect a lot of dots in this period of history.

But again, even though this theory has been advanced by some scholars, it all falls into the category of speculation. And we may never know if these pieces of history can be connected.

So where does that leave us? Well, it leaves us with the Swedish conquest of the Geats in the southern part of the Scandinavian Peninsula. And that left the Swedes in control of most of the eastern half of that peninsula – so most of the territory of modern Sweden. Meanwhile, the Danes were in control of much of modern-day territory of Denmark – so the Jutland Peninsula and the islands to the east of the peninsula.

And up to this point, I haven't really mentioned Norway. And that's partially because, up to this point, the western region of Scandinavia was still mostly empty. There were several isolated communities, but no semblance of unity or common governance. Each community was basically an independent kingdom. The communities were generally located along the west coast of Scandinavia amongst the chain of islands and sheltered harbors. And the mountain range that runs along the spine of the peninsula kept the people of Norway and Sweden separated from the very beginning.

For most of the maritime people of Scandinavia, the North Sea and Baltic Sea was the center of their universe. If they set out for the Baltic lands to the East, they went *austrvegr* – the East Way. If they set out for Germany and continental Europe to the south, they went *suthrvegar* – the South Way. And if they set out for the region on the northwestern side of the Scandinavian Peninsula, they went *Norvegr* – the North Way.   And that Old Norse term translated directly into Old English as 'North Way,' and later became Norway.

And this was basically the state of Scandinavia at our point in the overall story of English around the middle 700s.

The three main groups – the Swedes, the Danes and the Norwegians – were about to set sail. By this point, Scandinavian traders were already active in Britain. There is evidence that some men in Northumbria had begun to wear their hair in braids to mimic the hairstyles worn by Scandinavian traders. This was considered a sign of toughness.

And as the Scandinavians traded with places like Britain, they came to realize that those places were actually pretty wealthy. And the wealthiest places of all were monasteries. And there was another important thing about those monasteries. A lot of them like Lindisfarne were located right long the coast. And they were full of monks and nuns. And monks and nuns weren't exactly known for their ability to fight. So you didn't need a formal education to do the math. The wealthiest targets in Britain happened to be very easy to access by water, and they also happened to be very poorly defended. And the Scandinavians just happened to have the maritime technology to engage in lighting quick raids. And they were already engaging in those raids in places like Frisia.

So the Vikings were about to make their presence known in Britain. But before we explore the Viking invasions of Britain, there is one more aspect of Beowulf which I want to explore.

In this episode, I've focused on the historical background of Beowulf, but next time, I want to look at a little closer at the mythology of the poem. We'll take a closer look at some of the legendary stories surrounding the poem. And we'll focus on the monsters and the supernatural elements of the poem. We'll also explore the presence of monsters and mythological creatures in Anglo-Saxon society. And we'll see how these themes connect the culture of the Anglo-Saxons with the culture of the Scandinavians.

Let me conclude by noting that I am still working on that special Beowulf series which actually takes you through the whole poem and examines the specific language of the poem. I should have it ready pretty soon. So stay tuned for more information about that.

And as always, if you have any questions or comments regarding the podcast, please free to contact me at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And let me thanks all of you who have made donations to the podcast, as well as those of you who rated the podcast and written reviews on iTunes. And if you haven't rated the podcast on iTunes before, I would invite you to do that because it actually helps new listeners to discover it.

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