THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 43: ANGLO-SAXON MONSTERS AND MYTHOLOGY

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 43 - Anglo-Saxon Monsters and Mythology. Last time, we looked at the early history of Scandinavia and the historical background of Beowulf. This time, we're going to explore the other aspect of Beowulf – the monsters and supernatural elements of the story. And that's really what fascinates most modern readers. And were going to use Beowulf as 'jumping off point' to explore the monsters and mythology of the Anglo-Saxons, as well as the early Vikings. Remember that both groups shared a common Germanic heritage, and that included a lot of mythology. But by the time the Vikings arrived in Britain, the Anglo-Saxons had largely converted to Christianity. So those two world views clashed during that later period.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can always reach me directly by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com.

And the Beowulf series is coming along as well. I hope to have it ready within the next 2 to 4 weeks. That series will explore the poem – the story, the history and the language of the poem. But before we move on from Beowulf, there is one key aspect of that poem which I wanted to explore here in the podcast. And that is the way in which the poem reflects the Anglo-Saxon view of monsters and mythology. In fact, as we'll see, the poem has probably survived the centuries in large part because it is a monster story.

So let's start with Beowulf, specifically the name ***Beowulf***. It is very tempting to assume that the name ***Beowulf*** refers to some type of wolf. In fact, ***wolf*** is a very common part of Anglo-Saxon names. It appears in the names of kings like ***Aethelwulf*** which was 'noble wolf.' It also appears in the name of an early Anglo-Saxon poet who we haven't discussed yet named ***Cynewulf***. It also appears in the popular Anglo-Saxon name ***Wulfstan***. In fact, this was a common element in Germanic names. We still have it in the German name ***Wolfgang***. And ***wolf*** was once the original ending of modern names like ***Adolph*** and ***Rudolph***.

So it isn't surprising that ***Beowulf*** uses that same ending. But the name ***Beowulf*** is unknown in Anglo-Saxon Britain outside of this particular poem. So it is generally believed that the name is a poetic compound which remember are sometime called 'kennings.' The first thing to understand is that ***wulf*** didn't necessarily mean 'wolf.' It was often used as a descriptive term to mean 'hunter.' So because wolves were considered ravenous hunters, it was just used as a euphemism for hunter.

So if the poet used the term ***wulf*** as 'hunter,' what was he hunting? In other words, what was ***beo***? Well, it is generally believed that ***beo*** meant 'bee' as in ***honeybee***. So ***Beowulf*** was the 'bee hunter.' And what animals hunt honeybees? Well, animals that want honey. Specifically, bears. So ***Beowulf*** – or 'bee hunter' – is considered to be a poetic compound which meant 'bear.' A large, powerful creature which resembles a human, especially when it's standing on its hind legs. And of course, the character of Beowulf is a man with superhuman strength who grasps monsters with his bare hands and rips their arms off.

Now there was also another implied connection between wolves and bears in Germanic mythology. Their warriors were often formed into warbands that are sometimes called 'wolf cults' or 'bear cults.'

Within the early Germanic tribes, powerful leaders emerged which supported by loyal groups of warriors. The warriors were bound together by sworn allegiances to the common leader. And those war bands evolved into raiding parties. You might remember that the Romans had built the Saxon Shore defenses along the British coast to deal with raiders from the North Sea long before the Anglo-Saxon invasions began. So these types of raiding bands had been around for a long time. And within the Norse culture, these groups evolved into the early Viking raiding parties.

A term developed within German for these types of warrior bands. The term is ***Mannerbund*** which is literally a 'man bond,' but it meant a warband of men. Each tribe had one of these warbands to defend it against similar warbands from other tribes. As tribes grew over time, the Mannerbund became the most elite warriors within the tribe. In Old Norse, a member of this group was called a ***sveinn*** which is the source of the common Scandinavian name ***Sven***. It is also cognate with the word ***sib*** which gives us the modern English word ***sibling***. So these were warbands were like brothers – an early verison of the term 'band of brothers.' Now this development wasn't unique to the Germanic tribes. Even when we looked at the original Indo-Europeans, we saw evidence that they routinely engaged in raiding, and much of that raiding was conducted by similar warbands. And those same types of warbands existed in most early tribal cultures.

But within the early Germanic culture, certain traditions and mythologies began to emerge around those warbands. One of those was the animal cult in which warriors wore animal hides or skins. Sometimes they wore wolf skins, and sometimes they word bear skins. Those warbands followed and worshiped Woden. If they died in battle, they went to his Heavenly Hall in the sky – Valhalla. And in Germanic mythology, Woden had two giant wolves as pets. And in that same mythology, Woden is ultimately destined to be swallowed or consumed by a giant wolf. So these wolf cults derived from the association of the Woden with wolves.

Since they wore wolf skins, they resembled wolves. But there was more to it than that. The warrior cults had very sophisticated and harsh initiation rites. In Germanic mythology, Woden had experienced his own type of initiation when he hanged himself from a tree with a spear wound. So the initiation rites for these new members often included being stabbed by spears and even hanged from trees until the warrior passed out. This was called a 'little death.' These initiations were designed to toughen the young warriors and form tight bonds between them. But there was also a mythological component. It was believed that these types of rituals created a special type of war ecstacy. It was designed to develop a special mental state in which they lost all fear and actually became consumed by the battle itself.

In addition to wolf cults, there were also bear cults in which members wore bear skins – or 'bear shirts.' In Old Norse, a 'bear shirt' was a ***berserkir***. And this was the origin of the famous ***berserkers***. And in battle, they worked themselves into such a frenzy that they actually felt that they were invulnerable. And that Old Norse word gave us the modern English word ***berserk***.

That berserker rage was fostered by those early initiation rites. And the wolf cults used the same process and had many of the same beliefs. And it was believed that these warriors could actually transform themselves into wild animals like bears or wolves in battle. They didn't just fight like wild animals, they actually became wild animals. So there was a spiritual aspect to this process. And it was believed that the man's soul would actually leave its body, and in its place, a wild animal would take its place. And the soul would return to the body when the fight was over and the animal left.

And this is believed to be the ultimate origin of the concept of the ***werewolf*** – literally the 'man wolf' – the man who is transformed into a wolf. Werewolves were feared throughout the Germanic world and beyond. And it was tied to this idea of the human soul leaving the body, and it being replaced with that of an animal. And we'll come back to this concept in a moment.

But I wanted note the connections here between bears and wolves and that name ***Beowulf***. It wasn't a common name. As I noted, it doesn't appear in any Old English text other than the poem Beowulf. But remember that it meant 'bee wolf,' and it was a compound word which meant 'bee hunter' or 'bear.' So that name ***Beowulf*** had imagery of both wolves and bears. And wolves and bears were closely associated with Germanic and Norse warriors. So there was a implied meaning in that name which isn't really obvious to modern English speakers.

By the way, the tradition of wearing bear skins was eventually limited to simply wearing bear skin hats. And that tradition spread throughout much of northern Europe. And even to this day, tall bearskin hats are still worn by royal guards in Britain and other European countries. And even if the U.S., marching bands are sometimes led by a drum major who wears a similar bearskin hat, but this tradition can ultimately be traced back to the Germanic tribes and those early 'bear cults' and war bands.

Now as I noted, the idea that a soul could leave its body and be replaced by an animal was a fundamental belief within Germanic culture, but sometimes the soul actually took physical form and existed separate from the original body. And the one thing you didn't want to do if your soul had left your body was to meet the other version of yourself. If you did, it was a considered to be a premonition of death. Sometimes the soul took the appearance of a woman. This was common in the northern tradition. In one later Icelandic saga, a man named Thorgils is riding with his men to the assembly called the Thing. Along the way, he meets a large woman who starts screaming at him and his men. As he approaches her, she dodges around him. And he doesn't realize it at the time, but the woman is really his disembodied soul in the form of a woman. And soon afterward, Thorgils is killed by an ax.

So that's the northern tradition, but in the southern Germanic regions, it was more common for the disembodied soul to appear as a clone who looked just like the original person. We actually have the German word for this clone'scenario in Modern English. It is the word ***Doppelgänge***r, which is literally 'double goer.' And this idea of an alter-ego has passed down into European literature. And we still have a version of it in modern TV, movies and literature with the idea of the evil twin.

And these ideas of the disembodied soul and the doppelganger are found in many later Scandinavian sources. And in some of those stories, we can actually find similarities and parallels to Beowulf. And scholars think that some of those Scandinavian stories and the Beowulf story actually share some common roots. It is unlikely that the later Scandinavian stories were actually influenced by the Beowulf poem itself because Beowulf was composed in Britain, and there are not any references to the poem within Britain during the Old English period or even the Middle English period. So any similarities between Beowulf and the Scandinavian stories had to have come from an earlier common source.

One Danish legend which is believed by many to derive from the same roots as Beowulf is the story of Hrólf Kraki, a Danish king who is believed to be same person as Hrothulf in Beowulf. In both stories, he is identified as the nephew of the old Danish king Hrothgar. He is also identified as the nephew of Hrothgar in that poem Widsith which I discussed in an earlier episode. So he is well-documented. But he is only mentioned in passing in Beowulf and Wisdith. But in this later Danish legend, he is the actual focus of the story.

In the Danish legend, the nephew is now the King of the Danes having succeeded his uncle at some point. And he finds himself in battle with his brother-in-law who is trying to seize the throne. And the legend says that the king's bravest fighter was named Bodvar Bjarki. And many scholars think that this figure of Bjarki is derived form the same original source as the character of Beowulf. So we might say that the two characters are cognate in the sense that they both may have derived from the same original legendary figure. And that is because there are some strong parallels between the two stories. Just as Beowulf fights on behalf of the Danish King Hrothgar against several monsters, Bjarki fights on behalf of the Danish king Hrolf against the people who are trying to usurp the throne. And there are also parallels in the names – Beowulf and Bjarki. We established that ***Beowulf*** is an Anglo-Saxon compound word which meant 'bee-hunter' or 'bear.' Well, the name ***Bjarki*** means 'little bear.' So Beowulf and Bjarki actually have the same meaning.

But there is more to it than that. In the Danish legend, in the decisive battle against the usurpers, a bear suddenly appears beside the king Hrolf, and the bear decimates the opposing fighters in much the same way that Beowulf decimates his opponents in the Beowulf poem. But at the exact same moment that the bear appears, Bjarki disappears. And he is found sitting in the hall tired and sleepy. He is encouraged to join the battle, but when he does so, the bear disappears and the tide of the battle ends up shifting to the other side.

So in this story, we not only see a possible connection to the Beowulf story, we also see an apparent example of a warrior taking the form of a wild animal. And in the process, we see the soul of the warri=0or becoming disembodied and forming a type of doppelganger. So these ideas were a fundamental part of the Germanic warrior culture.

These ideas also persist in modern ghost stories which sometimes describe an image of a person appearing in one place around the same time that the person dies in a completely different place.

The idea of a disembodied soul also exists in the German word ***Geist*** which was originally a soul that had been dispatched by sorcery and appeared in a frightful form. Old English had its own version of the word ***Geist*** which was ***gast***, and that word survives in Modern English as the word ***ghost***.

That German version of the word gave us ***poltergeist***, literally a 'noisy ghost.' But German also developed a more general sense of the term meaning the part of person's nature or inner being that we can't see or touch. So it basically meant a person's spirit. And in that context, it gave us the word ***zeitgeist*** which is literally "time spirit" or "spirit of the age," basically the general attitude or spirit of a group of people during a particular time period.

And very much like German, English also developed a more general sense of that term.

Now since ***gast*** typically referred to a scary spirt, it produced words like ***aghast***, originally meaning 'terrified.' And it also produced ***ghastly*** which meant 'frightening.'

Beowulf also uses the term ***gast*** to refer to the monster Grendel. Early in the poem, he is referred to as "se ellen gæst," which is literally 'the bold ghost' or 'the bold spirit.' And later, he is referred to as "se grimma gæst," literally 'the grim ghost' or 'the grim spirit.'

So as we've seen, the Germanic tribes routinely mixed supernatural elements into their warrior culture. And like many ancient cultures, they both feared and embraced the supernatural. And they tried to control it. They relied upon magical rites to ensure good luck and good fortune. Magical rituals were also used for protection against diseases and to cure diseases. This type of magic is commonly known as ***sorcery***, but the words ***magic*** and ***sorcery*** are both French words brought to Britain by the Normans.

The Anglo-Saxons used other words to describe this process of using magic to control the world around them. One word was ***drycræft*** derived from the name of the native Celtic druids who routinely conducted magical rituals. So ***drycræft*** was the craft or skill of the druids.

And in an earlier episode, I mentioned that a song could be enchanting and could send someone into a trance-like state. And a song was sometimes called a ***gale*** as in ***nightingale***. So another Old English word for 'magic' or 'sorcery' was ***galdor-cræft*** which meant the 'singing craft.'

Of course, ***drycræft*** and ***galdor-cræft*** have both disappeared from English, but there was another Old English word for 'sorcery' which has survived into Modern English. That word was ***wiccecræft*** – or ***witchcraft*** today. As its name suggests, ***witchcraft*** was the craft of the ***wicce*** or the ***wicca***. The female version was ***wicce*** and the male version was ***wicca***. The ultimate origin of those words is uncertain, but they were apparently derived from a common Germanic word because similar forms of those words appear in other Germanic languages. The original Germanic word had the 'K' sound near the end as in the male version ***wicca*** – spelled W-I-C-C-A. But the ending changed for a female. It became W-I-C-C-E. And remember that in Old English, the sound of the letter C changed when it appeared before a front vowel like E. It shifted from its original 'K' sound to the 'CH' sound. That goes back to our discussion of the

letter C. So when the ending of the word changed, from A to E, the pronunciation of the letter C changed from /k/ to /ch/. So from ***wicca*** (/wee-kah/) to ***wicce*** (/wee-cheh/). But again, those are just the male and female versions of the same word.

In recent decades, there has actually been a revival of some of these pagan beliefs and traditions. There are modern-day practitioners of what is known as ***wicca***. And that term was actually borrowed from the original Old English word ***wicca***. And the practitioners still call themselves ***witches***.

And ***wicca*** also produced the Modern English word ***wicked***. So a 'wicked witch' is really kind of redundant.

Another example of this same type of sound shift can be found in the words ***wake*** and ***watch***. Both come from the same root word. ***Wake*** retains the original 'K' sound of the Old English word ***wacan*** meaning to 'arise or awake.' If you were a guard, you had to stay awake at night to keep an eye on any threatening activity. This state of being awake was called ***wæcce***, and it produced the Modern English word ***watch*** as in to 'keep watch.' So the same vowel change at the end of the word produced that same sound change.

Now I gave the example of ***wake*** and ***watch*** for a reason. Some scholars think that all four of those words – ***wicca, witch, wake*** and ***watch*** – are all derived from the same root word. And the proposed connection is the fact that witchcraft sometimes involved waking the dead. So ***wacan*** was 'to become awake,' and ***wiccian*** was 'to practice witchcraft.'

And if that connection seems a little odd, when someone died, it was customary to have a wake when someone would stay awake and keep watch for the dead spirits. So ***wake*** and ***watch*** had an inherent association with death and dead bodies. So that is one theory regarding the origin of ***wicca*** and ***witch***.

Another word for a ***witch*** in Old English was ***hægtesse***. It ultimately produced the modern word ***hag*** as in 'an old hag.' But there is something very interesting about that word ***hægtesse***. The first part – ***hæg*** – is cognate with and closely related to the word ***hedge***. The second part – ***tesse*** – is believed to mean fairy or flying demon. Both Old Norse and Old High German also had similar words. And they all literally translate as 'hedge-flyer' or 'hedge-rider.' So it's someone who flies or rides along the hedges which is very similar to the later notions of witches flying around on brooms.

By the way, since we're talking about witches, I should note that the Medieval Latin word for 'witch' was ***masca***. And it ultimately produced the word ***mascoto*** meaning a 'charm or sorcery.' And that word came into English as ***mascot*** meaning a 'person or thing which brings good luck.' So if you have a favorite sports team, the mascot isn't just a person dressed in a funny costume. It was originally a good luck charm. And the word ***mascot*** is derived from a Latin word meaning sorcerer or witch. But let's go back to Old English.

And obviously, the word ***witch*** has survived from Old English, but the male version ***wicca*** didn't survive, except as the name for the modern pagan religion. The word ***wicca*** gradually gave way to the word ***wizard*** in Middle English. And the root of ***wizard*** should be familiar to you if you listened to the most recent bonus episode. ***Wizard*** developed in Middle English out of the word ***wise***. A ***wizard*** was a 'wise' person .The original sense of the word survives when we describe someone as a 'wizard' at math or science. It also survives in the term ***whiz*** as in 'whiz kid.' But over time, the term ***wizard*** took on a more specific meaning. The wisdom of the wizard was reflected in his ability to see into the future, and this ultimately led to the sense of the word as someone who possessed magical or supernatural powers.

Another word for a male witch is ***warlock***. And ***warlock*** is also ultimately derived from Old English, but it didn't mean a male witch until about the sixteenth century. ***Warlock*** originally meant an 'oath breaker' in Old English. ***War*** was originally ***wær***, and it meant 'oath or vow.' And ***lock*** is derived from the same Germanic word which gives us the words ***lie*** and ***liar***. So a ***warlock*** was an 'oath liar' or 'oath breaker.' By the end of the Anglo-Saxon period, it was being used as a euphemism for the Devil. From there, it came to mean someone who was in league with the devil – in other words, a sorcerer or wizard.

Now initially, witchcraft was an accepted practice. But as Christianity spread, the two belief systems started to come into conflict. I've noted in earlier episodes that King Alfred – known as Alfred the Great – was one of the most important figures in the history of English. He was the Anglo-Saxon king from Wessex who finally stemmed the tide of the Viking invasions. He secured the homeland of the Anglo-Saxons, and he put a major emphasis on preserving the English language. But Alfred never ruled all of England. The Danish descendants of the Vikings still controlled the area known as the Danelaw in eastern and northern England. So Alfred signed a treaty with the Danish king there. We'll look at these developments in more detail in a future episode. But for now, it is important to understand that that treaty required the Danish king to convert to Christianity. And together, Alfred and the Danish king issued a set of laws which theoretically covered all of England – the English regions and the Danish regions. And those laws were some of the first laws to specially outlaw witchcraft.

Issued around the year 890, the law reads as follows in Modern English: "If witches or diviners, perjurers or morth-workers, or foul, defiled, notorious adulteresses, be found anywhere within the land; let them be driven from the country, and the people cleansed, or let them totally perish within the country, unless they desist, and the more deeply make ***bot*** (ie., 'make amends or reparations')." By the way, ***bot*** largely disappeared from English in this sense, but it still survives in the phrase 'to boot' meaning 'moreover, ' as in "My car wouldn't start, and I missed the train to boot."

Now these particular laws against witchcraft applied specifically to women – not men. So it applied to witches, but not wicca, or wizards or warlocks. And it reflected an attempt by the Christian authorities to weed out witchcraft. We've seen before that a standard test for identifying a witch was called an ***ordeal***. That was an old Germanic term, and it gave us the modern English word ***ordeal*** meaning a difficult experience. One type of ordeal was placing a

suspected witch's hand in hot water to see if blisters occurred. And that is the ultimate origin of the phrase 'to be in hot water' or 'find yourself in hot water' to mean 'get into trouble.'

Now I noted that Alfred's Laws used the word ***bot***, which exists today in the phrase 'to boot.' But those laws also used another term which you probably have never heard before – the term was ***morth-workers***. Specifically, the law says that it applies to "witches or diviners, perjurers or morth-workers."

Well, ***morth*** was an Old English word which meant 'death.' So the term ***morth-worker*** meant someone who worked or consulted with the dead. Basically it meant a 'spiritualist.' And that might make sense because we have words like ***mortal*** and ***morbid*** in Modern English which also relate to death. And all of those words are cognate. But ***mortal*** and ***morbid*** come from the Latin version of the word which we got from French. ***Morth*** was the Germanic version of the same Indo-European root word.

In Old English, when a person was killed unlawfully, it was ***morðor***. It didn't become ***murder*** until the Normans arrived because their version of the same word was ***mordre***. And that ultimately gave us the modern English version of the word – ***murder***.

And since we're taking about death, I should note that the words ***death*** and ***dead*** came from Old English where they had essentially the same spelling and meaning. But the word ***die*** (D-I-E) was borrowed from the Vikings which had a related but slightly different word. And to describe the process of dying, the Anglo-Saxons sometimes used the word ***steorfan*** which ultimately gave as the modern word ***starve***.

So we've seen that witchcraft was associated with raising the dead – and also with conjuring the spirits of the dead. Well, it was also believed that witches could imposes curses. And one specific type of curse which Anglo-Saxons feared the most was a curse on livestock. Since healthy livestock was a key to survival, any threat to the health or well-being of livestock was taken very seriously. In Old English, a curse on livestock was called a ***blasting***. And if something was ***blasted***, it was cursed or blighted. That word still survives in the word ***blast***, and the connection appears to be the fact that curses were often imposed by a blowing or puffing action in the direction of the person or thing being cursed. So today, we tend to use the word ***blast*** in the sense of an explosion, but the original use of the word in the sense of a curse has survived in one context where it refers to someone who is not in their normal state of mind. So when we say that someone who is drunk or stoned is 'blasted,' we're using the term in a way that is based on its original meaning.

Now to counter-act a 'blasting' or curse, people would burn a fire to ward off evil spirits. In Old English, the fire was called a ***neidfyre***. They would also sometimes take blood from sick cows or other livestock, and boil it to get rid of the curse or evil spirits.

Now the Anglo-Saxons not only thought livestock diseases was caused by curses, they also thought sickness in general was caused by evil spirits who literally sucked the health out of animals and people. This was an old Germanic belief that was actually common in many parts of

Europe. It ultimately led to the idea of the vampire, the creature that sucks the blood of the living.

There are some scholars who actually believe that ***suck*** and ***sick*** are ultimately cognate. They argue that the word ***sick*** derives from the same word which produced ***suck*** because sickness was thought to result from demon sucking.

One type of sickness which was believed to be caused by evil spirits was mental sickness or insanity. The Old English word for 'insane' was ***gidig*** – a word which still exists in modern English, but today it means silly, foolish or impulsive. In Old English, ***gidig*** had an underlying sense of being possessed by spirits. This belief wasn't unique to the Anglo-Saxons, however. The Greeks had the same general idea which was called ***entheos*** and meant 'God inside' or 'possessed by God.' It later produced the words ***enthusiasm*** and ***enthusiastic***. So ***enthusiastic*** and ***giddy*** both originally meant 'possessed by spirits or God.'

It was also believed that evil spirits possessed people while they were sleeping. This type of spirit was called a ***mare***. By the time of Middle English, that word ***mare*** was used to describe the experience of being possessed by an evil spirit while sleeping. It was called a ***niȝt-mare***, or as we know it today, a ***nightmare***.

And shortly after the Normans arrived, they gave English two other words for a demon or spirit which appears while someone is sleeping. Those words were ***incubus*** and ***succubus*** – both of which first appeared in English within a century of so after the Norman Conquest.

Another word for an evil spirit is a ***demon*** which is another word that came into English via Latin and the Normans, and ultimately from Greek. And it was another very early borrowing from Latin in the first century after the Normans arrived. So apparently English speakers were intrigued by these new words for evil spirits. The Anglo-Saxons had called an evil spirit a ***deofol*** – or '***devil***.' They also called it a ***fiend*** which still exists in Modern English. In fact, ***fiend*** was the preferred term used by the Beowulf poet. He called Grendel a 'fiend from Hell.'

Now I mentioned that spirits sometimes took over the body at night or appeared in dreams at night. Well, the word ***dream*** has a strange history. The use of the word ***dream*** as 'a vision one has while sleeping' goes back to the early Middle English period, but it wasn't a new word at that time. The word ***dream*** is also well-attested in Old English. But during the Old English period, it was always used to mean 'joy, merriment or music.' And scholars are not sure why the meaning changed from 'joy' in Old English' to 'sleeping visions' in early Middle English.

One theory is that the Anglo-Saxons did also use the word ***dream*** to refer to 'sleeping visions,' but that use simply doesn't exist in the surviving texts which we have today. So it might have been a secondary meaning which isn't really documented in the surviving Old English manuscripts.

The other theory is that the modern sense of the word came from the Vikings. As we've seen before, the Vikings brought their own words which were often very similar to the native Old

English words. And sometimes the Norse version of the word replaced the English version. Old Norse had the word ***draumr*** which meant ' an illusion or deception,' and it's believed that this led to the modern use of the word ***dream*** which is something that seems real, but really isn't.

But that Norse word ***draumr*** was cognate with another Norse word – ***draugr***. And that word is important to our discussion because it meant a 'ghost or apparition.' So again, it meant something that seemed like a real person, but wasn't a real person.

Within Scandinavian folklore, the term ***draugr*** could mean a ghost, but it was also used to mean an animated corpse. It was a dead person who had a grievance and roamed around at night seeking vengeance. So think zombies and Walking Dead. But unlike a zombie, a ***draugr*** could speak, and it was usually angry.

Another type of animated corpse was a ***vampire*** which is a Slavic word meaning 'witch.' And the most famous vampire is Dracula. So was Dracula a draugr? Well, they're both living corpses, but despite the similar names, there doesn't appear to be a linguistic connection between ***Dracula*** and ***draugr***.

However, ***Dracula*** is cognate with the word ***dragon***. And ***dragon*** takes us back to Beowulf because a dragon was one of the three creatures or monsters featured in the story. So I want to transition from our look at Anglo-Saxon spirits and witches and sorcery, and I want to turn to Anglo-Saxon monsters. Because, ultimately, Beowulf is a good old-fashioned monster story.

And in fact, that may be why the poem survived all of those centuries. Many scholars today think that the poem may have been preserved primarily because it was a monster story. The manuscript which contains Beowulf actually contains five different texts. Beowulf is the fourth text in the book. Unfortunately, parts of the first and last text are missing, presumably due to wear and tear over the centuries before the book was rescued from that fire in Sir Robert Cotton's library in the eighteenth century. The first three texts are all prose pieces, so they're written in normal Old English speech – not poetry. And based upon the particular handwriting styles and scripts used by the scribes, scholars have determined that all three of those texts were copied by the same scribe. The next text – the fourth text – was Beowulf, and that same scribe copied the first two-thirds of that poem. But then, a second scribe took over. The last portion of the Beowulf poem and what survives of the fifth and final text was written by this second scribe. He used a distinct script, and he had a different handwriting style. And his spellings were sometimes different from those of the first scribe. But here is the key. All four of the works which the first scribe copied, the first four texts in the book, including the majority of Beowulf, all concerned monsters or unusual creatures.

The first text is a life of St. Christopher who is described as having a dog's head and being almost twenty feet tall. The next text is called The Wonders of the East, and it also contains many monsters, including dragons. The third text is entitled Letter of Alexander the Great to Aristotle, and it describes a great battle between men and water monsters. And then we have Beowulf and his battles against monsters and dragons. The final piece is a fragment of a poem called Judith, and it's really the only work which doesn't specifically concern monsters, but it

was also added by that second scribe. So it isn't clear if it was originally intended to part of the collection. So some scholars have concluded that either the first scribe or perhaps both scribes selected those first four works for preservation because they were all about monsters. And it is also believed that that may be why the manuscript survived the centuries.

For some reason, this particular manuscript was selected for safe-keeping when so many other Old English texts were burned and destroyed over the centuries. And it may have been kept by various collectors over the years because of its association with monsters.

In fact, there is an interesting connection here between the Beowulf manuscript and another book compiled by Anglo-Saxon scribes called Liber Monstrorum which is Latin for 'Book of Monsters.' As its name indicates, it is a catalogue of monsters and marvelous creatures, and it was composed in Britain. But as was the general custom, it was written in Latin. It is believed that the book was originally composed in the late 600s or early 700s. So as we've seen before, this is the same general time frame in which many scholars think Beowulf was originally composed. It's in that narrow window after the introduction of Christianity and before the arrival of the Vikings. The original Liber Monstrorum was copied several times over the centuries.

And the book purports to be a summary of all the monsters and creatures known to the author during his time. The basic idea of the summary is to determine whether the monsters are actually real or not. Mixed in with the monsters and supernatural creatures are real life creatures in far away lands which the author had heard about, but couldn't confirm. It includes a description of an elephant and a Rhinoceros, among other animals who lived in far away places. So it is fascinating to see the writings of an author who has heard stories of all of these creatures, but he can't discern which ones are real and which one are just legends. In the end, since the author can't always verify the status of the creatures, he leaves it up to the reader the decide if they're real or not. So what's the potential connection with Beowulf?

Well, as I noted, the Liber Monstrorum was a book about monsters which was compiled in Britain around the same time that Beowulf was probably composed. But more significantly, the text specifically mentions Hygelac, who you might remember was Beowulf's uncle and King of the Geats in the Beowulf poem. I briefly discussed Hygelac in the last episode. He was the king who led a raid against the Franks in Frisia and was killed in the battle. Well, in that episode, I noted that this raid is mentioned in several other historical sources from around the same time period. And I also noted that there was some confusion as to whether Hygelac was a Geatish King or a Danish King. Almost all of the other historical sources say that he was a Danish king. But there are two sources – and only two sources – that say he was King of the Geats. One of those sources is Beowulf and the other source is the Liber Monstorum.

So in the Liber Monstrorum, we have a text that was likely composed around the same time as Beowulf, and it mentions this obscure Scandinavian figure Hygelac like Beowulf does, and it describes him as a Geat like Beowulf does, and those are the only two known texts to do that. So all of these similarities have led some scholars to conclude that the Liber Monstrorum may have been composed in the same scriptorium by the same scribes who composed Beowulf. Unfortunately, there is no way to prove any of that, but it is possible that a group of scribes

somewhere in Britain in the late 600s or early 700s decided to collect and compile a bunch of stories about monsters, and both of these surviving manuscripts may have been part of that original collection.

And that takes us back to a more fundamental question. Where did the story of Beowulf come from? It seems very likely that the poet who composed the poem pulled from earlier legends and stories. And it appears that those original stories also passed into the oral tradition of the Scandinavian people, and they were captured in writing many centuries later when the Norse tribes became fully literate.

Earlier I mentioned the Danish legend of Hrólf Kraki which has some similarities to the Beowulf story and mentions some of the same historical figures mentioned in Beowulf. It also contains a brave fighter was named Bodvar Bjarki who may have some connections to the character of Beowulf. So some scholars think there may have been an original Scandinavian story or legend which inspired both of those stories.

But there is an even more striking parallel to Beowulf in another Scandinavian legend. An old Icelandic Saga from around the year 1300 has some amazing similarities with the story of Grendel and Grendel's mother in Beowulf. So let me give you a summary of the two stories. And see if you can notice the similarities.

Let's begin with a quick summary of the first two-thirds of Beowulf.

Hrothgar is king of the Danes, and he directs the construction of a great mead hall called Heorot. Every night the hall is filled with revelry, and a monster named Grendel who lives in a nearby lake is driven to rage. One night, Grendel barges in and attacks the men in the hall and kills thirty of the men inside. Grendel returns over and over again and kills more of the Danes for several years.

Meanwhile, in the land of the Geats, a brave and noble prince named Beowulf hears of the attacks. He prepares a ship and travels with a group of men to the land of the Danes. When they arrive, they are escorted to meet Hrothgar. Beowulf offers to assist the Danish king by killing the monster.

That night, Beowulf and his men remain in the hall after everyone else leaves. Grendel storms into the hall ripping the door from its hinges. He seizes and kills a sleeping warrior and drinks his blood and consumes his body, but Beowulf seizes Grendel's arm. The two begin to grapple and fight. Beowulf eventually rips off Grendel's arm which the poet describes as 'burston bánlocan' - 'bursting bone locks.' Grendel is mortally wounded and flees from the hall back to the lake. Beowulf then places the severed arm above the mead hall door.

Back at the lake, Grendel's mother discovers her dead son, and she vows to avenge his death. A few nights later, she travels to the mead hall where the Danes were sleeping. Beowulf was still there, but he had been given lodging at a different location. So Grendel's mother makes her way

inside the mead hall, and she unleashes a fierce attack upon the sleeping Danes. And she kills one of Hrothgar's warriors.

Hrothgar and Beowulf soon arrive to see the death and destruction, but Grendel's mother has already fled. So Beowulf decides to pursue her and kill her as well. They travel to the lake or mere where she lives which is full of snakes and serpents. Beowulf jumps in the water. He swims for most of the day before he finally reaches the bottom.

Grendel's mother senses Beowulf's presence, and she reaches out and grabs him. She pulls him to her lair where sea creatures began to attack him. The fight continues for a while before he finally finds a massive sword. He swings the sword at Grendel's mother and strikes her neck killing her. The poet uses the phrase 'ban-hringas braec' – 'bone rings broke.' The men who had gathered by the shore see blood bubbling up from the bottom. And they assume it is Beowulf's blood, and they leave.

Meanwhile, Beowulf, who is still in the lake, comes across Grendel's lifeless body and cuts off his head. Beowulf then swims back to the top of the lake when Grendel's head in tow. And that concludes the second of the three battles in the Beowulf poem.

Now by comparison, here's a summary of a portion of the Icelandic Grettis Saga:

A female monster is threatening a farmstead. After each visit by the monster, a man is missing. One night, the mistress of the house leaves for church, and a man named Grettir stays behind in the main hall to see what type of creature is stalking the farm. Grettir barricades himself in the hall and lies down to rest. The monster arrives and Grettir is attacked. The two begin to fight, and the fight extends outside to a deep gorge with a waterfall by a river. Grettir finally cuts off the monster's right arm with a knife. She then falls down into the water fall. Later, Grettir tells the parish priest what happened. The priest doubts the story, so Grettir takes the priest to the waterfall. There is a cave behind the waterfall. So Grettir jumps into the water and reaches the cave. A giant is sitting beside a great fire burning inside the cave.

The giant jumps up and lunges at Grettir and the two begin to fight. The giant reaches for a sword hanging on the wall of the cave. As he does, Grettir seizes the opportunity and finally kills the monster. The priest back on shore sees gore rushing in the water, and he thinks it is Grettir's blood, so he gets scared and runs away. Grettir then returns to land, and he accuses the priest of not being faithful.

Now as you can probably tell, the basic events of both stories are the same. And even some of the details are the same. The hero cutting off the arm of the monster in the first battle. The sword which appears at during the second battle. The blood which fills the water. The witnesses standing by the water who leave before the hero returns.

It is unlikely that all these similar details were the product of a coincidence. Most scholars today agree that both of these stories were influenced by common legend which must have been

floating around Scandinavia, and which ultimately passed to Britain, possibly with the early Anglo-Saxon migrations.

In the last portion of Beowulf, after he has returned home to the land of the Geats, a dragon is awakened by a thief who steals a cup from a treasure horde which the dragon was guarding. The dragon retaliates going on a rampage throughout the land of the Geats killing people and destroying houses. Beowulf, who by now has been the King of the Geats for many years, goes off to fight the dragon. Ultimately, Beowulf slays the dragon with the help of a loyal thane, but not before receiving a fatal bite from the dragon. Beowulf dies, and his body is burned in a large funeral pyre.

The origin of this last part of the story is difficult to pinpoint with any certainty. And that's because fights against dragons and serpents were very common in Germanic folklore. One common belief was that the world inhabited by humans – the Middle Garden or Middle Earth – was surrounded by a primordial ocean, sort of like a large moat encircling the Earth. Remember, they didn't understand that Earth was a planet. To them, it was more like a large island. And beyond that island, was the circular ocean. And beyond that ocean was the outer world which was inhabited by giants and other creatures. But in that ocean which separated humans from monsters was a huge serpent which had been cast there by the gods. That same mythology purports to describe how the world will one day end in a great battle. Thor will end up fighting that giant serpent, and Thor will kill it with his famous hammer. So some scholars think that Thor's legendary battle with the giant serpent may have been an ultimate source for some of these later tales which describe battles against dragons.

But dragons and serpents weren't just Anglo-Saxons creatures. They are found in the folklore and literature of many ancient cultures. So their ultimate origin is much deeper and much more ancient than the Germanic tribes. The word ***dragon*** is actually a Greek word which meant 'serpent or sea monster.' The word was later borrowed by the Romans. And English borrowed it from Latin twice. The first time was before English was English, back when the Anglo-Saxons were still living on the continent. During that period, the word was borrowed by the early Germanic tribes from the Romans. So Old English had the word as ***draca***. And that's the version of the word used in Beowulf.

Later, after the Normans arrived in 1066, English borrowed the French version of the word – which was spelled exactly like the Modern English version - D-R-A-G-O-N. So that word hasn't changed for nearly 1,000 years.

By the time of Old English, the concept of the dragon had evolved from its original notion as a serpent or sea creature to the more modern notion of a flying creature who could breathe fire. When the Anglo-Saxons wanted to describe a more traditional sea serpent, they would use the term ***sæ-draca*** – 'sea dragon.' Sometimes that it would call it a ***sæ-deor*** which is literally a 'sea-deer' which seems odd today, but in Old English ***deer*** was a generic term for a wild animal. And in case you were curious, Old English had a different term for the animal we know today as a ***deer***. It was called a ***heorot*** which by the way is the name of that mead hall built by Hrothgar

where Beowulf battled Grendel. And that's because the name of the hall meant 'Hall of the Deer' in Old English.

Of course, today we don't use the phrase 'sea-dragon' or 'sea-deer.' Instead, we tend to use either serpent or snake. ***Snake*** is the older Old English word ***snaca***, and Old Norse has a very similar version of the word. But ***serpent*** is the Latin word borrowed from French immediately after the Normans arrived. The two words are not related though. They each come from different Indo-European root words, though both root words had the same meaning – to crawl or creep. The original root of ***snake*** also produced ***snail*** and ***sneak*** which also relate to creeping or crawling.

Similarly, ***asp*** and ***adder*** both mean a snake, but they also are not related. ***Asp*** is the Latin word from Old French, and ***adder*** is the Old English word. But again, they are not cognate.

Adder is actually one of my favorite words because it's modern form is the product of linguistic confusion. The Old English version of the word was ***næddre***, and in some modern dialects of Northern England it is still pronounced as ***nedder***. So if you had one nadder, you had 'a nadder.' But over time, people became confused, and they thought it was 'an adder.' So they thought the 'N' was part of the article, not part of the noun. So basically, the 'N' was shifted forward from the noun ***nadde***r to the article, and '***A***' became '***an***.' And so it became 'an adder.' The same thing also happened with words like ***apron*** which was originally ***napron***. And the same with the word ***umpire*** which was originally French ***noumper***.

Old English also had some other words for monsters which have long-since disappeared. A wretched creature was sometimes called an ***arming***. A giant was called an ***ettin***. Old English also had the word ***orc*** which meant a devouring monster. The source of the word is uncertain, but it is often connected to the Latin word ***ogre*** which had a similar meaning.

JRR Tolkien revived the word ***orc***, and he often used it as a another word for goblin. It also appears to be the root of the word ***orca*** for a type of whale, specifically a killer whale, another type of sea creature.

Another type of sea creature in Old English was a ***nicor***. It was originally a water monster. And in fact the Beowulf poet uses the term ***nicor*** to describe Grendel's mother at the bottom of the lake. ***Nicor*** is cognate with the word ***nixie*** which is a water fairy. ***Nixie*** is actually very late borrowing from German. The Scottish poet and novelist Sir Walter Scott first used the term in English in the early 1800s. But it also came in through the Brothers Grimm around the same time. One of their stories was 'The Nixie of the Mill-Pond.'

Another Germanic creature that found its way into the works of Tolkien and the Brothers Grimm was the troll. ***Troll*** is actually an Old Norse word, and in fact it still retains its original spelling and pronunciation. The word was deposited by the Vikings in the islands north of Britain and existed there from the Viking period. But it didn't enter general English until the 1800s – thanks to the works of the Brothers Grimm and other authors of the period.

Another Old Norse word which is directly related to monsters, goblins and witches is the word ***ugly*** which originally meant 'frightful or horrible in appearance.' I noted in an early episode that our modern ending '***-ly***' (L-Y) is derived from the word ***like***. Well, ***ugly*** was originally ***uglike*** – ***ug-like***. And it eventually became ***ugly***.

And before I conclude, I should note that Old French gave us the word ***monster*** – another word borrowed from the Normans within the first century after they arrived in Britain. It was derived from the Latin word ***monere*** which meant to 'warn or remind.' So that makes ***monster*** cognate with the word ***monitor***. Since the original Latin word also meant 'to remind,' it also makes ***monster*** cognate with 'monument.' It is also related to ***admonish*** and ***premonition***. That Latin word ***monere*** was used for the name of the Goddess Juno Moneta, and her name gave us words like ***money*** and ***mint***, so that makes those words cognate with ***monster*** as well. ***Monstrosity*** and ***demonstrate*** are also derived from the same Latin roots. And if we trace those same Indo-European roots back to Greek, we get words like ***manic***, ***mania***, ***maniac*** and ***maniacal***. And even the word ***mantis*** in 'praying mantis' goes back to that same Greek root. So all of those words are connected to the Modern English word ***monster***. They all come in via Greek, Latin and French.

So as we've gone though all of the names for these various creatures, you should have noticed an underlying theme. English has generously borrowed the names of monsters and creatures from other languages. And as always, the three main sources of these words are Old English, Old Norse and Old French. So within these words, we can get a sense of how these three languages blended together.

And as we move forward, the next four centuries of our history is really the story of how these three languages blended together to form Middle English and Modern English.

And having looked at the history of Old English and Old Norse up to the end of the eighth century, we have to briefly turn our attention to the third leg of that tripod – Old French. So next time, we're going to explore how Old French emerged Latin. And we'll also explore the rise of Charlemagne and the Carolingians and the evolution from the Frankish kingdom to France. And you might be surprised how much the developments there impacted modern English. And with the conclusion of the next episode, we can then turn our attention back to Britain and the Viking Invasions of the ninth century.

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