THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 46:
CYNEWULF AND THE KINDRED KINGS

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 46: Cynewulf and the Kindred Kings.

In this episode, we're going to explore the concept of Anglo-Saxon kingship. We'll examine the etymology of terms associated with kings and nobility. And we'll explore the role of the king in Anglo-Saxon society. We'll also look at a poet who lived during this period named Cynewulf. And the thing which connects these various story lines is a common root word – the original version of our modern word **_kin_**.

But before we begin, let me remind you as always that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And thanks to those of you who have donated to the podcast through the website. Those donations have permitted me to upgrade the server for the site, so it should be a little faster and more reliable now, especially during peak traffic times. And as always, you can reach me by email at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com, and you can follow me on twitter at englishhistpod.

So with that piece of business out of the way, let's turn to this episode.

This time, we're moving the story of English forward to the first half of the ninth century. We'll begin this episode with the crowning of Charlemagne as Emperor in the year 800, and we'll conclude about 50 years later with the first permanent Viking settlements in Anglo-Saxon Britain. So let's pick up where we left off last time.

We concluded the last episode with the initial Viking raids in Britain in the very late 700s. These were shocking events. And by the year 799, the Vikings were raiding the Frankish coast as well. On both sides of the Channel, defenses were being fortified. A year later, the Frankish Kingdom became the 'Empire' of the Franks when the Pope crowned Charlemagne as Emperor of the Romans. That title was actually given in exchange for Charlemagne's support of the Pope who was under threat in Rome. And it was intended to be a re-birth of the Western Roman Empire. It didn't really work out that way in the end, but for now, we can just think of the whole thing Charlemagne's Frankish Empire.

Charlemagne may have gotten an upgrade in title from 'King' to 'Emperor,' but the Vikings didn't really care. The Viking raids continued. Both Charlemagne and Offa dealt with those threats by fortifying their river defenses in order to block access to the rivers. It didn't do much to protect the coastal areas, but it at least kept the Vikings from traveling up river deep inland.

Those defenses actually had some initial success. And there was a brief lull in the action for a while. In fact, during the later part of Charlemagne's rule, the Frankish Empire was largely free from attack. And the Anglo-Saxons also enjoyed a bit of a break for a few decades.

As we saw last time, Offa of Mercia was the only northern European king who could deal with Charlemagne on something close to equal footing. But Offa had died in 796 around the time of the first Viking invasions. And after Offa's death there was a gradual transition of power from Mercia down to Wessex – Mercia's neighbor in the southwestern corner of Britain. And this is actually a very important event in the history of England, as well as the history of English, because Wessex was the one region which withstood the Viking conquest. Its kings became the Kings of a unified England, and they're the ultimate ancestors of the modern royal family. But more importantly for our purposes, their particular dialect – the West Saxon dialect – became the standard dialect for Old English writing. And since most Old English manuscripts were compiled after the rise of Wessex, most of that surviving literature is written in that particular dialect. So it is important to spend a few minutes at the outset to explore how power began to pass from Mercia to Wessex.

Wessex had long been a rival of Mercia. And even though Offa dominated Anglo-Saxons affairs, he never had direct rule over Wessex. However, he did succeed in placing his protégé on the throne there. His protégé was named Beorhtric, and Beorhtric seized the throne in the wake of a power struggle in Wessex. An earlier king named Cynewulf had been killed by the supporters of a rival noble named Cyneheard. And a period of turmoil followed. The Mercian king Offa supported Beortric's claim to the throne, while one of the other claimants named Egbert fled to Charlemagne's kingdom. So there was a lot of intrigue in Wessex during this period. But the bottom line is that Offa exerted indirect control and influence over Wessex through his protégé Beortric. But then Offa died, and his son succeeded him as King of Mericia.

But you might remember from the last episode that Offa's son only survived him by five months. And when his son died, everything started to fall apart for Merica. Kent in the southeast rose in rebellion. Then Offa's protégé Beortric died in Wessex. And that allowed the exiled Egbert to return home from France. Meanwhile, the Northumbrian king had been married to one of Offa's daughters. But that king was murdered around this same time, and Mercian influence in that region declined as well. So Kent, Wessex and Northumbria all rebelled against Mercia.

All of this turmoil created the perfect opportunity for the new Wessex king Egbert. He set out to counter Mercian power with his own authority. He approached the other southern kingdoms Kent, Sussex and Essex, and he offered to protect them from Mercia. And all of those southern kingdoms accepted his offer. Gradually, all three of those kingdoms began to consolidate under Egbert's rule. The net result is that Wessex basically consumed the other Saxon kingdoms, as well as Kent. Egbert also occupied the Celtic-speaking area of Cornwall in the far southwest, effectively ending the independence of the Welsh there. As the Wessex king, Egbert now controlled all of Britain south of the Thames. And that meant that the original seven Anglo-Saxon kingdoms had been reduced to just four. Wessex dominated the south, while Mercia, Northumbria and East Anglia remained in the region north of the Thames.

Then Egbert briefly drove out the Mercian king, and he received the submission of the East Anglians and Northumbrians. And for a very brief period of time, Egbert the Wessex king ruled all of the Anglo-Saxons.

He is the first king who could rightly be called the King of All the Anglo-Saxons. And some scholars give him the distinction of being the first King of England. The only problem is that his rule over all of the kingdoms was very brief. The Mercian king soon returned to the throne. But Egbert was laying the foundation for the new nation-state of England. And we can even trace the modern royal family back to Egbert. Egbert was the fourteenth [*CORRECTION: thirty-fourth*] great-grandfather of the current monarch Queen Elizabeth. But the permanent consolidation of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms would have to wait for Egbert's descendants.

With the return of the Mercian king, Mercia once again regained its independence, and there was a renewed balance of power between Mercia and Wessex. But just as that new balance of power began to emerge, the Viking raids started to pick up again. All of those events which I just described had occurred during that lull in the Viking raids. But now all of those kingdoms – even Wessex – were under renewed threat from the Scandinavian raiders.

For purposes of our story, all of these events are important for two reasons. First, it establishes that Wessex had emerged as a formidable power in the south. And as we'll soon see, the Wessex kings ultimately saved the English language from being consumed by the Old Norse language of the Vikings. The other reason why these events are important is because it shows that the Anglo-Saxons were too divided among themselves to mount an effective and unified defense against the Vikings. The Vikings were able to 'divide and conquer' without having to do too much actual dividing.

We're now in 830s, and as I noted, the Anglo-Saxons had enjoyed a brief lull in the Viking raids. During that time, the Vikings had been concentrating their efforts to the north in modern-day Scotland and Ireland. It was during this general time frame that Dublin emerged as a Viking settlement in Ireland.

Most of the Vikings who settled in Ireland and northern Britain were from Norway. Their settlement was particularly strong in the Shetland Islands and Orkney Islands north of Britain. In those islands, the Viking influence was so great that the native languages were completely replaced there by Old Norse. And virtually all surviving place names there are Scandinavian. This was just a small-scale version of what the later Vikings intended for Britain itself.

And this northern settlement is also an important point. Most of the Old Norse influence on English came for the Vikings who settled in the Anglo-Saxon regions, but some of it came into English later when Norse words filtered down from these northern areas. A good example of this is the Old Norse word *mal* which meant an 'agreement' or 'contract.' In Scotland, the Norse word came to mean 'rent.' People paid their rent in silver coins, and since those coins were bright and shiny, the coins were sometimes called 'silver mal' or 'white mal.' But in the 1500s, some of the chiefs of Highland clans in Scotland began to demand payment from farmers and traders for 'protection' from other clans. If they didn't pay, they would be beaten up or worse. The coins were call 'white mal,' but when it was used to may this type of extortion, it was called 'black mal' – or 'black money.' And that term filtered down into England as *blackmail*. So the 'mail' in *blackmail* doesn't have anything to do with the mail you receive from the postal

service. It's actually a completely different Viking word which came into English from Scotland and the islands north of Britain.

As we saw in the last episode, the first Viking raids specifically targeted monasteries. Those monasteries were quite wealthy. They tended to be located along the coast. And they were very poorly defended. They also happened to be where most of the books, and schools and scriptoriums were located. So not surprisingly, there was a significant decrease in book production in the early 800s as the Viking raids began to take their toll. And one of the consequences of that decrease in book production is a very limited amount of surviving English literature from this period.

However, there is one very important exception to that rule, and that's the Anglo-Saxon poet Cynewulf. And I want to digress here and take a closer look at Cynewulf. He is actually one of the few Anglo-Saxon poets who we know by name. Unfortunately, we don't know very much about him other than his name, and the four poems which he left behind.

If that name Cynewulf sounds familiar, it should. I mentioned earlier that there was a Wessex king named Cynewulf who was killed by a rival claimant to the throne, and that murder ultimately led to Offa's protégé taking the throne there. There was also a prominent bishop in Lindisfarne named Cynewulf. So that name Cynewulf was a pretty common Anglo-Saxon name. And as we'll see later, that name is actually important to the overall theme of this episode. But first, I want to focus on this particular poet named Cynewulf.

As I said, we have four surviving poems which we can attribute to him. All four of them have religious themes. Two of the poems survive in the Exeter Book, and the other two poems are found in the Vercelli Book. So you might remember that those are two of the four major collections of Old English poetry which have survived the centuries.

Now I say that we know the poet's name Cynewulf, and we know that he composed those four poems. But he didn't just sign his name to the poems in the way we might expect someone to do today. He did something else – something very ingenious. He spelled out his name with runic symbols in the actual texts of the poems. A technique called acrostic writing.

The runic symbols were basically a Germanic alphabet. And just like letters, there was a specific runic symbol for each sound. So Cynewulf took the symbols which were required to spell his name – the symbols for the sounds of C, Y, N, E ,W, U, L and F – and he incorporated those runic symbols into the last section of each of the four poems. And I'll explain in a minute how he did that, but the main point is that those symbols spell out the name 'Cynewulf' in all four poems.

He actually spelled his name two different ways. In two of the poems he spells his name 'C-Y-N-E-W-U-L-F,' and in the other two, he spells his name without the E in the middle, so it's just 'C-Y-N-W-U-L-F.'

And that's actually an important clue as to when he lived, and therefore when the poems were composed.   Prior to the mid-700s, the name *Cynewulf* was almost always spelled differently with an 'I' in the middle – C-Y-N-I-W-U-L-F. But from the mid-700s on, the 'I' in the middle was replaced with an 'E' or simply dropped altogether.   So based on the way the Cynewulf spelled his name, it appears that he lived after that common spelling change in the mid-700s.

Also, the surviving copies of the poems include some early West Saxon word forms which suggest they were originally transcribed around the late 800s or early 900s. So that suggests that Cynewulf lived and wrote at some point prior to that, probably in the early to mid-800s. And that means he was one of the few writers who we can place within the time frame that we're exploring in this episode.

And frankly, that's about all we know about Cynewulf with any certainly – his name, the general time frame in which he lived, and the fact that he composed poems about Christian topics. Other than that, we just have his poems, but it is neat to have his name because most Old English poetry was anonymous.

So I thought it might be interesting to examine exactly how we know his name. I said that he revealed his name through the use of runic symbols in the text. And those symbols can be combined to spell the name *Cynewulf*. Well how do we know that that name was his name, and not a reference to one of those other Cynewulfs – the Wessex king or the Lindisfarne bishop? Well, the answer is simple – because he tells us that the letters spell his name. And this revelation occurs in one of the four poems called 'The Fates of the Apostles.'

So here is how he incorporated his name into the poem. First, 'Fates of the Apostles' is one of two poems where he spelled his name without the middle 'E,' so it was C-Y-N-W-U-L-F. He began by converting each of those letters into runic symbols by selecting the runic equivalent of each letter.

Now the important thing to understand here is that runic symbols were like the original letters of the Phoenician alphabet in that each Runic symbol was both a letter for a specific sound and a picture of an actual object or concept. So the runic symbols had dual meanings.

So Cynewulf began with the runic symbol for the /k/ sound – the first sound in Cynewulf, so the runic equivalent of the Roman letter C. That runic symbol is called *cen*, and *cen* also meant 'torch or fire.' So the symbol could be used as a letter when spelling a word with /k/ sound, and it could also be used as a picture to depict a torch or fire – kind of like hieroglyphics.

And then he picked the runic symbol which matched the other letters of his name.
The runic symbol for 'Y' sound meant 'yew bow' – a longbow made from yew wood. The symbol for the 'N' sound meant need or obligation. The symbol for the 'W' sound meant joy or pleasure. The symbol for the 'U' sound meant strength. The symbol for the 'L' sound meant water, lake or sea. And the symbol for the 'F' sound meant wealth.

And I should note that those are just some of the possible meanings. The meanings actually varied from one Germanic region to the next. And even within the same region, they often had multiple meanings. So the intended meaning of the symbols is still a matter of some debate.

So Cynewulf now had the seven runic symbols for the seven letters of his name. And those symbols represented fire, a bow, need, pleasure, strength, sea and wealth. So then he composed a passage of the poem in which used all seven of those words, and when he got to one of those words in the line, he just put the runic symbol there. So anyone familiar with the runic symbols could still read the passage. But it meant that runic symbols were mixed in with the traditional Roman or Anglo-Saxon letters. And that suggests that scribes still had a basic working knowledge of the runes as late as the 800s, several centuries after the Roman alphabet was introduced.

Now Cynewulf introduced this particular passage with a little prelude which explained what he was up to. In Modern English, the lines read: "Here a wise person may discover he who enjoys the recitation of poems – he who composed this song." So he is saying that his name is revealed in the following lines of poetry, and a wise or clever person should be able to figure it out. So it's similar to a riddle. You have to identify the runes and put them together to spell out his name. And then we have the passage where the runic symbols are mixed in.

I want to read that passage to you first in Modern English, and then in the original Old English. But with respect to the modern version, I should note that the passage is subject to many different interpretations. First, it's poetry – not prose, so it isn't intended to be straightforward. Secondly, it was in Old English, so any modern translation loses some of the original meaning. And then we have those runic symbols mixed in which have several different meanings. So I am going to give you one possible interpretation of the passage. And I want to help you envision the way the passage was actually written down. So when I get to a word which was represented with a runic symbol, I'll include a little bell so you'll know that that word was actually a rune. So here's the passage:

"Wealth (F) stands there at the end. Earls enjoy it on earth, but they will not be allowed to be together forever, dwelling in the world. The pleasure (W) which is strength (U) in this homeland will fail, and then the body's borrowed ornaments will decay, even as the sea (L) will glide away – while the fire (C) and bow (Y) use their skill; need (N) will lie upon them in the anxious night – its servitude to the King."

So if you go through that passage, the runic symbols appear in the following order: F - W - U- L - C - Y- N. So we still have to do a little word scramble. And if you rearrange the letters, you get C-Y-N-W-U-L-F – a common Anglo-Saxon name. So it takes a little work to get there, but each of Cynewulf's four surviving poems use that technique.

Now that's a Modern English translation of the passage where he reveals his name, but here is that entire passage in the original Old English of the poem.

Her mæg findan	foreþances gleaw,
se ðe hine lysteð	leoðgiddunga,
hwa þas fitte fegde.	[feoh] þær on ende standeþ,
eorlas þæs on eorðan brucaþ.	Ne moton hie awa ætsomne,
woruldwunigende;	[Wen] sceal gedreosan,
[ur] on eðle,	æfter tohreosan
læne lices frætewa,	efne swa [lagu] toglideð.
þonne [Cen] ond ?	cræftes neosað
nihtes nearowe,	on him [nyd] ligeð,
cyninges þeodom.	

So that's the Old English version. As always, the Old English seems far removed from Modern English, but if we dig through that passage and look a little closer, we can see and hear glimpses of words and phrases that are familiar to us today. Cynewulf says that a wise person reading the poem in 'forethought' (foreþances) 'here may find' (Her mæg findan) the name of the poet. And he says that wealth or *feoh* may outlast you – 'feoh stands there at the end' ([feoh] þær on ende standeþ). He says that earls enjoy that wealth, but they're not always going to be together in this world – not 'always at same world dwelling' (awa æt some-ne woruldwunigende). And he concludes the passage by saying need (nyd) or obligation is servitude to 'the king and his people' (cyninges þeodom). *Cyninges* is 'King's,' and *þeodom* is 'people or nation.' *þeodom* gives us the word *þeodisc* which I discussed last time. It meant the language of the people, but since it was a Germanic term, it specifically meant the language of the Germanic people. So the root word *þeodom* was a general term for 'people or nation.' So servitude to the 'cyninges þeodom' is servitude to the 'king's people or nation.'

And there we have that word *cyning* which was the original version of the word *king*. And we have Cynewulf the poet. And we had Cynewulf the bishop of Lindisfarne. And we had Cynewulf the king of Wessex. And we also had Cyneheard – the rival whose supporters killed the Wessex king Cynewulf. So *cyn* was a very common element in Anglo-Saxon words and names.

That word *cyn* is the original version of our modern word *kin* as in *kindred* or *kinfolk* or *next-of-kin*.

Cynewulf meant 'kin wolf.' *Cyneheard* was literally 'kin hard,' but *hard* meant 'fierce or brave' in this context. So it meant a 'brave or fierce relative.'

Since it meant 'kin' or 'kindred,' the prominent use of word *cyn* illustrates how important family relations were in Anglo-Saxon society. These were values derived from the concept of the Germanic sibb – the larger family unit to which everyone belonged and which gave us the word *sibling*.

As a member of a particular family or kin group, you tend to have certain things in common with each other So when we make comparisons, we sometimes say that one thing is *akin* to something else. *Akin* comes from that same root word.

Old English also used the word as a suffix to indicate that a group of people were related or connected to each other in some way. So the old English word *moncynn* is the 'man kin' – 'kindred of men' – and *moncynn* ultimately produced the word 'mankind.' And an early word for the English people was *Anglecynn* – the kindred of the Angles. And we still use the word *kind* as a suffix – as in *womankind* and *humankind*. And in fact, the word *kind* as an adjective comes from this same root word. You tend to be 'kind or friendly' when dealing with people who are closely related to you. So *kind* emerged as an adjective to reflect the way people who are closely related treat each other. You treat your 'kin' with 'kindness.'

And from these various senses of the word *cyn*, we also get the word *cyning* – the 'king' or leader of the family. Someone who protects his family from others, and someone who treats his own people with kindness and generosity. The *-ing* at the end has led to some scholars to speculate that the original meaning was more like a 'member' of the family rather than a leader of the family. We've seen that ending before. A *sibling* was a member of the 'sibb' – the larger family group. A *Viking* was a person from the 'Viks' – the bays and inlets of Scandinavia. And town names liked *Hastings* and *Birmingham* and *Washington* all use that same *-ing* element which means the people who come from a certain place or a certain ancestor. We still use it in words like *duckling* to mean 'a young duck,' and *seedling* to mean 'a young plant.' So *cyning* may have originally meant a younger member of a noble family who had been chosen as the leader.

And we know that early Germanic kings were in fact chosen by specific nobles or persons who were authorized to make that selection. Kingship didn't always pass to the oldest son, and it didn't even automatically pass to a descendant.

It was a personal office, not necessarily an inherited office. Any male member of the royal family was eligible for the position. It could pass to an sibling or an uncle or another member of the noble family. So a king was merely a chosen leader of the family or the 'extended family' in this case. So the word *cyning* as a member of the kindred makes a little more sense when we considered the original concept of Germanic kingship.

So those are some of the common Old English words derived from the word *cyn*. But we also borrowed that same root from other languages. The word *cyn* derives from an original Indo-European word **gene* which meant to 'give birth, produce or beget.' So in that sense of giving birth to something, we have the word *kindling* which are the little pieces of wood used to start a fire. And that word was borrowed from the Vikings. The sense of giving birth also produced the German version of the word – *kind* – which means 'child' in German. And English has borrowed that version of the word in the term *kindergarten*. We also borrowed in the word *wunderkind* which is literally 'wonder child' and means a child prodigy.

So all of the Germanic versions of the word begin with the 'K' sound. And we have Grimm's Law to thank for that. One of Jacob Grimm's rules was that the Indo-European 'G' sound became a 'K' sound in the Germanic languages.

So in this case, the original Indo-European word *gene* became *cyne* in Old English. But it retained its original 'G' sound in Latin and Greek. And it produced the Latin words *gentem* and *genus*. And that hard G became a soft G in French. So it produced Modern English words like *gene*, *genetics*, *gender* and *generation*. And it produced the Greek word *genealogy*.

The sense of giving birth to something is reflected in words like *genitalia* and *generate*, and we even have it in the word *pregnant*. If you are *pre-genus*, you are 'before child,' and that construction ultimately produced the word *pregnant*. If you are born to a particular place or people, you are *indigenous* – the '*gen*' coming from this same root. And Greek gives us the word *genesis* to mean the birth or beginning of something.

And just as English produced the word *kind*, Latin produced the word *gentle*. And *gentle* developed with the same original sense as 'kind.' It was the friendly or respectful feeling that you have toward your family. So *kind* and *gentle* are actually cognate. And we not only got *gentle*, we also got *generous* and *genial*. A kind and respectful man is a *gentleman*.

We also have a correlation to the word *king*. Just as *cyn* produced *king*, the Latin word *genus* ultimately produced the word *general*. So that makes *king* and *general* cognate. The Latin word also gave us *gentry* for the noble classes.

For our purposes, the main point to take from that etymology is that the word *king* originally had an innate sense of family or intimacy. The king was a family or tribal leader. And since the first tribes were smaller groups of people, a tribe was often just an extended family. Most of the members were often related through some type of intermarriage. So kingship was more of a personal relationship. And his two main duties were to protect his people, and to reward them for their loyalty.

We get a sense of these traditional obligations of the king in another Old English poem called Maxims II. The poem is a collection of maxims or proverbial sayings which have been arranged in the form of a poem. It includes many maxims like "The man who knows the most is old, Schooled by years in the past."

And that particular poem contains two statements about the job or duty of the king. The first statement is actually the opening line of the poem. The line says that the king's job is to protect his people. In Old English, it reads:

Cyning sceal rice healdan.

Cyning sceal	rice	healdan
King shall	reich or kingdom	hold, tend, or watch over

So "Cyning sceal rice healdan" means "A king shall hold or watch over his kingdom.'

A little later in the poem, it is stated that the king's duty is to give out rings. In other words he is to reward his people for their loyalty and support. This second line of the poem is:

Cyning sceal on healle beagas dælan.

Cyning sceal	on healle	beagas	dælan.
King shall	in a hall	which means 'rings' - and it's actually cognate with the word 'bagels'	deal out

So "Cyning sceal on healle beagas dælan" means 'A king shall deal or give out rings in the hall where people gather.'

So that's the traditional role of the Germanic tribal king. His job was not to 'govern' because *govern* is French word brought by the Normans. Instead, the king's job was *steran* and *weldan* – to steer and wield – in other words to steer or guide the people and to wield or exercise the power required to do that.

The king's throne was the *cynestol* – the 'king's stool.' And it was sometimes called the *cynesetl* – the 'king's seat.'

And the king's wife was the *cwen* – or *queen* as we know her today. So despite it's very French spelling, *queen* is actually an Old English word. It was originally spelled C-W-E-N using the standard Old English 'CW' for the /kw/ sound. But the Norman French generally used the 'QU' letter combination for that sound. So after 1066, the Old English 'C-W' was replaced with the French 'Q-U.'

Queen is actually a little bit unusual as the word for a king's wife. In most Indo-European languages, the word for the king's wife is a variation of the word for king. Like Spanish *rey* for 'king' and *reina* for 'queen.' And English tends to do that as well. We have *prince* and *princess*, *duke* and *duchess*, *baron* and *baroness*, but *queen* is not a variation of *king*, it is a completely distinct word, and it's not even cognate with the word *king*.

In Old English, the word *queen* had the same meaning as today. It could refer to the wife of the king, or it could also simply refer to a female sovereign. But the original meaning of the word was simply a 'woman.' Going back to the late Germanic period, there were two main words for 'woman.' One version produced the Old English word *wif* – the original version of our modern word *wife*, but it was still used as a generic word for woman in Old English. Sometime during the middle of the Old English period, the word began to mean a 'married woman.' In fact, the oldest surviving text which uses the word *wif* as a married woman actually occurs in the works commissioned by King Alfred in the late 800s which we'll look at in the next episode.

The other word for a woman in the original Germanic language produced our word *queen*. And much like *wif* – or *wife* – it also began to take on the meaning of a married woman over time, in this case, a woman married to a king. But during the period of Old English the word could still

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carry both meanings. When used as a king's wife or as a female ruler, it was typically spelled C-W-E-N. But when it was used in the more general sense as a woman, it was often spelled C-W-E-N-E. And over time, English has distinguished the two senses of the word *queen* with different spellings.   And this may surprise you, but English actually has two separate words pronounced *queen*.

There's Q-U-E-E-N which is a king's wife or a female sovereign. And then there's Q-U-E-A-N which is the form of the word which means a 'woman' in the general sense of the term. Over time, this other version took on the meaning of a promiscuous woman. And it was from this sense of the word that we got the pejorative word *queen* for an effeminate gay man.

So in everyday speech, we don't make a distinction between the two terms, even though written English traditionally did. But many of those distinctions are being lost in contemporary English with Q-U-E-E-N often being used in all cases now.

Once again, *queen* is an Indo-European word. And it also was a general term for 'woman' in that original language. And just like we saw with *king*, the original word had the 'G' sound. The word was *gwen*. And under Grimm's Law, the 'G' sound shifted to a 'K' sound and became *cwen*, and then *queen*. But the original root word *gwen* passed into Greek, and it continued to mean 'woman' there. And over time, *gwen* became *gyne*. And we have that root today in the word *gynecology* – the area of medicine dedicated to women's health, specifically women's reproductive health.

So that means that *queen* is cognate with *gynecologist* in the same why that *king* is cognate with words like *genitalia* and *pregnant*. So all of these words related to families, and genealogies, and reproduction, and they're all ultimately connected to our words for 'king' and 'queen', and of course, the sons and daughters of kings and queens perpetuate the royal line and give rise to the next generation of kings and queens.

In Old English, someone born into nobility was *æthel-borennes* – literally 'noble born.' *Æthel* meant 'noble.' We've seen that word in the name of the King of Kent *Æthelbert* which was 'bright noble.' Someone descended from the noble family was an *ætheling* using the same construction as *sibling* or *cyning*. *Æthel* is cognate with the words *elder* and *old*.   So an *ætheling* was basically a descendant of the elders. It was sometimes used as a general term for the nobles and sometimes it was used specifically for princes. And they used that word instead of *noble* and *prince* because *noble* and *prince* are Norman French words which arrived after 1066.

The relationship between the king and his nobles evolved during the Anglo-Saxon period. Much of this early history is vague and uncertain since we have little written evidence from that early period. But some of that changing relationship is revealed in the law codes which were issued and which still survive. We've seen that oldest surviving document written in the English language was Æthelbert's Laws of Kent around the year 600. About a century later, a Wessex king name Ine issued his own set of laws, and we still have a copy of those laws today. Offa also issued a set of laws, but those have been lost to history. We know he issued laws because King

Alfred mentioned them later. And we'll discuss Alfred next time, but his laws were issued in the late 800s about two centuries after Ine's laws. And as historians compare those three sets of laws which still survive and which span almost three centuries, they see an evolving relationship between the kings and their nobles.

As we've seen, the original social organization was more tribal. It was based around the family and the clan. It relied heavily upon wergild to settle disputes. So if two people from different families or sibbs got into a dispute and one was injured or killed, the family of the guilty party had to pay a specific amount to the injured party or the family of the injured party. So individuals were just part of a larger family unit. And the family was responsible, at least financially, if one of the family members did something wrong. And the earlier laws reflect that tribal structure.

The first set of laws – Aethelbert's Laws of Kent – emphasize a free peasantry bound by kinship ties. The laws suggest that the free peasants didn't recognize or acknowledge any lord other than the king. So those laws reflect the very basic, simple tribal structure of the early Anglo-Saxons. The laws do reference earls who were heredity nobles, but they don't appear to have direct control over the free peasants.

The free peasants were just that. They were free and they owned their own land. But they were required to show loyalty to the king since he was their protector. And they did that by paying him for his services and his protection. So you may wonder how they paid the king. As we saw last time, money was a relatively late introduction, especially official currency. So they paid the king a *feorm* which meant a 'food rent.' *Feorm* was likely an Anglo-Saxon borrowing from Latin at some point after the Anglo-Saxons arrived in Britain, but long before the Normans arrived. It meant a fixed payment, and appears to be cognate with the word *farm*. *Farm* is a Latin word which later came into English with the Normans, but *farm* originally meant a 'fixed payment' in Latin and early French, so it had the same basic meaning as the Old English word – *feorm*. The Latin word *farm* later came to refer to the rent which a person paid to a landowner in exchange for the right to cultivate a piece of land.   And even later it came to refer the land itself. So if you 'farmed' a piece of land, it originally meant that you rented it so you could grow crops on it. It later came to mean the actual process of growing crops. And we still have the sense of *farm* as a payment when we say that we are going to 'farm out' some of our work to someone else. It means that we are going to pay someone else to do the work.

Well, *feorm* – or food rent – was a payment by free peasants directly to the king for his protection and service. In the more distant past on the continent, the king had actually traveled around his kingdom and enjoyed the hospitality of his people. They would feed him and provide for him. Again, we see their original idea of a king being a *cyning* – one of the kinfollk. But by this point in history, the king no long traveled to people's houses. So now the farmers and free peasants just sent a specific payment – the 'food rent' – directly to the king. So what had once been a way of personally accommodating the king on his travels had now become a type of tax. But since coins and money were limited at first, the food rent was paid with fool – typically ale, or oxen, or honey or loaves of bread.

In order to determine how much had to be paid to the king, the land was divided into hides called a *hid* in Old English. A hide was technically the amount of land sufficient to support a family or household. It was generally thought of as the amount of land that could be tilled by one plow in a year. So the size of the hide varied. If you had really good farm land, a hide might not be very big because it didn't take as much land to provide for the family. But if it was marshy or sandy or heavily forested land, the hide would be bigger because it took more land to provide the same amount of produce. Hides usually varied from around 40 acres on the small end up to around 120 acres. And the hide eventually developed into a much more formal way to assess land for taxes. But early on, it just determined the amount of 'food rent' to be paid to the king.

So early on, we have free peasants who owned their own land either directly or in some form of communal ownership. And their only lord or direct superior was the king to whom they a paid a food rent each year.

But by the time we get to Ine's Laws of Wessex about a century later around the year 700, the laws are quite different. We now see a class of lords betwewen the peasants and the king. Those laws start to emphasize lordship and the dependent nature of the lower classes. And the laws not only indicate the presence of this new class of nobles, they also indicate that there were differing degrees of lordship. Even some nobles recognized lords between them and the king.

Now historians argue over these differences. Some of them think this just represents a regional difference between Wessex and Kent, but most scholars think this represents an evolution of Anglo-Saxon society from a tribal society to something more akin to a feudal society, though it wasn't actually feudalism yet. So what was happening to make this change?

Well, again this is a matter of some dispute, but one theory is that it was the indirect result of outside threats. Early on, after the Anglo-Saxons had defeated the Celtic Britons and conquered much of the island, they had plenty of room to settle down. They were becoming farmers, and they were starting to prosper, and there were minimal outside threats.

But then as the kingdoms became more established, the kings began to consolidate their power. They began to rule over extensive kingdoms with fixed territories rather than being the leader of a migrating tribe. They now had to protect specific borders. And they often found themselves in conflict with rival kings from other kingdoms. They also had to deal with rivals from within as other nobles occasionally sought to overthrow an existing king. And those internal disruptions were often encouraged and supported by outside kings. So in order for nobles to obtain the title of 'King,' and then defend that title from internal and external threats, they needed to surround themselves with loyal supporters, and the more loyal supporters you could assemble, the more secure your position would be. But the only way to obtain those loyal supporters was to reward them for their support.

As we saw earlier, the king rewarded his loyal supporters with rings and other valuables, but that wasn't enough to secure the type of loyal support a medieval king needed to survive. The king needed earls and thanes who would go into battle with him, and this was becoming a regular occurrence. So the kings started to give out the right to collect the food rent each year. In

exchange for support, an earl might be given the right to collect the food rent in a specific region. Again the peasants still owned the land, so the king couldn't give away the land itself. But he could give away the right to collect those payments. And that's what he gave his supporters.

Initially, this new arrangement had little direct impact on the peasants. It just changed who they made their payments to. But then the inevitable problems began to occur – crop failures, bad weather, livestock diseases and invading armies who destroyed crops. Those events reduced the farmer's yield, and in some cases, it wiped out his entire crop. Since he couldn't provide the required food rent to his noble, he might agree to provide labor instead. And this often meant the literal or implicit transfer of lands to the lord to be secured by the agreement to farm the land and provide labor to the lord. The lord accepted the lands and offered protection to the peasant in return. And this type of personal obligation mean the peasant was now tied to the land. And the result was the creation of a landed aristocracy between the peasants and the king. Those nobles now owned the land, but that was the case only as long as the King ensured that arrangement, which the king gladly did in exchange for the support of the nobles. So this was a major change from the era of Germanic tribal kings. We're now entering the age of the landed aristocracy and medieval kings.

Again, not all scholars agree on how this transition occurred, but they do agree that the role of the late Anglo-Saxon king was quite different from the earlier tribal king on the continent. This newer more aristocratic society meant that those traditional family bonds were breaking down. A peasant now owed a duty to his lord, and that might conflict with his obligations to his extended family. In fact, the laws issued by King Alfred at the end of the 800s addressed this issue. His laws explicitly placed the claims of lordship over claims of kinship, and that really formalized the changes which had occurred up to that point.

I noted earlier that Germanic kings weren't necessarily born into the position. They were chosen by specific group of people who were authorized to select the king from a particular noble family. And once a king was selected, he continued to rely upon the advice of the nobles, as well religious and other personal advisors. In fact, one specific group of advisors called the *witan* began to have a much more important and much more formal role in government affairs. The witan was a council of advisors consisting of large landholders, prominent nobles, important thegns and military leaders, as well as church leaders. Over time, the witan acquired the right to elect the king from a royal family, but the primary role of the witan was to advise the king.

The full name of the council in Old English was *witenagemot*. It was a compound word – *witan* plus *gemot*. *Wita* was a term for a wise person. You might remember that the Old English word *wit* gave used words like *wise* and *wit* and *wisdom*. So the *witan* was a group of wise men.

Gemot meant a 'meeting.' And in fact the *mot* part of *gemot* comes from the same root which gave us our modern words *meet* and *meeting*. The *ge-* was a common Old English prefix which was dropped over time. The resulting word *mot* ultimately gave us the word *moot* meaning an assembly or group of people. Since assemblies are always debating things, the word *moot* eventually developed into the adjective *moot* meaning 'debatable' as in 'moot court,' but it also led to the sense of something inconclusive, and therefore something not worth considering, as in

the term 'moot' point. Which by the way, is not the same thing a 'mute point' which would be point that can't be heard at all.

So if we put *witan* meaning 'wise men' with *gemot* meaning 'a meeting,' we get the *witenagemot* – the meeting of wise men.

By the early 700s, all of the various Anglo-Saxon kings had their own witan. It met at least once a year, usually around great feasts like Easter and Christmas. Unfortunately, there is very little documentation which describes the exact role of the witan. It was not a formal assembly. It just played an advisory role, but after King Alfred, it began to take on a much more formal role. Alfred's witan became the national assembly of Wessex. Over time, it began to play an active role in legislation. It wasn't Parliament, but it established a tradition which was carried on by Parliament in later centuries.

So by the time we arrive at the ninth century, the nature of Anglo-Saxon kingship had changed considerably. And it was getting ready to change again. But these new changes weren't so much related to the structure of the kingship, it was related to the kingship itself.

As we've seen, one of the fundamental duties of the king was to protect his people from threats – both internal and external. Well, traditionally, external threats meant other Anglo-Saxon from neighboring kingdoms. But now, in the early ninth century, it also meant Vikings. And those invaders spoke a different language. So the king was the only thing standing between the English language of his people and the Norse language of the Vikings. For the first time since the various kingdoms had been established, there was an obvious and basic link between the power of the English kings and the preservation of the English language. So the future of English was only as secure as the future of those kings. And in the early ninth century, most of them probably had no idea that their reigns would soon be coming to an end – a very violent end.

So let's turn our attention back to the events on the ground.

We left off in the mid-830s with the Mercian king back on the throne and a renewed balance of power between Mercia and Wessex. But after a relatively quiet couple of decades, the Viking raids was starting to pick up again. The first sign of this increase was in the Frankish kingdom. Charlemagne had died a couple of decades before, and he only had one heir, Louis the Pious. At first, that was considered to be a good thing because the Empire would remain unified. Remember that Frankish tradition was to divide the kingdom among the various surviving sons. So for now, the kingdom remained in tact. As his name Louis 'the Pious' suggests, he spent a lot of time on Church reforms, but he proved to be a poor political leader. His children quarreled among themselves and with Louis himself over their future inheritance. During the 830s, the Frankish Empire broke into civil war and revolt three different times as Louis and his children fought for control of the empire.

The Vikings took advantage of the situation, and they plundered Frisia and, specifically, the Frankish trading center of Dorestad. Dorestad was located along the northern coast, and it was the largest trading center in northern Europe. Over the next three years, the port was plundered

four times. The city was eventually given to a Viking king named Roric. Some of the Vikings from this expedition headed across the channel to Britain to the mouth of the Thames. And that marked a new round of Viking invasions in Britain.

Over the next four years, two more expeditions of Vikings landed in Britain. The Wessex king Egbert controlled southern Britain, so he engaged the Vikings with mixed success. But for now, the invaders weren't looking to make a permanent home there. They just grabbed what they could and moved on.

But at the end of the 830s, both sides of the channel were rocked by the successive deaths of three different kings. Between 839 and 840, the Mercian King Wiglaf, the Wessex king Egbert, and the Frankish Emperor Louis all died. So that meant that all three kingdoms were dealing with succession issues at the same time. And all of that was occurring just as the Viking raids were picking up again.

The biggest succession issue was in the Frankish Empire where Louis's three sons had already been battling for their respective shares. When Louis died, the eldest son Lothar succeeded him. But his two bothers immediately went to war against him. A couple of years later, those two brothers – Charles, later known as 'Charles the Bald,' and Louis, later known as 'Louis the German' – met in Strasbourg. They agreed to support each other against their brother the nominal Emperor. To document their alliance, they swore oaths to each other, and the treaty was documented in the Oaths of Strasbourg which I mentioned a couple of episodes back.

The two brothers were accompanied by their respective armies at the meeting. Charles was from the western part of the Empire, so basically France. And his retinue mostly spoke Old French. But Louis's men were from the eastern part, so they spoke Germanic – or Theodisc ('þeodisc'). To ensure that both armies understood the agreement, each brother took the oath in the language of the other army. So Louis from Germany took the oath in Old French. And Charles from France took the oath in Theodisc, and that was the term actually used in the document – '*þeodisc*' – the word which later evolved into *Dutch* and *Deutsch*.

Those oaths were written down and preserved in Latin, as well as the two regional vernaculars – Old French and Theodisc.   And this is the first known document to be written down in the French vernacular Old French. So we are now officially in the period of Old French.

The alliance between the two brothers, Charles the Bald and Louis the German, proved to be successful. A year later, the Frankish Empire was formally divided between the three brothers. As anticipated by the Strasbourg Oaths, Louis the German got the Germanic-speaking lands to the east (basically Germany). Charles the Bald got the French-speaking lands to the west (basically France). And the older brother Lothar retained a thin stretch of land in between the other two kingdoms from Frisia in the north down to Italy. This basic division established the foundation of the Holy Roman Empire in the east, and eventually the modern nation of Germany. The western region was known as West Francia, but over the next couple of centuries, the French assibilation of the 'K' sound changed *Francia* to *France*. It's difficult to cite a specific date when France became France. It continued to have a complicated and fractured history even after

this date. But many historians cite this division of Charlemagne's Empire in 843 as the ultimate beginning of the French state. So just to keep things simple going forward, I am going to refer to the region as 'France' from now on.

Now these events in France were not only important in the history of the French language, they also had an indirect impact on the English language.   This initial division of Charlemagne's Empire didn't end the feuding between the three brothers – not by a long shot. They and their successors continued to fight against each other. So the former Frankish Empire was starting to look a lot like Britain. Instead of one strong unified kingdom, it was now divided into several independent kingdoms who were regularly fighting against each other. And that is just what the Vikings needed in order to transition from small-time raiders to big-time colonizers.

There were still occasional raids in Britain, but the Vikings spent most of the decade of the 840s concentrating on the fractured remains of the Frankish Empire. In France, Charles the Bald had the largest coastline to protect, so he had the biggest problem to deal with. The Vikings began to focus their efforts on the Western Atlantic coast of France. They established a base there which was the first permanent Viking settlement in France. And it marks an important transition. It shows that the Vikings were no longer content to simply raid. They were now looking to settle down and establish permanent bases.

A couple of years after establishing that base on the western coast, another group of Vikings attacked the northern coast of France. These Vikings were led by one of the more famous Viking leaders of the period.   His name was Ragnar Lothbrok. ***Lothbrok*** is a Norse name with an interesting etymology. ***Loth*** is cognate with the Old English word ***locc***, as in a hair or a tress of hair. So when we use the word ***locks*** to refer to someone's hair, that is an Old English word. And ***brok*** is cognate with the Old English word ***brec*** which became ***breeches*** and ***britches*** in later English. So ***Lothbrok*** meant 'hairy britches' or 'hairy pants.'

Despite the funny name, he was one of the most important Viking leaders, and his life and death indirectly led to the formation of the Danelaw in Britain. He was a descendant of the Danish royal family. And in March of 845, he reached the River Seine with a fleet of 120 Danish ships. He sailed up the river and plundered several cities, including the small but emerging city of Paris. And that shows how much the power of the region had declined in the 30 years or so since Charlemagne died. The Vikings had now attacked and plundered the heart of the kingdom which had dominated Europe a few years earlier. The French king Charles the Bald ended up paying Lothbrok's Vikings 7,000 pounds of silver to go away and bother someone else. And eventually, the people who he chose to bother were the Northumbrians.

Having been bribed to leave France, he ended up in Britain a few years later. And Lothbrok began to raid Northumbria with impunity. But then, two of his ships wrecked off the coast. As a result, he was captured and turned over to the Northumbrian king. According to legend, the King sought to exact revenge on the brutal Viking, so he ordered Lothbrok to be thrown into a dungeon with poisonous snakes where he died a slow and painful death. As he was dying in the pit, he supposedly condemned the king and the king's supporters. He screamed that his sons

would avenge his death and that they would soon be drinking from the skulls of the Northumbrians. And this prophesy proved to be pretty accurate.

A new phase of Viking attacks were soon underway. And just as in France, the Vikings were starting to build permanent bases in Britain. They were looking to conquer the region just as the Anglo-Saxons themselves had done about three centuries before. And within a few years, just as Ragnar Lothbrok had predicted, his three sons arrived to avenge his death. They led what is sometimes called the Great Danish Army. And those sons began to carve up the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms. And those kings – the protectors of the language and the culture of the people – were no match for the Vikings.

Next time, we'll explore the collapse of the Anglo-Saxon kings in the second half of the ninth century. And we'll look at the permanent settlements built by the Danes. But most importantly, we'll look at the one king who was able to protect his people. The one king who did preserve their language and culture. His name was Alfred. And he didn't just save the language. He actively promoted it in a way that no king before him had ever done. And in the process, he became the most important king in the history of the English language.

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