

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 48:
THE UNITY OF ALFRED'S ENGLISH**

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 48: The Unity of Alfred's English. In this episode, we're going to look at the events which took place during the final years of Alfred's reign in Wessex in the last decade of the ninth century. Specifically, we're going to look at the reforms implemented by Alfred to both preserve and promote the English language.

And one of the underlying goals of Alfred's reforms was to unify the Anglo-Saxons in the face of the Viking threat. He used every tool at his disposal. And one tool was the common language of the Anglo-Saxons. He used that language to emphasize their shared history and culture. And in the process, he laid the groundwork for what would soon become known as 'England.' So one of the underlying themes of this episode is unity and togetherness.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the Beowulf audiobook is available through the website – historyofenglishpodcast.com. But as of the time I'm recording this episode, it's not yet available on iTunes or Amazon.com. It should be there shortly, but the timing is out of my control. For those of you who follow me on twitter at [englishhistpod](https://twitter.com/englishhistpod), I'll send out a note when the book is officially added iTunes. And as always, you can reach me directly at kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com.

So let's turn to this episode about Alfred's English. Last time, we looked at the conquest of a large portion of Britain by the Danish Vikings. And we saw how Alfred preserved Anglo-Saxon culture in his kingdom of Wessex, as well as in western Mercia. He also re-took London from the Vikings later in his reign. And we examined how he fortified the defenses of his kingdom.

But for language historians, Alfred is most famous for his efforts to preserve the English language, especially the written language. After he secured his kingdom from the Danes, Alfred tried to revitalize literacy and education in a manner similar to Charlemagne. But whereas Charlemagne emphasized the teaching of proper Latin, Alfred focused instead on English. And this makes Alfred unique because his was the first king in Western Europe to place the local vernacular on the same level as Latin, if not actually above Latin in many respects.

As we saw last time, literacy and education had experienced a significant decline in the 800s. That decline was largely the result of the destruction caused by the Vikings, especially the destruction of the monasteries and monastic schools. There was also a bit of a brain-drain as prominent Anglo-Saxon scholars headed across the Channel to France in the wake of the Carolingian Renaissance. As a result, there were very few people left in southern Britain who could speak and write proper Latin.

Later in life, Alfred reflected on his childhood. And he noted the general decline in literacy and scholarship. Even though he was the son of a king, he still had a problem finding teachers as he was growing up. And this decline in literacy continued until the time he became king.

So after he became king, he set about trying to revive literacy in Wessex. And he did that by implementing a series of educational reforms. It appears that he was influenced by Charlemagne's earlier reforms in the Frankish kingdom. And he had several goals in mind. He had always been fascinated by reading and learning even as a child. He had taught himself how to read and write English as a teenager. So he placed a high value on literacy his whole life. And he lamented the destruction of manuscripts and the general decay of scholarship. So part of his motivation was personal.

But there was also a more practical goal. Alfred saw English as a way of uniting the Anglo-Saxons, especially uniting them against the Danes. And throughout his reign, he sought to emphasize the things which the Anglo-Saxons had in common with other, especially their language. So Alfred's reforms were part of a larger effort to unify the Anglo-Saxons under his leadership.

And there was also a third reason why Alfred encouraged a literary revival. He was a staunch Christian, and he realized that the English Church needed a literate clergy in order to secure and spread its message. This was the same concern which Charlemagne had when he became King of the Franks. And it was why Charlemagne's scholars tried to standardize Latin and reform the writing system there. And it was why he developed a series of schools to educate the clergy.

Well, Alfred did something very similar. He also established new schools including a new palace school for the sons of nobles, just as Charlemagne had done. But whereas Charlemagne sought to emphasize Latin, Alfred did something very unusual. He chose instead to focus on English.

As we know, Latin was the standard written language of Western Europe, and it was the language of scholarship and the Church. So up to this point, schools taught in Latin. But Alfred changed that in Wessex. Under his plan, the basic education and training of the clergy was to be conducted in English. The overall idea was that basic learning would be taught in the common language of the people – English. And then the top scholars could proceed to learn Latin as they advanced. So English would be the base language of education, and Latin would be the advanced language.

And this was actually a radical idea. English would no longer take a back seat to Latin in Alfred's schools. In fact, it was Latin that would take a back seat, at least in terms of the basic education program. It was simply more efficient to teach students in their own language. Why teach them Latin to read Latin manuscripts when you could just use English manuscripts? This change would open the door to smart and promising students across the kingdom regardless of their origins. And once they were educated, those students could then enter the civil service so Alfred would have access to a large talent pool.

Alfred began his reforms by rebuilding the monasteries and schools. And as I noted, he established a palace school for the education of young nobles in the kingdom.

But in order for Alfred's reforms to work, he needed to overcome one major obstacle. The basic education was to be taught in English, but all of the important manuscripts were written in Latin. So before his reforms could be fully implemented, he had to translate all of those texts into English. That meant he needed scholars who could speak both Latin and English, but as we've already seen, there was hardly anybody left in Wessex who could speak Latin. So once again, he used Charlemagne as a model. Just as Charlemagne sought out scholars in other kingdoms to come to his court in France, Alfred did the same thing. He turned to other parts of Britain, and even to France, to find scholars who could help him out.

Thanks to the biography of Alfred written by his friend Bishop Asser, we actually know who most of those scholars were. Asser himself was one of them having come from Wales. He also invited the Bishop of the church at Worcester in Mercia who was named Werfrith. He then invited the Archbishop of Canterbury named Plegmund, and a couple of priests named Aethelstan and Werwulf – and yes that was his name – Werwulf. All of those priests were Mercians. And that suggests that some level of scholarship must have been maintained in Mercia after the time of Offa.

Asser also tells us that Alfred brought in a couple of priests from Gaul named Grimbald and John, and John is actually identified as a Saxon.

Asser also reported that one of those scholars would read to Alfred whenever he had a moment of leisure. And we know that Alfred finally learned to read and write Latin around this time. So apparently those new scholars set about teaching Alfred first.

With his scholars in place, and having learned Latin himself, Alfred began to commission a series of translations from Latin to English in the year 887. And Alfred actually participated in those translations. In fact, for language historians, Alfred is best known not for his role as king, but for his contributions as a translator of Latin texts. The idea was that certain texts would be translated into English, and then copies would be sent out to the twelve bishops in his kingdom so they could be used in monasteries and church schools.

The first text to be translated was a series of Dialogues of Pope Gregory. It was a very popular book, and was basically a collection of miracle stories and healings performed by holy men in sixth-century Italy, especially the miracles of St. Benedict – author of the Benedictine monastic reforms. It is believed that Alfred chose this book first because he desired to see monasticism re-established in Wessex. The translation of the Dialogues was carried out by Werfrith, Bishop of Worcester.

But for the next translation, Alfred himself took the lead role. This was the translation of Pope Gregory's 'Pastoral Care.' Pastoral Care was basically the manual on the office and duties of a bishop, so it was a fundamental text for all clergy throughout the Middle Ages. And we are told that Alfred himself prepared the translation.

The translation itself is pretty straight-forward, staying true to the Latin original. But the most fascinating part of the translation is the Preface which Alfred composed himself. And in his own

words, he tells us why he commissioned his reforms, and why he felt it was so important to promote English. Today, leaders give speeches and write books all the time, but for a King in the so-called 'Dark Ages,' you don't normally get this type of personal insight.

The Preface of the book comes in the form of a letter from Alfred to Bishop Werfrith – the bishop who had translated that first text. And this is such an important letter in the History of English that I want to read it to you – or at least a slightly abridged version of it. One quick note before I begin. In his original wording, Alfred refers to the Anglo-Saxons as the *Anglecynn* – the Angle-kin or Angle-kindred. We've seen that term before, but Alfred was the first person to record this term in writing. So *Anglecynn* basically meant the Anglo-Saxons. So here is the slightly abbreviated Preface in Modern English:

“It very often comes to my mind what wise men there formerly were among the Anglecynn, both of sacred and secular orders; and how happy the times were then throughout the Anglecynn; and also how eager the sacred orders were about both teaching and learning, and how men from abroad came to this land in search of wisdom and teaching, and now we now must get them from abroad if we shall have them. So completely had wisdom fallen off among the Anglecynn that there were very few on this side of the Humber who could understand their rituals in English, or indeed could translate a letter from Latin into English; and I believe that there were not many beyond the Humber. There were so few of them that I indeed cannot think of a single one south of the Thames when I became king. Thanks be to God that we now have any supply of teachers. Therefore I command you to do as I believe you are willing to do, that you free yourself from worldly affairs as often as you can, so that you can establish the wisdom which God gave you. Consider what punishments befell us in this world when we neither loved wisdom at all ourselves, nor transmitted it to other men.

Then when I remembered all this, I also remembered how the churches throughout all of the Anglecynn stood filled with treasures and books before they had all been ravaged and burnt. But God's servants received very little benefit from those books, for they could not understand anything in them, because they were not written in their own language.

Then when I remembered all this, I thought of the good and wise men who were formerly throughout the Anglecynn, who had completely learned all those books. And I wondered if they would not have translated any of them into their own language.

But I immediately answered myself and said: 'They did not think that men would ever become so careless and learning so decayed: they deliberately refrained, because they believed that the more languages we knew, the greater wisdom would be in this land.'

Then I remembered how the law was first composed in the Hebrew language, and afterwards, when the Greeks learned it, they translated it all into their own language, and also all other books. And afterwards the Romans in the same way, when they had learned them, translated them all through wise interpreters into their own language.

Therefore it seems better to me, if it seems so to you, that we also translate certain books which are most needful for all men to know, into that language that we all can understand so that all the youth of the Anglecynn who have the means to apply themselves can set to learn until they know how to read English writing well. One may then instruct in Latin those whom one wishes to teach further and promote to a higher rank.

Then I remembered how knowledge of Latin had formerly decayed throughout the Anglecynn, and yet many knew how to read English writing. So I began among the other various and manifold cares of this kingdom to translate into English the book that is called in Latin ‘Pastoralis,’ and in English ‘Shepherd-book,’ sometimes word for word, and sometimes sense for sense, just as I had learned it from Plegmund my archbishop and from Asser my bishop and from Grimbold my mass-priest and from John my mass-priest. When I had learned it, I translated it into English, just as I had understood it, and as I could most meaningfully render it. And I will send one to each bishopric in my kingdom. And I command in God's name that no man remove the book from the church. It is unknown how long there may be such learned bishops. Therefore I would have them always remain in place, unless the bishop wishes to have the book with him, or it is loaned out somewhere, or someone is copying it.”

And there you have it – the goal of Alfred’s translations in his own words. He wanted to make sure that the people actually read and understood all of those clerical books in those libraries. If they were just sitting on the shelves, they weren’t serving their intended purposes. What good was a book if nobody could read it? So it was essential to translate those books into the language which people actually spoke and understood.

And notice the subtle theme of Alfred’s letter. He doesn’t refer to the people as West Saxons, or Mericians, or Northumbrians. He refers to them simply as the *Anglecynn* without distinction. And more importantly for our purposes, notice what he calls their respective languages or dialects. He calls it *English*. And that term is also used in other translations commissioned by Alfred.

The term *English* is first documented in the earlier treaty between Alfred and the Danish leader Guthrum which I mentioned in the last episode. That treaty secured Wessex and formalized the Danelaw. It referred to the ‘Engliscne and Deniscne’ – the English and the Danish. But in that case, the term *English* was referring to the people in the same way that we might refer to the ‘English’ today. It wasn’t used as a term for their language.

But now, within Alfred’s translations, we see the term actually being used to refer to the language itself. His translations, including the Preface to Pastoral Care, are the oldest surviving documents which use the term *English* in this manner. So again, Alfred speaks of a common Anglo-Saxon people – the *Anglecynn* – who spoke a common language – *English*. He never once refers to them by tribe or kingdom. And this is an important point which I’ll return to a little later in this episode. But for now, let’s take a quick look at Alfred’s other translations.

The next two works which were translated under Alfred's direction were history books. One was Bede's 'Ecclesiastical History of the English People,' and the other was a history of the world sometimes called 'Universal History' by a Spanish priest and historian named Orosius.

We've discussed Bede's 'History of England' before, but this is the first time that it was rendered in English. And thanks to that translation, we have Bede's 'History' today in Old English, as well as the original Latin. The translation of Bede's 'History' also uses the term *English* to refer to the language of the people. In one passage, the translation refers to a town or monastery "nemned on Englisc Cneoferisburh" – 'named in English Neoferisburgh.' So again, we see the term *English* being as the name of the language.

While the translation of Bede's history remained very true to the original Latin, the translators took a great deal more liberty with the other book – 'Universal History.' This was a well-established history book by the time of Alfred, and it was in wide-spread use on the continent. The book had been written by Orosius to refute the view that the collapse of the Roman Empire had been caused by the abandonment of the pagan gods in favor of Christ. Orosius attempted to show that all great Empires rise and fall, and it had nothing to do with the arrival of Christianity. But Alfred's translation – or the one he commissioned – was a significant re-write. It left out some things and put in a lot of new passages. Since Orosius was from the southern part of Europe, he had little knowledge of the Scandinavian people. So Alfred added his own reflections and views of the people of Scandinavia and the Baltic regions. This also partially reflects his interest in – some would say 'obsession with' – the Vikings. The result was basically a brand-new work under an old title.

And in an interesting little side note, this English translation contains the oldest written use of the Old English word *smart* which seems appropriate given that we were discussing educational reforms. But the use of the word *smart* here was quite different from the way we usually use it today. Today we think of *smart* as an adjective meaning intelligent or wise, but it was originally used as a verb meaning 'to cause sharp or intense pain.' And we still use that original sense sometimes. If you hurt yourself, you might say, "Ouch that smarts." Well, that was the original meaning of the word as used here around the year 893. From there, in late Old English, it became an adjective meaning 'painful' as in "I have a smart injury." In Middle English, it was applied to the use of words, especially in a debate or an argument. So it referred to the use of words in a sharp or clever manner as in 'biting wit' or 'cutting words.' By the early Modern English period, it was being used to refer to someone who spoke, or dressed or behaved in a clever manner.

And thus, we got the modern sense of the word *smart* as intelligent or clever. By the way, if that evolution seems a little strange, think about the word *sharp*. It experienced a very similar evolution. It also originally referred to something that was pointed or could cut physically like a 'sharp stick.' But it also evolved within Old English to refer to someone who was clever or quick-minded. So we might refer to an intelligent person as being 'sharp as a tack' or having a 'sharp mind.' And *smart* and *sharp* also acquired similar meanings in terms of dress. So today, we might refer to someone who dresses 'smartly' or we might refer to a 'sharp-dressed man.' So those words have kind-of parallel histories. But whereas *smart* has lost much of its original

meaning, *sharp* has also retained its original meaning as something pointed or having a cutting edge.

So turning back to Alfred's translations, the fifth and most ambitious translation was 'Consolation of Philosophy' by Boethius. This particular text was one of the most famous and most popular philosophical works of the Middle Ages. Boethius had sought to reconcile Plato and Aristotle, and he sought to prove that their philosophy was consistent with Christianity.

'Consolation of Philosophy' has been translated into English several times over the centuries. Later translations were prepared by Geoffrey Chaucer, and even by Queen Elizabeth I. But the first English translation was prepared by Alfred. This was another translation which has been attributed to Alfred himself.

The final translated work was Saint Augustine of Hippo's 'Soliloquies,' together with some other accompanying texts.

At the end of it all, it meant that English now had a core group of texts for training future clergy in Britain. And we have to keep in mind that Alfred commissioned his educational reforms, rebuilt monasteries, learned Latin, and personally translated works into English, while at the same time he fought and defeated the Vikings, developed a system of shires and burhs, reorganized the military, and developed the first English navy. All of this from a man who lived to barely 50 years of age. So you can see why he is known today as 'Alfred the Great.'

Alfred was the only European king of the Early Middle Ages known to have written books' And he was the only English king to do so until Henry VIII.

Before we move on from Alfred's translations, I want to make a couple of notes about the language used in those translations. Not surprisingly, the translations were written in the standard dialect of Wessex, which was distinct from the dialects spoken in the Anglian kingdoms north of the Thames. And this is going to become a very important point over time. In the years after Alfred's death, his descendants were able to unify the various Anglo-Saxons kingdoms under Wessex rule. And the West Saxon dialect of Wessex continued to be standard written dialect. That means that most of the surviving Old English texts were written in the West Saxon dialect – what is sometimes called the Late West Saxon dialect. And as we'll see in future episodes, that dialect didn't necessarily reflect the way people spoke in other parts of England, especially in the regions conquered by the Danes. So there was a bit of a disconnect between the written language and the spoken language in other parts of the island.

Another important aspect of Alfred's translations is the explosion of Anglo-Saxon writing which occurred in the following century and a half. Not only were lots of new texts appearing in English, but most of those texts were written in prose – the regular speech of the Anglo-Saxons. And there was really no tradition of writing in English prose. So these were not only new works in English, but they also represented a new writing style as well.

With all of those new texts, we also see the first appearance of a lot of English words. It's not that the words themselves were new. They were probably quite old. But this is the first time we see a lot of these words in writing.

The list of those words written down for the first time is too long for this episode. But there are a few which I wanted to mention given the overall theme of this episode. I noted earlier that words like *English* and *smart* appear for the first time. In the last episode, I mentioned words like *fast* and *quick* which had very different meanings in Old English. Well, Alfred's translations contain the oldest known uses of those terms in writing as well.

As you may recall, *quick* meant alive or animated in Old English. And a few podcast listeners gave me some more examples of *quick* being used in its original sense. Candia mentioned *quicksilver* which was a word for mercury because mercury is a liquid at room temperature. So it is a silver material that moves around.

And Susan mentioned 'the quick and the dead' which was a phrase which meant 'the living and the dead.' And I mention the 'quick and the dead' because the first documented use of that phrase was in Alfred's translation of 'Pastoral Care.' He uses the phrase "cwicum and deadum," the original version of 'quick and dead.'

I also discussed the Old English word *iland* which later mixed with *isle* and became *island*. Well, again, the first recorded use of *iland* in writing was in Alfred's translation of 'Consolation of Philosophy.'

I also noted that Alfred's translations gave us the first use of the word *English* as a term for the language. Well, they also gave us the word *England* for the region, even though it would not become an accepted term for the political entity for another century. In the translation of Bede's 'History of the English Church,' the term used is '*Engla Lande*' – land of the Angles. And the use of that term became much more widespread as the Wessex kingdom expanded over time to re-claim the Anglo-Saxon regions from the Danes.

Words like *behoove* and *methinks* also appear for the first time in Alfred's translation.

Alfred is known as 'Alfred the Great,' so appropriately, the word *great* appears for the first time in his translation of 'Consolation of Philosophy.' He uses the phrase "great beam on wuda" – 'great beam on wood' – but can be translated as 'a great tree in the woods.' *Beam* originally meant 'tree' in Old English. And as this passage indicates, *great* had an original sense of 'large,' which still exists in some uses today. Over time, the meaning evolved to mean 'very good or excellent.'

Alfred's translations also give us the first documented uses of the word *teach*. In fact, almost every translation uses the word *teach*.

Again these are just a few examples of the hundreds of words which appear for the first time in written form in those translations. But there is one more word which I want to make note of

before we move on. The translation of Bede's History contains the first known use of the word *annesse* – 'one-ness' – the Old English word for unity or togetherness. That translation also contains the first documented use of the word *one* as a verb to mean 'the process of uniting or joining together.'

And these uses of the word *an* – or *one* – are very important, because one of the underlying themes of this episode, and one of the underlying goals of Alfred's reforms, was the unification of the Anglo-Saxon peoples.

As we've seen, Alfred wanted to promote the Church, and he wanted to promote education, and those two goals were fundamentally linked together during this period of history. But Alfred also understood that the Anglo-Saxons had been vulnerable to Viking attacks over the past century because they had been divided. So Alfred sought to unify the Anglo-Saxons under Wessex leadership, and a common shared enemy made that process more acceptable to the other Anglo-Saxon peoples.

As we saw earlier, this goal is reflected in the fact that Alfred used collective terms like *Anglecynn* instead of regional terms like *West Saxon*, *Mercian* or *Northumbrian*. He emphasized their common culture, and especially their common language. He focused on their shared sense of 'Englishness.'

Alfred's goal may have been unity and unification, but he didn't use those terms because *unity* is a Latin word which didn't enter English until after the Normans arrived. Instead, a common Old English way of expressing unity was that word which I mentioned earlier from the translation of Bede's 'History.' That word was *annesse* – literally 'one ness.' In Old English, *one* was *an* – spelled 'A-N.' So 'being together' or 'unified' was 'oneness.' And as we saw, *an* could even be used as a verb to mean 'the process of joining together.'

At some point in the fourteenth century in the south and west of England, the word acquired a 'w' sound at the beginning. It isn't entirely clear why that happened, but the word for the number went from *an* to *wan* – and then later to *one*. That pronunciation spread throughout England and became the standard pronunciation of the number by the time of Modern English. But interestingly, this sound and pronunciation change was limited to the number itself. The related adverb was *anlic* – literally 'one-like.' Over time, *anlic* (/an-leech/) became /an-lee/, and then *only* – O-N-L-Y. But note that *only* didn't incorporate that 'w' sound at the beginning.

An is not only the original version of our modern word *one*, it is also the origin of our modern indefinite articles 'a' and 'an' – as in "I see a horse" or "I want an apple."

But the Anglo-Saxons didn't actually use articles as a general rule. So they wouldn't say "I see a horse." They would say "I see horse." And depending on the inflection which they chose to use, they might even say, "I horse see." But it was simply 'horse,' not 'a horse.' The fact that it was one horse was just implied.

But they did sometimes distinguish number. If they wanted to indicate that it was more than one horse, they might refer to ‘some horses’ or ‘many horses’ or ‘a specific number of horses.’ And if they needed to emphasize that it was just one horse, as opposed to many, they would just refer to ‘one horse.’ But outside of that context, they didn’t generally use the word *an* as an article because ‘oneness’ was just implied.

But during the period after the Normans arrived in 1066, this began to change. For some reason, it was no longer just assumed that a basic noun was singular. You had to make it clear that it was in fact singular. So I couldn’t just say “I see horse” anymore. Now I had to qualify it. So I had to say something akin to “I see an horse” – ‘I see one horse.’ And this just became a standard way of identifying a singular noun.

By the time of Geoffrey Chaucer in the 1300s, the number *one* – or *an* – was well-entrenched as an indefinite article before a singular noun. And within that same time period, *an* was shortened to simply ‘*a*’ when it appeared before a consonant. So the modern ‘*a*’ before a consonant and ‘*an*’ before a vowel was basically in place by the time of Chaucer. All of that development occurred very quickly as Old English evolved into Middle English. I’m actually going to discuss changes in grammar in more detail in future episodes, but for now, it is just important to know that our modern ‘*a*’ and ‘*an*’ developed out of the Old English number *one*.

So the Anglo-Saxons spoke of *oneness*, but the Normans brought *unity* and *unification* from Latin. And they brought the prefix ‘*uni-*’ as in *unicycle* and *unicorn*. All of those words derive from the Latin word *unum* meaning ‘one.’ And as you might have guessed by now, Old English *one* – or ‘*an*’ – and Latin *unum* are cognate. The each derive from the same Indo-European word for ‘one’ which was something like **oi-no*. So that means that words like *unity*, *unite*, *union*, *unify* and *unification* are all cognate with the English word *one*.

So in Modern English, we can speak of English *oneness* or Latin *unity*, but we might also speak of ‘joining together.’ Well the phrase ‘join together’ is another blend of Latin and English. *Join* is Latin, and *together* is derived from Old English.

Together is a Germanic word which comes from the same root as the word *gather* meaning ‘to collect or assemble.’ In Old English, *together* was typically rendered as two separate words – *to* plus *gædere*. It had a literal sense of ‘to gather’ – to meet or assemble in one place. But by Middle English, it was beginning to be written as a single word, and the meaning had evolved from a verb to an adverb. It now meant ‘in one unified group.’ So *together* and *gather* are cognate. And if you say ‘gather together,’ you’re really being a little bit redundant.

But Modern English has one other word which derives from the same root as *together* and *gather*, in fact it’s a very common word. It’s the word *good*. I noted earlier that the first documented use of the word *great* was in Alfred’s translations, but *great* is actually unrelated to *good* – at least in terms of etymology.

The connection between *good*, *gather* and *together* is ultimately based on the original Indo-European root word. The word meant ‘to unite or join together.’ If you joined together with other

persons, it usually meant that there was companionship and revelry and a generally good time. By the time of Old English, it had produced the word *god*. But that word simply referred to desirable qualities, the type of qualities that you want to find in people you associate with. So it was similar to the way we use the term today to mean a ‘good buddy’ or a ‘good neighbor.’

Over time, it developed a sense of something positive, virtuous or desirable as in a ‘good deed’ or a ‘good Samaritan’ or a ‘good job.’

And one other quick note about *good*. Today, we use the word *good* to express approval of something, but notice what happens when we try to compare things. You might think a bronze metal is *good*, but a silver metal is *better*, and a gold metal is *best*. ‘*Good-better-best*.’ And that seems a little odd. I mean, we have ‘*big-bigger-biggest*.’ ‘*Smart-smarter-smartest*.’ But it’s not ‘*good-gooder-goodest*.’ So what’s going on there? Well, the answer lies in this history.

Good in the modern sense of the word developed within Old English from a Germanic word which meant ‘belonging together.’ So the modern sense of the word didn’t really exist in earlier Proto-Germanic language.

Back then, on the continent, if you wanted to express the idea of something good, you might use the word *bat* which meant ‘good.’ And the comparing how good two things were, you might say that one was *batizon* which eventually became the word *better*. And if you wanted to express the idea that something was the top or superior thing, you might say that it was *batistaz*, which became the word *best*. So it was ‘*bat-batizon-batistaz*.’ And theoretically, it should have evolved into ‘*bat-better-best*,’ but *bat* disappeared as the word *good* was gradually acquiring the same meaning. So for some reason, the Anglo-Saxons dropped *bat* and replaced it with *good*. And since *good* didn’t have established comparative or superlative form, they just used the traditional *better* and *best*. And that left us with ‘*good-better-best*.’

So what happened to *bat*? Did it just disappear? Well, not exactly. One version of the word survived as *bot* in Old English – spelled B-O-T. And we actually came across that word before in the phrase ‘to make bot’ meaning to make amends or reparations, in other words ‘to make good.’ And it still exists in the phrase ‘to boot,’ as in “I bought a tank of gas and got a free car wash to boot.” It basically means ‘to the good,’ as in ‘an advantage or an improvement,’ so it has that original Germanic sense of something ‘good or positive.’ So it still lingers in the background of English, but the word *good* has largely taken its place. And for purposes of this episode, the important thing to know about the word *good* is that it is developed from a word which originally meant to ‘join together.’ And it’s cognate with the words *gather* and *together*.

So we have looked at *oneness*, *unity*, and *together*. That leaves us with the Latin word *join*. And that word is fascinating because it has lots of related words in Modern English. So let’s go back to the original Indo-Europeans. In addition to the other words which we’ve seen, they had this particular word which meant to ‘join together’ – which was *jugom*.

That word passed into Latin and retained much of that same original pronunciation. Within Latin, that word evolved into the word *iungere* (/yoon-geh-reh/), which still meant ‘to join

together or unite.’ But as we know, that ‘Y’ sound became a ‘J’ sound over time in Late Latin and early French. And just as *Iupiter* (/yoo-piter/) and *Iulius* (/yoo-lius/) became *Jupiter* and *Julius*, the same thing happened with *iungere* (/yoon-geh-reh/) which became /joon-geh-reh, and later via French, gave us the word *join*.

Latin (/joon-geh-reh/) also gave us *junction* and *junction* which is an intersection. Closely related to the word *join* is the word *joint* which was originally a part of the body where two bones met. It later evolved into an adjective meaning ‘unified’ as in a joint venture. Within Spanish, that initial consonant evolved into an ‘H’ sound, and it produced the Spanish word *junta* meaning a group of people joined together for a common purpose.

In Latin, the prefix *con-* meant ‘with.’ And when that prefix was added to the word *iugum* (/joo-gum/), it gave us the words *conjugal* and *conjugate*. The same construction was later applied to the word *join* to produce the word *conjoin* as in ‘conjoined twins.’

The Latin root also produced the Latin word *juxta* meaning ‘next to.’ And that resulted in the words *juxtapose* and *juxtaposition* meaning ‘the process of placing one thing in a position next to something else.’ Via French, *juxta* became *jouster*. *Jouster* meant ‘two things coming together.’ And *jouster* gave us the word *joust* as in two knights coming together on horseback with lances.

Remember that the original Indo-European word was *iugom*. And that word also passed into Greek. Within Greek, it became *zygon*. That shift to the ‘Z’ sound at the beginning is the same sound shift that produced *Zeus* in Greek where we have *Iupiter* (/yoo-piter/) and *Jupiter* in Latin. And Greek *zygon* ultimately gave us the word *zygote* meaning ‘a cell formed from the union of two reproductive cells.’

That same Indo-European word passed through Sanskrit as well. Indo-European *iugom* produced Sanskrit *yoga*. It had the sense of ‘union with the divine.’ And of course, we still have the word *yoga* in English today.

And that Indo-European word *iugom* also passed into the Germanic languages. We know from Grimm’s Law that the ‘G’ sound became a ‘K’ sound in the Germanic languages. So *iugom* produced *yoke* in Old English. A *yoke* was the piece of equipment which linked two oxen or other animals together when pulling a wagon or plow. The Romans had the same device and they used the same construction, presumably derived from the original Indo-Europeans. In Latin, the device was called a *iugum*, and since the *iugum* or *yoke* was attached around the neck of animals, that word came to be associated with the neck region.

A collar bone was called a *iugulum* in Latin because it was shaped like a small yoke. And when that ‘Y’ sound became a ‘J’ sound, it was pronounced /joo-goo-lum/. The word was eventually applied to the entire area around the collar-bone, specifically the throat. And that produced the word *jugular*.

You might also remember from an earlier episode about the early Romans that defeated soldiers were forced to march under a yoke or *iugum* as a symbol of defeat. They were therefore *sub iugum* or ‘under the yoke.’ And *sub iugum* eventually became *subjugate*.

So all of that means that words like *join*, *junta*, *conjugal*, *conjugate*, *juxtapose*, *joust*, *zygote*, *yoga*, *yoke*, *jugular* and *subjugate* are all cognate. They all have an original sense of joining together.

So that’s the history of words like *oneness*, *unite*, *join* and *together*. And as we’ve seen, this was one of Alfred’s overall goals – to unite the Anglo-Saxons under Wessex leadership. This is reflected in his educational reforms, but it is also indicated by certain legal reforms which he instituted. So let’s take a closer look at his legal reforms.

After commissioning the translation of Latin texts into English, he turned his attention to the law. As I noted in the last episode, Anglo-Saxon law had traditionally been dispensed every month in the local hundred courts. The hundreds were administrative units, and each hundred consisted of 100 hides. Thus the name the *hundreds*. Each hundred had a tribal court for settling local disputes. And those laws were based on ancient custom.

But that system had started to break down over the prior century in the wake of the Viking invasions. Just as the Church relied upon an educated clergy, the courts relied upon educated judges who knew the traditional Germanic laws and customs for settling disputes. And just as the Church was having a problem finding an educated clergy, many of the hundred courts lacked educated and knowledgeable judges. Much of that ancient legal tradition was being lost. So Alfred wanted to fill in those gaps in knowledge. And he did that by issuing a brand new legal code for Wessex.

This legal code is the legal code which I mentioned several episodes back when I was discussing witchcraft in Anglo-Saxon culture. I noted back then that Alfred’s legal code was the first legal code to specifically prohibit witchcraft, but it did much more than that. Whereas the earlier codes described a man’s duty to the king, Alfred’s laws indicate a more complex society where a man owed duties to his noble or lord. Ultimately, the laws were not intended to replace the traditional Anglo-Saxon rules. They were simply intended to clarify or modify those rules. So where there was a question about the proper rule, or where an old rule needed to be updated, the Code tried to solve those problems. So it’s not a comprehensive legal code of the type which we have today.

In order for that new legal code to have any practical effect, it was important for judges to learn those new laws. So they were instructed to learn the code or resign. But as we know, literacy was a problem.

Bishop Asser, who wrote Alfred’s biography, reported that most of the judges couldn’t read the code. So each judge had to find someone who could read it, and that person had to read the laws out loud to the judge by day and night so he could memorize them. Alfred even reviewed many of the local judgments. He would sometimes summon the local judge to his court to question the

judge, and ask how he came to his verdict or judgment. He wanted to make sure it wasn't a case of ignorance of the law, bad faith or bribery.

So you may be wondering what all of this has to do with English or the unification of the Anglo-Saxons. Well, the answer lies in the way Alfred formulated those laws. He did something very unusual. There was an older Wessex legal code issued by the Wessex king Ine in the late 600s about two centuries earlier. But rather than simply updating Ine's code of Wessex, Alfred actually sought to combine all of the pre-existing Anglo-Saxon codes into one combined, amalgamated code.

He looked to Aethelbert's Laws of Kent – the oldest document written in English. And he looked at Offa's legal code of Mercia which unfortunately has been lost. And he looked at Ine's prior code of Wessex. And he tried to produce a complete Anglo-Saxon legal code for everybody. And once again, Alfred explained what he was up to in his own words. He wrote a prologue to the legal code. And here is part of that prologue in Modern English:

“Then I, King Ælfred, gathered the laws together and ordered to be written many of the ones that our forefathers observed - those that pleased me; and many of the ones that did not please me I rejected with the advice of my councillors, and commanded them to be observed in a different way. For I dared not presume to set down in writing at all many of my own, since it was unknown to me what would please those who should come after us. But I collected herein those which I found either in the days of Ine, my kinsman, or of Offa, king of the Mercians, or of Ælthelberht (who first among the English people received baptism). Among those laws, I collected those which seemed to me most just, and omitted the others.”

So Alfred tells us that he sat with his councillors – or witan – and they looked over the various legal codes of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms which had been issued in the past, and they agreed which laws should be observed. This prologue not only gives us an insight into Alfred's mental process, but it is in fact the first description of English law-making.

But the key is the fact that he looked to the legal codes in the other kingdoms. West Saxons didn't typically look to Kent or Mercia for laws. They didn't need to. They had their own laws issued by Ine. So it seems very clear that Alfred was trying to appeal to a broader sense of 'Englishness.' Unlike earlier laws, these new laws were to be applied to all lands under English rule.

And in fact, Alfred's Code was eventually adopted by the Danish leader Guthrum. Remember the Danes weren't literate yet. So Guthrum permitted the laws to extend to the Anglo-Saxons within the Danelaw as well. And once again, we see another example of Alfred's efforts to unite the Anglo-Saxons – in this case English laws for the English people written in the English language.

But Alfred did one more thing during his reign which shows his desire to unite his people and also his desire to secure his legacy. And this last accomplishment is very important to historians.

During in his reign, Alfred directed the creation of an annual chronicle to record the history of the Anglo-Saxon people. This was the beginning of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – the most important historical source of the late Anglo-Saxon period. And once again, this Chronicle was to be written in English – specifically the Wessex dialect which was to become the standard written dialect of English.

Even though the Chronicle was commissioned in the late 800s, it attempted to trace the history of Britain back to the first year AD or Common Era. It was designed as an annual chronicle, so it has entries year by year in chronological order. In order to compile the Chronicle, the authors relied upon earlier histories, annals, royal genealogies, and whatever other historical records they could find. Those sources were condensed and edited together.

Of course, the authors had limited knowledge of the Roman period of Britain, so the early entries are very sparse. And it appears that the authors relied heavily upon Bede's history for much of the early Anglo-Saxon period. The Chronicle then fills in a lot of missing pieces between the time of Bede and the time of Alfred. And after the time of Alfred, the Chronicle was maintained on an annual basis until the latter part of the twelfth century.

After the initial Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was compiled, copies of it were distributed to every important church in England. There are seven surviving copies of the Chronicle. All seven are basically identical through the year 891. Thereafter, the manuscript copies start to diverge. That suggests that the original manuscript was compiled around the year 891 in a standard version. Then the standard copy was sent out across England and regional chroniclers started to maintain local versions of the chronicle beyond that date. So there isn't really one Anglo-Saxon Chronicle today. There are actually several different regional variations.

Even though the history of Wessex is laid out in some detail, the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle was not designed as a history of Wessex or the West Saxons. It was actually a history of all of the Anglo-Saxons. It was written and maintained in English. And in fact, it was the first history of a western people written in a language other than Greek or Latin. Even Bede had written his history in Latin. And remember from earlier that Alfred also commissioned the translation of Bede's 'History' into English, and we have the translation of that 'Universal History' written on the continent. These histories were very important to the following generations of Anglo-Saxons.

And those histories and those other translations gave English a large body of prose literature in late 800s and early 900s. I mentioned this earlier, but I want to mention it again. The earliest literature of most ancient peoples tends to be verse or poetry for reasons which I have explained before. Poetry was essential to the oral tradition, and outside of a few legal codes, almost every piece of English literature which we have looked at up to this point has been poetry – Beowulf, Widsith, Caedmon's Hymn, The Dream of the Rood, and Cynewulf's poems. But thanks to Alfred, Old English now developed an extensive amount of prose literature – works written in the normal language of the people. And in fact, many scholars consider Alfred to be the founder of English prose.

As the ninth century came to a close, so did Alfred's reign as King of Wessex. He died in the year 899. By all accounts, his reign had been very successful on so many different levels. He had defended the Kingdom of Wessex from Viking conquest. And he had preserved the Anglo-Saxon culture in the process. And that meant that he had also preserved the language of the Anglo-Saxons, but he did so much more than that.

He was an advocate and promoter of the language. He gave English a place which no local vernacular had ever had in Western Europe. After Alfred, English rivaled Latin for supremacy in what would soon become known as England. And his literary and educational reforms ushered in a new era of writing in English.

I don't usually quote other historians in the podcast, but I want to conclude our look at Alfred with a quote from Michael Wood's book, 'In Search of the Dark Ages.' With respect to Alfred, he wrote: "To embark on such a systematic programme of instruction at such a time was the act of a remarkable man, practical, resolute, and ruthless: he took on himself not only the strain of defense but also concern for the future lives of his subjects. That is why, alone among English kings, he is 'the Great', and why he has rightly never lost the esteem of the English-speaking world."

But despite Alfred's 'greatness,' he never ruled more than half of the Anglo-Saxons. So even though his efforts at unification laid the groundwork for what would become a unified kingdom, he was never a King of all of England. Those Danes in the north and the east ensured that Alfred's authority was limited to Wessex and western Mercia. And as Alfred was busy reforming Anglo-Saxon culture in the south and west, the Danes were bringing about their own changes in the Danelaw. Specifically, their Norse language was mixing with native English language. And English was starting to undergo some radical changes. And those changes represent the very first steps from Old English to a language which we can actually recognize today.

So next time, we'll turn our attention to the north and east – to the Danelaw. And we'll start to explore the Norse impact on English.

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