

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPTS**

**EPISODE 50:  
A UNIFIED FAMILY OF ENGLISH SPEAKERS**

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## **EPISODE 50: A UNIFIED FAMILY OF ENGLISH SPEAKERS**

Welcome to the History of English Podcast – a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 50: A Unified Family of English Speakers. In this episode, we’re going to look at how the Anglo-Saxons conquered the Danes and reclaimed the Danelaw. In the process, the traditional barrier between the Danelaw and the Anglo-Saxons began to break down. And all of the English-speaking people of Britain finally became unified under a single monarch. This was the beginning of the nation-state of England. And it was also the beginning of the process by which the Norse language of the Danes began to spread around the island and began to mix with Old English beyond the Danelaw.

This process was also a family affair. As the unified nation of England began to emerge in the tenth century, it did so thanks to the children and grandchildren of Alfred. Those children and grandchildren worked together to defeat the Danes and establish Wessex rule over the newly unified kingdom. They also married many of the leading rulers of Western Europe. Within a couple of generations after Alfred’s death, it was hard to find a territory in England, France or Germany that didn’t have some type of family connection to Alfred. So one of the underlying themes of this episode is family and family relationships.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the Beowulf audiobook is available through iTunes, Amazon.com and the website – [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And I haven’t mentioned it lately, but if you listen to the podcast through iTunes, let me encourage you to include a few comments or quick review there. Those reviews and ratings determine how the podcast is ranked. So the more feedback the podcast receives, the more listeners will discover the podcast.

Also, this is episode 50, so I thought it might be a good time to reveal a little inside information. When I first conceived this podcast, I had a rough idea of the overall scope of the series. And my basic idea was to cover to the entire history of English in 100 episodes with about 25 episodes dedicated to each of the four stages of English – pre-English, Old English, Middle English and Modern English. Well, as it turns out, I’ve actually adhered pretty closely to that schedule. So here at Episode 50, it means we are approximately half way through the series – which might be good news or bad news. But it also means, we will soon transition to Middle English. So as we move forward over the next few episodes, I am going to continue to bring the three pieces of Middle English together. We continue to focus on Old English, Old Norse and Old French. And we’ll continue to look at events in Britain as well as France. And this time, we’ll finally get to the unified nation of England. So let’s begin this time by picking up where we left off last time.

In the last episode, we looked at the decade immediately following the death of Alfred the Great. It was a period of relative peace between the Danes and the Anglo-Saxons. Within the Danelaw itself, the two groups lived side-by-side, and the evidence suggests that they were starting to trade with each other, marry each other, and generally blend together. The linguistic evidence also suggests that the English language spoken within the Danelaw was beginning to undergo significant changes.

But outside of the Danelaw, the Anglo-Saxons continued to speak the Old English of their ancestors. Wessex and Western Mercia were ruled by Alfred's children. His son Edward ruled Wessex. And his daughter Aethelflaed had assumed the leadership of Mercia. You might remember from the last episode that her husband Aethelred had been the ruler of Mercia, but when he died, the leadership passed to her. And this was very unusual in Anglo-Saxon society. Women didn't typically serve as heads of state. Perhaps she benefitted from the fact that she was the daughter of the highly-regarded Alfred. Whatever the circumstances were, the local nobles rallied around and supported her. And she proved to be a very effective and very powerful leader. And she wasn't just a political leader. She was also a military leader. She became known to history as the 'Lady of the Mercians.' And she was an essential ally to her brother Edward the King of Wessex. Together, the two siblings coordinated the attacks which led to the defeat of the Danes in the southern and central Danelaw.

Now as I noted, one of the underlying themes of this episode is family and family relationships. And since we are talking about siblings, let's take a quick look at our words for siblings. First, we've seen the word *sibling* before. A *sibb* was a Germanic word for the extended family unit. And a descendant of the family unit was a *sibling*. Again we see that *-ing* ending which was a standard way of indicating that someone or something was from a particular place or family. So *sibling* is a native Old English word. And traditionally, it just meant a relative – any descendant of the *sibb*. So it could refer to a niece or nephew or cousin. And this was actually a bit of a surprise to me, but according to my research, the term wasn't restricted to brothers and sisters until the early 1900s.

Speaking of brothers and sisters, those are also very old words. The word *brother* is also an Old English word with Germanic and Indo-European roots. We've seen before that the Indo-European 'B' sound shifted to an 'F' sound in a lot of Latin words. And in the case of the original Indo-European word for '*brother*,' it ultimately produced the Latin-derived words *fraternal*, *fraternity* and *fraternize*. But *brother* is the native English word.

But what about *sister*? Well, it was a word which existed in both Old English and Old Norse. But the modern word *sister* actually resembles the Norse word more than the English word. The English word was *sweostor*, and the Norse word was *systir*. Since the modern word *sister* more closely resembles the Norse word, a lot of linguists consider *sister* to be a borrowing from the Vikings. And if that's true, then we once again see a Norse word borrowed into the core vocabulary of English. But again, both versions of the word *sister* were so similar that it's difficult to say that it came exclusively from either English or Norse.

So let's turn our attention back to the brother and sister pair who ruled Anglo-Saxon Britain in the early tenth century. With respect to the two siblings – Edward and Aethelflaed – there is another interesting family connection. Edward's oldest son was named Aethelstan, and he is going to become very important in the later part of this episode. In fact, he will become the first King of the unified English nation, but the circumstances surrounding his birth are a little uncertain.

His mother may or may not have been married to his father Edward. He was actually born while his grandfather Alfred was still alive, so his father Edward wasn't the king yet. The surviving sources indicate that Edward did get married – or remarried – at a later date. And in fact, he was later married twice. And both of Edward's later wives were designated as 'Queen.' But Aethelstan's mother never had that designation. And more importantly, when Edward got married to one of his later queens, young Aethelstan was sent packing. It appears that Aethelstan's step-mother wasn't interested in having him around. So he was sent to live with his father's sister Aethelflaed in Mercia. And he was raised there by his aunt. So even though he was born into the West Saxon noble family, he was actually brought up in Mercia. His education was Mercian. In fact, he is believed to be the first English king who was literate from childhood. It also meant that all of his contacts and associates were Mercian.

Now you may be saying 'So what?' But this was actually an important development in the unification of England. His father and his aunt ruled as distinct leaders. They may have been siblings, but they each ruled separately. But later in our story, after both his father and his aunt had died, his Wessex lineage and Mercian upbringing enabled him to be recognized as king by both kingdoms. So the fact that his step-mother sent him packing as a child had major consequences down the road. That step-mother's decision inadvertently played a big role in the ultimate unification of England.

So what about terms like *step-mother* and *step-child*? Well, once again those are terms which go back to Old English. But the *step* in *step-mother* and *step-child* might not mean what you think it means. A lot of people think that '*step*' has to do with some degree of relationship like in a family tree. They think it refers to some way of defining the relationship between people as in a second cousin twice removed. But actually, the word *step* in this context has nothing to do with the modern word *step* as in a certain level or degree. It actually derives from a completely different word – the Old English word *steop* which meant 'the loss of a family member' or more specifically 'the loss of one's parents.' So a *step-child* was originally a child who had lost its parents, so it was an Old English term which meant an 'orphan.' *Orphan* is actually a Latin word which didn't enter English until the Normans arrived. When the orphan was taken in by new parents, those parents became the child's *step-mother* and *step-father*. So it was someone who was like a parent, but wasn't actually a biological parent. Over time, the meaning evolved to refer to a someone who becomes a parent by marriage. So it still refers to someone who is not a biological parent, but the overall sense has changed, and it has lost its association with orphanage.

So that's *step-child* and *step-parent*, but what about an *in-law*. We'll we've seen before that *law* is a Norse word from the Vikings. So the term *in-law* is actually derived from a Norse word. The term isn't actually attested in English until the early 1300s. So it first appears in the Middle English period which is actually quite common for Norse words because the West Saxon scribes in the late Old English period didn't tend to use Norse words. So Old English writing often fails to capture those words, but they're suddenly there in early Middle English when the Normans began to write down the local vernacular as it was actually being spoken.

And around the year 1300, the word *brother-in-law* appears in English writing. At the end of the 1300s, the term *son-in-law* appears in writing for the first time. And in the 1400s, the terms *mother-in-law* and *sister-in-law* are attested. It is believed that the term derived from a statement akin to ‘he is not my brother in reality, he is my brother in law’ meaning my ‘brother by marriage.’ So *in-law* was originally a prepositional phrase. Over time, it has also evolved into a noun as in ‘the in-laws are coming to town.’ Nevertheless, the term *in-law* is at least partially derived from the Vikings thanks to the word *law*. And once again, we see how basic family relationships in English were derived or influenced by the Old Norse language of the Vikings.

So let’s return to the story of Edward of Wessex and his sister Aethelflaed of Mercia. I concluded the last episode with year 911 – the year in which Normandy in France was given to the Vikings. It was also the year after an Anglo-Saxon force had soundly defeated an invading army from the northern Danelaw. That defeat had neutralized the Danes in the north. And it meant that the Danes in the southern part of the Danelaw would have to deal with Edward and his sister without any real help from the North.

With the northern Danes neutralized, Edward made his plans for the conquest of the southern Danelaw. The following year - 912 - Edward invaded the southernmost regions of the Danelaw, specifically the southern portion of East Anglia. This was the region just north of the Thames east of London. And from there he gradually pushed northward. Meanwhile, his sister Aethelflaed initially focused on the defense of Mercia to prevent the Danes from moving westward. But soon, she too began to move against the Danes. She began to move eastward from Mercia just as her brother Edward was moving northward. So the Danes had to battle the Anglo-Saxons on two different fronts.

As I’ve noted before, the Vikings often exploited the divisions among their enemies, but when their enemies were able to unite, the Vikings could be driven back. And what’s really interesting about the Anglo-Saxon efforts here is how well they were coordinated.

The two siblings worked together. And they also used many of the same strategies. Their father Alfred had developed a system of fortified burhs. And those burhs were designed as a defensive strategy to protect Wessex from invasion by the Danes. But now, his son and daughter used those burhs as offensive weapons. As they gained a small amount of territory within the Danelaw, they would build a burh there to secure the acquired land. That made it easier for the Anglo-Saxons to consolidate their position, and it prevented the Danes from being able to re-take it. They then used those burhs as a base for further excursions deeper into the Danelaw. This was a new strategy, and it was implemented by both Edward and Aethelflaed.

The two siblings were also aided by the inability of the Danes to organize an effective resistance. It had been around fifty years since the Great Danish Army had arrived in Britain. In the half century since then, most of those original Vikings had died of old age. Their children and grandchildren now occupied the Danelaw in their place. Meanwhile, new Danish settlers had arrived. And they weren’t necessarily looking to fight. They were just looking for a place to settle and raise a family. So the Danes were no longer the fierce warriors of a half century earlier.

They had become farmers and traders. They had married native Anglo-Saxons. They were more domestic – and less warlike. And that made them vulnerable to Anglo-Saxon attacks.

Another problem for the Danes is the fact that there was no centralized government in the Danelaw. As we saw last time, the Danelaw was divided into a variety of autonomous or semi-autonomous regions. So the unified Anglo-Saxons were facing the disorganized Danes. And we know that the advantage always went to the unified side.

Of course, there were still a lot of Anglo-Saxons within the Danelaw. In fact, the native Anglo-Saxons may have constituted a majority in much of the Danelaw. And the Danes may not have been able to rely upon their loyalty in the battles against their fellow Anglo-Saxons.

Another problem for the Danes was the creation of Normandy in northern France. By their nature, the Danish settlers were a migratory people. They had moved in looking for land and opportunity. So when the situation turned bad, they tended to do what they always did. They would pack their bags and head elsewhere. And now, there was a potential safe-haven right across the Channel. So it is believed that some of the Danes in the Danelaw fled to Normandy. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle actually records that one Danish leader submitted to Edward in the year 917, and then sailed off two years later to Francia together with such men as would follow him. It is presumed that they went to Normandy.

Meanwhile, Edward and Aethelflaed were engaged in a more or less constant series of campaigns against the Danes. Interestingly, when Edward conquered a new region, he would allow the Danes in that region to retain their estates, and to continue to live according to their Danish laws and customs. So the Danes didn't really have to fight for survival. All they had to do was recognize Edward as their protector and agree not to take up arms against him. And many of them did just that.

Over time, the two siblings captured a large portion of the southern and western Danelaw. As I noted last time, within the overall region of the Danelaw, there were two distinct kingdoms. In the north it was the Kingdom of York in the southernmost part of Northumbria. In the south it was the kingdom of East Anglia. In the year 917, the Danish king of East Anglia was killed in the fighting, and East Anglia fell to the Anglo-Saxons. It was a major defeat for the Danes, and organized Danish resistance began to crumble.

While the kingdom of East Anglia was under attack by the Anglo-Saxons, the Danish kingdom of York in the north was being threatened by a new group of Vikings. These new arrivals were Vikings primarily from the Viking kingdom of Dublin in Ireland. Dublin has been established as a Viking settlement in Ireland. And it appears that most of those Vikings were from Norway. And I am going to refer to them as the Norwegian Vikings, even though that is probably a bit of a generalization. Other Viking groups may have been mixed in. But those Vikings had spread into northwestern Britain, including the western portions of modern-day Scotland. And over time, they moved eastward, and now they were approaching York. So that means that we have Norwegian Vikings threatening the Danish Vikings in the north.

So the Danish leaders of York actually promised to pledge their loyalty to Æthelflæd, the Lady of the Mercians. It appears that they were trying to form an alliance with Mercia against the approaching Norwegian Vikings.

But before those overtures could be reduced to a formal alliance, Aethelflaed died in June of 918. That left her brother Edward as the primary leader of the Anglo-Saxons.

With the death of Aethelflaed, the future of Mercia was uncertain. So Edward rushed in to secure control of the Mercian kingdom. Within a few months, Edward was recognized by the Mercian nobles as the overlord of Mercia. For all practical purposes, Wessex and Mercia were now united under Edward's rule. But Edward's rule in Mercia was a little shaky. And there was no guarantee that Mercia would remain unified with Wessex when Edward died. But remember from our earlier discussion that Edward's oldest son Aethelstan had been raised in Mercia in Aethelflaed's court. And that's going to be a very important point when Edward dies.

Having defeated the Danes in East Anglia and the southern Danelaw, and now having secured the succession in Mercia, Edward now ruled all of England south of the Humber. So to put it another way, all of England except Northumbria was now under Wessex leadership.

And both Edward and the Norwegian Vikings had their sights set on the Danish kingdom of York in Northumbria. But the Norwegian Vikings got there first in 918 – the same year that Aethelflaed died. This new group of Vikings moved into York and displaced the Danish rulers there.

Unfortunately for Edward, the new Norse Viking kingdom in York prevented him from having the distinction of being called the first King of England. Northumbria remained out of his direct control. Within York, the Viking leader Raegnald became king. These new Vikings minted their own coins, and they engaged in diplomatic relations with the various Celtic kings of northern Britain, including the kings of Scotland, Cumbria and Strathclyde – all distinct kingdoms during this period. Of course, Edward's powerful kingdom of Wessex was now on the border in the south, so there were lots of groups vying for power in the north.

Edward was not content to stay south of the Humber, so he planned an invasion of York. But the new Viking kingdom there had access to a steady supply of fighters and reinforcements from Viking bases in Ireland. So any invasion of York was going to be a very risky venture.

Edward probably realized that he risked overextending himself if he invaded the northern kingdoms. He had claimed a great deal of territory, and there was always the possibility of internal revolts. In fact, just a short time later, Edward had to put down a small rebellion in Mercia. With his sister's death and the Danish threat curtailed, the Mercians were already starting to get restless with Edward's control there. Meanwhile, the leaders of the northern kingdoms knew that any war against Edward would be bloody and would come with high risk of loss.

So before a great battle could be had, a settlement was reached by the respective parties. According to the West Saxon version of the events as set forth in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, the northern kings submitted to Edward in the year 920. The nature of the submission is still a matter of some dispute. So let's look at what this entry in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle actually says. It begins by noting that Edward:

“geces þa to fæder 7 to hlaforde” – ‘was then chosen to be father and Lord.’

The entry then lists all the kings and peoples in Britain who recognized him as their father and lord. It says he was chosen by:

“Scotta cyning 7 eall Scotta þeod” – ‘the Scottish king and all the Scottish people.’

This is actually the first time in which the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle uses the term *Scotta* or *Scots* for the people who inhabited that part of the north. The Chronicle then continues to the list:

“7 Rægnald” – This was new Viking king of York. So he too recognized Edward. Reading on:

“7 Eadulfes suna” – ‘and Eadulf's son.’ That's actually a reference to the son of the Anglo-Saxon king Eadulf. The son's name was Ealdred. Now, I haven't really mentioned it before, but a small portion of Northumbria has remained under Anglo-Saxon control in the far north of Northumbria in the region known as Bernicia. This was an independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom separate from the southern kingdoms of Wessex and Mercia. And this says that the local Anglo-Saxon king there also recognized Edward). The Chronicle continues:

“7 ealle þa þe on Norþhymbrum bugeaþ ægþer ge Englisce, ge Denisce, ge Norþmen, ge oþre” – ‘and all who dwell in Northumbria – the English, the Danish, the Northmen, and the others.’ So all of Northumbria now recognized Edward as well.

Continuing on:

“7 eac Stræclédweala cyning, 7 ealle Stræclédwealas” – ‘and the king of the Strathclyde Britons and all of the people of Strathclyde.’ Now Strathclyde was an independent Celtic-speaking kingdom in the southwest portion of modern Scotland. It was later conquered by the Scots about a century later.

So if we put that entire entry together, we learn that all of various Celtic, Norse, Danish and Anglo-Saxon people in northern Britain recognized Edward of Wessex as their ‘father and lord.’ But what did that mean? The entry itself is very cryptic, and as I noted, it is the subject of much debate.

It is generally agreed that the northern peoples were not actually invaded or conquered by Edward. They just recognized his leadership and power in some manner. It may have been akin to the old-fashioned overlord or *bretwalda*. But it actually appears to have been more like a



settlement or peace-treaty in which each side chose to maintain the status quo rather than face an extended military campaign. Edward probably realized that he had secured as much territory as he could at that time. So he chose to consolidate his gains and secure his position. Northumbria and all of the other northern kingdoms recognized his power in some type of arrangement. They probably paid him tribute. But he never had direct control over those Northern regions. So a unified England would have to wait a little longer.

I mention that little bit of history about the northern kingdoms here because it will be very important in the next episode. And I also mention it because it is the first time that the various kings of northern Britain – in modern-day Scotland – recognized an Anglo-Saxon king as some type of overlord or *bretwalda*. And for later English kings who claimed a right to rule over Scotland or part of Scotland, this little bit of history provides the ultimate basis for some of those claims. And in fact, as we'll soon see, Edward's son Aethelstan extended Anglo-Saxon rule all the way into Scotland. So if you're interested in the long complicated history between England and Scotland, this is where a lot of those competing claims begin. And you can see why historians debate the exact nature of Edward's arrangement with those northern kings.

In the year 924, just four years after Edward's arrangement with the northern kings, he died. He had ruled for 25 years, almost the entire first quarter of the tenth century. During his reign, the Anglo-Saxons had conquered all of the Danelaw south of Northumbria. With respect to those lands which had fallen to Edward, it may be a little strong to say that he 'conquered' them. In actuality, the Danes who lived in those regions retained their land and their customs. Of course, they also retained their language. So life on the ground in the Danelaw changed very little. The Danes and the Anglo-Saxons continued to live side-by-side. They just recognized Edward as their leader and king.

But with the death of Edward, a new leader had to be chosen. And once again, we return to the fundamental division between Wessex and Mercia. As we saw earlier, Edward had imposed himself as king of Mercia when his sister died. Now the Mercians chose Edward's eldest son Aethelstan to be the new king of Mercia. He was the eldest son. He had military experience. And he had been raised in Mercia by his aunt Aethelflaed. So the nobles there quickly selected him as King.

But in Wessex, the succession initially went to another one of Edward's sons. The nobles there selected the eldest son from Edward's later wife – the one who had sent young Aethelstan packing as a small child. But this other son died just a few weeks after his father. So the West Saxon nobles then turned to Aethelstan who was inaugurated as king of all of Edward's lands in 925. This is important because both the West Saxons and the Mercians now recognized Aethelstan as their king. And going forward, the two kingdoms would be unified under the same monarch.

So we can see in this history that nobles generally looked to the son of a deceased king when choosing a successor. But when kings like Edward had sons from different marriages, it wasn't always clear which one was going to be chosen. So let's stop here for a minute and consider the origin of the words which we use to describe children in Modern English.

The most common words in English are *son*, *daughter* and *child*, and all are Old English words. *Son* was usually rendered as *sunu* in Old English. And *daughter* was *dohtor* in Old English. Remember that the (/x/) sound was rendered with a ‘GH’ in Middle English. And over time, that sound disappeared from English. The result was the modern word *daughter* with the ‘G-H’ spelling, but without that guttural consonant sound in the middle.

With respect to the word *child*, we’ve seen that word before. It was *cild* in Old English. For most of the Old English period, *cild* referred to a newborn or even an unborn child. So it was basically a ‘baby.’ That original sense still exists in the phrase ‘with child.’ A mother’s womb was called a *cildhama* – a ‘child’s home.’ But to describe a child who was older than a baby, the Anglo-Saxons tended to use the word *bearn*. That was the more common Germanic term for a child, and it is derived from the same root which gave us *bear* as in to ‘bear a child’ or ‘child-bearing.’ And it also gave us the word *born*.

The Anglo-Saxons also sometimes called a child a *lytling* – literally a ‘little-ling.’ And they also created the term *ofspring* which became *ofspring* – literally ‘one who springs off of someone else.’

The Anglo-Saxons also sometimes referred to children or offspring with the Old English word *brod* which became *brood*. That term was primarily applied to animals, and it originally referred to a fetus or hatchling. But it was sometimes applied to humans. And even today, when it is applied to humans, it is usually done in a negative or contemptuous manner.

That word *brood* came from an Indo-European root word which meant to warm or heat something. So it was applied to the process of incubation, so a hen sitting on her eggs. And that’s how it became associated with hatchlings and then offspring in general. And as you might have guessed, *brood* is cognate with the word *breed* which is another variation of that same root word. To *breed* is to produce offspring. Of course someone who sits around sulking in a sour mood is sometimes described as *brooding*. The term originally referred to a chicken sitting on her eggs, but was later used to describe someone sitting around in a bad mood. If you’ve even been on a chicken farm, you know that hens who are incubating their eggs can be moody and protective of the eggs. So that sense of an irritable hen sitting on her eggs was applied to people.

Of course another type of warming or heating is the process of cooking. And that same root word produced the words *brew* and *broth*. And I mentioned way back in an earlier episode that some linguists believe that this word which produced *brew* and *broth* is also the ultimate origin of the word *bride*. They believe that *bride* originally meant a ‘brewer,’ and if that etymology is correct, it means that *bride* and *brood* are both cognate. And I should note that the process of heating in an oven produced the English word *bread*. And the Latin version of that root word produced the French word *braise*. So *braise*, *brew*, *broth* and *bread* are all cognate with *brood* and *breed* because all of those words had to do with warming or incubating something.

So those were the common Old English or Anglo-Saxon words for children. But the Vikings brought a couple of additional terms. The Vikings called a young goat a *kið*. That word passed into English, probably within the Danelaw. Of course, *kið* became *kid* in English. And by the

late 1500s, it was being used as a slang word for a ‘child.’ The use became so widespread that it entered the general language as a term for a child in the 1800s.

The Vikings also brought the word *frjo*. It meant a ‘seed, offspring or child.’ And some etymologies including the Oxford English Dictionary cite this Norse word *frjo* as the original version of *fry* as in ‘small fry’ meaning a child. I should note that French had a very similar word which meant a ‘young fish,’ and some etymologies cite that French word as the origin of ‘small fry.’ But again, the Oxford English Dictionary goes with the Norse word. By the way, the word *fry* as in a type of cooking comes from a completely different French word.

And speaking of children and Vikings, we can thank the Vikings for the distinction between the words *raise* and *rear* with respect to bringing up children. The Old English word was *rear*, but the Vikings brought the word *raise*. Both words are cognate, but it gave English two different words to describe the processing of bringing up a child. Early on, English didn’t use the Norse word *raise* for this purpose though. *Raise* had a more literal sense of making something higher. So it was eventually applied to the process of growing crops because the plants would ‘rise’ or grow over time. So you might speak of raising a particular crop.

But in the 1700s, in the American South, that construction was extended to animals. So it became common to speak about raising pigs or cows or other livestock. And from there it was applied to humans. So you might raise a child. That construction was bitterly opposed by grammarians in the northern part of the United States. And even today, people who are very particular about their English will argue that you ‘rear’ children. You don’t ‘raise’ them. But despite the protests, it is now generally acceptable to use the Norse word *raise* with respect to children – especially in American English. But you can see how rules of so-called ‘proper English’ are really just a product of history, and the state of the language when many of those rules were adopted in the 1700s and 1800s.

By the way, since I’m discussing the Vikings and children, I should note that the Vikings had a tradition of presenting a gift to an infant when his or her first tooth appeared. This was called the *tann fé* – literally the ‘tooth fee.’ *Fee* had an original sense of money or payment, so it was the ‘tooth money.’ In fact, the Vikings also sometimes wore necklaces made of children’s teeth because they thought it brought them good luck. So children’s teeth were considered very valuable. And many historians think the Norse traditions of ‘tooth money’ and ‘lucky teeth’ were combined over time, and eventually produced the tradition of the tooth fairy – a fairy who delivers the ‘tooth fee’ when the first tooth is lost.

So let’s turn back to the new Wessex king, Aethelred – Edward’s son and Alfred’s grandson. In fact, Aethelstan was said to be Alfred’s favorite grandson when he was a small child. By the way, the *grand* in *grandfather* and *grandmother* is a later borrowing from French. The Anglo-Saxons used the prefix *ealde* – or *elder*. So instead of *grandfather*, they would say *ealdefæder*. And instead of *grandmother*, they would say *ealdemodor*. Of course grandparents are ancestors, but again, *ancestor* is a Latin borrowing. The Anglo-Saxons would call an ancestor a *foregenga* – literally a ‘fore-goer.’

So Alfred the Great was Aethelstan's *ealdefæder* and *foregenga*. And Aethelstan was consecrated with the same title which Alfred used – 'King of the Anglo-Saxons.' But up to this point, no king had ever truly been a king of all of the Anglo-Saxons despite the title. But now, that was about to change. Aethelstan would soon complete the work begun by his father, and he would thereby become the first true king of the Anglo-Saxons, and therefore the first King of all of England.

The one original Anglo-Saxon kingdom which had alluded his father was Northumbria. By this point, that original kingdom which always had a fractured history was once again divided. In the southern part was the Kingdom of York newly conquered and settled by the Norse Vikings from Dublin. In the north, that small independent Anglo-Saxon kingdom still existed. It was basically the old Anglo-Saxon region of Bernicia.

There is little doubt that Aethelstan coveted Northumbria. If he really wanted to be the King of all the Anglo-Saxons, he was going to have to conquer that region. But as we saw earlier, the various kings in northern Britain had entered into a settlement with Edward in which they recognized him as some type of overlord in Britain. But they continued to rule their own respective kingdoms.

Soon after his coronation, Aethelstan sought to confirm that existing peace agreement. By this point, Raegnald – the Viking king of York – had died. And he was succeeded by his cousin Sitric. Aethelstan met with Sitric and secured a marriage alliance. Aethelstan's sister was given to Sitric in marriage. And this is a very important point because, as we'll soon see, Aethelstan had a lot of sisters. And that meant Aethelstan made a lot of marriage alliances. The Viking king Sitric also agreed to convert to Christianity. So at this point, it looked like the status quo was going to be maintained.

But then Sitric died in the following year – 926. And it soon became apparent that Aethelstan had no intention of letting Northumbria remaining under Viking rule. He then launched an invasion of York and drove out the Viking leaders. Aethelstan then assumed direct control over southern Northumbria. He then turned north and attacked Bernicia – the northern part of Northumbria still nominally under the control of a local Anglo-Saxon earl. Under threat of war, the northern Celtic kings of Scotland and Strathclyde then reiterated the prior pledges which they had made to Edward. But this time, it was a clear expression that they recognized Aethelstan as their overlord. And the Welsh kings also recognized Aethelstan's supremacy.

Aethelstan then turned to the Celtic-Britons in Cornwall in the far southwestern corner of Britain, and he defeated them as well. This effectively gave Aethelstan direct rule over all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms and indirect rule of the rest of Britain. No southern king had ever ruled over Northumbria. And no British king had ever been considered as the overlord of the entire island. Aethelstan was now the most powerful ruler in Britain since the Romans, and even the Romans never ruled the north.

So with Aethelstan, we finally have a single, unified Anglo-Saxon kingdom. The kingdom which would increasingly be referred to as England. It is actually a little surprising that such a powerful

king – the king who is considered the first King of England – is so little known today. But that wasn't always the case.

Throughout much of the Middle Ages, Aethelstan was regarded as one of the most important kings of England. His court was considered one of the most important, powerful and glamorous in all of Europe. It's not entirely clear why, but his fame and renown faded after the Middle Ages. But during the time of his reign, he was seen by many as an English Charlemagne. Continental leaders were impressed with his power. And throughout Western Europe, kings and nobles tried to forge alliances with his kingdom. And this is where all of his sisters come in.

The kings and prominent leaders of Europe sent ambassadors to the English court. In many cases, they sought to make new alliances. But sometimes, they simply sought to nullify or balance out an alliance formed between Aethelstan and a potential rival.

So to understand what was going on with those marriage alliances, let's briefly turn our attention back to the continent – specifically the Frankish kingdom. As we know, that kingdom had become divided between a German kingdom in the east and a very fractured French kingdom in the west.

As we saw last time, the French king was Charles the Simple. He was the king who ceded Normandy to Rollo and his Vikings. Well, a few years after he gave Normandy away, he found himself in a precarious position. As you might imagine, his nobles were not very happy with him or the overall state of the kingdom. Well, a few years after he lost Normandy, Charles sought to make an alliance with the Wessex king. At the time, that king was Edward – Aethelstan's father. And Edward had a daughter named Eadgifu, so she was the sister of Aethelstan – actually the half-sister. So in 919, Eadgifu married Charles the Simple, and that marriage helped to seal an alliance between the Wessex king and the French king.

But after the loss of Normandy, Charles had to deal with internal threats from his rivals. His biggest rivals were the relatives of the prior king, Odo. You might remember from the last episode that Odo was the Count of Paris – a non-Carolingian – who had briefly served as king because the prior Carolingian leader was so inept.

This had been an important development because it meant that the French nobles were willing to choose someone who was not a Carolingian if the Carolingian leader was considered weak and ineffective. So if you were Charles, and you had given away a large portion of northern France to a group of Vikings, well you might start to see where this was headed. The prior king Odo had died, but he had a younger brother named Robert. And Robert had emerged as Charles's biggest rival for the French throne.

That marriage to Aethelstan's sister a few years earlier had given Charles a close connection with the Wessex monarchy in Britain, but it wasn't enough. The local French nobles and church leaders ultimately reached a breaking point with Charles. He had given away too much land, and he was too weak and ineffective to rule. So they turned to Robert. In 922, the nobles selected Robert as King, and Charles was effectively deposed. But Charles didn't give up that easily. He

led an army against Robert, and in the following year, the new king Robert was killed in battle. But despite the death of Robert, Charles's army was defeated anyway. Charles was imprisoned, and his English wife fled by to Wessex with their young son.

With the death of Robert in battle, power ultimately passed to his son named Hugh. Hugh wasn't actually king, but he was the most powerful lord in France. And he was also the future leader of the family which was emerging as the clear rivals of the Carolingians. So in order to check Charles's marriage alliance with Wessex, Hugh sought to make his own alliance. By this point Aethelstan was king. And fortunately for Hugh, Aethelstan had a lot more sisters. So in the year 926, Hugh married another one of Aethelstan's sisters named Eadhild.

So now, Hugh and Charles were not only rivals in France, but they were both married to sisters of Aethelstan. Meanwhile, Charles was rotting away in prison, and he soon died there. And the interim king also died. And the nobles then turned to Hugh because he was Count of Paris and the most powerful noble. He also controlled a great deal of land within France, so that really left him as the king-maker.

He could have taken the title of 'king' for himself, but he realized that the position of 'king' had very little power at that point in France. The real power behind the throne were the nobles. So it was very reminiscent of the late Merovingian period where the Mayors of the Palace ran things while the kings were largely figureheads. And notice the trend which had emerged here. Whereas England had become unified under a strong king Aethelstan, France had become fractured into various regions with a very weakened king.

So Hugh elected to remain as the power behind the French throne. All he needed was a puppet to be the king. And that puppet was living in England. Charles the Simple's wife and son had fled back to Wessex. Remember she was Aethelstan's sister. And the son's name was Louis. Now if you follow these marriages, you start to realize how incestuous this was becoming. Louis's father was the deposed king Charles the Simple. His uncle was Aethelstan – the first King of England. And now thanks to that second marriage alliance, his other uncle was Hugh – the most powerful noble in France. So all of those connections meant that Louis was now the common link between all of those powerful leaders. So back in France, Hugh decided that Louis would be the best person to serve as the new king.

Aethelstan would likely approve, and Hugh could oversee and manage his young nephew upon his return to France. So Hugh sent ambassadors to Aethelstan, and it was agreed by all the parties that Louis would return to France to be the king, and he became Louis IV of France. And that really illustrates the importance which continental rulers placed on maintaining good relations with Aethelstan.

So now Aethelstan was the uncle of the French king Louis. And he was the brother-in-law of the Hugh – the most important noble in France and the real power behind the throne. And I am going to leave the history of France right there for now, but we have established the theme which will continue in France over the next few decades. The Carolingians now had a rival ruling

family. And Hugh's son – also named Hugh – would soon become king and put a permanent end to Carolingian rule there.

So that was France. But keep in mind that the French kings also had to deal with the rival kingdom in the east in modern-day Germany. And as I noted last time, when the Carolingians died out there, a Saxon named Henry the Fowler had emerged as the leader of that region. His son was Otto who would become Otto the Great. And Otto's reign marks the effective beginning of the Holy Roman Empire in east. Well, at this point, Otto was still a young man – not yet king or Emperor. And his father Henry noticed that the two most important leaders in the west were now allied with Aethelstan. So Henry thought it might be a good idea to get in on some that action. And as it turned out, Aethelstan had more sisters. So in 928, Henry married his son Otto to another sister of Aethelstan named Edith. So now Aethelstan was also brother-in-law to the heir of Germany and the future Holy Roman Emperor. And that marriage actually reopened certain links between the Anglo-Saxons and the Old Saxons in Germany, including as well see in the next episode, the arrival of clerics from northern Germany.

I should also note here that another sister of Aethelstan married the king of Burgundy. So this network of marriage alliances only served increase Aethelstan's role and prestige.

Now I wanted to go through that exercise for a couple of reasons. First, I wanted to bring you up to date on the developments on the continent. But more importantly, I wanted you to see the high regard in which Aethelstan was held at the time. All of the leading figures in France and Germany sought to form alliances with him by marrying one of his sisters.

I discussed the importance of marriage alliances back in Episode 38, and those alliances continued to be a very important feature of diplomacy in the Middle Ages. So let me digress here and make a couple of notes about marriage relationships.

Back in Episode 38, I reviewed the history of certain terms related to marriages and weddings. But here, I want to focus on specific family relationships like *husband* and *wife*. And back in that earlier episode, I discussed the word *wife*, but I didn't really discuss the word *husband*. And that's because *husband* isn't actually attested until around this time in the history of English – in the period shortly after the Vikings arrived. And that's because *husband* is actually a Viking word. It is actually one of the earliest attested Norse words in the surviving English texts. Since the West Saxon scribes used the term, it means that it spread very quickly beyond the Danelaw into Wessex.

As I've noted before, marriages were part of the process by which Norse words entered English. As Danes and Anglo-Saxons began to marry each other, Norse words began to pass to Anglo-Saxon spouses and then pass to their children. So it isn't really surprising to find Norse words among our basic marriage terms.

In fact, *husband* is one of those core terms which a language doesn't usually borrow from another language. So the fact English borrowed the Norse word shows that there was very close and intimate contact between the two groups. Some English scholars believe that the Anglo-

Saxons may have had an English term which was cognate with *husband* and was very similar to *husband*, but there is no way to prove that because, if it existed, it doesn't survive in any of the surviving English texts from the pre-Viking period. And those scholars even acknowledge that our modern word *husband* is a Viking word, not an English word.

*Husband* is of course a compound word. The original Old Norse word was *husbondi*. The first part of that compound is easy. It's *hus* – the original version of the word *house*. That word was the same in Old Norse and Old English.

But when we get to the second part of that compound word, things get a little more complicated. The word was *bondi*. In Old Norse, that word meant someone in possession of a piece of property or land. So it was a word which meant a 'freeholder, peasant or dweller.' So a *husbondi* was a person who was in possession of a house or who dwelled in a house, so it was a 'house dweller.' But it really meant the 'master of the house.' And to understand this, we have to look a little closer at the term *bondi*.

The word *bondi* was derived from an Indo-European root word which meant 'to be, to exist, to come into being, or to dwell' (in other words, 'to exist at a particular place'). And that original Indo-European root word actually gave us the word *be* as in 'to be or not to be.' So that makes the word *be* cognate with *husband*.

That original Indo-European word did pass into Old English. Within English, the sense of the word as *dwell* produced the Old English word *bur* which meant a 'dwelling, hut or room.' And we still have the word *bur* in the word *neighbor* which was literally a 'near bur' or 'nigh bur,' and it meant 'one who dwells nearby.'

That same Indo-European word also produced an English word to describe the process of constructing a dwelling. That word was *build* – again another Old English word. So *be*, *build* and *neighbor* are all cognate English words.

But that original Indo-European word also passed into the Norse language of the Scandinavians. It became *bondi* there meaning a dweller or more generally one who lives in a particular house or on a particular piece of land. And as I noted earlier, the Vikings brought that word with them to the Danelaw.

In its sense as 'dweller' or 'possessor,' it came to refer to peasant who owned his own land or home. It could also be used to describe a farmer or a land tiller. But with respect to a house, it was used to mean the master of the house. So *bondi* could refer to a person in possession of land or a person in possession of a house. So it appears that the word *hus* or *house* was stuck on the front of the word when it was being used in relation to a house. And thus the term *husbondi* was created. And it appeared in later Old English as *husbonda*. But again, it merely meant the person in charge of the house, it didn't necessary meant a male spouse.



This original, general sense of the word *husband* still survives in the term *husbandry* meaning ‘farm management.’ So for example, ‘animal husbandry’ refers to the process of breeding and raising animals for profit.

Since the *husbonda* was the master of the house, and since this was the Middle Ages, the term was usually applied to the male head of the household. So by the time of Middle English, *husbond* meant the male head of the house, and was being used more specifically in the sense of the man married to the wife.

But that word *hus* was also applied to the female head of the household. As we’ve seen before, the word *wife* was *wif* in Old English. And it didn’t mean a married woman. It was just a general term for a woman. That general sense still survives in the word *midwife*. So some scholars think that it became common to use the phrase ‘husband’s wif’ to mean the ‘husband’s woman’ or the ‘husband’s spouse.’ And over time, the phrase ‘husband’s wif’ tended to narrow the meaning of *wif* down to its modern sense of a married woman – a woman married to the *husband*.

But around the same time that it became common to refer to a ‘husband’s wif,’ it also became common to refer to the female head of the house as the *husewif* – the *housewife*. And it appears that this term was considered the female equivalent of *husbond*. So the *husbond* was the ‘house dweller’ or male master of the house, and the *huswif* or *housewife* was the female head of the household. So *husband* and *housewife* both have that common root word meaning ‘house’ at the beginning.

Again, the term *husewif* or *housewife* was a general term meaning the female head of the household. And she was usually married to the husband. But not always. *Husewif* could mean any woman in charge of the household. And this more general sense of the term *husewif* produced the word *hussy* which in Middle English just meant a ‘woman or girl.’ It didn’t become a pejorative or derogatory term until the 1700s and 1800s. So, *husband*, *housewife* and *hussy* all have the same root – *hus* meaning ‘house.’

So again, *hus* plus *bondi* gave us *husbondi* – or *husband*. And the second part of that word – *bondi* – also produced the word *bondage*. The connection between *bondage* and *husband* has to do with that original sense of dwelling or occupying a piece of property. A *bonda* was someone who had a right to possess or occupy a piece of land for a specific period of time. So *bondage* developed within Middle English to refer to the state or condition of being a *bonda* – typically a peasant or farmer. Prior to the advent of feudalism, it could refer to a peasant or free farmer who owned his own land or had specific rights to the land. But after the Normans arrived, and feudalism was introduced, the term referred to peasants who were basically tied to the land as serfs or slaves. So it was at this point that the term *bondage* began to acquire the sense of being bound to something.

And you may assume that *bondage* gave us words like *bond* and *bound* and *bind*, but that’s actually not the case. Words like *bond*, *bound* and *bind* are English variations of the Norse word *band*. But the Norse word *band* comes from a completely different Indo-European root than the words which we have been exploring. So technically speaking, *bond* and *bondage* are not even

cognate. Even though they're not cognate, both words did acquire that sense of being tied to something. *Bondage* was the state of a peasant who was *bound* to the land. And it appears that English speakers started to assume that *bondage* and *bond* were somehow related. So the sense of *bondage* began to shift from a specific sense of being tied to a piece of land to a more general sense of being tied to anything.

So thanks to that little quirk of English, the word *bondage* is not cognate with words like *bond*, *bound* and *bind*, but it is cognate with *husband*, *neighbor*, *build* and *be*.

So that's the etymology of *husband* and its related terms. But before I move on, let me make a couple of other notes about the word *wife*. As I noted, *wife* was originally *wif* in Old English, and it was used as a general word for a woman – married or unmarried. Of course, its meaning became limited to a married woman over time. And the word *man* had a similar evolution. In Old English, *man* was a general word for a person – both male and female. But over time, its meaning became limited to a male.

But in Old English, if you were using the term *man*, and you were referring to a female, you might want to make it clear that you were in fact referring to a female. In that case, you might refer to her as a *wifman* – literally a 'woman person.' And over time, *wifman* lost that 'F' sound in the middle, and the vowel sound shifted in the first syllable. And *wifman* actually became *woman*. That type of construction – a *wifman* or 'female person' – is actually unique to Old English. And it didn't exist in early Old English. But as the meaning of *wif* narrowed over time from a general term for a woman to a married woman, the word *wifman* gradually filled that vacuum. And *wifman* or *woman* became the general term for a female in Modern English.

So *man* and *woman* are native English terms, but *male* and *female* are Latin words borrowed from French. And *husband* and *wife* are Germanic terms – one is Old English and one is Old Norse. But *spouse* is a Latin word borrowed from French. So, as is often the case, the more informal versions of the words – *man*, *woman*, *husband*, and *wife* – are native Germanic words. But the slightly more formal words – *male*, *female* and *spouse* – are borrowed from Latin and French.

Now speaking of *wife*, there is another very common word in English which originally related to wives and which comes from the Vikings. And that word might surprise you a little bit. The word is *gift*. And the history of this word illustrates the subtle and complicated influences of Norse words on Modern English.

Of course, *gift* and *give* are closely related words in Modern English. And as you might expect, both of those words are cognate. *Gift* is usually used as the noun form, and *give* is the verb form. *Gift* and *give* can both be traced back to a common Indo-European root word. By the time of the original Germanic language, that Indo-European root word had evolved into distinct noun and verb forms which were the predecessors of modern-day *gift* and *give*. And those words passed into both Old English and Old Norse.

The verb form *give* was largely the same in both languages. It was *gefa* (/gay-fah/) in Old Norse and *giefan* (/GEE-ay-van/) in Old English. And both words basically meant to ‘give or donate’ in the modern sense of the word. So there is nothing unusual about any of that.

But with respect to the noun form *gift*, things get a bit more complicated. The word became *gift* (/geeft/) in Old Norse, and it had the general sense of a present or something given. And that is the word which we still have today. *Gift* is the Old Norse word which still has a general sense of something given.

But Old English had its own version of that word. The Old English version was *giefu* (GEE-ay-voov/). But in Old English, the meaning of that word had become very restricted. It was only used in Old English to refer to the payment made to a wife or a wife’s family when two people got married. So it was the bride-price. It was basically akin to the later concept of *dower* which was a Latin term borrowed from French. I have mentioned this usage before. Back when I discussed marriage terms, I mentioned that the payment was usually made on the morning after the marriage was consummated. And so it was sometimes called the *morgen-gifu* – the ‘morning gift.’ But whenever the word *gift* appears in Old English, it always has the sense of a bride payment. The Anglo-Saxons didn’t really use the term as a general term for a present.

So that’s part of the reason why we know that the modern word *gift* was borrowed from the Vikings. Today, it has the same general sense in which the Vikings used it, not the specific marital sense in which the Anglo-Saxons used it.

But there is another more basic reason why linguists know that the word *gift* came from Old Norse and not Old English. And in fact, they know that the modern word *give* is also the Norse version, not the original Old English version. So how do they know that *gift* and *give* came from the Vikings?

Well, the answer lies in the sound changes. And in fact, this is one of the most basic techniques used by linguists to identify Norse words.

As we’ve seen so many times, the original Germanic ‘G’ sound (/g/) shifted to a ‘Y’ sound in Old English when the sound appeared before the front vowels – specifically E and I. So linguists know with a fair amount of certainty that the English words *giefan* (/GEE-ay-van/) and *giefu* (GEE-ay-voov/) were pronounced as (/YEE-ay-van/) and (/YEE-ay-voov/) by the time of late Old English. Now that is a little difficult to see in Old English texts because the West Saxon scribes continued to use the letter G in those words even though the sounds had changed. But as soon as the Normans arrived, the Anglo-Norman scribes got rid of the West Saxon writing conventions. They tended to use French spellings, and they tended to write down words as they were actually pronounced. So if a word with an original ‘hard G’ sound was now being pronounced with a ‘Y’ sound, the Norman scribes just wrote it with a ‘Y.’ And that’s how linguists know that the pronunciation of all of those words had changed during that earlier period.

Well, when linguists look at Middle English texts, they see the words *gift* and *give* spelled both ways – sometimes with a ‘G’ at the beginning and sometimes with a ‘Y’ at the beginning. For

example, Geoffrey Chaucer often used *yive* – Y-I-V-E – instead of *give*. And this is where geography becomes important. In the areas of the former Danelaw, the spellings tended to be with the Norse ‘G’ indicating that the word was still being pronounced with its Norse /g/ sound. But in other areas, the letter ‘Y’ was more common suggesting that the Old English pronunciation was more common. But today, we don’t say *yive* and *yift*, we say *give* and *gift*. And that suggests that the Norse version of the words – or at least the Norse pronunciation of the words – won out over time.

And I wanted to go through that example because it reveals how modern linguists use sound changes to identify Norse words in English. And it also reveals how they are able to distinguish Norse words from English words.

So I want to conclude this episode on that note because next time, we’re going to take this concept and explore it a lot further. We’ll briefly review the common Old English sound changes which we’ve seen before. And then we’ll see how those sound changes actually help to reveal the large number of Norse words in English. And they also reveal a lot of English and Norse pairs which still exist in English like *shirt* and *skirt* and *dike* and *ditch*.

Next time we’ll also continue to the overall story of the Anglo-Saxons. Specifically, we’ll look at the later years of Aethelstan’s rule over a unified England. And we’ll look at a great alliance which was formed by the various kings in the north of Britain. The plan was to unify and defeat Aethelstan. The result was a great battle which was later documented in poetic form. The resulting poem known as the ‘Battle of Brunanburgh’ is one of the most famous and most important poems in Old English literature. So we’ll also look at that poem in the next episode.

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