THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST TRANSCRIPTS

EPISODE 52: BLOODY AXES AND A BATTLE ROYAL

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Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 52: Bloody Axes and a Battle Royal. In this episode, we're going to continue our look at the Norse influence on English. Last time, we explored how sound changes reveal many of the Vikings words in Modern English. This time, we'll continue to look at the North-South divide in tenth century England. We'll look at the final years of King Aethelstan's rule. And we'll explore how a great alliance of northern kingdoms culminated in one of the greatest battles of the entire Anglo-Saxon period – a battle commemorated in a well-known Old English poem – the Battle of Brunanburh. And we'll also continue to explore the large number of Viking words which entered English.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is historyofenglishpodcast.com. And my email is kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com. And you can follow me on twitter at englishhistpod.

In this episode, I'm going to explore the Old English poem 'The Battle of Brunanburh,' and I'm going to be reading some of the poem in its original Old English, but if you want to listen to even more Old English, let me recommend the Beowulf Deconstructed audiobook which is available at the website, iTunes and Amazon.com.

One more quick note before we begin. In the last episode, I included a clip for the Story of English documentary which PBS did back in the 1980s and which is available on YouTube. And I stated that Jim Lerher was the host of that series. As soon as I posted that episode, I realized that I misspoke and it was actually Robert MacNeil who hosted it. So all of those years of the MacNeil-Lerher News-hour got me confused. Several of you contacted me to note that correction, so I thought I would mention it here. The series is actually quite good, and its worth the time if you want a good overview of the history of English. I also noticed that Melvyn Bragg's series 'The Adventure of English' is also available on YouTube. It's actually titled the 'History of the English Language' when I looked at YouTube a few days ago, so you might want to check that out as well. Of course, if you don't want any spoilers, just check out the early episodes and wait for the podcast to catch up which may take another year or two, but we'll get there eventually.

So let's turn to this episode. At our point in the overall history of English, we're focusing on the early Norse influences on the language in the tenth century. Last time, we looked at the growing north-south linguistic divide which emerged after the Viking invasions. The Viking settlers in the Danelaw brought lots of Norse words which began to mix in with the local English dialects. Up to this point, I've spoken of the Viking influence in the Danelaw region in the north and east of England. And I've noted that there was comparatively little Viking influence outside of the Danelaw in the south and west. So the basic dividing line was from the southeast to the northwest because that was the Danelaw border. But increasingly, we can begin to think of the linguistic divide which emerged as more of a north-south divide.

It appears that Scandinavian settlement was actually more concentrated in the north in places like York. And then the Norwegian Vikings from Ireland moved into the same region which tended to reinforce that Scandinavian influence there. Meanwhile, the Wessex monarchy had conquered East Anglia in the east and southeast. And East Anglia was being incorporated into the new unified English state without too much difficulty. So the Norse influence there began to fade a little bit.

The net result was that the southern parts of England quickly emerged as a unified political entity under Wessex rule. But the north remained distinct – politically, culturally and linguistically. So going forward, I'll speak more in terms of the north-south divide rather than the northeast-southwest divide. But I just wanted to note that even though I may refer to a north-south split, some of these Norse influences were present in places in the southeast as well, just not to the same extent.

Now I've noted that Aethelstan was the first Anglo-Saxon king to rule over all of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms including York. So many historians consider him to be the first true king of the Anglo-Saxons. We might even call him the first King of England. The only problem with that specific title is that the north wasn't completely on board yet. As we'll see in this episode, York would continue to pass back and forth between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings over the next few decades. So in terms of when did 'England' actually begin, some historians prefer to wait until the north was permanently on board a few decades later. But either way, we can definitely call Aethelstan the first true king of all of the Anglo-Saxons.

Aethelstan actually took that that one step further. On his coins, he styled himself 'Rex Totius Britanniae' which was literally 'King of All of Britain.' And he had some basis for claiming that title. His supremacy was acknowledged by the northern Celtic kings, as well as the Welsh kings. He didn't directly rule over those regions, but he was basically their overlord. So he could legitimately claim direct or indirect rule over the entire island.

But the situation in the north was shaky to say the least. Those northern kings resented and feared Aethelstan's power. And the Norwegian Vikings in York had no interest in being ruled by Wessex.

Even though he claimed supremacy over the entire island, that authority was challenged in the year 934. In that year, the King of the Scots Constantine broke his treaty with Aethelstan. The details are unclear, but he may have simply refused to pay the required tribute to Aethelstan. All we know is that Aethelstan sent an army into Scotland in that year as a show of power. He raided and plundered a large portion of the Scottish kingdom, but the Scots largely avoided battle. The northern kings couldn't actually defeat Aethelstan alone, so they had little choice but to submit to him.

But after that excursion in 934, the northern kings started to form an alliance. Northern Britain wasn't unified under Scottish rule yet. There was a distinct Scottish kingdom, but there were other kingdoms as well – Cumbria and Strathclyde. And the leaders of those respective kingdoms

began to realize that the only chance they had against Aethelstan was as a unified force. And they also sought to bring York into that alliance.

York was basically a buffer zone between the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms in the south and the Celtic regions in the north. So the Scottish king Constantine probably preferred that it remain a buffer zone, and that meant that it needed to be ruled by the Vikings – not the Wessex king Aethelstan. So Constantine allied with Norse Vikings in York as well.

The important thing to understand about these events is that it was completely unprecedented. In earlier generations, a particular Welsh or Scottish king might ally with another Welsh or Scottish king, or with an Anglo-Saxon king, or with a Danish or Norse king. But there had never been a grand alliance in which all of the Celtic-speaking people of Britain allied with each other and allied themselves with the Scandinavians in York. But with all the Anglo-Saxons now combined under one king, the only way to counteract that was for everyone else on the island to band together. So this was leading up to a great battle. The Anglo-Saxons versus everyone else.

But the alliance proved to be one of the worst-kept secrets in Britain. And we know that because a Welsh poem exists from this same period which describes how this alliance had been formed and which anticipates a great defeat of the Anglo-Saxons. The poem was composed in Wales in Welsh and bears a Welsh name – 'Armes Prydein.' And I hope that pronunciation is at least close. The name meant 'The Prophesies of Britain." One of the fascinating aspects of the poem is that the poet is almost giddy at the prospect of driving the Anglo-Saxons out of Britain. He describes how the Welsh have allied with the Scots and other Celtic peoples of Britain including the Cornish. And they have also joined with the Irish – and the men of Dublin – so presumably the Norse Vikings from Dublin who had settled in York.

The poem the describes the defeat of the Anglo-Saxons. It vividly describes"the crimson gore on the cheeks of the Allmyn." ***Allmyn*** was a term used for the Anglo-Saxons. And it was a fascinating choice of words. ***Allmyn*** is a Germanic term. It meant 'all men,' and it is the same term used to described the 'Allemanni' tribe in Germany. And it's still used as the name of the nation of Germany in French and Spanish. So from the perspective of the Welsh, or at least from the perspective of this particular poet, the Anglo-Saxons weren't viewed as a distinct new people – the 'English.' Instead, they were still viewed as Germanic invaders largely indistinguishable from their cousins back on the continent. And the poem says that they will all be driven out of Britain and forced to return to their native land.

Another interesting aspect of the poem is that it states that the prophesy is foretold by 'Myrdin.' 'Myrdin' is apparently a prophet who is capable of seeing the future. And 'Myrdin' is the original verison of Merlin. In fact, this particular poem is the first known reference to the figure of Merlin. And as we saw in an earlier episode, the legend of the Celtic king Arthur had grown in Wales in the years after the Anglo-Saxons arrived. Arthur was the Celtic king who had fought against the invading Anglo-Saxons. That legend had taken root, and over the next few generations, the figure of Merlin would be added to the story.

The fact that this Welsh poem exists proves that stories of the grand alliance against the Anglo-Saxons had spread throughout the island. And that suggests that Aethelstan probably got word of the alliance as well.

A key factor in this alliance was the support of the Northumbrians. And that included both the Vikings of Northumbria, as well as the native Anglo-Saxons there who opposed Wessex rule.

In the year 937, the northern allied forces gathered in Northumbria. Once again, the details are unclear, but they apparently moved south and attacked the eastern Midlands – basically eastern Mercia. And Aethelstan engaged the allied forces at a fort called Brunanburh. The exact site of Brunanburh has never been identified. It is generally believed that it was one of the frontier forts on the southern border of Northumbria.

The battle began with an early morning assault by the Anglo-Saxons. They were led by Aethelstan and his brother Edmund who would soon succeed Aethelstan as king of Wessex. The Anglo-Saxons actually fought as separate armies. The West Saxons fought against the Celts, and the Mercians fought against the Vikings. It was a gruesome battle royal. Both sides experienced heavy losses. But the army of the northern allies experienced the heaviest losses. Several northern kings and Viking earls were killed. And a son of Constantine, the King of the Scots, was also killed. By nightfall, the Anglo-Saxons had emerged victorious, and what remained of the northern allies escaped into the darkness. The northern coalition had been shattered.

To commemorate this great Anglo-Saxon victory, the scribes who maintained the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle did something which was unusual at that time. Rather than including a straight-forward entry for the year which summarized the battle, they chose instead to include a poem. The poem is known as "The Battle of Brunanburh." And it is one of the important poems of the entire Old English period. In Modern English, the opening lines of the poem read:

Here King Aethelstan, lord of earls,
ring-giver to men, and his brother,
Prince Edmund, earned eternal fame
won in battle with the edges of swords
at Brunanburh.

Here's the same passage in the original Old English:

Her Aethelstan cyning, eorla dryhten,
beorna beag-giefa, and his brothor eac,
Eadmund aetheling, ealdor-langetir
geslogon aet saecce sweorda ecgum
ymbe Brunanburh.

The poem then paints the imagery of men fighting. It describes how the men fought from sunrise to sunset, and how the battlefield was covered with blood.

The poet describes the conflict , and notice the Old English alliteration:

There lay many warriors	Thaer laeg secg manig
slain by spears men of the North	garum agieted, guma Northerna
shot over their shields the Scottish as well	ofer scield scoten swelce Scyttisc eac
weary and sated with war. West Saxons went forth	werig, wiges saed West-Seaxe forth
all day long all the troops	andlange daeg eorod-cystum
they legged the trail of the hateful people,	on last legdon lathum theodum,
hewed down the fugitives from behind harshly	heowon here-flieman hindan thearle
with their sharpened swords	mecum mylen-scearpum.

When the fighting was over, we are told that 'five lay on the battlefield or campstead, young kings' – "Fife lagon on tham camp-stede cyningas geonge."

I should note here that the poet refers to the battle-field as the ***camp-stede*** – the 'camp-stead.' This was actually a common term for a battlefield. ***Stead*** is pretty straight-forward. It means a 'place or location,' as in ***homestead*** or ***farmstead***. But why would they call a battlefield a ***camp-stead***? They aren't camping out. They're fighting.

Well, ***camp*** was an early Germanic borrowing from the Latin spoken by the Romans on the continent. It is one of the oldest Latin words in English, and in fact, it pre-dates English. So the Anglo-Saxons always had it in their language.

In Latin, it meant an 'open field or space.' That original sense still survives in the sense of the word as a 'campsite' – an open space for setting up camp. It also survives in the word ***campus***. But open spaces were used for military exercises. And battles were generally fought in open spaces as well because guerrilla warfare wasn't really common at the time. So ***camp*** became associated with the place where troops trained and fought. In Old English, the word acquired an association with the military, and specifically it came to mean a battle or fight. So a ***camp-stead*** is the place where a battle takes place.

The word ***camp*** acquired a similar sense in late Latin and French where it produced the word 'campaign' – an military exercise or movement. And we've seen before that the Latin 'K' sound became a 'CH' sound in many later French words. That how ***Karl*** became ***Charles***. Well, that same sound change in French converted ***camp*** into ***champion*** – the victor in a battle. And that word also passed into English with the Normans.

But the original Old English sense of the word ***camp*** as a 'battle or fight' died out over time. Several centuries later, in the early Modern English period, the word ***camp*** was re-borrowed from Latin. And this time, it came back in with its original meaning as an open space. And that is the sense that we still have today.

So returning to the Battle of Brunanburh, we've seen that five northern kings lay dead on the camp-stead – or battle-field.

In the words of the poet, they had been put to sleep with swords – "sweordum answefede."

The poet then states that seven earls of the Viking king and numerous other men had also been slain in battle. The Viking king fled to his ship and sailed out to sea saving his life. The Scottish king Constantine also fled, but the poet tell us that he 'left his young son lifeless on the battlefield.'

The defeated allies returned home. And Aethelstan and his brother Edmund returned to Wessex victorious.

The poem then concludes by putting the victory in historical context. The poet tell us that it was the greatest victory since the first Anglo-Saxons had arrived in Britain and conquered the native Welsh. He writes:

Never was there more slaughter on this island - ever yet
Ne wearth wael mare on thys ig-lande aefre gieta

Of folk felled before this time with the edges of swords
folces gefielled beforan thissum sweordes ecgum,

even since the time when books tell us that the Angles and Saxons came from the East
thaes-the us secgath bec, eald uthwitan, siththan eastan hider, Engle and Seaxe upp becomon,

over the broad seas they sought Britain – proud war-smiths
ofer brad brimu Britene sohton, wlance wig-smithas

They overcame the Welsh – the earls eager for glory – and they conquered the county.
Wealas ofercomon, eorlas ar-hwaete eard begeaton.

So that was the 'Battle of Brunanburh,' and even though we're nearing the last century of the Anglo-Saxon period, note how traditional this poem sounds. It almost sounds like an excerpt from Beowulf with its praise of the Germanic warrior code. In fact, the poet even uses variations of the same stock phrases used by the Beowulf poem.

In Beowulf, the poet describes the sun moving through the sky as "heofones gim glád ofer grundas" – literally 'heaven's gem glided over the ground.'

In the Battle of Brunanburh, the poet describes the sun passing over the battlefield as "glad ofer grundas Godes condel beorht" – literally 'glided over the ground, God's bright candle.' So it's basically the same stock phrase, except here the poet describes the Sun as 'God's bright candle' instead of 'Heaven gem.'

The main point is that the more things change, the more they stay the same. The unified English kingdom may have been staunchly Christian, but the deep Germanic roots of the Anglo-Saxons were still very strong in the tenth century. And the language and poetry of Wessex was still relatively unchanged. In fact, it's difficult to find any Old Norse influences in the poem we just looked at.

In fact, the only obvious Norse word in the entire poem is the word ***cnear***, which was a Norse word meaning a 'merchant ship.' Apparently, the West Saxons had picked up that word through trade with the Vikings, and it was used in English as a general term for a ship. So the poet describes how the defeated Viking king boarded his ship and fled the region. The poet writes:

cread cnear on flot, cyning ut gewat
he pressed the ship afloat, the king went out

The poem also uses the word ***saecce*** for 'battle or war.' Now that's not a Norse word. It's an English word. But the form of that word confirms that Norse influences were still limited in Wessex. And let me explain what I mean.

The word ***saecce*** meaning 'a battle' is actually derived from the original version of the word ***seek***. Of course, ***seek*** means 'to search for something or pursue something.' And that original sense of the word led to a sense of a military action or campaign as in 'seeking victory.' But as we know, the 'K' sound often became a 'CH' sound in Old English. So in Old English, the word evolved from ***secan*** (/say-kahn/) to ***saecce*** (/sæ-cheh/), and it came to refer to a battle. That version of the word still exists in the word ***beseech*** with its 'CH' sound at the end, and with its sense of 'demanding or begging something.'

So if the 'K' sound shifted to a 'CH' sound, why is the modern English word ***seek*** and not ***seech***, except in ***beseech***. Well, it's because of the Vikings. The Vikings also had a version of the word ***seek*** with the 'K' sound at the end. And our modern word ***seek*** was influenced by the Norse pronunciation in the north of England. But notice that the 'Batte of Brunanburh,' written by West Saxon scribes, used ***saecce*** (/sæ-cheh/) with the traditional English 'CH' sound. So this is actually more confirmation that the Norse influence hadn't really reached Wessex yet.

I should note here that Modern English has another word related to warfare which was borrowed from the Vikings and which uses the Norse verison of that word ***seek***. And that is the word ***ransack*** as in 'to pillage or plunder.'

Some people mistakenly assume that ***ransack*** is based on the word ***sack*** because when someone plunders a place, they might put valuables in a sack, but that's not actually correct. That type of ***sack*** came from French, and it didn't enter English until much later. ***Ransack*** is a Viking term

which combines the word ***rann*** meaning 'house' with ***sækja*** which is the Norse version of the word ***seek***. So it literally meant 'seeking or searching for something in a house.' And again, it seems appropriate that ***ransack*** comes from the Vikings given their reputation for plunder and looting.

But even though ***ransack*** came from the Vikings, it wasn't used by the West Saxons scribes. Like so many Norse words, it isn't actually attested in writing until the Normans arrived and defeated the Wessex monarchy. Only at that later date then the new Norman scribes begin to document many of these Viking words which were in common use in the north of England.

So the major point here is that the northern Norse influence hadn't really seeped into Wessex at this point in our story in the mid-900s. The West Saxons were still speaking and composing poems in their traditional Old English dialect. So despite the growing linguistic divide, the language of Wessex had changed very little.

With Aethelstan's victory at Brunanburh, the grand alliance of the northern kings was destroyed. Yet for all the glory of the victory, it actually settled very little in the long run. Aethelstan had defended and secured his new English kingdom, but in the north, there the balance of power remained largely the same. The northern kings still ruled their own domains, and the Norse Vikings were still hanging out in York. So English rule of York continued to be shaky.

And that tenuous hold on York was put to the test in the years following the death of Aethelstan in the year 939 – just two years after Brunanburh. Aethelstan had never married, and he didn't have any children, so the new king was his younger brother Edmund who had fought alongside him at Brunanburh. Edmund was a teenager, and in fact we're now entering the period in which the next few English kings are known as the 'boy kings.' The next six kings were all very young All but one was a teenager. And it's easy to lump the next five together because they all had very similar names – Edmund, Eadred, Edwy, Edgar and Edward. Collectively, their reigns covered a period of about forty years.

This time we'll focus on the first two, Edmund and Eadred, both brothers of Aethelstan. Collectively, they ruled for a period of about sixteen years, and during that time, the control of York went back and forth between the English and the Vikings. In fact, during that 16 year period, four different Viking kings ruled York in between the periods when the English kings in charge. And this is important because it serves to illustrate how important the Vikings were in that region.

The ultimate problem for the Wessex kings was that there were lots of competing interests in York. There were the established Danish Vikings, as well as the newly-arrived Norwegian Vikings from Ireland. And there were the native Anglo-Saxons of Northumbria. And now they were all under the rule of the southern Anglo-Saxons. But even the two groups of Anglo-Saxons couldn't get along. The Anglo-Saxons of Northumbria viewed the Anglo-Saxon kings of Wessex with suspicion. And they preferred to govern themselves.

So York was this complicated cultural melting pot. It was also the biggest city in the north. And it was second in size only to London in the south. A contemporary writer said York had a population of about 30,000 people, but modern historians think it was actually closer to 10,000. Even so, that made it one of the larger cities in Western Europe. York had initially been a Roman city, and it still retained some buildings and structures from the Roman period, though many were uninhabited by this point.

And after the Anglo-Saxons arrived, York had also been the traditional capital of Northumbria. So the early Celtic Britons in the region had been overtaken by Anglo-Saxons. Remember that Caedmon's Hymn was composed in Northumbria by an Anglo-Saxon poet named Caedmon, but Caedmon was a Celtic name. So the evidence suggests a cultural mix had been in place even before the Vikings arrived. But then the early Danes swept in and made York a northern capital of the Danelaw. And now the Norwegian Vikings had settled in the same region.

As I noted last time, York became a vital link in the Viking trade networks extending from Ireland to Scandinavia. Reports indicate that there was actually a Viking quarter of York. It was densely populated and dirty. It was occupied by leather-shops, weapon shops, and craftsmen making pins, brooches and buckles. Viking cargo ships imported and exported Vikings goods from the city.

And most of the trade through York was by ship. The region could still be a rough and violent place. In fact, southern merchants were encouraged to travel in groups of 20 when they headed there to trade. So there wasn't a lot of over-ground trade between York and the southern kingdoms. Most of York's trade was nautical. And much of that trade was conducted by the Vikings. So that reinforced the Scandinavian presence there. As we saw last time, that Viking presence was changing the language of the region by importing lots of new Norse words. It was also changing the grammar, which we'll look at next time. And increasingly, southerners couldn't understand the dialects in the north.

Those Viking traders brought lots of Norse words related to ships. As I noted earlier, the word ***cnear*** meaning a 'ship' was borrowed from the Vikings. Last time we saw that ***keel***, as in the 'keel of a ship,' was also borrowed. The word ***ferry***, which originally meant a 'water passage,' was also borrowed from the Vikings. A boat which was used at the ferry was called a ***ferry boat***, and eventually the boat itself just became a ***ferry***. Nautical terms like ***rig*** and ***reef***, as in the 'reef' of a sail, also came from the Vikings. The word ***skate***, as in the type of fish, came from Old Norse. ***Gill*** as in a 'fish gill' was likely borrowed from Norse. The word ***bait*** used to catch fish also came in. And when you're trying to catch fish, you might 'cast a net' or 'cast a fishing line.' Well, ***cast*** also came from the Vikings.

We also see Viking influence in non-linguistic areas as well. For example, the Vikings and the ancient Romans believed that in order to ensure good fortune for a ship and its crew, the keel of a newly-built ship had to 'taste' the blood of a living person when it was first launched. Slaves or prisoners were tied to the keel blocks, and as the ship slipped down the launching ramp into the water, it would crush the victim. This often left blood on the keel. Needless to say, that was kinda gruesome. So over time, red wine was used as a substitute for blood. Sometimes it was

simply poured on the deck or the bow of the ship. But eventually, it became common practice to simply smash the bottle against the bow. And course, that tradition continues to this day.

So the Viking influence was strong in York. And it's important to emphasize that the local Anglo-Saxons in Northumbria sometimes preferred Viking rule over Wessex rule. This may seem a little surprising, but the Northumbrians had a long history of independence, and if necessary, they would ally with the Vikings to try to maintain that independence.

This attitude is probably best represented by the figure of Wulfstan – the archbishop of York. He was as much a political leader as a religious leader, and he was a staunch and resolute northerner. In addition to being a cleric, he was an aristocrat and he led the local witan – the group of advisors to the king. And it was the group who technically elected the king, so he emerged as a vital figure behind the scenes, and he strongly opposed southern rule. And despite the fact that he was a cleric and an Anglo-Saxon, he was willing to ally with pagan Vikings to oppose the Christian kings down south. So as we can see, politics makes strange bedfellows. And ***fellow*** is another Viking word, so maybe it was appropriate that the Northumbrians were willing to be 'bedfellows' with the Vikings.

And this was the situation which Aethelstan's brother Edmund inherited when he became king of Wessex in 939. Without Aethelstan's strong leadership, the Wessex hold on Northumbria began to slip.

Soon after Edmund became king, the Norwegian King of Dublin, Olaf Guthfrithson, seized control of York. And that didn't just happen by accident. Olaf had secured the support of Archbishop Wulfstan behind the scenes. Once they had control of York, the Norse Vikings then headed south from York and sacked territories in Mercia in the Midlands. And Archbishop Wulfstan actually accompanied the Vikings on that expedition. Within a very short period of time, the York Vikings had rolled back all of Aethelstan's gains, and even re-claimed much of the old Danelaw. But then the Viking king died. And he was succeeded by another Norse king – Olaf Sihtricson. The second King Olaf lacked his predecessor's ambition and skill.

By the year 942, Edmund has amassed an formidable army and was able to drive the second King Olaf out of the Midlands. Then the internal divisions and rivalries within Northumbria came into play. A rival group of Northumbrians rebelled against Olaf and expelled him from York. He was succeeded by a rival to the throne – a brother of the first Olaf. But a short time later, Edmund moved into York itself and defeated both groups of Vikings. That brought York back under English control. So despite the horrible start, Edmund had finally reversed his fortunes and re-claimed all of what had been lost early on.

But Archbishop Wulfstan wasn't willing to give up that easily. Four years later, King Edmund was murdered by an outlaw who had entered the king's hall uninvited. Edmund was only 24 when he died. His children were still infants, so he was succeeded by his brother Eadred.

And on again, Eadred immediately had to deal with the situation in York. The Witan of York led by Wulfstan initially professed loyalty to Eadred, but then they turned around and invited a

terrifying Viking named Eric Bloodaxe to be their king. By the way, 'Bloodaxe' was not a family name. It was more of a description. He was actually the son of the first Norwegian king named Harald Fairhair. Harald had been the first king to subdue and unite all of the smaller kingdoms of Norway. But when Harald died there, his numerous sons began to fight for their inheritance. Eric killed his rivals and briefly emerged as king, thereby earning his nickname 'The Bloodaxe.' But he also alienated many of the nobles in Norway. His young 15-year old half-brother had been raised in Aethelstan's court in England. So a group of wealthy landowners in Norway brought the brother over from England and they kicked out Eric. By that point, Eric had lost so much support, that he elected to sail away rather than stay and fight for control. He initially landed in northern Britain and plundered Scotland, but then he traveled down to York.

The circumstances are not clear, but the Northumbrian witan led by Archbishop Wulfstan invited Eric to be the new King of York.

His initial rule in York was very brief. It appears that he ruled from 947 into 948. During that time, coins were minted in York which bore his name – 'Eric Rex' – literally 'King Eric.' They were modeled on the English coinage. But the selection of Eric as king was a breach of the prior recognition of the Wessex king, Eadred. So in the summer of 948, Eadred amassed an army and rode back into Northumbria. Eadred burned towns, knocked down fortifications and killed those who stood in his way. But Eric's Northumbrian troops ambushed the rear-guard of the West Saxons, and they inflicted a defeat on the trailing soldiers. Eadred's main army was not aware of the defeat at first, but when they found out, Eadred threatened to return and burn down the entire region.

At this point, the Northumbrian witan realized that they had gone too far. They backed down and abandoned Eric. They sent ambassadors to Eadred to inform him that they now recognized him as king again. At the end of 948, Eadred was once again recognized as king in Northumbria. and Eric was sent into exile.

But the next year, that second King Olaf, who had ruled York a few years earlier, returned from Dublin. And he once again emerged as king in York. So as you can see, the leadership of York was a revolving door. But interestingly, Eadred down in Wessex didn't challenge Olaf's position in York, so Olaf apparently recognized Eadred's authority as overlord and probably paid him tribute.

But a couple of years later, the Northumbrians drove out Olaf again, and Eric Bloodaxe returned from exile and became King of York for a second time. So the turnover in York continued. Not only did kings come and go, but quite often the old kings came back and ruled again. But while the Wessex king Eadred had tolerated Olaf, he couldn't bear Eric Bloodaxe. The selection of Eric outraged the Wessex court. The rumor was that Archbishop Wulfstan was once again behind the move. So the next time Wulfstan traveled south, he was placed under house arrest. He was held in an old Roman fort in Essex. Wulfstan was now out of the picture, but Eric Bloofaxe continued to rule York for the next two years.

But in the year 954, Eric was killed in battle. Once again, the circumstances are very vague. The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle only says that "the Northumbrians expelled Eric." But later Norse chronicles describe a battle between Eric and one or more other kings in the north. As we've seen, there were lots of rival factions in the region. At any rate, it appears that the nobles who had supported Eric simply deserted him over time. Maybe he wore out his welcome just as he did in Norway. But the bottom line is that Eric Bloodaxe was now dead, and Eadred once again swept in and secured York for Wessex. Archbishop Wulfstan was released from prison, but died two years later and never returned to York. The back-to-back deaths of Eric Bloodaxe and Archbishop Wulfstan effectively ended Scandinavian rule in York. It has been a messy business, but York was now a permanent part of the unified Anglo-Saxon kingdom.

When Eadred – the Wessex king – died the next year, he died as the King of a permanently unified English nation. Well, it was unified politically. But culturally and linguistically, the situation on the ground remained much the same. A strong north-south divide still existed. And for many generations thereafter, the Northumbrians lamented the loss of their independence and were nostalgic for their own king.

As we've seen, the north-south differences were highlighted and reinforced by the linguistic differences. All of those Norse words were mixing in with English words in the region around York. And last time, we explored how English sound changes reveal many of those Norse words in Modern English. But those were just a few of the Viking words which have survived the centuries. So I want to spend the remainder of this episode focusing some other very common English words which were borrowed from the Vikings.

One of the underlying themes of this episode is warfare and military conflict. And given the extensive fighting between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons, it isn't really surprising that we have a lot of Norse words related to fighting – and the consequences of fighting.

I've noted before that the word ***slaughter*** was borrowed from the Vikings. And it's cognate with the native English word ***slay***. But ***slaughter*** provides a much more violent and gruesome imagery.

Of course, when men are slaughtered in battle, they ***die***. And ***die*** is also a Viking word. Interestingly, English had native versions of that word. The noun ***death*** and the adjective ***dead*** are English words, but English didn't have a verb version of that word. To describe the process of dying, the Anglo-Saxons used the word ***sweltan***, which survives as the word ***swelter***. The word still has a sense of suffering, as in extremely hot, but it doesn't meant 'dying' anymore.

Another Old English word to describe the process of dying was ***steorfan***, which survives as the word ***starve***. Again, the sense of the word has been limited over time. Technically, it can describe someone dying from lack of food, but it's usually used simply to mean hungry.

And another Old English word to describe dying was ***cringan*** which meant 'to die in battle,' and could also mean to 'bend over' or 'bend something.' The connection is that a soldier who

received a mortal sword blow would typically bend over and fall to the ground. And that word ***cringan*** still survives as the word ***cringe***. And a later variation of that word is ***crinkle***.

So all of those original Old English words survive in a more limited sense. But the Anglo-Saxons borrowed the word ***die*** from the Vikings presumably because it resembled the native words ***death*** and ***dead***. And this is a good example of how Norse words were borrowed. Since they often resembled English words , and had a similar meaning to English words, they were borrowed in as variations of the same basic idea or concept. So Norse ***die*** came in as the verb form of English ***death*** and ***dead***. And the words which the Anglo-Saxons had been using previously – ***swelter***, ***starve*** and ***cringe*** – became restricted to other more limited uses over time.

Given the violent contact between the Vikings and the Anglo-Saxons, it probably isn't surprising that English borrowed the words ***anger*** and ***ill*** from Old Norse.

Before the word ***anger*** was borrowed, the Anglo-Saxons used the words ***ire*** and ***wrath***. Of course, both of those native words still survive.

The word ***ill*** was borrowed from the Vikings with a similar meaning. It originally had more of a sense of 'evil, hurtful or bad.' We still have some of that sense when we speak of someone being 'ill-tempered' or in an 'ill mood.' But over time, it developed a sense of being sick. So today, when we say that someone is feeling 'ill,' we usually mean that they feel 'sick' or 'under the weather.' By the way, ***sick*** is an Old English word. So today, ***ill*** and ***sick*** are synonyms – one being Norse and one being Old English

Another possible Norse word is the word ***cut***. Traditionally, it has been considered a Viking word, though some modern scholars suggest other origins. Whatever its origin, it largely replaced the Old English words ***carve*** and ***shear***.

So the net result of these Norse words was lots of synonyms in late Old English and early Middle English. And just as in the last episode, we see lots of English and Norse pairs. We have English ***sick*** and Norse ***ill***. We have English ***ire*** and ***wrath*** and Norse ***anger***. We have English ***carve*** and ***shear*** and Norse ***cut***.

And here are some other common English-Norse pairs. With respect to flowers, we have the Old English word ***blossom*** and the Norse word ***bloom***. Both words are cognate. And I've noted before that the Indo-European 'B' sound became an 'F' sound in Latin. That's why we have English ***brother*** and Latin ***fraternal***. Where here, the same Indo-European root word which produced ***bloom*** and ***blossom*** in the Germanic languages, produced the word ***flower*** from Latin. So that makes ***flower***, ***bloom*** and ***blossom*** cognate.

We can also use English-Norse cognates to describe someone who is lazy. We can use the native English word ***slack***, or we can use the Norse word ***slouch***.

Here's another interesting pair of synonyms – ***smile*** and ***smirk***. ***Smirk*** is actually the native Old English word, but ***smile*** was a Germanic borrowing which first appears in writing around the 1300, and many linguists think it came from Vikings. Originally, ***smile*** and ***smirk*** meant the same thing, but over time the borrowed Viking word ***smile*** became the dominant word. And if we think about ***smile*** and ***smirk***, they're very similar, but ***smirk*** has a more negative sense. And that is interesting because ***smirk*** is actually the native English word. The Viking word ***smile*** has a positive connotation. And that's actually the opposite of what usually happened. Usually the Norse word acquired the negative sense.

Another English-Norse pair is ***bask*** and ***bathe***. ***Bask*** is the Old Norse word, ***bathe*** is the Old English word. Today, they have similar but distinct meanings. But if you think about it, when you 'bask in the spotlight,' you're literally bathing in the spotlight. But ***bask*** has that Norse 'K' sound at the end, and it is the borrowed Viking word.

Now in addition to all of these English-Norse synonyms, I should note that the Vikings also provided synonyms for basic words like ***to***, ***from*** and ***no.***

From time to time, you may hear someone use the phrase 'to and fro.' You might assume that ***fro*** is just a colloquial way of saying ***from*** by dropping the final consonant. But that's not actually the case. ***Fro*** was a distinct Norse word. Of course it was cognate with the English word ***from***, but both were distinct synonyms with the Norse ***fro*** being more common in the north of England.

So 'to and fro' uses an English word and a Norse word. ***To*** is English, and ***fro*** is Norse. But we also got a variation of the word ***to*** from the Vikings. The Norse version of the word ***to*** was ***till***. So in a phrase like 'from dusk till Dawn,' the ***till*** is from the Vikings. And you might assume that ***till*** is just a shortened version of the word ***until***, but it's actually not. ***Till*** was a distinct word in Old Norse. ***Until*** was a separate Norse word, but it used a construction based on the word ***till***, which was the root word. So ***till*** and ***until*** came from the Vikings, and they both entered the northern English dialects around places like York. They then passed into early Middle English. In the south of England, the native word ***to*** was more common. But over time, all of those words mixed together and basically became synonyms.

By the way, I gave the example of the phrase 'from dusk till dawn.' In fact, almost that entire phrase may have been influenced by the Vikings. Both ***dusk*** and ***dawn*** show Norse influences. That 'S-K' sound at the end of ***dusk*** is a big clue that we're looking at a Norse word. Prior to the Viking invasions, the Anglo-Saxons rarely used that sound. And we looked at a long list of Norse words that began with that sound in the last episode. So when we see that sound in these old Germanic words, it's a big clue that we're looking at borrowed Viking words. And the word ***dawn*** is cognate with the English word ***day***, but the evolution of the word appears to be influenced by a Norse word ***dagan*** which meant 'a dawning.' We've seen before that the 'G' sound sometimes shifted to a 'W' sound in later English. So it appears that the Anglo-Saxons in the north borrowed the Norse word ***dagan***, and the G in the middle became a 'W' sound over time, and it produced ***dawan***, and then that later shortened to simply ***dawn***. So three-quarters of the words in 'from dusk till dawn' are Norse words.

So we've seen that the Vikings gave us variations of common words like ***to*** and ***from***. And along the same lines, they also gave us a variation of the word ***no***. Specifically, they gave us the word ***nay***. We still use ***nay*** when voting, as in 'vote yea or nay.' We also have it in the word ***naysayer***. But ***nay*** is simply the Norse version of ***no***. And speaking of ***no*** and ***nay***, some people say ***aye*** instead of ***yes***, especially if they're a pirate. As in, 'Aye aye captain!' Well, some etymologies attribute ***aye*** to Old Norse as well.

So those are some examples of English-Norse synonyms – situations where the English and Norse words both derive from the same root and both retain similar meanings. And if we compare those with the words which we looked at in the last episode, you can see how common Norse words are in Modern English and how they supplemented the language.

So we've explored a lot of synonyms – words with similar meanings. But sometimes, the Anglo-Saxons borrowed a Viking word which had a completely different meaning than the English verison. And sometimes, that Viking verison replaced and superceded the original English meaning.

So I noted before in an earlier episode that the English version of the word ***gift*** meant a 'bride price' or dowry, but the Norse verison meant any type of donation or present. So English borrowed the Norse word and eventually took the Norse meaning of the word.

A similar situation happened with the word ***plow*** which I've mentioned before. In Old English, a ***plow*** was a measure of land – the amount of land that a couple of oxen could plow in a day. But in Old Norse, a ***plow*** was a farming tool. And once again, English borrowed the Viking word and eventually adopted the Norse meaning.

Another example of this process is the word ***dream***. In Old English ***drēam*** meant 'joy and revelry.' But the Old Norse version of the word – ***draumr*** – meant a 'vision experienced while sleeping.' Well here, English retained the Old English form of the word – ***dream*** – but it borrowed the meaning from Old Norse. So when we speak of our ***dreams***, we're really using the Norse meaning of the word. So that type of process suggests very close and intimate contact where the overall forms and meanings of the words became confused over time. So we end up with the English form of the word, but the Norse meaning.

Another example is the word ***bread***. Today ***bread*** is a general term for the food we eat. But in Old English, it had a sense of a small piece of bread. In fact, it could be used to refer to a small piece of any king of food. The normal word for baked dough in Old English was ***hlaf***, which became our modern word ***loaf***. And you might remember that ***hlaf*** was an original part of the words ***lord*** and ***lady***, which were the 'loaf guardian' and the 'loaf maiden.' But over time, the meaning of ***hlaf*** became restricted to the actual loaf of bread in the sense that we use it today. And ***bread*** evolved from a small piece of food to ***bread*** in the more general sense that we use the term today. So what happened there? Well, some linguists think that it was the result of Old Norse influence. Old Norse had the word ***brauð***. And it meant baked dough in the general sense that we use the word ***bread*** today. So it is believed that the Anglo-Saxons borrowed the general Norse meaning and that gave English two general words for bread – ***bread*** and ***loaf***. So

loaf became more restricted over time, and it took on the more limited meaning that we have today as the actual loaf of bread itself. And ***bread*** thereby acquired the more general Norse sense as a general term for baked dough.

Another example of Old Norse changing the meaning of an English word is the word ***mood***. It originally meant 'heart, courage or frame of mind' in Old English. So ***modig*** – or 'moody' – could mean proud. And the sense of the word as 'frame of mind' still exists when we speak of someone being 'in the mood' to do something. But the Norse verison of the word meant 'anger or wrath.' So today, when we refer to someone as being ***moody***, as in having a bad temperament, that meaning may be traced back to the Vikings. And that actually makes sense because we don't tend think of the Vikings as being very friendly.

The word ***dwell*** also changed under Norse influence. In Old English, the word meant 'to mislead, deceive or lead astray.' So it was a type of deception. But within Old Norse, the word ***dwell*** developed a sense of 'hinder or delay,' which kind of makes sense. If you lead someone astray, in the English sense of the word, you're hindering or delaying them, which is the Norse sense of the word. Well, that Norse sense of being hindered or delayed led to a sense of remaining in a particular place of a long period of time. So English borrowed this Norse meaning. And today, ***dwell*** no longer has its original English meaning of deception. It now has the Norse meaning of 'living in a particular place or making a home somewhere.'

Another word which changed under Norse influence was the incredibly common preposition ***with***. ***With*** is an Old English word, and Old Norse had a verison of the same word. But it might surprise you that in Old English, ***with*** didn't mean 'together or beside.' It actually meant the opposite. It meant 'against or opposed to.' In Old English, if you wanted to express the idea of being together, you used the word ***mid***, which still exists in a word like ***midwife***. Of course, if you with others, you were surrounded by them, and that led to the more common sense of ***mid*** as ***middle***. Both senses of the word ***mid*** were in common use in Old English.

But to express the idea of being against something, you might use the Old English word ***with***. The closest example of that original usage in Modern English is a phrase like 'have an argument with someone' – or 'two nations going to war with each other.' But ***with*** also has a sense of close proximity in those usages.

A better example can be taken directly from Beowulf. In one passage, the Beowulf poet described the churning ocean with the following line:

stréamas wundon sund wið sande

which is literally "streams wound sound with sand'

But it meant the 'sea currents were winding – the sound or sea was churning against the sand'

So how did ***with*** go from meaning 'against' or 'opposed to' to meaning 'together or beside?' Well, it was the Vikings. Again, the Vikings had their own version of that word. The sense of the word in Old Norse focused on that sense of close proximity, which we still have in that phrase 'go to war with someone.' If you are 'against something' or 'opposed to something', you often find yourself in conflict with it, and that means that you're in close proximity to it. So the Norse version acquired a sense of closeness and proximity. And that Norse meaning passed into northern English. And over time, that Norse meaning spread throughout the island, and it became the modern meaning of the word. And it eventually replaced the word ***mid***, which became more restricted to the sense of ***middle***.

So as you can see, the Old English language was undergoing lots of changes under Norse influence. New words were coming in. Sometimes they supplemented English words and provided synonyms. Sometimes they came in and changed the meaning of native words. And again, early on, most of that change was taking place in the north.

Over the past few episodes, we've focused on the new words which were coming in from Old Norse. But next time, I'm going to look more closely at how the Norse influence was changing the grammar and syntax of English. I haven't really discussed Old English grammar in any detail. So next time, we'll delve into that topic a little bit. And the changes which were taking place are actually very fascinating because we can actually see the origins of Modern English grammar start to emerge around this time in northern England.

So next time, we'll look at the how the Vikings beat up and battered the grammar of English. Until then, thanks for listening to the History of English Podcast.