

**THE HISTORY OF ENGLISH PODCAST  
TRANSCRIPT**

**EPISODE 73:  
POSSESSION, POWER  
AND CHECKMATE**

## EPISODE 73: POSSESSION, POWER AND CHECKMATE

*[Hello, everyone. This is Robin Pearson from the History of Byzantium podcast. My show is a continuation of the narrative of the History of Rome podcast. The later Roman Empire that stretches on into mediaeval time is called the Byzantine Empire to distinguish it from the Rome that Julius Caesar knew. You as a lover of the English language may think of the word byzantine as ‘characterized by elaborate scheming and intrigue, especially for the gain of political power,’ which, to be fair, is not a bad description of the narrative of my podcast. So, if dramatic scheming by entertaining characters sounds good, check out the History of Byzantium, but for now, stay tuned to the History of English podcast.]*

Welcome to the History of English Podcast - a podcast about the history of the English language. This is Episode 73: Possession, Power and Checkmate. In this episode, we’re going to explore connections between possessions and power, especially political power. And no king of the Middle Ages exemplified that connection better than Henry I. So, we’ll also explore the events of Henry’s reign. We’ll see how much he valued his possessions, and we’ll see how he made sure to collect every penny that was owed to him. And speaking of possessions, this was also a period during which the English language was starting to change the way it indicated possession. So, this time we’ll explore those various aspects of possession and power.

But before we begin, let me remind you that the website for the podcast is [historyofenglishpodcast.com](http://historyofenglishpodcast.com). And you can always reach me directly by email at [kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com](mailto:kevin@historyofenglishpodcast.com).

Also, a quick thanks to Robin from The History of Byzantium podcast for the introduction. If you want to learn everything you need to know about the Eastern Roman Empire, be sure to check out Robin’s podcast.

So, with that, let’s turn to this episode about possessions and power. I thought it might be a good idea to begin this episode with the golden rule – ‘Treat others as you want them to treat you.’ It’s sage advice from the oldest religious traditions. But in 1965, the American comic strip *The Wizard of Id* gave us a comical and perverse take on the golden rule. In the comic strip, a king addresses his subjects from the balcony of his castle. He tells them that the kingdom needs peace and harmony and that they all need to live by the golden rule. This statement is met with some confusion by those standing in the crowd. And a peasant asks, ‘What the heck is the golden rule?’ to which another observer replies, ‘Whoever has the gold makes the rules.’

This twisted take on the golden rule has survived, and it’s actually become a common saying in English. But this 1965 comic strip is the first known use of that phrase. So the saying ‘whoever has the gold makes the rules’ is a relatively new phrase, but it’s not a new idea. It’s probably as old as the golden rule itself. And it’s the ultimate theme of this episode – the connection between possessions and power, especially political power. In fact, the link between possessions and power is so fundamental that both words come from the same root. The word *possession* is a French word that entered English after the Norman conquest. It’s based on the root word *possess*,

and *possess* comes from the Latin word *potis*, which meant ‘potent or powerful.’ And in fact, the words *potent* and *power* also come from that same Latin root. So *potent*, *power* and *possess* are all cognate. So in that history we see the fundamental link between possessions and power. I should also note that the Indo-European root that gave us the words *possession* and *power* also produced the Persian word *pasha*. That word meant a high-ranking power official, and it ultimately passed to the Ottoman Empire, where it was widely used. So, between *possession*, *power* and *pasha* we see that there is historical truth to the saying ‘Whoever has the gold makes the rules.’

The same idea can also be found in the ultimate roots of the word *prince*. Today, we tend to think of *prince* as the son or grandson of a king or queen, so it’s someone below the king in power and authority. This idea goes back to the early 1600s in Britain, when that title was given to the sons of the king. But before that, the word *prince* was really synonymous with the king himself. It was another term for the primary leader of a country or region. We still see that original sense in older phrases like ‘the Prince of Peace’ in reference to Jesus or ‘the prince of darkness’ for Satan. So, if we look closely at the word *prince*, we can see that it once referred directly to the king or sovereign. *Prince* comes from Latin via French. It has the same Latin root as words like *prime*, *primary* and *principle*. In fact, we can hear the word *prince* in *principle*. So, the prince was the first or primary leader. And when that word passed into Middle English, it still had that original meaning.

But let’s look a little closer at that Latin root. The original Latin version of *prince* was *princeps*. The ‘p’ sound at the end was dropped every time, and *princeps* became *prince*. That development took place within French, but if we go back to that original Latin word *princeps*, we have to keep in mind that the letter C was always pronounced as a ‘K’ in Latin. So, in Latin the word was pronounced as /prinkep/. It was originally a combination of two separate roots. *Prin* meant ‘first,’ and it surely is the same root as *prime* and *primary*. But what about the second part – ‘kep’? Well, it has the same Latin root that gave us words like *capture* and *captive* and *catch*. The root word was actually *capire*, and it meant ‘to take’. So, the prince or *princeps* was literally the primary taker – the person who took possession before everyone else. So, once again, “he who has the gold makes the rules.”

So, in the linguistic connection between words like *power*, *possession* and *pasha*, and words like *prince*, *catch* and *capture*, we see that possessions can lead to power and the person with the most possessions can have the most power.

No one in mediaeval England understood this connection more than Henry I – the youngest son of William the Conqueror. As we saw last time, Henry secured his position as the King of England after he fended off a challenge from his brother Robert who was the Duke of Normandy. Henry was a grand administrator who understood the power of money and property, and during his reign he expanded the English bureaucracy in part to ensure that his tax collectors could collect every penny that was owed to his government. In the past couple of episodes, I’ve alluded to the fact that Henry understood that fundamental link between money and power. When his father, William the Conqueror, was lying on his deathbed, he decided to divide his realm between his sons. The eldest son Robert got Normandy. The middle son William Rufus got

England. So, there wasn't a kingdom to leave to Henry as the youngest son. Instead, he got money – 5,000 pounds of silver. And I noted that Henry made sure that he got his full share, because he proceeded to count every penny while his father was lying on his deathbed. A few years later Henry was hunting with his brother William Rufus in the New Forest when William Rufus was struck by an arrow and killed. So what did Henry do? Well, he left his brother on the ground and headed straight for the treasury at Winchester. He understood a very basic idea – whoever has the gold makes the rules, and three days later Henry was crowned as the King of England.

We have another story from Henry's early life that sheds light on his personality. The 18<sup>th</sup> century story where Thomas Carte wrote about a trip that Henry and his brother Robert made to the King of France shortly before their brother William died. Carte wrote that Henry was playing a game of chess with the king's son Louis. They were playing for money, and Louis kept losing to Henry. After a while Louis lost so much money to Henry that he got upset and he started cursing at Henry. He said that Henry was the son of a bastard, and he threw the chess pieces at Henry. But Henry retaliated. He grabbed the chessboard, and he hit Louis over the head with it. He then proceeded to batter Louis with the chessboard until Robert finally stepped in and broke up the fight. We are told that Louis was left bloody on the floor, and he would have been killed by Henry had Robert not intervened.

I mentioned this story for a couple of reasons. First, it shows young Henry as a skilful chess player using his skills to win money from the French king's son Louis. But I also mentioned this story because it shows that the game of chess was popular in the royal courts of Europe. And there is an interesting parallel between the game of chess and the themes we have been exploring. The game of chess was a microcosm of medieval society. It featured a king, and knights, and bishops, and castles. It also featured pawns who represented peasants. By the way, there was no queen yet. The piece that later became queen was actually considered an adviser or minister to the king during this period. So each piece represented a specific social class.

It was a game of strategy and it mirrored the strategy of warfare. One player captured or took possession of an opponent's pieces, and the ultimate object was to capture the opponent's king. The game actually ended when the king had no other options but capture. The size of the pieces represented the relative status of those roles in the medieval society. So, the king was the biggest piece – the most important. The pawns or peasants were the smallest pieces. And military terminology was even incorporated into the game. When troops were arranged on a battlefield, each line of soldiers was called a rank. So, troops were arranged in successive horizontal ranks. But they were also aligned one soldier behind the other. So from front to back each vertical line was called a *file*. So, the foot soldiers were ranged in ranks and files. And that created the term *rank-and-file* to describe the common foot soldiers in an army. And that term has been expanded over time to refer to common people. Well, that same terminology was used on the chessboard. The horizontal lines were called ranks and the vertical columns were called files.

So, in many respects, the game was a symbol of mediaeval warfare and, to a certain extent, even a symbol of mediaeval society. Young nobles were encouraged to learn the strategies of chess, and it became very popular among the nobles.

Chess actually has its origins in India several centuries earlier. The original chess pieces had different meanings in the original game. So, the bishops were originally elephants, and the knights were originally horses. In fact, they are still represented by horses in the modern game. The game spread from India to Persia, and then to the Arab world, and then into parts of Europe around 9<sup>th</sup> or 10<sup>th</sup> century. In medieval Europe, the pieces were altered to reflect the culture and society of Europe. So the elephants became bishops, and the horses became knights. And the pieces that once represented chariots were changed to rooks meaning a tower or castle.

Originally, the popularity of chess in Europe was confined to a handful of nobles, but then the First Crusade took place. Remember that Henry's brother Robert was the Duke of Normandy, and he left Normandy to fight in the First Crusade. Well, when those knights returned to Europe from the Middle East, many of them brought the game of chess back with them. And the game exploded in popularity over the next couple of centuries even among the rank-and-file in Europe.

So what does this discussion of chess have to do with our theme of possession and power? Well, just about everything. Do you remember how the Turkish word *pasha* meaning a high official is cognate with *possession* and *power*? And do you remember how the word *prince* or *princep* meant the 'first taker,' and it is cognate with words like *capture* and *captive*? Well, the word *chess* is derived from the word *shah*, which was the Persian word for king, and it is ultimately derived from an Indo-European root word that meant 'power.' So, chess is a game of capture and taking possession, and it's derived from words that meant power and king.

I noted that the game of chess began in India. And as we know, a large part of India spoke Indo-European languages. There was an Indo-European root word that meant 'power' or 'gain power'. And it was pronounced something like /tke/. And that word passed into Persian as *shah*, and *shah* meant 'king' in Persian. In fact, the title of Shah existed as recently as 1979 when the last shah of Iran was deposed. I noted earlier that the Turkish also had this word *pasha*, which meant 'a high-ranking official.' Well, there is a link between *shah* and *pasha*. *Pasha* is actually a compound word. It combines that root we looked at earlier that gave us *power* and *possession* with this word *shah*. So, *pasha* is literally 'the powerful king.'

So, as the game of chess spread from India to Persia, the Persians called the piece that represented the king 'the shah.' The goal of the game was to capture the shah, or at least to hem the shah in and give him no other option but capture. So, when one player attacked the other player's king or shah, they would call out: *Shah mat!* And when the shah was hemmed in and couldn't escape, they would yell: '*Shah mat!*' which literally means 'the king is helpless' in Persian. So, '*Shah mat!*' became the call of victory. As the game spread into Europe, the word *shah* passed through Latin as *scaccus*, and then into French as *eschec*. And that winning call of '*Shah mat!*' became '*Eschec mat!*' or '*Checkmate!*' So, the word *shah* meaning 'king' evolved into the French word *eschec*. And that word passed into English as *check*. But the plural form of *eschec* was *eschies*. So, the various pieces on the board were called the *eschies*, and that word passed into English as *chess*. And that became the name of the game itself in English. Of course, the other version of the word *eschec* passed into English as *checkers* – a variation of chess, that's commonly known as *draughts* in the UK.

So, that's how we got the words *chess* and *checkers* from the Persian word for 'king' and ultimately from the Indo-European root word for 'power'. So in chess you acquire power over your opponent by capturing or taking your opponent's pieces and ultimately by capturing or trapping the opposing king. If a king lost his pawns and rooks and knights, he was left vulnerable. So, chess was the ultimate game of capture and possession. And since the word *chess* originally meant 'shah' or 'king,' we once again see the connections between possessions, power and kingship.

And as we know, Henry I of England was well aware of those connections. And he was very familiar with the game of chess, to the extent of beating his opponent with a chessboard itself, if necessary. But Henry was actually playing a larger game of chess – a real-life game. When William Rufus died in the New Forest, he took possession of the treasury. Then he took possession of the crown. Then he fended off a challenge from his brother Robert by marrying Edith – an Anglo-Saxon princess. That gave him support in England. So these were all calculated moves. One move led to the next. And what was the ultimate goal? Well, checkmate!

Whether or not Robert over in Normandy realised that, he was playing a real-life game against Henry. And Henry was winning the game one strategic move at a time. Henry had outmanoeuvred Robert in England, and he had essentially stolen the English crown right out from under Robert. And we know that Henry was always looking to increase his possessions, so he wasn't going to be satisfied until he had Normandy as well. So the game of chess continued.

Henry tried to undermine Robert's position in Normandy. He paid bribes to the barons in Normandy and also the barons in the neighbouring provinces. He encouraged them to challenge Robert's rule. Those barons had their own grievances against Robert, so Henry gave them support and encouragement. Normandy soon fell into rebellion and anarchy. It was another strategic move by Henry.

In the year 1105, five years after Henry became the King of England, he crossed the Channel to intervene in Normandy. He campaigned in Normandy for a while, but there was never a conclusive battle, so Henry returned to England. But the next year Henry decided to head back across the Channel. And this second trip was intended to be a full conquest of Normandy.

Henry arrived in Normandy and met with the barons who supported him. Henry's forces actually included a lot of Anglo-Saxon soldiers who had travelled and supported Henry. In the late summer of 1106, Henry's forces confronted Robert's forces at a castle near the town of Tinchebray south of Bayeux. A great battle ensued, and Henry emerged victorious. Robert was hemmed in after the battle, and he couldn't escape. It was checkmate.

Of course, a game of chess would have ended at that point, but since this was a real-life game of chess, Robert was captured and placed in prison. Henry then put down the remaining resistance, and he captured the rest of Normandy. It was a complete victory. Henry now had possession of England and Normandy, and he also had possession of his brother Robert. And he never let Robert go. Robert spent the next 28 years in prison until he finally died at the age of 80 in the year 1134.

The net result of all of this was that Henry had reunified the two realms that his father had once governed. It should be noted that many Anglo-Saxons considered the victory over Robert to be revenge for their loss at Hastings back in 1066. They considered it to be an English victory over the Normans. Of course, that was a bit of a stretch because the English king Henry was very much a Norman himself. But it shows how much Henry was embraced by the English people during his reign.

Of course, Henry may have been accepted as an English king, but he spoke French just like most of the other nobles. And French influence was still very heavy in England. And the reunification of England and Normandy ensured that that French influence would continue to flow into England.

So, this was actually an important development for the English language. Had Henry not conquered Normandy, he would have just ruled England. And it's very possible that the Norman influence in England would have weakened and started to disappear. The Norman aristocracy in England may have been assimilated much more quickly, but this reunification with Normandy delayed that process. The nobles and aristocrats in England continued to embrace French influences because they were once again subjects of a combined Anglo-Norman realm. And that realm would remain unified for another century. So Henry's victory over Robert may have been seen as the English victory over the Normans, but ironically, it was really a victory of French over English. It ensured that English would continue to be relegated to second-class status in England. And arguably, it was relegated to third class, behind both Latin and French. So while some Englishmen may have cheered the victory, it ensured that their native language would have no official status for the foreseeable future. Under Henry all official scribes in England wrote in Latin. And by the end of the century, French was also being used, but English continued to be relegated to merely a spoken language.

Within Henry's court professional scribes produced all kinds of official documents. They wrote down charters and writs and other official correspondence. The office expanded quite a bit after the Norman conquest, and it continued to expand during Henry's reign. The official writing office had once been part of the royal household during the time of Edward the Confessor, but by this point, it had grown so much that it had become an independent department called the royal chancery.

Now, Henry was regarded as a great administrator. He expanded the bureaucracy, and he was a diligent tax collector. And all of that bureaucracy required lots of paperwork. So during Henry's reign, the chancery had to expand to produce all of that paperwork. When Henry took office, there were two scribes. By the end of his reign, the number had doubled to four. We know that those scribes were producing lots of documents because a lot of them have survived the centuries. From the time of Henry's father – William the Conqueror – there are about 300 surviving royal actions. But from the period of Henry's reign there are five times as many surviving actions. So, from 300 a few years earlier to around 1500 during Henry's reign.



I noted that the office that produced these documents was called the *chancery*. And the name of that office has some interesting etymology. It was a French term, and like most French terms, it came from Latin. The ultimate Latin root meant ‘lattice’ – the crisscross material used for screens and barriers and such. The word *lattice* also came in from French around this time, but it’s ultimately a Germanic word that came from the Franks or some other Germanic source. The native Latin word was *cancelus*. So, the Romans used that word *cancelus* to refer to lattice or latticework. And during the Roman period, it was common to use lattice barriers to separate part of a church or court. The attendants or ushers were typically stationed behind those lattice barriers. So that type of attendant became known as a *cancellarius*, literally ‘a keeper of the barrier.’ As we know, in the standard French of Paris that hard ‘k’ sound of the letter C shifted to a ‘ch’ sound at the beginning of many words. So a *cancellarius* evolved into *chancellor* or *chancellor* in Old French. And *chancellor* is still used as a term for specific government offices in parts of Europe. Within England the term evolved into the office of the attendants who kept official documents, thus producing the word *chancery*. So the chancery was the office of public records, but it literally meant ‘the attendants behind the lattice barriers.’

Now, I noted that the original Latin word for lattice was *cancelus*. And that root also produced another English word – the word *cancel*. When scribes wanted to delete some part of a document, they would mark through it with crisscross marks, sort of like we do today when we write an X over something to mark it out. Since those crisscross marks resembled lattice, they used that Latin term for lattice, which was *cancelus*. And that produced the English word *cancel*. And since *cancel* retains the hard ‘k’ sound at the beginning, we know that that version of the word came in with the Normans. Remember that the Normans didn’t make that sound change at the beginning of words; they retained the hard ‘k’ sound. So, we ended up with Norman *cancel* and French *chancellor* and *chancery*.

So the chancery was an important office during the reign of Henry I. In fact, it was one of the two main offices during Henry’s reign. The other was Henry’s auditing and tax collection office because of course Henry would have an office to calculate and collect every penny of tax that was owed to him. The office itself may have existed in some form prior to Henry, but Henry developed it into a tax collecting machine. It really came into its own during his reign, so Henry is typically given credit or blame for the office. For a king who had shown a propensity to count every penny before he became king, it was no surprise that he continued to do so after he became king. And for a king who loved the art of capture and power in the game of chess, it’s probably no surprise what this office was called. It was called the *Exchequer*. And *exchequer* is the French word for ‘chessboard.’ So, let’s look a little closer at that office and that name.

As I noted, the Exchequer was basically Henry’s tax collection office. Over the time, it became somewhat synonymous with the treasury, but the Exchequer was a distinct department early on. Twice a year the sheriffs and royal officials from the shires were called to Westminster. They had to bring their money with them to be checked and counted. The income was audited and the taxes were determined and collected.



Now, this seems straightforward, but we have to keep in mind that Western Europe was still using Roman numerals. The Arabic numerals that we use today hadn't been adopted yet. In fact, there is an interesting parallel between Arabic numerals and chess. Both were invented in India around the same time, and both passed to Persia around the same time, and then both passed to the Arab world, and then to Europe. But by this point, chess was becoming very popular in Europe, but those Arabic numerals were not. Europeans, and in particular the English, were still using those older Roman numerals.

One of the big problems with Roman numerals is that there was no zero. But Arabic numerals did have a zero, and that's one of the reasons why Arabic numerals became so popular over time. It was much easier to do complicated math with a zero. By contrast, Roman numerals were bulky and difficult to work with. Even simple arithmetic would be challenging with those numerals. So Henry's auditing and tax collection office had to find another way to do all of that math. One way to do it was to use an abacus, but the other way was to use a chequered cloth that resembled a chessboard. And that's what the office of the Exchequer used. Using this grid pattern, each of the boxes represented specific amounts of money – pounds, shillings and pence. The auditors would use counters to keep track of the amounts being added. The counters were sort of chips on a gaming table, so the auditors could add counters or chips to a stack and then they could move them around to keep track of the amounts being audited. Since this auditing cloth was chequered and resembled a chessboard, the office became known as the Exchequer, which meant 'chessboard' in French. So, *chess*, *checkers* and *Exchequer* all derive from the game of chess, and all ultimately come from that Persian word *shah* meaning 'king'.

Now when the office of the Exchequer audited the various sheriffs of England, they 'checked' their accounts. And that sense of the word *check* also comes from the game of chess. The goal of chess was a check as in checkmate. It meant that the other player couldn't move his king, so his movement was restricted, and it also meant the end of the game. So from this usage in chess, the word *check* came to mean 'a sudden stoppage.' And from there, it came to mean 'a way of stopping or preventing something.' A bank check was a check or stop against forgery or fraud. And that gave us the word *check* as in a way of paying for something. You might write a check to pay a bill. The word *check* also passed into English in the phrase 'checks and balances,' which meant 'a check or stop against someone's actions.' Sometimes you have to make a brief stop to report in. You might stop and report in at the doctor's office for a 'check-up.' You might stop and report in on your way out of a store or hotel; that's the 'check-out.' Of course, that process of reporting to someone is sometimes called the 'check-in.' This sense of reporting to someone led to the sense of the word *check* as an audit, or report, or observation. You might 'check on' somebody to see how they are doing. And a teacher might 'check your work' to make sure you did your homework correctly. Sometimes a person doing the check-in had a list to go by to make sure that everything on the list was completed correctly. That was a 'checklist.' And as the person went through the list, they would put a little mark beside each entry to make sure that the entry was completed. Those marks became known as 'checkmarks.'

So, all of these senses of the word *check* go back to the French word *eschec*. So Henry's office of the Exchequer forced sheriffs to 'check in' to have their accounts 'checked' using a

‘checkerboard’ or ‘chessboard.’ That way, Henry made sure he got every penny that was owed to him. And it also extended his authority over the sheriffs by expanding the bureaucracy and making them keep proper account.

It's also interesting to note that two main offices in Henry's reign were named for things with crisscross patterns. The Chancery was named after lattice, and the Exchequer was named after a chessboard. The other connection between those two departments is that they show the importance of writing and literacy in Henry's court. When the Exchequer checked or audited all of those accounts, the results were recorded on long rolls of parchment. Those rolls resembled pipe, and they came to be known as the pipe rolls. For the first time since the Roman occupation, government accountings were written down and maintained for posterity.

So from all of this, we get a sense of how Henry governed England. He was a diligent administrator and record-keeper. He was also a very effective tax-collector. He recognised the importance of money. And he made sure that his government did everything it could to collect every single penny that was owed to it. The office of the Exchequer and all of those annual pipe rolls allowed Henry to maintain a firm grip on England's finances. Nothing was going to get by him. As a result, Henry was able to collect more and more taxes, and that meant larger revenues. By the end of Henry's reign, he was regarded as the wealthiest monarch up to that point in English history. In fact, he was the last king for the next 400 years to die without owing any debts.

Henry didn't let anything affect his wealth or the wealth of the country. Late in his reign, he discovered that many of the moneyers around the country were debasing the coinage. He had silver pennies shipped over to Normandy to pay his troops there, but the pennies were well below the required standard. So, Henry summoned all of the moneyers in England to come to Winchester at Christmas time and, when they arrived, each one was taken out one by one, and each one had his right hand and testicles chopped off. The message was clear – you didn't mess with Henry's money.

And Henry needed that money. He needed it to build castles, and he needed it to bribe barons and feudal princes back in France. Henry was also involved in a lot of wars in France, and he needed money to fund those wars and hire mercenaries. But in the year 1109, he needed that money for something else. He had emerged as such a rich and powerful king that the Holy Roman Emperor sought to make an alliance with him. And that meant a marriage alliance.

I mentioned last time that Henry had two children, and they were both given very common Norman names – William and Matilda. And in the year 1109, Henry agreed to a marriage between Matilda and the Holy Roman Emperor, who was also named Henry – Henry V, to be precise. So, Henry – the English king – had to come up with the money to pay that substantial dowry. Matilda's marriage to the Holy Roman Emperor was recorded in that sole surviving English version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle – the one that was being maintained at Peterborough. For the year of the marriage – the year 1110 – the Peterborough Chronicle contains the following entry:

This year sent the king before Lent his daughter  
Ðises geares sende se cyng toforan længtene his dohter

with manifold treasures over the sea  
mid mænigfealdan maðman ofer sæ.

and to the Kaiser she was given.  
7 hi þam Casere forgeaf.

So, Henry had to part with his daughter and many manifold treasures, and he wasn't accustomed to giving away his possessions. The entry for that year also tells us something else very interesting. As we know, Henry controlled England and Normandy. And to the south-west of Normandy was the French province of Anjou. And between Normandy and Anjou was a buffer zone called Maine. And both Normandy and Anjou claimed that region. But much like everything else, Henry controlled that buffer zone; he had his own earl there. But the chronicle tells us that the earl died in that year – 1110. And the Count of Anjou rushed in and took control of that region, essentially taking it away from Henry. And you can probably guess what came next. Henry headed to Normandy and went to war with the Count of Anjou. And he remained there through the following year.

By this point, the King of France was Louis, specifically, Louis VI. Remember him? He was the son of the prior French king – Phillip, and he was the one that got in a fight with Henry while playing chess at the French court when they were both younger. Henry had bashed him over the head with a chessboard and nearly killed him. Well, now Henry ruled England and Normandy, and Louis had succeeded his father as the King of France. And there was no love lost between those two rulers. And now, it was Louis's turn to play a little real-life chess against Henry. He formed an alliance with Anjou and also with Flanders. It was a three-way alliance against Henry – Flanders in the north-east, France in the south-east and Anjou in the south-west. But there was no checkmate. Warfare between Henry and his French rivals dragged on and on for much of the next nine years. And Henry increasingly spent most of his time in Normandy, trying to hang on to his possessions there.

As the battles raged on in France, the monks at Peterborough continued to maintain the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. And in the year 1116 we find an entry describing Henry's wars in France. But the entry concludes with the following:

In this same year was consumed by fire the whole monastery of Peterborough,  
On þisum ylcan geare bærnde eall þæt mynstre of Burh

and all the houses, except the chapel-house and the dormitory,  
7 eallæ þa husas butan se Captelhus 7 se Slæpperne

and therewith also all the most part of the town.  
7 þær to eac bærnde eall þa mæste dæl of þa tuna.

So, a large portion of the monastery at Peterborough was destroyed in a fire that also destroyed much of the town. And when the monastery burned, many of the manuscripts maintained there were lost. And that included the version of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle that was still being kept by the monks in English. So if that version of the chronicle was destroyed. How do we have it today?

Well, we don't actually have the version that the monks had been keeping. But thankfully, the monks didn't give up. They began to replace the manuscripts that had been lost, and they decided to continue the chronicle. They tracked down and borrowed a version of the chronicle from another monastery – probably from Canterbury. And then they copied it to recreate all that had been lost. It appears that a single scribe copied all of the entries around the year 1121, and he brought the entries up to date to that year. And based on the handwriting, it appears that each year after that the same scribe continued to add new entries until the year 1131. Then there was an extended break and another scribe added new entries to the year 1154, when the chronicle finally ended.

What is so fascinating about those particular scribes, is that they broke with some of the traditional Wessex writing conventions, and over time it appears that they wrote in their own vernacular. So these last few years of the Peterborough Chronicle captured the English language as it was changing from Old English to Middle English.

When the first scribe copied the entries from the borrowed chronicle around the year 1121, it appears that he generally maintained the language of that borrowed version. So the language remains very traditional in those pre-1121 entries. Then, when he started to compose his own entries after 1121, the language started to change. We'll look at some of these changes next time, but for now, I want to focus on some of those copied entries for the earlier years, specifically, for the year 1116 – the year the monastery burned. It appears that the scribe that copied that entry for that year may have added the language at the end about the fire at Peterborough. After all, that would make sense. A copy from Canterbury might not have bothered to mention a fire at Peterborough. But that fire was a big deal in Peterborough. So the Peterborough scribe may have added that part about the fire at the end after the copied part. And there is some linguistic evidence to support that theory because that sentence breaks from the Wessex standard in two places.

First, the scribe wrote that all of the monastery houses were destroyed, except for the chapel-house and the dormitory. In Old English, the word 'house' was *hus* (H-U-S), and it was an old noun that fell into a special class that had the same form for both singular and plural. So you could have one *hus* or several *hus*. So it was kind of like 'deer' and 'fish' – it didn't change in its plural form. So, when that scribe composed that passage, he used a new plural form – *husas*, literally 'houses'. So he used the plural ending with [-s], just like we do today. In fact, it's the same ending we use today. It was one of several plural endings in Old English, but it was rapidly becoming the primary plural ending. And here, we see a scribe using it for a noun that didn't normally take a plural ending at all. So, this is the first evidence of a change from many *hus* in Old English to many *houses* in Modern English.

This is also important because it confirms that Old English inflectional endings were breaking down. And in fact, they had probably already broken down in places like Peterborough. The scribe probably wrote that passage in his own dialect, since he composed it himself. And remember that there had not been any education in English for quite some time, so the scribe may not have even known that *husas* or ‘houses’ was grammatically incorrect at that time. But then the sentence shows another new development, and that development has to do with possession.

The scribe wrote that the fire burned ‘the most part of the town’ – ‘*þa mæste dæl of þa tuna.*’ The word *dæl* meant ‘part’ or ‘portion’. So again, he wrote that the fire destroyed ‘*þa mæste dæl of þa tuna*’ – ‘the most part of the town.’ Now, you say, ‘So what? That sounds perfectly fine!’ Well, it does today, but it didn’t really make sense in Old English, and that’s because Old English didn’t use the word *of* to show possession. So, you wouldn’t refer to a ‘portion of the town’ – you actually had to say ‘the town’s portion.’ In other words, you had to use an inflectional ending, not a prepositional phrase.

Now I know this gets confusing because today we can do it either way. If we want to show possession today, we can either add an ‘apostrophe S’ [-’s] to a word or we can use a prepositional phrase with the word *of*. So we can have a ‘hornet’s nest’ or a ‘nest of hornets.’ We can have a ‘country’s leader’ or the ‘leader of a country.’ We can have ‘God’s wrath’ or the ‘wrath of God.’ The ‘world’s population’ or the ‘population of the world.’ Of course, sometimes one construction works better than the other. For example, with people, we tend to use [-’s], so we refer to ‘Mike’s car,’ not the ‘car of Mike.’ But even though certain situations call for one version over the other, we generally have two different ways of expressing possession. But if we were to go back to Old English, things we’re quite different.

First of all, there was no apostrophe in Old English. The apostrophe wasn’t introduced until the 1500s. And the prepositional phrase using ‘of’ to show possession didn’t exist yet. If you wanted to show possession, you had to add an ending to word that had possession. Of course, we know that those endings are called ‘inflections’ or ‘inflectional endings.’ That was the way Old English worked.

Now, the actual endings for possession varied. It depended on whether the noun was considered a masculine noun, or feminine noun or neutral noun. It also depended on whether the noun was singular or plural. So sometimes the ending was ‘-e’ (/eh/) or ‘-a’ (/ah/), but the most common ending was ‘-es.’ That ending was used for masculine nouns and neutral nouns when they were singular.

So take the masculine word *man* (/mahn/) – the original version of our word ‘man.’ A ‘man’s home’ was *mannes ham*. A ‘man’s daughter’ was *mannes dohtor*. A ‘man’s ship’ was *mannes shipu*. But the ending was different for a plural noun. So, the ‘men’s ship’ was *manna scipu*. It took an ‘-a’ ending instead of an ‘-es’ ending.

But as we know, these endings started to break down and become simplified in late Old English. And part of this process was the simplification of all of those various inflectional endings for possession. All of those different endings merged into the very generic ‘-es’ ending. And that ‘-

es' ending is the original version of the ending that we still use today, and that we typically represent in writing with an [-'s]. So it is the original version of the '-s' ending in 'Mike's car' or the '-z' ending in the 'dog's collar.' And it's one of those few inflectional endings that has survived into Modern English.

So, what about that other option – the prepositional phrase using the word *of* – like the 'leader of the pack' or the 'window of the building,' or as the scribe wrote, 'the most part of the town'? Well, that type of phrase to show possession wasn't found in Old English because the word *of* didn't indicate possession. The word *of* is an Old English word, and today it can be used in a lot of different ways. But originally, it had a very limited meaning. It meant 'from' or 'away' or 'away from.' So it was often used to indicate where somebody was from. So you might say 'William of Normandy,' which was literally William from Normandy. And Leofric of Mercia meant Leofric from Mercia. So it represented a point of origin.

I should also note that the word *of* actually produced the word *off* ('o-f-f-). And *off* first appeared as a distinct word around this point in our overall story of English. *Off* began as just another way of spelling *of*. Sometimes you spelled it 'o-f,' and sometimes you spelled it 'o-f-f.' But I noted that the word *of* meant 'from' or 'away' or 'away from.' So it could have a passive sense, and it could have an active sense. You might be 'of' Normandy, meaning you were 'from' Normandy in a passive sense. Or you might 'leave of' from Normandy to travel to England. So that had a more active sense. And that distinction produced the difference between 'of' and 'off.' So, whereas before, you might have said that 'The leaves fell of the tree' – meaning 'from the tree,' now you would say, 'The leaves fell off the tree.' So *off* acquired an active sense of something in motion. So today, you might 'jump off a cliff' or 'break off a relationship' or 'drive off the road.' So *off* has that active sense. By contrast, the word *of* tends to have a more passive sense – 'peace of mine', 'time of year', 'tired of waiting.' And of course, in its original sense in Old English, the word *of* was used to describe a location – a point of origin. So, we had 'William of Normandy' and his son, 'Robert of Normandy.' But you didn't use the word *of* to show possession.

So, when the Peterborough scribe wrote that a fire burned the 'most part of the town,' he was doing something very unusual, at least for traditional Old English. But it must not have been unusual in his local dialect. This is actually further evidence that Old English inflectional endings were being confused and disappearing. A few words earlier, he had written *husas* instead of *hus*, so he put a generic '-s' ending on a word that wasn't supposed to have it. And here, he dropped the traditional ending used to show possession, and he used a prepositional phrase instead. Both of those changes show a move toward Modern English.

But the question remains, why did the scribe use the word *of* to show possession. Well, we know that that construction became common in English over time, so this scribe wasn't just making it up. He was reflecting the way people were speaking at the time. And it appears that people were starting to use *of* to show possession for a couple of reasons.

First, since the word *of* referred to a point of origin like ‘William of Normandy,’ it came to have a sense of belonging or ownership. ‘William of Normandy’ was from Normandy, and in a sense, he belonged to Normandy. He was part of Normandy. So, he was ‘Normandy’s William.’ And it’s believed that the use of the word *of* to show possession may have come out of that use to show a person’s place of origin.

But there was also another factor at work at the same time. And if you guessed that that other factor had something to do with French, you would be correct. French showed a person’s place of origin in much the same way as English, except French used the native word *de* and English used the word *of*. So ‘Robert of Normandy’ in English would be ‘Robert de Normandy’ in French. So the two words worked the same way. In this context, French *de* and English *of* meant the same thing, and *de* was translated with the word *of* in English.

But in French, *de* was also used to show possession. There was no inflectional ending for possession in French. So, in French, I wouldn’t say ‘Mark’s house’ or ‘Mark’s *maison*.’ I would say ‘la maison de Marc,’ literally the ‘house of Marc.’ And I wouldn’t refer to ‘William’s car’ – or *voiture*. I would say ‘la voiture de Guillaume,’ literally ‘the car of William.’ And with that heavy influence of French in the 1100s, this type of construction was passing into English, and it was being embraced by some English speakers. So English started to mimic French. And *of* was extended to show possession in the same way that French used *de*. But we couldn’t see that development before now. Very few documents were being composed in English, and the ones that were being composed used the traditional Wessex dialect. But now, in the entry for the year 1116 in the Peterborough Chronicle, we have a scribe who was writing in his own local dialect, and we see a new form of English emerging.

That entry for 1116 contains one other interesting tidbit. In describing Henry’s battles in France, the scribe wrote that Henry was engaged in *wyrre*. That’s the word *war*. And it’s the oldest surviving use of the word in the English language. We’ve actually seen that word before. It’s a Norman French word that was now starting to pass into English. It was originally a Germanic word that had been borrowed into Late Latin. It had an initial ‘w’ sound that was common in Germanic languages at the time, but was very unusual in Late Latin and French. So this was one of those words that was pronounced with an initial ‘g’ sound in the Romance languages. So it gave us French *guerre* and Spanish *guerrilla*, as in a ‘guerrilla war.’ But the Normans were ultimately a Germanic people from Scandinavia. So they had no problem pronouncing that initial ‘w’ sound. So the version that passed into English was the Norman version – *war*. And English borrowed the word again as *guerrilla* in the 1800s from Spanish.

One other quick note about that word *war*. The traditional Latin word for ‘war’ was *bellum*, which we still have in a word like *antebellum* meaning ‘before the war.’ It also shared the same root as words like *belligerent* and *bellicose*. But *bellum* was very similar to the Latin word *bello*, which meant ‘beautiful.’ And one theory is that Latin speakers dropped the word *bellum* for ‘war’ because they didn’t want to use a word for ‘war’ that sounded like ‘beautiful.’ And since they were in constant conflict with the Germanic tribes at the time, they borrowed this Germanic word which became *war* in English. Interestingly, the word *war* is cognate with Old



English words like *worse* and *worst*. So, within the Germanic languages, all of those words had to do with bad things.

As the word *war* came in, most of the native Old English words for war disappeared. That included words like *wig*, *guð*, *heaðo* and *hild*. The word *winnan* also meant ‘war’ in Old English, and it survives as the word *win* (‘w-i-n’). So the meaning of *win* changed over time as the word *war* became the more dominant word in English. By the way, the word *battle* was another French borrowing, but it didn’t come in for another century or so.

Now, speaking of war and battles, Henry continued to be consumed with his wars in France as he fought against the triple alliance that had been formed by the French king Louis. But as we know, Henry was a great chess player. He had beaten Louis at chess before when they were both young men. He had beaten Louis both figuratively and literally. And now he was going to try to do it again.

Henry’s first move was to break up the triple alliance. He approached the Count of Anjou in the southwest and offered to marry his son William to the Count’s daughter. By the way, her name was Matilda. Apparently that was the only popular female name during that period. So in May of 1119, Henry’s son William married the Angevin Matilda. And Anjou broke its alliance with the French king Louis.

Later in that year, Louis tried to invade Normandy with a small force. But Henry intercepted Louis’s forces at a place Brémule in eastern Normandy. A battle ensued, and Henry’s forces routed Louis’s forces. So was it checkmate for Henry? Well, not according to Louis. The historian John of Salisbury reported that, during the battle, the fighting was so close that one of Henry’s knights was able to grab the bridle of Louis’s horse. The knight yelled out, “The King is taken.” But according to the story, Louis grabbed his sword and struck the knight, knocking him to the ground. Louis then yelled out in French, “Don’t you know that in chess, the king is never taken?” And technically, Louis was right. A game of chess ends when the king is trapped, before he is actually captured. But in this case it didn’t matter. Henry won the battle, and that victory effectively ended the ongoing war between Henry and Louis.

For the following year – the year 1120 – the Peterborough Chronicle records the following:

This year were reconciled the King of England and the King of France  
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In order to make a peace with Louis, Henry had to swear an oath of homage or loyalty to Louis. Remember that the Duke of Normandy was technically a vassal of the French king. But Henry wasn’t willing to do that, He was a king in his own right. So, in that year – 1120 – Henry named his son William as the Duke of Normandy, and he let William pay homage to Louis. It was a technicality, but it worked.

So everything was looking up for Henry. England was stable and well-run. His expanded bureaucracy was generating a lot of revenue for the crown. The wars in France appeared to have been settled. His daughter was married to the Holy Roman Emperor. And his son was married to the daughter of the Count of Anjou. His son was also invested with Normandy, and he was Henry's clear successor. So, Henry was probably very optimistic late in the year 1120 as he and his son William headed back to England. But fate played a cruel trick on Henry.

Henry and his son William boarded their respective ships, and they set sail for the English coast. Young William was just 17 years old, and the ship he boarded was called the White Ship. Just off the coast of Normandy, the White Ship struck a rock, and it started to sink. Almost all on board the ship drowned, but William was able to get on a small lifeboat. And it looked like he would survive the disaster. But he decided to turn back to rescue some of the people who were fleeing the sinking ship. The lifeboat was suddenly swamped, and it also sank into the water. Henry's only son William drowned in the water off the coast of Normandy.

As Henry sailed back to England, he was unaware that the White Ship was lost at sea. After arriving in England, his messengers brought him the bad news. By all accounts, Henry was absolutely devastated by the loss. Though Henry lived for 15 more years, it is said that he never smiled again. It was an obvious personal loss, but it was also a political loss. William was his only legitimate son. An orderly succession was dependent on William surviving Henry.

Next time, we'll look at the period after 1120 as Henry desperately tried to avoid a succession crisis and anarchy. Those efforts involved having his daughter Matilda named as his successor, thereby making her the first queen to rule England. But as you may know, those efforts largely failed, and a period of anarchy did follow Henry's death.

These events were captured in the continuation of the Peterborough Chronicle. As these events played out, the Peterborough scribes recorded them in their own local dialect. And those final entries in the Peterborough Chronicle are considered some of the earliest examples of Middle English.

So, next time we'll look at these developments through the language of the Peterborough Chronicle. And in many ways, this next episode represents the formal beginning of the Middle English period.

So, as we turn our attention to a new period of English, let me thank those of you who have supported the podcast over the years by making donations and by writing reviews on iTunes. Those donations allow me to dedicate more time to the podcast and to produce episodes more frequently. So I welcome that support, and I look forward to exploring the Middle English period with all of you.

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