# The History of the English Language

## The Beginnings of English

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# Sir William Jones

Our understanding of the history of English began at the end of the 18th century when **Sir William Jones**, a British judge who lived in India, began to study **Sanskrit**. This is a very old language of India, and at the time was used in Indian law. Like others before him, Jones noticed many **similarities** between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and other European languages. For example:

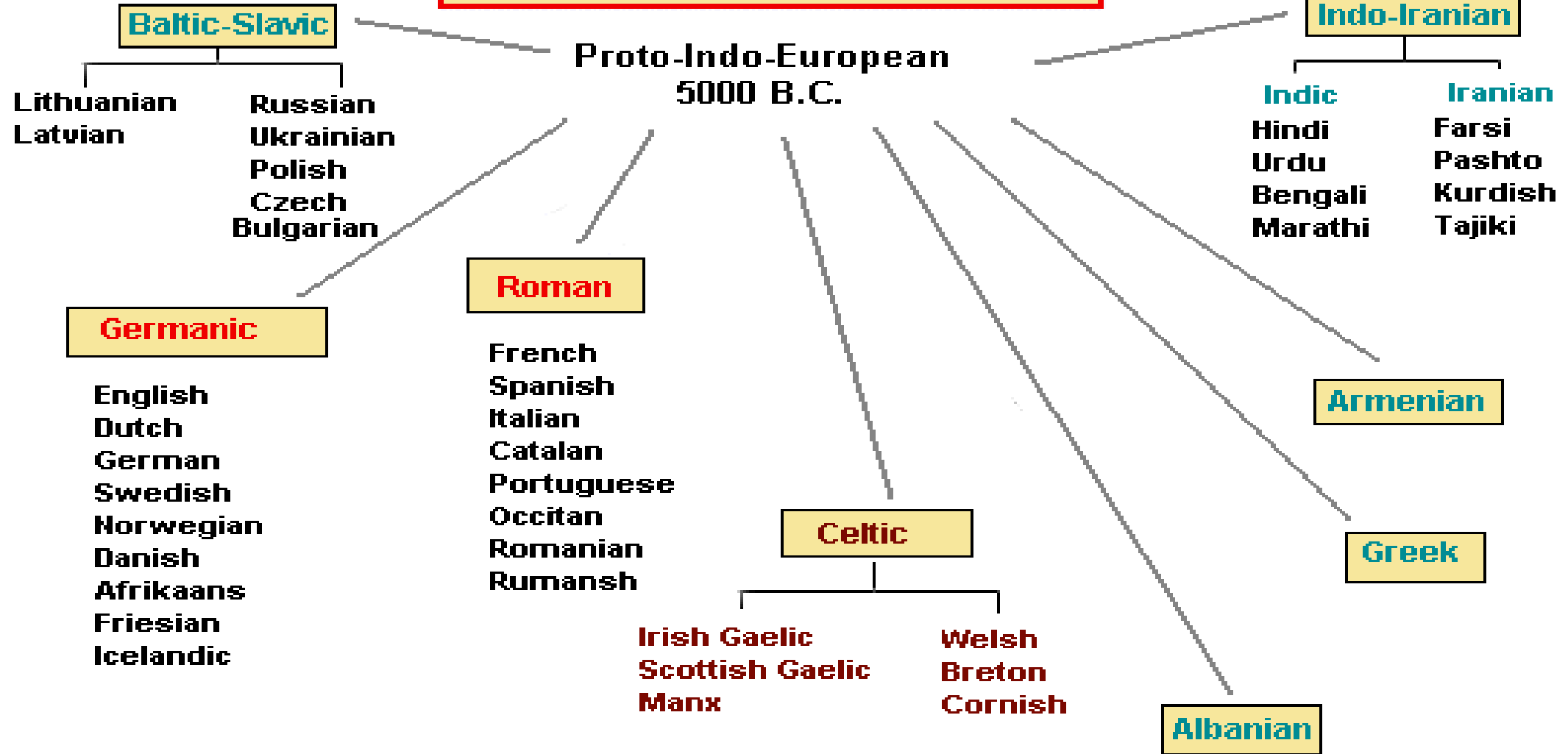| **Sanskrit** | **Latin** | **Greek** | **English** |
|---|---|---|---|
| pitr | pater | pater | father |
| matar | mater | matr | mother |

# The Indo-European Family

People had thought that Latin, Greek, and all European languages came from Sanskrit, but Jones disagreed. In 1786 he wrote that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin all came from a 'common source', which had perhaps disappeared.

There was a lot of interest in his idea and other people began to study these three languages. Their work proved that Jones was right. We now know that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, and many other languages all belong to one enormous 'family' of languages called **the Indo-European family**.

Jones's 'common source' from which all these languages developed is now known as **Proto-Indo-European**.

# The Indo-European Family

**Proto-Indo-European 5000 B.C.**

## Baltic-Slavic

Lithuanian
Latvian

Russian
Ukrainian
Polish
Czech
Bulgarian

## Germanic

English
Dutch
German
Swedish
Norwegian
Danish
Afrikaans
Friesian
Icelandic

## Roman

French
Spanish
Italian
Catalan
Portuguese
Occitan
Romanian
Rumansh

## Celtic

Irish Gaelic
Scottish Gaelic
Manx

Welsh
Breton
Cornish

## Indo-Iranian

**Indic**

Hindi
Urdu
Bengali
Marathi

**Iranian**

Farsi
Pashto
Kurdish
Tajiki

## Armenian

## Greek

## Albanian

# The Kurgans

It is thought that a group of people called the **Kurgans** spoke this language, or dialects of it, and lived in what is now southern **Russia** from some time after 5000 BC. In about 3500 BC the Kurgans probably began to spread west across Europe and east across Asia.

As groups of Kurgans traveled further and further away from each other, they began to develop stronger differences in their dialects. With the passing of time, these dialects became **different languages**. When some of them (**the Greek** and **Indo-Iranian languages**) appear in written form from about 2000 to 1000 BC, they are clearly separate languages.

# The History of the English Language

| Type | Event | Language | Date |
|---|---|---|---|
| Old English | Celt Migration | Celtic | 200 BC |
| | The Roman Occupation | Latin | 43-410 AD |
| | Germanic Settlements | Anglo-Saxons (runes) | 449 AD |
| | Viking Invasions | Old Norse | 787-1000 century |
| Middle English | Norman Invasion | Old French | 1000-1500 century |
| Early Morden English | Renaissance Mixing | French, Latin, Greek, Italian | 1500-1800 century |
| Late Morden English | Empire Imports | Different Languages | 1800- present |

# Old English

- **The Celt Migration- Celtic- (200 BC)**

- **The Roman Occupation- Latin -(43 -410 AD)**

- **The Germanic Settlements- Anglo-Saxons (runes)- (400 century)**

- **The Viking Invasions- Old Norse- (787-1000 century)**

# The Celt Migration

The **Celts** were the first group of Indo-European speakers to move across Europe. In 200 BC, they began to leave their homeland north of the Alps in central Europe. They went to the Black Sea, Turkey, south-west Spain and central Italy, the whole of Britain, and Ireland.

As they traveled, **different dialects** of their language developed. The Celts who settled in Turkey spoke Galatian, those in Spain spoke Celtiberian, and those in France, Italy, and northern Europe spoke Gaulish. The Celts who went to Ireland and later Scotland spoke Goidelic (Gaelic) and those who went to southern England and Wales spoke Brythonic (or British).

# The Roman Occupation
## AD 43 -410

In AD 43 the **Romans** invaded Britain. They remained there for almost 400 years, and almost all of what is now England came under their control. They introduced a new way of life and a new language – **Latin**.

**British Celts** in the upper classes and the towns became used to life with laws and police, roads, baths, and theatres. Some learnt to speak and write Latin. However, a new language did not develop from Latin in Britain.

# The Germanic Settlements

From the middle of the 3ʳᵈ century AD, the Romans grew weaker and weaker as **the Germanic peoples** of northern Europe invaded more and more Roman lands. In AD 410 the Romans finally left Britain. Without the Roman army to guard it, the country was in danger from other invaders.

In AD 449, the **Jutes** and **Angles** from **Denmark** came and settled in eastern Britain. In 477 the **Saxons** from **Germany** came and settled in southern Britain. They were called **the Anglo-Saxons** in what is now called **England**.

These **three Germanic peoples** were very different from the Romans. The Romans had governed the British Celts, but they had not taken their lands. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons came in larger numbers and they settled on the lands belonging to the British Celts.

# The Seven Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms: England

**Three Germanic peoples** slowly organized themselves into **seven kingdoms:**

1. **Northumbria**
2. **Mercia**
3. **Essex**
4. **East Anglia**
5. **Wessex**
6. **Kent**
7. **Sussex**

They were often at war but no single kingdom was able to conquer the others.

# The Four Main Dialects of Old English

**The old English** language changed and took in words from other languages. There were four main dialects of Old English (the Anglo-Saxons):

1. **West Saxon**
2. **Kentish**
3. **Mercian**
4. **Northumbrian**

The dialects had **small** differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation.

# The Germanic Settlements: The Anglo-Saxons

Unlike other invaders, the Anglo-Saxons kept their own language and did not learn the language of the British Celts. They did not take many Celtic words into their dialects either; only about **twenty** Celtic words are found in Old English.

The names of some English cities, **London** and **Leeds** for example, are Celtic. Different Celtic words for river also survive in the river names, like **Thames** is Celtic which means dark river.

# Runes of the Anglo-Saxons

Most Anglo-Saxons could not read or write, but those who could write used **runes**. These were letters, which had been used by the Germanic people since about the 3rd  century AD. They were cut into stone or weapons and were often used to say that someone had made or owned something.

# Augustine

The arrival of Augustine and about forty monks in 597 brought changes to Anglo-Saxon life in Britain and to Old English. They had come from Rome to teach the Anglo-Saxons about **Christianity**.

Although Christianity was not new in Britain, this was the first organized attempt to make the people of Britain Christians. Augustine and the monks were welcomed in Canterbury in the southeast by King Aethelbert of Kent and Queen Bertha, who was a Christian. By the end of the seventh century all, the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms were Christian.

# The Entrance of Latin Words in OE

The monks built churches and taught poetry, Greek, and Latin as well as Christianity. As a result, a number of **Latin** words entered Old English: about 450 appear in Old English literature.

Some were about the life of the church: for example, **munuc** (monk) and **scol** (school). Others were words for things in the house: **fenester** (window) and **cest** (chest). Some verbs from Latin were **spendan** (to spend), **sealtian** (to dance), and **tyrnan** (to turn).

# England as the Center of Learning

At first, the monks wrote only in Latin, but then they began to write in old English. This was unusual: people in other northern European countries did not begin writing in their own languages until much later.

Learning spread and flowered among the Anglo-Saxons, and by the eighth century England was a center of learning in western Europe.

# OE alphabet

Old English has no silent letters, so you should pronounce every letter in a word. For example, the letter **h** in **hring** (ring) was pronounced. Here are the letters in the Old English alphabet:

| A a | Æ æ | B b | C c | D ð | Ð ð | E e | F f |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| a | ash | be | ce | de | eth | e | eff |
| a | æ | b | c | d | ð | e | f |
| [a/a:] | [æ/æ:] | [b/v] | [k/tʃ] | [d] | [θ/ð] | [e/e:] | [f/v] |
| E ʒ | h h | I ı | L l | M m | N n | O o | P p |
| yogh | há | i | ell | emm | enn | o | pe |
| ʒ (g) | h | i | l | m | n | o | p |
| [g/ɣ/j/ʤ] | [h/ç/x] | [ɪ/i:] | [l] | [m] | [n/ŋ] | [o/o:] | [p] |
| R ſ | S ſ ſʒ | T τ | U u | P p | X x | Y ẏ | Þ þ |
| err | ess | te | u | wynn | eks | yr | thorn |
| r | s | t | u | p (w) | x | y | þ |
| [r] | [s/z] | [t] | [u] | [w] | [ks/xs/çs] | [y/y:] | [θ/ð] |

# The Vocabulary of OE

The vocabulary of Old English was almost completely Germanic. Much of it - about 85 percent - has disappeared from Modern English and replaced with **Latin** or **French** words.

However, many of the words in Modern English that are most often used come from Old English. A few examples are: **the**, **and**, **can**, and **get**. Other words in Modern English that come from Old English are for very basic things and ideas. Some examples are **mann** (person), **cild** (child), **hus** (house), **etan** (eat), **slsepan** (sleep).

# The Vocabulary of OE

Other words which survive from Old English are names of places. The Anglo-Saxons used **ford** for a place where a river can be crossed, **ham** for village, **ton** for farm or village, and **wic** for house or village. These words survive in many names, for example, **Oxford**, **Birmingham**, **Brighton**, and **Warwick**.

Some Modern English names for the days of the week come from the names of Anglo-Saxon gods and goddesses. **Tuesday** is named after **Tiw**, **Wednesday** after **Woden** (both gods of war), **Thursday** after **Thunor** (god of thunder), and **Friday** after **Frig** (goddess of love).

# The Structure of the Words in OE

Like other Indo-European languages, Old English made new words by putting **two other words together**. For example: **boccradft** (book-skill) meant literature; **sunnandaeg** (sun's day) meant Sunday.

Old English also made new words by **adding letters before or after the main word**. For example: **gдn** (to go) became **ingдn** (to go in), **upgдn** (to go up), and **ьtgдn** (to go out). The word **blıd** (blood) became **blıdig** (bloody), and **blind** became **blindlice** (blindly).

# Nouns and Pronouns in OE

Nouns also changed their endings for the **plural**: for example, **guma** (man) became **guman** and **stдn** (stone) became **stдnas**.

Nouns had **three genders**, and adjectives and articles changed with the gender of the noun. However, many of the possible changes to words did not happen in practice.

There were more personal pronouns than in Modern English. For example, there was **hine** (him), **him** (to him), **hi** (her) and **hire** (to her). **Him** also meant **to it** and **to them**. There were also the pronouns **wit** meaning **we two**.

# Verbs in OE

**Verb** endings changed, too. The past tense of most verbs was made by changing a **vowel** in the present tense, so **sing** changed to **sang**, for example.

In Old English, there were about twice as many of these **irregular** verbs as there are today. The past tense of regular verbs was made by adding the endings -**de**, -**ede**, or -**ode**. For example, the past tense of **cnyssan** (to push) was **cnysede**, and the past tense of **lufian** (to love) was **lufode**

# The Vikings Invasions
## (from Denmark, Norway, and Sweden)

In the 8$^{th}$ century, Britain was visited by the **Vikings**. From 787 they came in many small groups and they stole gold and silver from towns and churches on the north coast. In 793 and 794, they destroyed Lindisfarne and Jarrow, two very important Christian centers of learning in the north-east of England.

In 850, a large Viking army took London and Canterbury, and so war began which continued until 878. Then King Alfred (the Anglo-Saxon king of Wessex from 871 to 899) won an important battle and made an agreement with the Vikings to separate England into two parts. After that, the northern and eastern part, known as the Danelaw, was controlled by the Vikings, and the rest of England was controlled by **King Alfred**.

# Alfred the Great

## King of Wessex 871-899

# The Achievements of King Alfred

In order to bring back the centers of learning that had been destroyed, **King Alfred decided to make English, not Latin, the language of education and literature.** So at the age of forty, he learnt Latin and began translating books into Old English. He described his plan in these words:

*Therefore, it seems better to me... that we should also translate certain books, which are most necessary for all men to know into the language that we can all understand, and also arrange it... so that all the youth of free men among the English people... are able to read English writing well.*

# The Achievements of King Alfred

Later he had other books translated into Old English. One of these was **Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum** (The History of the English Church and People), which had been written in about 731 by a monk in Northumbria called **Bede**. This is the most important source of information about early English history that we have.

In the translation, and in other early English writings, we begin to see the word **Englisc** (English) used to describe the people and the language.

# The Achievements of King Alfred

King Alfred also started **a history** of England in English: **The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle**. This was written by monks in different parts of the country. It described what had happened in the past in England, and also happened every year at the time of writing. **It was the first chronicle in Europe that was not written in Latin**.

Most of the Old English works that have survived were written after King Alfred's death. One of the greatest writers was a monk from Wessex called **Alfric** (955-1010). He wrote many Christian works and a guide for young monks called **Colloquy**. This was written in Latin as a conversation between a teacher and a student, and it is important for two reasons. It tells us a lot about the daily life of monks and ordinary people, and it also tells us a lot about Old English, because in one copy someone has written the Old English words above the Latin words.

# Beowulf
## The Greatest Poem in the Literature of OE

Beowulf is an Old English epic poem that is considered one of the most important works of Anglo-Saxon literature in the 8th century.

The poem tells the story of Beowulf, a heroic warrior from Scandinavia, who comes to the aid of the Danish king Hrothgar. Hrothgar's kingdom is plagued by a monstrous creature named Grendel, who has been terrorizing the Danes for years. Beowulf bravely confronts Grendel and later faces other challenges, including Grendel's mother and a dragon.

# A Short Piece of Beowulf

**Old English (Anglo-Saxon):**

Hyrde ic þæt þa æþelingas ellen fremedon,

Oretmecgas, ond for aræd fæste,

Wæpn ond gewædu. Him on witan fæðm

 Weorðode þæt swurd, þæt him Wyrd ne gescraf

**Modern English Translation:**

I have heard that warriors performed noble deeds,

 those battle-brave men, and stood firm in courage,

 with weapons and clothing. A treasure which fate had not destined

 to be a deadly weapon nor broadsword for them

# The Simplification of OE

In the Danelaw, the Vikings and the English were able to communicate quite well, because their two languages, Old Norse and Old English, were both Germanic.

 One effect of this was that **Old English became simpler**. Many of the different word endings disappeared. **Plural endings** became simpler as the **-s** ending was more widely used, and many verbs that used to change their vowel to make **the past tense** now began to take the **-de** ending instead.

# The Entrance of Old Norse Vocabulary into the Old English Language

Another result was that thousands of words from Old Norse (ON) entered Old English (OE). Between four and five hundred remain in use today, with hundreds more in the dialects of northern England and Scotland. We can see that the speakers of the two languages lived together closely because the Old Norse words that came into Old English are words from everyday life - words for the house (**window**), parts of the body (**leg**, **neck**), and common verbs (**get**, **take**, **want**).

There are also many words beginning with **sk-** like **skin**, **skirt**, and **sky**. Others are: **bag**, **die**, **egg**, **husband**. In some cases, both the Old Norse and Old English words for the same idea were used. For example, there was **wish** (OE) and **want** (ON), and **sick** (OE) and **ill** (ON).

# The Entrance of Old Norse Vocabulary into the Old English Language

The Vikings also left their mark on place names. More than 1,500 places in northern England have Scandinavian names. Over 600 end in **–by**, which means town (for example, **Whitby**). Others end in **-thorpe**, which means small village (for example, Scunthorpe). Modern family names that end in -**son**, like **Johnson** and **Davidson**, also come from the Vikings.

The Old Norse **verb ending -s for the third person singular in the present tense** began to be used. The Old Norse **they**, **their**, and **them** slowly replaced the English **hi**, **hire**, and **hem** in the following centuries.

# The Beginning of the Hastings Battle

Battles between the Vikings and the English continued in the 10th century. From 1016 to 1041, England had Danish kings, who were then followed by an English king, Edward. When Edward died in 1066, Harold, the leader of Wessex, was chosen to be the next king. However, William, one of Edward's cousins, said that Edward had promised that he would become king of England.

William was the leader of Normandy in northern France. He decided to take an army to England and fight Harold in the Battle called Hastings.