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The Origins of Old English to 800 A.D.[†]

Pre-history of England and the Celtic Settlements

By the best available estimates, the land we now call England had been inhabited for 50 to 250 thousand years before the recorded history of the English-speaking peoples. Paleolithic man roamed the area when the North Sea was only a minor river and when no channel separated England from the Continent. Neolithic man from the Mediterranean with his polished and ground stone implements, his agrarian interests, his domesticated animals, and his rituals of burial lived in these lands from ca. 5000 B.C. The Stone Age lasted in this region until ca. 2000 B.C., and the Bronze Age settlements continued probably to ca. 500 B.C. The early Celts made their way to this land in the last centuries of the Bronze Age and remained the chief population through the early centuries of the Iron Age in England.

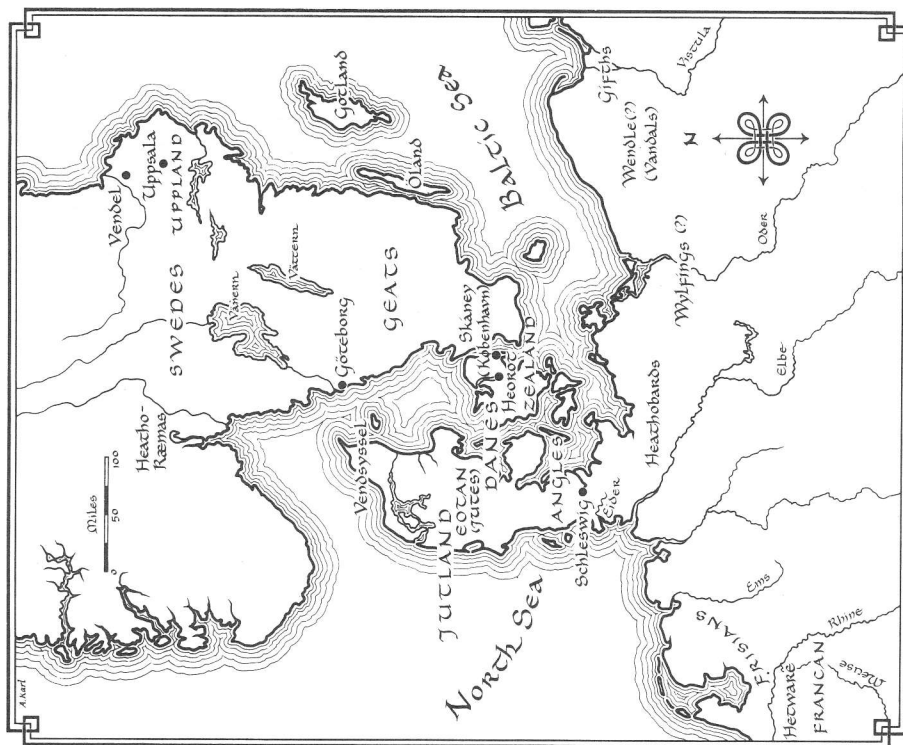
By the time of Christ, Celtic peoples lived not only in England, but also had migrated throughout many other parts of western Europe. Although, as far as we know, the Celts had no single name for England, early Latin writers referred to these western lands as "Britannia" ("island of the Bretons"). The Celts lived in small groups or tribes of kinsmen without the larger political unity necessary for a nation or empire. The language of the Celts in England, near kinsmen of the Celts in Gaul, was probably first Gaelic and then later Brittonic, from which Welsh, Breton, and Cornish derived.

Roman Occupation of England

In 55 B.C. and again in 54 B.C., Julius Caesar invaded the Celtic lands in England, not necessarily to conquer the islands, but perhaps to retaliate for the British fellowship with the Gallic Celts who had fought him on the Continent. Neither invasion was successful even though Caesar established his forces for a time in the southeast and demanded tribute which the Brittonic Celts never paid. Not until 43 A.D. did the Romans

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This brief review of the Old English language and peoples is extensively indebted to Albert C. Baugh, *A History of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Appleton, 1957). For additional material on the internal and external history of Old English, see Henry Alexander, *The Story of Our Language* (1940; rpt. New York: Anchor, 1969); Otto Jespersen, *Growth and Structure of the English Language*, 9th ed. (New York: Anchor, 1955); Samuel Moore and Thomas A. Knott, *The Elements of Old English*, 10th ed. (Ann Arbor: Wahr, 1965); John Nist, *A Structural History of English*, (New York: St. Martin's 1966); Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*, 2nd ed. (New York: Harcourt, 1971); and Stuart Robertson and Frederic G. Cassidy, *The Development of Modern English*, 2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N. J.: Prentice-Hall, 1954).



(After Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf*)

Map from *Medieval English Literature*, edited by J. B. Trapp, vol. I of *The Oxford Anthology of English Literature*. Copyright © 1973 by Oxford University Press, Inc. Original version of map first appeared in Fr. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 3rd ed. Reprinted by permission of Oxford University Press, Inc., and D. C. Heath & Co.

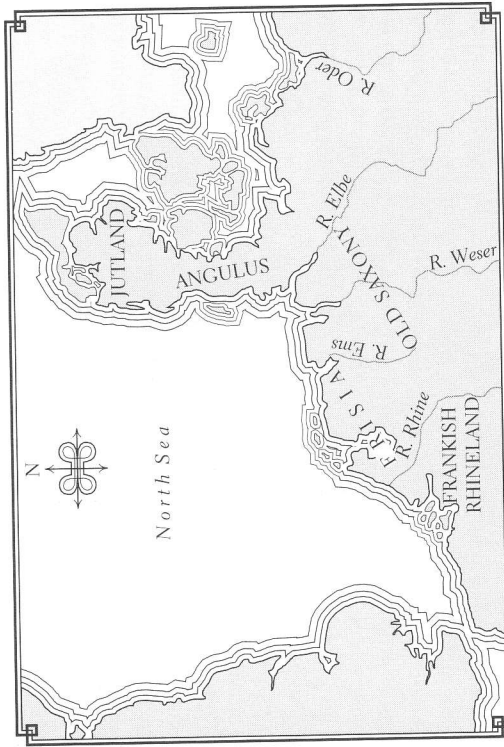
under Emperor Claudius seriously attempt to occupy Britannia. Between 78 and 85 A.D., the Roman governor of Britain, Agricola, completed the conquest of the southern and midland Celtic populace; however, the Roman forces never entirely overcame the Celts in the northern mountains and in the far western land of Wales, where many Celts had retreated in the face of Roman advances. The Roman occupation was challenged from time to time from the North and from the West; for instance, in the second century the Celts from the North revolted and pushed the Romans south of the Humber River. In reaction, after the northern Celts were driven back, the Emperor Hadrian came to England and constructed "Hadrian's Wall" (73 miles long) from Wallsend on the Tyne River to the head of the Solway Firth, ca. 121–27 A.D., a line of fortifications which helped the Romans defend themselves later against the Picts.

By the end of the fourth century, the Roman rulers had begun to recall their military forces from the frontiers of the Empire to help defend the homeland from the increasing hostility of the Germanic tribes on the move, kinsmen of the Teutons who would settle in England from the second half of the fifth century. The Angles, Saxons, and Jutes (*L. Iuti*) shared a common Germanic history and culture with other migratory peoples who challenged Roman sovereignty in western Europe, with tribes such as the Goths, Vandals, Franks, and Danes.¹

By ca. 410, the last of the Roman legions were recalled from Britannia and left the British Celts without protection from their own kinsmen in the North and West. With the end of the Roman sovereignty in England and with the British Celts weakened militarily after over three centuries of Roman occupation, the Gaelic Scots (Irishmen) from the West and the Britannic Picts from the North began to encroach upon the Celtic dominance south of the Humber. For a narrative account of what then happened in Britain, we have Venerable Bede (673?–735) to thank for his history of these times in his *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*.

Germanic Invasions

In his Latin work written in 731, Bede relates that the Celtic chieftain Vortigern offered the Germanic Jutes the island of Thanet in exchange for military support against the Picts and the Scots. The Jutes, led by the brothers Hengest² and Horsa, came in force and fulfilled their obligation to the Celts, but they decided to stay and settled in Kent and on the Isle of Wight. This first Germanic tribe to occupy part of England seems to have come from the Frankish Rhineland and



The continental homelands of the Germanic invaders

(From Ralph Arnold, *A Social History of England*)

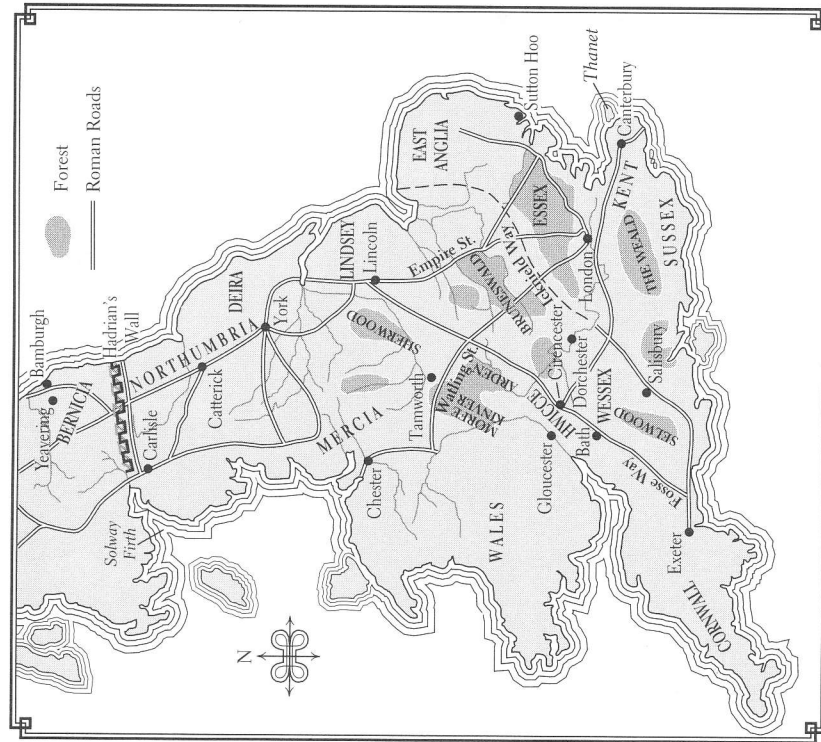
was closely related to the Frisians, many of whom had joined with the Jutes in their military adventures.

Within a generation, the Saxons came to England in great numbers and settled in Sussex by 477 and in Wessex by 495. The mythic King Arthur from Wales supposedly helped fight off the Saxon advance to the West; in the fifth century, many Celts were driven into Wales and Cornwall and over to Brittany by the Saxons. These Saxons, sea-raiders of the English coasts from the fourth century, migrated from the area between the Rhine and Elbe Rivers.

Within another generation after the Saxon invasions, the Angles from South Denmark had invaded East Anglia and the midland between the Humber and the Thames. By 547 the Angles had set up yet another area of dominance in Northumbria. The tribal divisions of England and the European homes of the Germanic tribes are matters of scholarly opinion and should be understood as probable rather than historical locations. For instance, by the end of the fifth century both Saxons and Angles inhabited the midland regions in England. By the seventh century, the Anglo-Saxon heptarchy constituted the main political divisions of the land later named after the Angles: Northumbria, Mercia, and East Anglia populated by the Angles; Kent settled by the Jutes; and Essex, Wessex, and Sussex controlled by the Saxons. In the seventh century, Northumbria dominated politically; in the eighth century, Mercia; and in the ninth century, Wessex, first under Egbert (802–39), and then under King Alfred, who ruled the West Saxons and hence the heptarchy from 871 to 899.

1. Note how stories and figures from all these related Germanic cultures are interwoven in *Beowulf* [Editor].

2. He may be the same Hengest referred to in the Finn Episode in *Beowulf* (see pp. 19–22) and in the *Fight at Finnsburg* [Editor].



The English kingdoms at the beginning of the seventh century A.D. (From Ralph Arnold, *A Social History of England*)

The name "Anglo-Saxon" originally referred to Saxons in England as distinct from those on the Continent, but by the sixteenth century the term was used in reference to both the peoples and the language of England after the Germanic migration. In 601, Pope Gregory I referred to Ethelbert, the Jutish king, as "Rex Anglorum" ("King of the Angles"), and a century later Bede entitled his work *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum*. By the year 1000, the English people were often called "Angul-cynn" ("race of the Angles"). The word "Englisc" actually predates the term "Englaland" which came into use about 1000.³

Maps from Ralph Arnold, *A Social History of England: 55 B.C. to A.D. 1215*. Copyright © 1967 by R. C. M. Arnold, Barnes & Noble Books, New York. Reprinted by permission of Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., Penguin Books, Ltd., and Winant Towers, Ltd., for the Arnold Estate.

3. Baugh, p. 57.

Christianity in England

The Celts had their first contact with Christianity through the Roman occupation of the third century, before the Germanic invasions. Some of the Celts in the North and West remained Christian even after the Teutons settled in England in the fifth century. Irish missionaries from Iona in the Hebrides, a mission established in the sixth century by St. Columba to convert the Scots, helped to introduce the Northumbrians to Christianity through the work of St. Aidan and his missionaries from 635 to 655.

In 597, Pope Gregory I appointed St. Augustine, a Roman Benedictine monk, to convert the central and southern regions of England to Christianity. With some forty monks, Augustine first arrived in Kent at the reluctant invitation of King Ethelbert, who had married Bertha, a Christian Frankish princess. At the end of the sixth century, King Ethelbert was the strongest overlord in the lands south of the Humber. After Ethelbert granted Augustine some lands in Canterbury, Augustine began his work for which he was later called the "Apostle of the English"; within three months, the king himself became one of Augustine's first English converts to Christianity. By the end of the seventh century, almost all of the English had been converted by missionaries through the efforts of Aidan in the North and of Augustine's monks in the South. For centuries thereafter, the Germanic myths and pagan rituals survived barely beneath the surface of Christian philosophy and theology, with *Wyrd* ("fate, doom") and Providence often scarcely distinguishable.

The "Englisc" Language

The language that the Germanic tribes spoke at the time of their invasions of England sprang from a common language used by the early Teutonic peoples in prehistoric times. By the fifth century, the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes spoke dialects of the same language understandable in large measure by each of the tribes. Old English (OE), as the shared language is called, belongs to the low West Teutonic (Germanic) branch of the Indo-European family of languages. OE is related to the North Teutonic languages (Icelandic and the Scandinavian tongues, Danish, Norwegian, and Swedish), to the East Teutonic (Gothic, now extinct), and to other West Teutonic languages such as Frisian and Franconian. OE, like Latin and Greek, was a highly inflected, synthetic language in which person, number, and tense in verbs, and case, number, and gender in nouns, adjectives, and pronouns were established by adding special endings to words or by making internal changes in words. As is the case with modern German, the major method of word formation in OE was the compounding of base forms with one another or with affixes.

With the exception of place names, the British Celts contributed only a small number of words to OE, the language of their conquerors. The Latin influence upon the Germanic dialects when these tribes were on the Continent amounted to several hundred words. Although Latin contributed over six hundred words to the British Celts, very few of these words found their way from Celtic to OE. The greatest influence of Latin upon OE before the Norman invasion came about coincident with English conversion to Christianity, and with the subsequent introduction of philosophical, theological, liturgical, and administrative vocabulary used by the Roman Church in England. To the tenth century, OE dialects (Northumbrian, Mercian, and West Saxon) only reluctantly and sparingly borrowed from other languages, and even then usually only in vocabulary, with a few important exceptions from the Scandinavian languages.

Literature and Learning

Since the West Saxon dialect became the literary standard of OE in the eighth and ninth centuries, it is the dialect in which the vernacular literature is preserved. When they invaded England, the Germanic tribes apparently did not keep written records, but relied on a strong oral tradition for the transmission of their depository of literary and historical matters to later generations. Not until the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity with its use of the Roman alphabet and with its commitment to the preservation of written historical records do we have extant examples of OE vernacular. The earliest OE work extant is a code of laws promulgated by King Ethelbert, the first Christian King of the Jutes, ca. 600. Since nearly all OE works are preserved in copies compiled years after their composition, it is very difficult to ascertain a definite chronology for them and to testify to their authorship with certainty. The earliest and most important Germanic epic, *Beowulf*, was probably composed in the oral tradition at a time roughly contemporaneous with Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* in the first half of the eighth century.

From the end of the seventh century to the close of the eighth, York and Canterbury were the main centers of learning in England. Both Alcuin (735?-804), who established a school in the court of Charlemagne ca. 781, and Venerable Bede, who did his work in Northumbria, were from the school at York. The scholars at Canterbury spent much of their efforts in teaching Latin and Greek. Caedmon, who is our first known English poet, flourished ca. 670 at the Abbey of Whitby. Bede quotes a Latin version of Caedmon's "Hymn" in his *Ecclesiastical History*. *Widsith* also belongs to this early period of OE literature, ca. 650-700; in this poem of less than 150 lines, the scop, who is the "far traveller," describes his visits to famous

Germanic kings and praises their generosity in the gifts they gave him in return for his works. The chieftains looked to the poets in the oral tradition for the recording of their heroic deeds, thereby to attain immortality through succeeding generations who would marvel over the exploits of their ancestors.

From these works emerges a portrait of the Germanic tribes not very different from Tacitus' description of the continental Teutons in his *Germania*, written in 98 A.D. The Germanic traditions in the legal payments for offenses (such as the *wergild*, or "man-price," paid by a murderer to the bereaved family), in the composition of the society as a *comitatus*, or brotherhood of men who owed allegiance to a chieftain and expected his benevolence in return, and in the heroic ideal of excellence in kingly behavior form some of the basic tenets of the Old English society from the fifth to the eighth century. Even with this heroic ethic established, however, the atmosphere remains dark and ominous as heroic man struggles against the natural and supernatural forces that are perhaps malevolent or, what is worse, indifferent to his survival, honor, and nobility. Heroic literature, typified by *Beowulf*, at least held out the possibility of the dignity that comes alone from demonstrated skill and courage in struggles engaged in for the manly values of the community.

E. TALBOT DONALDSON

[Old English Prosody and Caedmon's Hymn][†]

All the poetry of Old English is in the same verse form. The verse unit is the single line, since rhyme was not used to link one line to another, except very occasionally in late Old English. The organizing device of the line is alliteration, the beginning of several words with the same sound ("Foemen fled"). The Old English alliterative line contains four principal stresses, and is divided into two half-lines of two stresses each by a strong medial caesura, or pause. These two half-lines are linked to each other by the alliteration: at least one of the two stressed words in the first half-line, and usually both of them, begin with the same sound as the first stressed word of the second half-line (the second stressed word is generally non-alliterative). The fourth line of *Beowulf* is an example:

[†] Adapted from *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, M. H. Abrams and others, eds., 3rd ed. (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1974), I, 18, 21-22. Copyright © 1974, 1968, 1962 by W. W. Norton & Co., Inc. Reprinted by permission of the publisher. For a more detailed discussion of Old English prosody see J. R. R. Tolkien's classic Prefatory Remarks to *Beowulf and the Finnesburg Fragment*, John R. Clark Hall, trans., ed. with notes and an introduction by C. L. Wrenn (London: Allen & Unwin, 1950).