

A Brief History of the English Language and the landmass we call England

Part 2: Old English

**John Gavin
Marist CLS
Fall 2025**

Last Week: Class #1

- 1. Language in general**
- 2. Two types of languages:**
 - a) Inflected languages:** lots of endings on nouns, adjectives, verbs,
 - b) Word order languages**
- 3. Language Families**
- 4. Prehistoric England**
- 5. Geography of England: same shape since Roman rule**

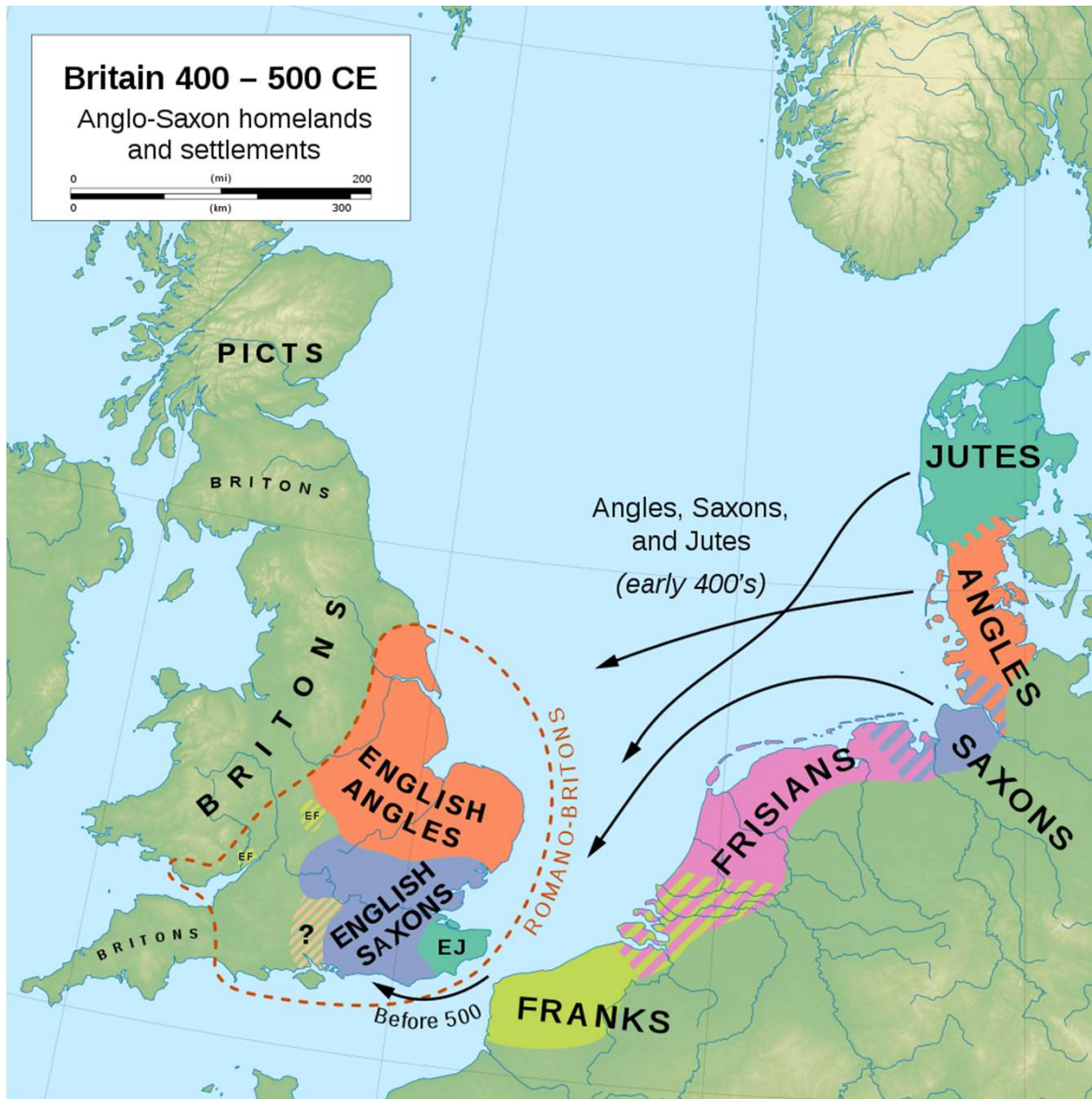
This is week 2 of 4 weeks

1. The landmass we call England before the English Language
2. Old English: 450 to 1150 AD. A foreign Germanic language.
3. Middle English: 1150 to 1500 AD. Looks sort of like Modern English.
4. Modern English: 1500 to 2025 AD. Why is English so difficult to learn as a second language?

No class next week: Jewish Holy Days!

Old English was an evolving **dialect** of Old German

- The Germanic people invaded and settled beginning around 450 CE
- No history of the Germanic Invasion and Settlement was written until **731 CE** by the **Venerable Bede**, a monk, who wrote in Latin.
 - ✓ What he wrote was treated as absolutely true until quite recently
- The settlers brought with them several languages (Old Saxon, Old Dutch, Old Norse, Old Frisian, ...) that evolved into the dialects of Old English
 - ✓ Could they understand each other?
 - ✓ No one really knows what their speech sounded like.
- Old English dialects were all German based.



The old accepted history.

The Invaders of England: 450 to 500

All speak Germanic Languages

Almost everything known about the Germanic invasions was written in 731 CE by a monk named the **Venerable Bede**, who wrote in Latin 300 years later.

Anglo-Saxon People and Language

A name invented by academics to describe the different Germanic invaders.

- **Angles**: lived in the Angel Peninsula in the north-east of today's Germany.
 - ✓ The Roman historian Tacitus called all the people in "England" Angles
 - ✓ Angles → English → England
- **Saxons** (also from Germany) settled as East Saxons, West Saxons, Middle Saxons and South Saxons → Essex, Wessex, Middlesex, Sussex
 - ✓ All these names are used in New Jersey
- **Jutes**: from Denmark
- WASP (1960s): White **Anglo-Saxon** Protestant

Characteristics of Old English

1. Germanic vocabulary: 85% has been lost in the last thousand years
2. Inflections / Word Endings: Nouns, verbs, etc. all have word endings (inflections), like Latin and many other languages.
3. Decoding a sentence: you use the Inflections / Word endings to understand the meaning of the sentence.
4. Grammatical Gender (not natural gender): actually not gender at all, but categories of nouns
5. Strange Foreign Alphabet: There are several letters that we are not familiar with that makes the written text look even more foreign.
6. Old English Dialects: West Saxon dialect dominated written Old English
7. But Latin dominated most written records of the period



Anglo-Saxon Dialects of Old English

Most written records are in West Saxon.

They could probably communicate if they tried very hard.

The dominant written language

Old English Evolves

- **Old English** belongs to the West Germanic branch of the Germanic languages, including **Old Frisian, Old Saxon, Old High German, and Old Dutch**.
- The **Anglo-Saxons in England were isolated** from the continent. The languages were mixing together. The Old Germanic languages gradually evolved into several **Old English Dialects**.
- The first written records in Old English that survive come from **700 AD** and were predominately written in the **West Saxon dialect** (Alfred The Great).
- All of “England” was Christianized by 700 CE
- The huge library at Bede’s monastery had perhaps 200 Latin books. Being able to read and write was an almost **magical skill**.

Major Historical Events in the Old English Period

- Start: 410 CE: the Romans leave England to protect the crumbling Empire
- **Germanic** groups raid and then settle England beginning in 450 CE (???)
- Former **Celtic** inhabitants of England were killed, enslaved, fled or blended in.
 - Celts remain in Wales, Cornwall, Scotland, Isle of Mann, Ireland and Brittany.
- **Vikings** raid (793 CE) and settle (866 – 878 CE). **Old Norse language**.
- England is **partitioned** between the Anglo-Saxons and the Vikings (865 CE).
- Vikings later invade again and became **kings of England**
 - 1013, **Sweyn Forkbeard** became the first Danish King of England. His son, **Cnut the Great**, held the throne until he died in 1035
- **1066: The Norman French invade, conquer and rule England**

Danelaw – 800 AD – Old Norse

Note how fragmented England is!

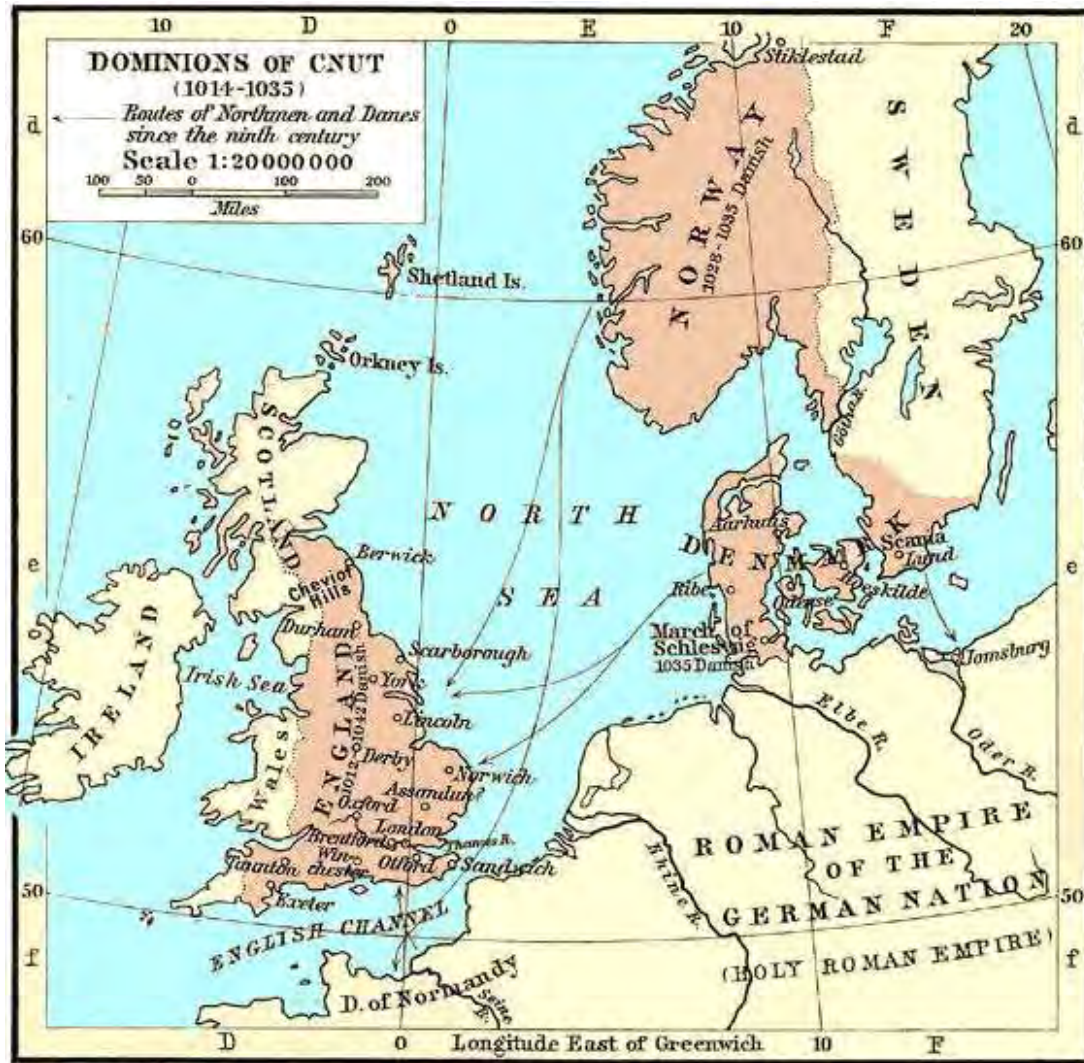
elts



Danelaw

Alfred The Great
Anglo-Saxon

Cnut's Land 1014 - 1035



Norse Kings of all England

- 1013 Sweyn Forkbeard
- 1016 – 1035: Cnut the Great
 - King of England, Norway and Denmark
- 1035 – 1040: Harold Harefoot
- 1040 – 1042: Harthacnut

Then back to the Anglo-Saxons

- 1042 – 1066: Edward the Confessor

Major Language Events in the Old English Period

- 700 CE: first written records that survive in **Old English**
 - ✓ **Latin** is the language of the Church and of scholarship
 - ✓ Vikings bring Old Norse with them.
 - ✓ **Old Norse** adds vocabulary to Old English
- Alfred The Great (849 – 899) revitalizes the use of **English** even for religious documents, as England is **partitioned** between English and Vikings
- Beowulf written in **Old English around the year 1000 CE**
- **1066: Norman French conquer and rule England. French and Latin dominate**
- English becomes a 3rd rate oral language of the peasants (the conquered)

**The most commonly used words in Modern
English come from Old English**

The 100 most used words in Modern English

- **93 are from Old English**
- **4 are from Old Norse**
- **3 are from Old French**

You can't create a sentence without using Old English words.

I'll list these 100 words on the next two pages.

The First Fifty Most Common English Words

about	get	make	say	time
all	give	man	see	to
also	go	many	she	two
and	have	me	so	up
as	he	more	some	use
at	her	my	take	very
be	here	new	tell	want
because	him	no	than	way
but	his	not	that	we
by	how	now	the	well

Black = from Old English

Red = from Old French

Blue = from Old Norse

The Second Fifty Most Common English Words

can	I	number	their	what
come	if	of	them	when
could	in	on	then	which
day	into	one	there	who
do	it	only	these	will
even	its	or	they	with
find	just	other	thing	would
first	know	our	think	year
for	like	out	this	you
from	look	people	those	your

Black = from Old English

Red = from Old French

Blue = from Old Norse

What the heck is the English Language?

- English is classified as a West Germanic language
 - ✓ Our **basic small words** come from Germanic languages
- But our vocabulary is **loaded** with words that came from French, plus Latin and Greek

Let the university professors argue about this!

We will now dip our toes into Old English

Modern English has a few inflections (word endings)

- d, ed to show that a verb is talking about the past.
 - I raked the leaves yesterday.
 - I talked to Jane yesterday.
- s, es to show that a noun is plural (more than one)
 - kings
 - Tomatoes,
 - arches, churches, latches, stitches
 - biases, dresses, grasses
 - Changes to the root of a noun: man – men, foot – feet
- Changes to the root of a verb: sing, sang, sung and man-men
- er, est: Comparative and Superlatives: fast, faster, fastest and large, larger, largest
- 's, s': endings that show possession. The Tom's backpack. The soldiers' formation.
- There are many exceptions: child – children, ox – oxen, brother – brethren

The young man happily gave the red ball to the beautiful baby.

- The young man: the **subject phrase** of the sentence (Nominative Case)
 - ✓ “the’ is a Definite Article
 - ✓ “young” is an adjective
 - ✓ “man” is a singular masculine noun
- happily gave: the **verb phrase**
 - ✓ “happily” is an adverb
 - ✓ “gave” is a singular past tense verb
- the red ball: **direct object phrase** (Accusative Case)
 - ✓ “the’ is a Definite Article
 - ✓ “red” is an adjective
 - ✓ “ball” is the direct object of the sentence (singular, neuter)
- to the beautiful baby: **the prepositional indirect object phrase** (Dative Case)
 - ✓ “to” is a preposition
 - ✓ “the’ is a Definite Article
 - ✓ “beautiful” is an adjective
 - ✓ “baby” is the indirect object (dative case): singular, gender neutral

Old English Declensions of Nouns (Word Endings)

Cases: **N**ominative, **G**enitive, **D**ative, **A**ccusative

Number: Singular and Plural plus Grammatical Gender

	Stone (masculine?)	Gift (feminine?)	Hunter (neuter?)
<i>Singular</i>			
N.	stān	gief-u	hunt-a
G.	stān-es	gief-e	hunt-an
D.	stān-e	gief-e	hunt-an
A.	stān	gief-e	hunt-an
<i>Plural</i>			
N.	stān-as	gief-a	hunt-an
G.	stān-a	gief-a	hunt-ena
D.	stān-um	gief-um	hunt-um
A.	stān-as	gief-a	hunt-an

Old English Adjectives

Old English *gōd mann* (good man) but *sē gōda mann* (the good man). The forms are those of the nominative singular masculine in the strong and weak declensions respectively, as illustrated below.

STRONG DECLESION				WEAK DECLENSION		
	<i>Masc.</i>	<i>Fem.</i>	<i>Neut.</i>	<i>Masc.</i>	<i>Fem.</i>	<i>Neut.</i>
<i>Singular</i> N.	<i>gōd</i>	<i>gōd</i> ¹²	<i>gōd</i>	<i>gōd-a</i>	<i>gōd-e</i>	<i>gōd-e</i>
G.	<i>gōd-es</i>	<i>gōd-re</i>	<i>gōd-es</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>
D.	<i>gōd-um</i>	<i>gōd-re</i>	<i>gōd-um</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>
A.	<i>gōd-ne</i>	<i>gōd-e</i>	<i>gōd</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-an</i>	<i>gōd-e</i>
I.	<i>gōd-e</i>		<i>gōd-e</i>			
<i>Plural</i> N.	<i>gōd-e</i>	<i>gōd-a</i>	<i>gōd</i>		<i>gōd-an</i>	
G.	<i>gōd-ra</i>	<i>gōd-ra</i>	<i>gōd-ra</i>		<i>gōd-ena or gōd-ra</i>	
D.	<i>gōd-um</i>	<i>gōd-um</i>	<i>gōd-um</i>		<i>gōd-um</i>	
A.	<i>gōd-e</i>	<i>gōd-a</i>	<i>gōd</i>		<i>gōd-an</i>	

Stange Letters in the Old English Alphabet

- makes Old English writing even more foreign looking -

- Thorn (**þ**): Represents the "th" sound (like in "thin").
- Eth (**ð**): Represents the "th" sound (like in "the").
- Wynn (**ƿ**): Represents the "w" sound.
- Yogh (**ȝ**): Represents sounds like "g", "ch" (as in Scots), or a consonantal "y".
- Ash (**æ**): Represents a short "a" sound, similar to the "a" in "cat".
- Ethel (**œ**): Represents a sound similar to the "oi" in "coil"

King **Æ**thelstan was the first king of all England, ruling from 925 to 939 AD

Old English Definite Article: THE

	SINGULAR			PLURAL
	<i>Masc.</i>	<i>Fem.</i>	<i>Neut.</i>	<i>All Genders</i>
N.	sē	sēo	ðæt	ðā
G.	ðæs	ðære	ðæs	ðāra
D.	ðæm	ðære	ðæm	ðæm
A.	ðone	ðā	ðæ	ðā
I.	ðȳ, ðon		ðȳ, ðon	

Old English Personal Pronouns

Number: singular and plural

<i>Singular</i>	N. ic	ðū	hē (<i>he</i>)	hēo (<i>she</i>)	hit (<i>it</i>)
	G. mīn	ðīn	his	hiere	his
	D. mē	ðē	him	hiere	him
	A. mē (<i>mec</i>)	ðē (<i>ðec</i>)	hine	hīe	hit

<i>Plural</i>	N. wē	gē	hīe
	G. ūser (<i>ūre</i>)	ēower	hiera
	D. ūs	ēow	him
	A. ūs (<i>ūsic</i>)	ēow (<i>ēowic</i>)	hīe

7 Classes of Strong Verbs: Strong means irregular

	Infinitive		Past Tense Singular	Past Tense Plural	Past Participle
I.	drīfan	(drive)	drāf	drifon	(ge) drifen
II.	cēosan	(choose)	cēas	curon ¹³	coren
III.	helpan	(help)	healp	hulpon	holpen
IV.	beran	(bear)	bær	bæron	boren
V.	sprecan	(speak)	spræc	spræcon	sprecen
VI.	faran	(fare, go)	fōr	fōron	faren
VII.	feallan	(fall)	fēoll	fēollon	feallen ¹⁴

Each of the 7 classes of verbs has many forms or conjugations.

Memorize, Memorize, Memorize.

Example of one Verb Conjugation: drifan (drive) with personal pronouns

	<i>Present</i>
ic	drīf-e
ðū	drīf-st (-est)
hē	drīf-ð (-eð)
wē	drīf-að
gē	drīf-að
hīe	drīf-að
	<i>Past</i>
ic	drāf
ðū	drif-e
hē	drāf
wē	drif-on
gē	drif-on
hīe	drif-on

Word Endings, aka Inflections

- Old English, Latin, French, German and Russian use lots and lots of word endings.
- The order of the words in the sentence is not critical. The endings (inflections) convey the meaning.
- Latin Example
 - ✓ Puella^a militem^m occidit^{it} (The girl killed the soldier)
 - ✓ Puellam^m miles^s occidit^{it} (The soldier killed the girl)
 - ✓ The word endings (inflections) drive the meaning
- Modern English uses word order (**subject-verb-object**), prepositions and auxiliary verbs to convey meaning

The prayer we'll look at

- The Lord's Prayer or the Our Father is a Christian prayer.
- I'm using it as an example because it existed in England in 1000 CE

Old English Prayer: with obsolete letters

1. Fæder ure þu þe eart on heofonum,
2. si þin nama gehalgod.
3. to becume þin rice,
4. gewurþe ðin willa,
5. on eorðan swa swa on heofonum.
6. urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us todæg,
7. and forgyf us ure gyltas,
8. swa swa we forgyfað urum gyltendum.
9. and ne gelæd þu us on costnunge,
10. ac alys us of yfele soþlice.

Written down around the year 1000 CE

Old English: I've substituted modern letters for the old obsolete letters

1. Fader ure thu the eart on heofonum,
2. si thin nama gehalgod.
3. to becume thin rice,
4. gewurthe thin willa,
5. on eorthan swa swa on heofonum.
6. urne gedaghwamlican hlaf syle us today,
7. and forgyf us ure gyltas,
8. swa swa we forgyfath urum gyltendum.
9. and ne gelad thu us on costnunge,
10. ac alys us of yfele sothlice.

Familiar words in blue.

Abbreviations on next pages

- **OE: Old English**
- **ME: Middle English**
- **MOD: Modern English**

Lines 1 and 2

OE **Fader ure** thu the **eart on** heofonum,

ME **Oure fadir** that **art in** heuenes

MOD **Our Father** who **art in** heaven,

Word order changes: “Fader ure” → “our father”

Spelling of father and heaven evolve. “on” changes to “in”

Old Fashioned Language

“**art**”

OE si thin **nama gehalgod.**

ME **halwid** be thi **name;**

MOD **Hallowed** be thy **name.**

“gehalgod” means “to make holy” → “halwid” → ‘hallowed’

Old Fashioned Language

“**Hallowed**”

“**thy**”

Lines 3 and 4

OE to become thin rice,

ME thi reume or kyngdom come to be.

MOD Thy kingdom come.

Old word “rice” (Reich) is replaced by “kyngdom”

In Middle English both “reume” and “kyngdom” are used

Old Fashioned Language

“thy”

OE gewurthe thin willa,

ME Be thi wille don

MOD Thy will be done

Old word “gewurpe” replaced by “done”

Old Fashioned Language

“thy”

Lines 5 and 6

OE **on eorthan swa swa on heofonum.**

ME **in herthe as it is dunin heuene.**

MOD **on earth as it is in heaven.**

Spelling of “earth” and “heaven” evolve

OE **urne gedæghwamlican hlaf syle us today,**

ME **yeue to us today oure eche dayes bred.**

MOD **Give us this day our daily bread,**

New word “give” replaces “urne” and “yeue”

Complicated phrase become “our daily bread”

Lines 7 and 8

OE **and forgyf** **us** **ure gyltas,**

ME **a****nd foryeue** **to us** **oure dettis that is oure synnys**

MOD **and forgive** **us** **our trespasses,**

Synonyms??: guilt, debts, sins, trespasses

Old Fashioned Language

“trespasses”

OE swa swa **we forgyfath** **urum gyltendum.**

ME as **we foryeuen** **to oure dettouris that is to men that han**
 synned in us.

MOD as **we forgive** **those who trespass against us,**

Complex structures to express “those who sin against us”

“Forgive” evolves from “forgyf”

Inflected endings in 7 and 8: gylt**as**/gyltend**um**, dett**is**/dett**ouris**, synn**ys**/synn**ed**

Lines 9 and 10

OE and **ne gelæd** **thū** **us** **on costnunge,**

ME And **lede** **us not** **into temptacion**

MOD and **lead** **us not** **into temptation,**

Old word “costnunge” replaced by “temptation” (Latin)

Spelling of “lead” evolves, “ne” becomes “not”

OE ac alys **us** of **yfele sothlice.**

ME but **delyuere** **us** from **euyl.**

MOD but **deliver** **us** from **evil.**

Old word “sothlice” becomes “deliver” (Latin)

“of” becomes “from”, Spelling of “evil” evolves

Summary: 410 to 1066 AD

- 410 -500: Germanic folks and their Germanic languages invaded England
- The Germanic languages evolved and became several Old English dialects.
- Old English is a very foreign language. Their alphabet used several obsolete letters making it even more difficult to read Old English.
- Of the 100 most common words in Modern English, 93 are based on Old English. **We use these words every day.**
- England was fully Christianized by 700 AD
- The first king of **all of England** was Athelstan or **Æthelstan** : 925 - 939 AD
- One great poem in Old English, Beowulf, can be read in a wonderful modern translation by Seamus Heaney. Manuscript from 975 – 1025 CE

Next Week: 1066 The Norman Invasion

Thank-you!

Questions?