Just For Fun: Old English!

Background

When we say Old English, we mean a language that was the ancestor of the English we speak today. Another name for this language is Anglo-Saxon, and it was spoken in England and parts of Scotland in the early Middle Ages.

Old English is so different from modern English that it is very difficult to understand much of it without studying it like you would any foreign language. It is more similar in many ways to modern German. Actually, Old English was influenced a lot by Old Norse, the language of the Vikings, which is almost the same as modern Icelandic.

Old English didn't originate in England; it was brought by Anglo-Saxon settlers in the 5th century who came from what is today Holland and Denmark. They are called "Anglo-Saxon" because they came from tribes traditionally known as the Angles, the Saxons, and the Jutes. Previously Celtic languages and Latin, the language of the Roman invaders, were spoken in England. These languages were mostly replaced by Old English.

Old English began to change after the Norman conquest of England in 1066, when it came into contact with French and over time became the next form of English, known as Middle English, which is much more similar to the English we speak today.

Writing and Grammar

In earlier centuries, until about the 9th century, Old English was written in runes; in the 7th or 8th centuries the Latin alphabet was introduced. The spelling is much more straightforward than modern English; it seems that pretty much every letter was pronounced, and words were pronounced as they were spelled. It does have four letters that we don't find in modern English: ð, þ, ƿ, and æ.

Old English grammar was very different from that of modern English. One thing it had was a system of "cases" similar to what German has today. This means that you change the endings of words to show what the word is doing in the sentence. This case system has mostly disappeared in modern English, except for the 's that we use to indicate possession: Dave vs. Dave's.

Another interesting feature of old English grammar which has disappeared from modern English is the idea of grammatical gender. This means that every noun was considered to be either masculine, feminine, or neuter, and the distinction was pretty random. For example, *mōna* meant "moon" and was masculine, *sunne* meant "sun" and was

feminine, and *wīf* meant "wife or woman" and was neuter! Again, same as the German system.

Old English Literature

There is a good amount of interesting literature written in Old English, although a lot has been lost. The most famous work is the long epic poem Beowulf. There are also some shorter lyric poems, for example the well-known poem "The Seafarer" and "The Wanderer." Other documents such as histories, sermons, a Bible translation, legal documents, and others are maybe not as exciting but are useful for learning about the language, culture, and history of early England. There is a mixture of earlier pagan influence and later Christian influence in Old English literature. England was Christianized around 700 CE.

Beowulf is an epic (epic as in telling a story, not like "that's so epic, dude") poem of 3182 lines. The poem was composed sometime between 700-1000 CE, and the author is anonymous. The poem is known from only one surviving manuscript dated at about 1000 CE.

Old English poetry did not rhyme but instead made use of alliteration. Other poetic devices commonly used were *kennings*, repeated phrases used to describe one thing in terms of another (such as calling the sea "the whale road"), and *litotes*, understatement for an ironic effect.

The story takes place in Scandinavia. Beowulf, who is a hero of the Geats (from what is now Sweden), comes to the aid of Hrothgar, king of the Danes, whose mead hall (like a big single-room building for feasting) has been under attack by a demonic monster named Grendel. After Beowulf slays him with his bare hands, Grendel's mother attacks the mead hall. He slays her too, with a giant's sword which he found in her lair. Beowulf goes home to Geatland (in Sweden) and becomes king of the Geats. After 50 years go by, Beowulf defeats a dragon who has been terrorizing his land but is fatally wounded in the battle. He dies and they built a barrow in his memory. Kinda gory, dark and depressing.

Here are the first three lines of Beowulf in the original:

Hwæt! We Gar-Dena in gear-dagum

þeod-cyninga, þrym gefrunon,

hu ða æþelingas ellen fremedon!

Here's the rough Modern English translation:

Hear me! We've heard of Danish heroes,

Ancient kings and the glory they cut

For themselves, swinging mighty swords!

The famous author J.R.R. Tolkien, known for The Hobbit and The Lord of the Rings, was also a professor of Old English. His translation of Beowulf (done in the 1920s) was published in 2014 with the help of his son Christopher.

<u>Some cool words and phrases to remember:</u>

Wer	Man (think of "werewolf")
Wudu	Wood, forest, tree
Sweord	Sword
Deor	Wild animal
Heorot	Deer; also location of the mead hall in Beowulf
Sweart	Dark, black
Snottor	Wise
Þæt wæs god cyning!	That was a good king!
Feorhseoc	"Lifesick" (meaning mortally wounded)
Hronrad	"Whale's road" (meaning the sea)
Rodores candel	"Sky's candle" (meaning the sun)