

OLD ENGLISH

This is the research document I am putting together for the Easy Peasy Just For Fun Class about Old English.

This document is NOT everything there is to know about Old English; however, it will provide a basic outline of Old English, its history, and related topics.

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Alphabet

Something important to mention is the fact that Anglo-Saxon and Old English are the same! And I will be using them interchangeably.

The English language was first written in Anglo-Saxon runes, known as Futhorc (ƿƿƿƿƿƿ). These runes are descended from a runic alphabet called Elder Futhark, which is one of the oldest runic alphabets that we know of.

The writing systems descended from Elder Futhark are Anglo-Saxon Futhorc, and Younger Futhark, which was the writing system for the Old Norse language.

Around the 7th century AD the Latin alphabet was introduced and started to replace Futhorc, and both alphabets continued to be used until around the 10th century AD. We have evidence to suggest that knowledge of Futhorc was still known even into the 12th century AD.

The Latin alphabet was modified in order to better suit the needs of the Anglo-Saxons; in doing so they added 4 more letters, eth(ð), thorn(þ), ash(æ), and wynn(ƿ). The letter wynn is usually left out of modern translations in favor of the letter w, which is the same in pronunciation.

Pronunciation:

eth(ð): th sound in the word “the”

thorn(þ): th sound in the word “thing”

ash(æ): a sound in the word “have”

wynn(ƿ) same sound as modern English’s “w”

The reason there is two different letters for the “th” sound is because one is “unvoiced,” meaning that your throat does not vibrate when you say it. For example, say “the thing” and see if you can hear or feel the difference in the “th” sounds.

History

The Old English language lasted from the 5th century to the late 11th century AD. The reason for its decline is the Norman Invasion of 1066. The Normans were French and spoke French, and it was due to this that after the decline of the English, French had a great impact on the English language.

The Old English language came from the Anglo-Saxon people, who came from what is now modern Netherlands, the coast of Germany, and Denmark. Old English is more similar to modern German than it is to modern English; Germans can understand varying amounts of it.

What can not be overlooked is the Norse impact on the English language. After Viking raiders came and took land for themselves in northern England, they slowly blended into the population already living there. Words of Viking origin usually are more commonly used words than words of French origin.

We still maintain some words from Old English in modern English. One good example of this is in the word “werewolf”(literally “manwolf”); “wer” means man in Old English and wolf means the same thing now as it did then, although they would have spelled it “werewulf.”

Modern Spellings

The modern spellings and translations of Old English often include things that were not commonly or at all used in real Old English, but are helpful for better understanding.

Modern translations of Old English texts often drop out letters or change how they look in order to make more sense to the modern reader. Such examples include the dropping out of the letter wynn (as mentioned previously), sometimes dropping out the letter eth in favor of thorn (this is because there is not a huge difference between the pronunciation of the two), and sometimes adding a line over vowels to indicate a longer sound.

Further Thoughts

I am very interested in the Old English language and the history of English in general. I hope I have made you want to look deeper into it, and if nothing else, I hope I've given you something to think about. Thank you for reading and learning, all I have left to say is, “Wes þu hal, ond þank þu!”

Appendix

Anglo-Saxon runic alphabet:

						
ƿMƿN	NR	þMR†	ƿN	RƿW	ƿM†	XNƿN
feoh	ur	þorn	ós	rad	cen	gyfu
wealth	aurochs	thorn	god	ride	torch	gift
f	u	þ/ð/th	o	r	c	ʒ
[f/v]	[u]	[θ/ð]	[o]	[r]	[k/tʃ]	[g/j]
						
ƿN†††	NƿX†	†Nƿ	IN	*MR	MƿN	ƿMƿRþ
wynn	hægl	nyd	is	ger	eoh	peorð
joy	hail	need	ice	year	yew	?
w/p	h	n	i	j	eo	p
[w]	[h]	[n]	[i]	[j]	[i:/x]	[p]
						
Mƿ†NƿY	NIXM†	†IP	þMƿRƿ	MN	Mƿ†††	†ƿXN
eolhx/iolx/ilx	sigel	tiw	beorc	eh	mann	lagu
elk-sedge	sun	Tiw (god)	birch	horse	man	lake
x	s	t	b	e	m	l
[ks]	[s/z]	[t]	[b]	[e]	[m]	[l]
						
Ið	ðþM†	ðƿX	ƿƿ	ƿNƿ	NR	*R
ing	éðel	dæg	ac	æsc	yr	ior
Ing (a hero)	estate	day	oak	ash tree	bow	eel
ŋ/ng	œ	d	a	æ	y	ia/io
[ŋ]	[œ]	[d]	[a]	[æ]	[y]	[ia/io]
						
ƿR	†MƿRþ	††††	ðƿ†	ðƿR		
ear	cweorð	calc	stan	gar		
grave		chalice	stone	spear		
ea	kw	k	st	g		
[ea]	[kw/k]	[k]	[st]	[g]		

Anglo-Saxon Latin alphabet:

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

Notes: The letter “yogh” is just the letter “g” written in the Irish insular style. They did not have the letters k, z, j, q, and v.

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