Chapter 1

The Anglo-Saxons and Their Language

1.1 Who were they?

'Anglo-Saxon' is the term applied to the English-speaking inhabitants of Britain up to the time of the Norman Conquest, when the Anglo-Saxon line of English kings came to an end. The people who were conquered in 1066 had themselves arrived as conquerors more than six centuries earlier.

According to the Venerable Bede, whose *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (Ecclesiastical History of the English People), completed in the year 735, is the most important source for the early history of England, the Anglo-Saxons arrived in the island of Britain during the reign of Martian, who in 449 became co-emperor of the Roman Empire with Valentinian III and ruled for seven years.

Before that time, Britain had been inhabited by Celtic peoples: the Scots and Picts in the north, and in the south various groups which had been united under Roman rule since their conquest by the emperor Claudius in AD 43. By the beginning of the fifth century the Roman Empire was under increasing pressure from advancing barbarians, and the Roman garrisons in Britain were being depleted as troops were withdrawn to face threats closer to home. In AD 410, the same year in which the Visigoths entered and sacked Rome, the last of the Roman troops were withdrawn and the Britons had to defend themselves. Facing hostile Picts and Scots in the north and Germanic raiders in the east, the Britons decided to hire one enemy to fight the other: they engaged Germanic mercenaries to fight the Picts and Scots.

It was during the reign of Martian that the newly hired mercenaries arrived. These were from three Germanic nations situated near the northern coasts of Europe: the Angles, the Saxons and the Jutes. According to Bede, the mercenaries succeeded quickly in defeating the Picts and Scots and then sent word to their homes of the fertility of the island and the cowardice of the Britons. They soon found a pretext to break with their employers, made an alliance with the Picts, and began to conquer the territory that would eventually be known as England – a slow-moving conquest that would take more than a century.

It is now difficult to measure the accuracy of Bede's account of the coming of the Anglo-Saxons. But Bede's story gives us essential information about how these people looked at themselves: they considered themselves a warrior people, and they were proud to have been conquerors of the territory they inhabited. Indeed, the warrior ethic that pervades Anglo-Saxon culture is among the first things that students notice on approaching the field.

But Europe had no shortage of warrior cultures in the last half of the first millennium. What makes Anglo-Saxon England especially worthy of study is the remarkable literature that flourished there. The Anglo-Saxon kingdoms converted to Christianity in the late sixth and seventh centuries, and by the late seventh and early eighth centuries had already produced two major authors: Aldhelm, who composed his most important work, *De Virginitate* (On Virginity), twice, in prose and in verse; and the Venerable Bede, whose vast output includes biblical commentaries, homilies, textbooks on orthography, metre, rhetoric, nature and time, and of course the *Historia Ecclesiastica*, mentioned above. A small army of authors, Bede's contemporaries and successors, produced saints' lives and a variety of other works in prose and verse, largely on Christian themes.

These seventh- and eighth-century authors wrote in Latin, as did a great many Anglo-Saxon authors of later periods. But the Anglo-Saxons also created an extensive body of vernacular literature at a time when relatively little was being written in most of the other languages of Western Europe. In addition to such well-known classic poems as *Beowulf*, *The Dream of the Rood*, *The Wanderer*, *The Seafarer* and *The Battle of Maldon*, they left us the translations associated with King Alfred's educational programme, a large body of devotional works by such writers as Ælfric and Wulfstan, biblical translations and adaptations, *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* and other historical writings, law codes, handbooks of medicine and magic, and much more. While most of the manuscripts that preserve vernacular works date from the late ninth, tenth and eleventh centuries, the Anglo-Saxons were producing written work in their own language by the early seventh century, and many scholars believe that *Beowulf* and several other important poems date from the eighth century. Thus we are in possession of five centuries of Anglo-Saxon vernacular literature.

To learn more about the Anglo-Saxons, consult the 'Further Reading' section at the back of this book and choose from the works listed there: they will give you access to a wealth of knowledge from a variety of disciplines. This book will give you another kind of access, equipping you with the skills you need to encounter the Anglo-Saxons in their own language.

1.2 Where did their language come from?

Bede tells us that the Anglo-Saxons came from *Germania*. Presumably he was using that term as the Romans had used it, to refer to a vast and ill-defined territory east of the Rhine and north of the Danube, extending as far east as the Vistula in present-day Poland and as far north as present-day Sweden and Norway. This territory was nothing like a nation, but rather was inhabited by numerous tribes which were closely related culturally and linguistically.[1]

The languages spoken by the inhabitants of *Germania* were a branch of the Indo-European family of languages, which linguists believe developed from a single language spoken some five thousand years ago in an area that has never been identified – perhaps, some say, the Caucasus. From this ancient language come most of the language groups of present-day Europe and some important languages of South Asia: the Celtic languages (such as Irish, Welsh and Scottish Gaelic), the Italic languages (such as French, Italian, Spanish and Romanian, descended from dialects of Latin), the Germanic languages, the Slavic languages (such as Russian and Polish), the Baltic languages (Lithuanian and Latvian), the Indo-Iranian languages (such as Persian and Hindi), and individual languages that do not belong to these groups: Albanian, Greek and Armenian. The biblical Hittites spoke an Indo-European language, or a language closely related to the Indo-European family, and a number of other extinct languages (some of them poorly attested) were probably or certainly Indo-European: Phrygian, Lycian, Thracian, Illyrian, Macedonian, Tocharian and others.

The Germanic branch of the Indo-European family is usually divided into three groups:

North Germanic, that is, the Scandinavian languages, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Icelandic and Faroese;

East Germanic, that is, Gothic, now extinct but preserved in a fragmentary biblical translation from the fourth century;

West Germanic, which includes High German, English, Dutch, Flemish and Frisian.

[1] For an early account of the Germanic tribes, see *Germania*, a work by the late first- and early second-century Roman historian Tacitus.

Within the West Germanic group, the High German dialects (which include Modern German) form a subgroup distinct from English and the other languages, which together are called 'Low German' because they were originally spoken in the low country near the North Sea.[2]

Surely the language spoken by the Germanic peoples who migrated to Britain was precisely the same as that spoken by the people they left behind on the Continent. But between the time of the migration and the appearance of the earliest written records in the first years of the eighth century, the language of the Anglo-Saxons came to differ from that of the people they had left behind. We call this distinct language Old English to emphasize its continuity with Modern English, which is directly descended from it.

1.3 What was Old English like?

We often hear people delivering opinions about different languages: French is 'romantic', Italian 'musical'. For the student of language, such impressionistic judgements are not very useful. Rather, to describe a language we need to explain how it goes about doing the work that all languages must do; and it is helpful to compare it with other languages – especially members of the language groups it belongs to.

Languages may be compared in a number of ways. Every language has its own repertory of sounds, as known by all students who have had to struggle to learn to pronounce a foreign language. Every language also has its own rules for accentuating words and its own patterns of intonation – the rising and falling pitch of our voices as we speak. Every language has its own vocabulary, of course, though when we're lucky we find a good bit of overlap between the vocabulary of our native language and that of the language we're learning. And every language has its own way of signalling how words function in utterances – of expressing who performed an action, what the action was, when it took place, whether it is now finished or still going on, what or who was acted upon, for whose benefit the action was performed, and so on.

The following sections attempt to hit the high points, showing what makes Old English an Indo-European language, a Germanic language, a West Germanic and a Low German language; and also how Old and Modern English are related.

[2] The Low German languages are often called 'Ingvaeonic' after the *Ingvaeones*, a nation that, according to Tacitus, was located by the sea.

1.3.1 The Indo-European languages

The Indo-European languages do certain things in much the same way. For example, they share some basic vocabulary. Consider these words for 'father':

Old English	*fæder*
Latin	*pater*
Greek	*patḗr*
Sanskrit	*pitṛ*

You can easily see the resemblance among the Latin, Greek and Sanskrit words. You may begin to understand why the Old English word looks different from the others when you compare these words for 'foot':

Old English	*fōt*
Latin	*pedem*
Greek	*póda*
Sanskrit	*pā́dam*

If you suspect that Latin *p* will always correspond to Old English *f*, you are right, more or less.[3] For now, it's enough for you to recognize that the Indo-European languages do share a good bit of vocabulary, though the changes that all languages go through often bring it about that the same word looks quite different in different languages.[4]

All of the Indo-European languages handle the job of signalling the functions of words in similar ways. For example, all add endings to words. The plural form of the noun meaning 'foot' was *pódes* in Greek, *pedēs* in Latin, and *pā́das* in Sanskrit – and English *feet* once ended with *-s* as well, though that ending had already disappeared by the Old English period. Most Indo-European languages signal the function of a noun in a sentence or clause by inflecting it for case[5] (though some languages no longer do, and the only remaining trace of the case system in Modern English nouns is the possessive *'s*). And most also classify their nouns by gender – masculine, feminine or neuter (though some have reduced the number of genders to two).

[3] There is a complication, called 'grammatical alternation'; see §7.4.2.

[4] For example, it's not at all obvious that Modern English *four* and Latin *quattuor*, or Modern English *quick* and Latin *vivus* 'alive', come from the same Indo-European word – but they do.

[5] Inflection is the addition of an ending or a change in the form of a word (for example, the alteration of a vowel) to reflect its grammatical characteristics. See chapter 4 for a definition and explanation of case.

Indo-European languages have ways to inflect words other than by adding endings. In the verb system, for example, words could be inflected by changing their root vowels, and this ancient system of 'gradation' persists even now in such Modern English verbs as *swim* (past-tense *swam*, past participle *swum*). Words could also be inflected by shifting the stress from one syllable to another, but only indirect traces of this system remain in Old and Modern English.

1.3.2 The Germanic languages

Perhaps the most important development that distinguishes the Germanic languages from others in the Indo-European family is the one that produced the difference, illustrated above, between the *p* of Latin *pater* and the *f* of Old English *fæder*. This change, called 'Grimm's Law' after Jakob Grimm, the great linguist and folklorist who discovered it, affected all of the consonants called 'stops' – that is, those consonants produced by momentarily stopping the breath and then releasing it (for example, [p], [b], [t], [d]):[6]

Unvoiced stops ([p], [t], [k]) became unvoiced spirants ([f], [θ], [x]), so that Old English *fæder* corresponds to Latin *pater*, Old English *þrēo* 'three' to Latin *tres*, and Old English *habban* 'have' to Latin *capere* 'take'.

Voiced stops ([b],[7] [d], [g]) became unvoiced stops ([p], [t], [k]), so that Old English *dēop* 'deep' corresponds to Lithuanian *dubùs*, *twā* 'two' corresponds to Latin *duo* and Old English *æcer* 'field' to Latin *ager*.

Voiced aspirated stops ([b^h] [d^h], [g^h])[8] became voiced stops ([b] [d], [g]) or spirants ([β], [ð], [ɣ]), so that Old English *brōðor* corresponds to Sanskrit *bhrā́tar-* and Latin *frater*, Old English *duru* 'door' to Latin *fores* and Greek *thúra*, and Old English *ġiest* 'stranger' to Latin *hostis* 'enemy' and Old Slavic *gosti* 'guest'.

Almost as important as these changes in the Indo-European consonant system was a change in the way words were stressed. You read in §1.3.1 that the Indo-European language sometimes stressed one form of a word on one

[6] For the meanings of these International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA) symbols and of terms such as 'stop', 'spirant', 'voiced' and 'unvoiced', see Appendix B. IPA symbols in this book are enclosed in square brackets.

[7] The consonant [b] for some reason was exceedingly rare in Indo-European, as a glance at the *b* entries in a Latin dictionary or the *p* entries in an Old English dictionary will show. Indo-European antecedents for Germanic words containing [p] are difficult to find.

[8] An aspirated stop is a consonant that is accompanied by an *h*-like breathing sound. Most Indo-European languages altered the voiced aspirated stops in some way; for example, in Latin [b^h] and [d^h] became *f*, and [g^h] became *h*.

syllable and another form on another syllable. For example, in Greek the nominative singular of the word for 'giant' was *gígās* while the genitive plural was *gigóntōn*. But in Germanic, some time after the operation of Grimm's Law, stress shifted to the first syllable. Even prefixes were stressed, except the prefixes of verbs and the one that came to Old English as *ġe-* (these were probably perceived as separate words rather than prefixes). The fact that words in Germanic were almost always stressed on the first syllable had many consequences, not least of which is that it made Old English much easier than ancient Greek for modern students to pronounce.

Along with these sound changes came a radical simplification of the inflectional system of the Germanic languages. For example, while linguists believe that the original Indo-European language had seven cases, the Germanic languages have four, and sometimes traces of a fifth. And while students of Latin and Greek must learn a quite complex verb system, the Germanic verb had just two tenses, present and past. Germanic did introduce one or two complications of its own, but in general its inflectional system is much simpler than those of the more ancient Indo-European languages, and the Germanic languages were beginning to rely on a relatively fixed ordering of sentence elements to do some of the work that inflections formerly had done.

1.3.3 West Germanic and Low German

The West Germanic languages differ from North and East Germanic in a number of features which are not very striking in themselves, but quite numerous. For example, the consonant [z] became [r] in North and West Germanic. So while Gothic has *hazjan* 'to praise', Old English has *herian*. In West Germanic, this [r] disappeared at the ends of unstressed syllables, with the result that entire inflectional endings were lost. For example, the nominative singular of the word for 'day' is *dagr* in Old Icelandic and *dags* in Gothic (where the final [z] was unvoiced to [s]), but *dæġ* in Old English, *dag* in Old Saxon, and *tac* in Old High German.

Low German is defined in part by something that *did not* happen to it. This non-event is the 'High German consonant shift', which altered the sounds of the High German dialects as radically as Grimm's Law had altered the sounds of Germanic. Students of Modern German will recognize the effects of the High German consonant shift in such pairs as English *eat* and German *essen*, English *sleep* and German *schlafen*, English *make* and German *machen*, English *daughter* and German *Tochter*, English *death* and German *Tod*, English *thing* and German *Ding*. Another important difference between High German and Low German is that the Low German languages did not distinguish person in plural verbs. For example, in Old High German one would say *wir nemumēs* 'we take', *ir nemet* 'you (plural) take', *sie nemant* 'they take', but in Old English

one said *wē nimað* 'we take', *ġē nimað* 'you (plural) take', *hīe nimað* 'they take', using the same verb form for the first, second and third persons.

The most significant differences between Old English (with Old Frisian) and the other Low German languages have to do with their treatment of vowels. Old English and Old Frisian both changed the vowel that in other Germanic languages is represented as *a*, pronouncing it with the tongue farther forward in the mouth: so Old English has *dæg* 'day' and Old Frisian *dei*, but Old Saxon (the language spoken by the Saxons who didn't migrate to Britain) has *dag*, Old High German *tac*, Gothic *dags*, and Old Icelandic *dagr*. Also, in both Old English and Old Frisian, the pronunciation of a number of vowels was changed (for example, [o] to [e]) when [i] or [j] followed in the next syllable. This development, called *i*-mutation (§2.2.2), has implications for Old English grammar and so is important for students to understand.

Old English dramatically reduced the number of vowels that could appear in inflectional endings. In the earliest texts, any vowel except *y* could appear in an inflectional ending: *a*, *e*, *i*, *o*, *u*, *æ*. But by the time of King Alfred *i* and *æ* could no longer appear, and *o* and *u* were variant spellings of more or less the same sound; so in effect only three vowels could appear in inflectional endings: *a*, *e* and *o/u*. This development of course reduced the number of distinct endings that could be added to Old English words. In fact, a number of changes took place in unaccented syllables, all tending to eliminate distinctions between endings and simplify the inflectional system.

1.3.4 Old and Modern English

The foregoing sections have given a somewhat technical, if rather sketchy, picture of how Old English is like and unlike the languages it is related to. Modern English is also 'related' to Old English, though in a different way; for Old and Modern English are really different stages in the development of a single language. The changes that turned Old English into Middle English and Middle English into Modern English took place gradually, over the centuries, and there never was a time when people perceived their language as having broken radically with the language spoken a generation before. It is worth mentioning in this connection that the terms 'Old English', 'Middle English' and 'Modern English' are themselves modern: speakers of these languages all would have said, if asked, that the language they spoke was English.

There is no point, on the other hand, in playing down the differences between Old and Modern English, for they are obvious at a glance. The rules for spelling Old English were different from the rules for spelling Modern English, and that accounts for some of the difference. But there are more substantial changes as well. The three vowels that appeared in the inflectional endings of Old English words were reduced to one in Middle English, and

then most inflectional endings disappeared entirely. Most case distinctions were lost; so were most of the endings added to verbs, even while the verb system became more complex, adding such features as a future tense, a perfect and a pluperfect. While the number of endings was reduced, the order of elements within clauses and sentences became more fixed, so that (for example) it came to sound archaic and awkward to place an object before the verb, as Old English had frequently done.

The vocabulary of Old English was of course Germanic, more closely related to the vocabulary of such languages as Dutch and German than to French or Latin. The Viking age, which culminated in the reign of the Danish king Cnut in England, introduced a great many Danish words into English – but these were Germanic words as well. The conquest of England by a French-speaking people in the year 1066 eventually brought about immense changes in the vocabulary of English. During the Middle English period (and especially in the years 1250–1400) English borrowed some ten thousand words from French, and at the same time it was friendly to borrowings from Latin, Dutch and Flemish. Now relatively few Modern English words come from Old English; but the words that do survive are some of the most common in the language, including almost all the 'grammar words' (articles, pronouns, prepositions) and a great many words for everyday concepts. For example, the words in this paragraph that come to us from Old English (or are derived from Old English words) include those in table 1.1.

Table 1.1 Some Modern English words from Old English

about	by	from	now	these
all	come	great	of	this
almost	Danish	in	old	thousand
and	do	into	or	time
are	England	it	some	to
as	English	king	speaking	was
at	everyday	many	such	were
borrowings	for	middle	ten	which
brought	French	more	than	word
but	friendly	most	the	year

1.4 Old English dialects

The language spoken by the Anglo-Saxons at the time of their migration to Britain was probably more or less uniform. Over time, however, Old English

developed into four major dialects: Northumbrian, spoken north of the river Humber; Mercian, spoken in the midlands; Kentish, spoken in Kent; and West Saxon, spoken in the southwest.

All of these dialects have direct descendants in modern England, and American regional dialects also have their roots in the dialects of Old English. 'Standard' Modern English (if there is such a thing), or at least Modern English spelling, owes most to the Mercian dialect, since that was the dialect of London.

Most Old English literature is not in the Mercian dialect, however, but in West Saxon, for from the time of King Alfred (reigned 871–99) until the Conquest Wessex dominated the rest of Anglo-Saxon England politically and culturally. Nearly all Old English poetry is in West Saxon, though it often contains spellings and vocabulary more typical of Mercian and Northumbrian – a fact that has led some scholars to speculate that much of the poetry was first composed in Mercian or Northumbrian and later 'translated' into West Saxon. Whatever the truth of the matter, West Saxon was the dominant language during the period in which most of our surviving literature was recorded. It is therefore the dialect that this book will teach you.