

Old English Dialects. Linguistic Situation

The Germanic tribes who settled in Britain in the 5th and 6th c. spoke closely related tribal dialects belonging to the West Germanic subgroup. Later these dialects were transformed into a single tongue - English. OE dialects acquired certain common features which distinguished them from continental Germanic tongues. Initially these dialects were tribal, but gradually, due to the development of the feudal system they were transformed into local or regional dialects.

The following four principal OE dialects are commonly distinguished:

Kentish, a dialect spoken in the area known now as Kent and Surrey and in the Isle of Wight. It had developed from the tongue of the Jutes and Frisians.

West Saxon, the main dialect of the Saxon group, spoken in the rest of England south of the Thames and the Bristol Channel. Other Saxon dialects in England have not survived in written form and are not known to modern scholars.

Mercian, a dialect derived from the speech of southern Angles and spoken chiefly in the kingdom of Mercia, that is, in the central region, from the Thames to the Humber.

Northumbrian, another Anglian dialect, spoken from the Humber north to the river Forth {hence the name — North-Humbrian).

The boundaries between the dialects were uncertain and probably movable. The dialects freely passed into one another.



England in the Old English period

Words were freely borrowed from one dialect into another. In the Early Old English period none of the dialects was the dominant form of speech, each of them was used over a limited area.

By the 8th c. the centre of English culture had shifted to Northumbria, and the Northumbrian dialect became the leading one. In the 9th c. the political and cultural centre moved to Wessex. Culture and education made great progress there; it is no wonder that the West Saxon dialect has been preserved in a greater number of texts than all the other OE dialects put together. Towards the 11th c. the written form of the West Saxon dialect developed into a bookish type of language, which, probably, served as the language of writing for all English-speaking people.

OLD ENGLISH WRITTEN RECORDS

Runic Inscriptions

OE written records represent various local dialects, belong to diverse genres and are written in different scripts. The earliest written records of English are inscriptions on hard material made in a special alphabet known as the *runes*. The word *rune* originally meant ‘secret’, ‘mystery’. Runic inscriptions were believed to be magic. Later the word “rune” was applied to the characters used in writing these inscriptions.

There is no doubt that the art of runic writing was known to the Germanic tribes long before they came to Britain, since runic inscriptions have also been found in Scandinavia. The runes were used as letters, each symbol to indicate a separate sound.

A rune could also represent a word beginning with that sound and was called by that word, e.g. the rune þ denoting the sound /θ/ and /ð/ was called “thorn” and could stand for OE *þorn* (NE *thorn*), the runes ƿ and ƿ stood for [w] and [f] and were called *wynn* ‘joy’ and *feoh* ‘cattle’ (NE *fee*).

In some inscriptions the runes were found arranged in a fixed order making a sort of alphabet. After the first six letters this alphabet is called *futhork*.

The runic alphabet is a specifically Germanic alphabet, not to be found in languages of other groups. The letters are angular; straight lines

are preferred, curved lines avoided; this is due to the fact that runic inscriptions were cut in hard material: stone, bone or wood. The shapes of some letters resemble those of Greek or Latin, others have not been traced to any known alphabet, and the order of the runes in the alphabet is certainly original. To this day the origin of the runes remains unknown.

The number of runes in different Old Germanic languages varied. As compared to continental, the number of runes in England was larger: new runes were added as new sounds appeared in English (from 28 to 33 runes in Britain against 16 or 24 on the continent).

The runes were not used for everyday writing or for putting down poetry and prose works. Their main function was to make short inscriptions on objects, often to bestow on them some special power or magic.

The two best known runic inscriptions in England are: “Franks Casket” and “Ruthwell Cross”. Both records are in the Northumbrian dialect.



Agate ring with runic inscription

The Franks Casket was discovered in the early 19th c. in France, and was presented to the British Museum by a British archeologist, A. W. Franks. The Casket is a small box made of whale bone; its four sides are carved: there are pictures in the centre and runic inscriptions around. The longest inscription tells the story of the whale bone, of which the Casket is made.

The Ruthwell Cross is a 15feet tall stone cross inscribed and ornamented on all sides. The principal inscription is a passage from an OE religious poem, THE DREAM OF THE ROOD. In this poem, the tree of which the cross was made tells its story from the time it was cut to the crucifixion of Christ.

Many runic inscriptions have been preserved on weapons, coins, amulets, tombstones, rings, crosses etc. The total number of runic inscriptions in OE is about forty, and they all belong to the end of the OE period.

Old English Manuscripts in Latin

In England, like other countries, Latin was the language of the church and also the language of writing and education. Monks were practically the only literate people; they read and wrote in Latin and therefore began to use Latin letters to write down English words. They modified the Latin script to suit their needs: they changed the shape of some letters, added new symbols to indicate sounds, for which Latin had no equivalents.

The first English words to be written down with the help of Latin characters were personal names and place names inserted in Latin texts.

All over the country, in the kingdoms of England, all kinds of legal documents were written and copied. At first they were made in Latin, later they were also written in the local dialects. Many documents have survived on single sheets or large manuscripts: various wills, grants, deals of purchase, agreements, laws, etc. Most of them are now commonly known under the general name of “Anglo-Saxon Charters”; the earliest are in Kentish and Mercian (8-9th centuries); later laws and charters are written in West Saxon.

Among the earliest insertions in Latin texts are pieces of OE poetry. Bede’s “Ecclesiastical History of English People” (HISTORIA ECCLESIASTICA GENTIS ANGLORUM) written in Latin in the 8th c. contains an English fragment of five lines known as “Bede’s Death Song” and a religious poem of nine lines “Caedmon’s Hymn”.

We have about 30,000 lines of OE verse. The names of the poets are unknown except Caedmon and Cynewulf, two early Northumbrian authors.

OE poetry is mainly restricted to three subjects: heroic, religious and lyrical. It is believed that many OE poems, especially those dealing with heroic subjects, were composed a long time before they were written down; they were handed down from generation to generation in oral form. Perhaps, they were first recorded in Northumbria some time in the 8th c., but have survived only in West Saxon copies made in the 10th or 11th c.

The greatest poem of the time was *BEOWULF*, an epic of the 7th or 8th c. It was originally composed in the Mercian or Northumbrian dialect, but has come down to us in a 10th c. West Saxon copy. It is the oldest poem in Germanic literature. *BEOWULF* is built up of several songs arranged in three chapters. It is based on old legends about the tribal life of the ancient Teutons. The author is unknown.

In the 10th c. some new war poems were composed: *THE BATTLE OF BRUNANBURH*, *THE BATTLE OF MALDON*. They describe the wars with the Scots, the Picts and the raiders from Scandinavia.

Another group of poems are OE lyrical poems: *WIDSITH* ("The Traveller's Song"), *THE WANDERER*, *THE SEAFARER*, and others. *THE WANDERER* depicts the sorrows of a poet in exile. *THE SEAFARER* gives a mournful picture of the dark northern seas and sings joy at the return of the spring. Most of those poems are ascribed to Cynewulf.

Religious poems paraphrase the books of the Bible — *GENESIS*, *EXODUS* (written by Caedmon). *ELENE*, *ANDREAS*, *CHRIST*, *FATE OF THE APOSTLES* tell the life-stories of apostles and saints.

OE poetry is characterized by a specific system of versification and some peculiar stylistic devices, mainly alliteration (the use of the same sound at the beginning of at least two stressed syllables in the line). The lines are not rhymed and the number of the syllables in a line is free. The line is divided into two halves with two strongly stressed syllables in each half.

OE prose is a most valuable source of information for the history of the language. The earliest samples of continuous prose are the first pages of the *ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLES*: brief annals of the year's happenings made at various monasteries. In the 9th c. the chronicles were unified at Winchester, the capital of Wessex.

Literary prose flourished in Wessex during King Alfred's reign. The flourishing is due to King Alfred and a group of scholars he had gathered at his court at Winchester. An erudite himself, Alfred realized that culture could reach the people only in their own tongue. He translated from Latin books on geography, history and Philosophy, e.g. Orosius's *WORLD HISTORY*, *PASTORAL CARE* by Pope Gregory the Great; *ON THE CONSOLATION OF PHILOSOPHY* by Boethius, a Roman philosopher. Bede's *ECCLESIASTICAL HISTORY OF THE ENGLISH PEOPLE*, written about a hundred and fifty years before, was translated into English in Alfred's time, maybe by Alfred himself.

By the 10th c. the West Saxon dialect had firmly established itself as the written form of English. The two important 10th c. writers are Aelfric and Wulfstan.

Aelfric was the most outstanding writer of the later OE period. He wrote sermons called Homilies, the LIVES OF THE SAINTS, the COLLOQUIUM, which is a series of dialogues written as a manual for boys at a monastic school in Winchester and a LATIN GRAMMAR giving OE equivalents of Latin forms, grammatical terms and constructions.

Wulfstan, the second prominent late West Saxon author, was Archbishop of York in the early 11th c. He is famous for his collections of sermons known as the HOMILIES.

Scholars got interested in Old English written records many centuries later. Nowadays many written monuments are kept at the museums of various countries.