



# Anglo-Saxon – Part One

To help create this brief introduction to Old English - the language of the Anglo-Saxons - I have consulted Mitchell and Robinson's *Guide to Old English*, Dorothy Whitelock's revised version of *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, and J.R. Clark Hall's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*. Out of respect for Tolkien's feelings I have avoided the great Bosworth and Toller dictionary, although it remains a necessary tool for anyone who is serious about working on Old English.

If you have not yet read *The Lord of the Rings*, chapter references will help you to find the relevant passage.

As we know, Tolkien loved the language of the Anglo-Saxons, the people of Germanic origin who first came to Britain as a mercenary force after the Romans had left. They settled here and developed their own society, culture and language. That language is generally known, especially in its written form, as **Old English**, usually **abbreviated to OE**. Tolkien worked on it professionally as a philologist and translator, and used it creatively in *The Lord of the Rings*.

There were many dialect forms of Old English. Tolkien preferred the dialect of the west midlands known as Old Mercian and once said he thought he would speak nothing but Old Mercian.

All the Old English we are about to look at is primarily in the West Saxon dialect because that came to be the main literary language in Anglo-Saxon England and many of the most important texts that have survived are written in it, although they may have been composed in other dialects.

If you want to speak like the Anglo-Saxons it will take a much more detailed course than this short introduction to learn all the grammar, but you can learn some sounds and some words and phrases that are of particular interest as you read *The Lord of the Rings*.

## The First Step

The first steps in OE begin with learning some of the special Old English letter forms that are used in it, and how they sound. Old English used a few **runic forms**, especially þ (it is called thorn) which looks like a /p/ with a long ascender (the bit sticking up); and ð (which is called eth) which looks like a /d/ with a curved ascender with a little line through it. They describe the particular /th/ sound each is used for - the hard form of /thorn/ and the soft form of /eth/. TRY SAYING the words 'thorn' and 'eth' TO HEAR THE DIFFERENCE IN THE SOUND OF THE RUNES- it is quite subtle.

Next you need to recognise the very commonly used vowel combination æ (called **ash**, but more correctly spelt in OE, asc). It always has the sound of the /a/ in mat/hat/cat.

Then we have the frequent eo which is sounded - **e+o** but the sounds are run together, not said separately. You will be familiar with this if you have seen the films or listened to the BBC radio adaptation of *The Lord of the Rings*.

As Tolkien uses it in names, the /e/ in this combination should sound like the /a/ in 'hate', not like the /e/ in 'bet'. It is a much harder vowel sound. The reason for this particular pronunciation is

because names like 'Éomer' and 'Éowyn' borrow their 'Eo' syllable from the word for 'horse' - eoh, and this is a stressed syllable.

As a useful rule for pronunciation we can say that OE vowels are pronounced more like vowels in German or French.

There are some tricky consonants in OE. As with the name of the æ vowels sound, it is called /ash/ but the word is spelled asc in OE where the consonants sc taken together have a /sh/ sound.

The cg in OE words like ecg (meaning an edge or sword) is pronounced as /dge/ as in MnE (Modern English) 'ledge', 'hedge'.

c can also be tricky. If you see it in a text **with a dot over it** then it is pronounced as we pronounce 'ch'.

Sometimes g will appear with a dot over it, or italicised in a word. This means that it has a 'y' sound. This happens frequently when making past tenses in OE. A dotted or italicised ge is tacked onto the front of some verbs to make a past tense, as in *gelædan* (guided, led). In these cases it has a /y/ sound, so the word is pronounced 'yelædan'.

Using what you have just read, try saying this: Meriadoc *gelædde* pone eoh 'Meriadoc led the horse'.

Be sure to sound the final /e/ of *gelædde* and *pone*. **There are no really silent letters in OE.** For example, *cniht* - 'boy' or 'squire', needs to have its /c/ sounded [it is not dotted so it has its usual sound], and even its /h/ needs to be 'breathed' in.

The *ge* is also sometimes found at the start of nouns like *geweorc* (work) and has the same /y/ sound. Modern editors always show by dotting or italicising the *ge* if it should be pronounced as a /y/ or should be left lone as a /g/.

It can also happen in the middle of words. If we look back a moment, just to make life difficult, in OE the word for 'hedge' is spelt *hege*, but the /g/ is pronounced as a /y/ so it sounds like 'heye', from which 'hay' as in the High Hay, is derived.

## Words and Phrases

Probably the best known OE phrase Tolkien borrowed, and one which is fun to use with friends, is the greeting *Wes þu hal*. It means roughly 'good health to you'.

The archaic word 'wassail' comes from it and Tolkien uses a modern spelling form in the phrase - **'Westu Théoden hal'**

The later greeting **'Ferthu hal'**, or *ferþu hal* means roughly 'health to your spirit'. See *The Two Towers*, Book 3 Chapter VI for the use of both these greetings.

There are lots of OE words that Tolkien transfers straight into *The Lord of the Rings*, mostly into the Rohan episodes.

For example: The names Théoden and Thengel are both common nouns in OE simply meaning 'prince' or 'lord'. The OE word for 'king' is *cýning* and is pronounced with a hard /c/ (a /k/ sound) and note that the /y/ is pronounced as /i/ with lips in a whistling position so it sounds like the /u/ in French 'tu'. See *The Two Towers*, Book 3 Chapter VI.

We could then say Théoden *cýning* *rad þone eoh* = 'Théoden the king rode the horse'.

If we learn the verb **'to be'** in OE, we make up other sentences of our own. And this is easier than you may expect!

We can say things like - *se hring is gold* - 'the ring is gold'; *þeoden is wlanc* - 'The prince is proud'. You can see that it does not need to be translated. It has come down to us unchanged, so you use the language of the Anglo-Saxons every day of your life if you speak English!

There are many words in **Modern English (MnE)** that are the same, or almost the same as words in OE, as you can see with the spelling of 'hring' - only the /h/ is missing from the modern word.

Some examples:

- Sam *wyrceþ* = Sam works [sounds like 'Sam work**eth**]
- Frodo *bideþ* = Frodo waits [biden gave us the word we use in the phrase 'biding her (or his) time']
- Gollum *biteþ* = Gollum bites
- *Se stan is heard* = the stone is hard
- *Ylfe lufiaþ steorran* = Elves love stars
- Sam *lufað Rose* = Sam loves Rose
- *Ic eom cald* = I am cold
- *þu eart cild* = you are a child [the /c/ of 'cild' may be dotted to show that it should be pronounced as /ch/]
- *he is wicing* = he is a viking
- *heo is wif* = she is a woman
- *wit waciaþ* = we two keep watch ['wit' is the special OE pronoun used to mean 'we two']
- *we þencaþ* = we think
- *git swimmaþ* = you two swim ['git' is the special OE pronoun used to mean 'you two']
- *ge cunnon* = you all can / know how to

It is easy to ask questions -

- *Hwær is se hring?* = where is the ring?

- Hwaet hring? = what ring?
- Hwær eart þu = where are you? [this will sound like 'where art thou?']
- Hwý stande ge idele? = why are you standing idle? [this will sound like 'why stand ye idle?']
- Hwa is se cyning? = who is the king?

## Some Harder Bits

We know that Théoden is cyning. Note that **OE does not always use the definite article as we do in MnE (Modern English)**. The definite article in MnE is '**the**'. When it is used in OE its form depends on whether the following noun is masculine, feminine, or neuter, and singular or plural. This is something we all need to look up until we have learnt the vocabulary very well.

Because **OE is an inflected language**, like French, German, Latin, the definite article **the** has different forms, and nouns change their endings depending on where they are used in a sentence.

OE may begin a sentence with a definite article, e.g. Se cyning - the king (a masc. noun with a masc. definite article). Seo cwen - the queen (fem. noun with fem. definite article). þæt sweord - the sword (neut. noun with neut. definite article).

But in a sentence OE does not always use the definite article in the way we do, so we find sentences like Oswald cyning his cynedom geheold hlisfullice. (Oswald the king held his kingdom gloriously.) You can see how Tolkien adopted this way of referring to a king as the form he uses to name the king in Rohan where he is addressed as 'Théoden king', not 'King Théoden'.

With care we can come up with our own sentences such as se hol bytla feoll in þæm smygle.

Remember when pronouncing a sentence like this to sound all vowels and consonants. Remember /æ/ has the sound of /a/ in 'mat', and note that the /g/ in smygle is itself a /y/ sound so the word sounds like 'smiyl'. The form of the word perhaps reminds us of Smeagol who lived in a hole, but Tolkien seems to have derived /smial/ from the OE word although he says in the Appendices that it is pronounced like 'smile'. [Smeagol's sneaking suggests his name has a closer relationship to OE /smeagan/, a verb which means 'to investigate, look closely into'].

The whole sentence - se hol bytla feoll in þæm smygle means 'the hole-dweller fell into the burrow'. Which is better, as we know, than saying se hol bytla feoll in þæt wætere (the hole dweller fell into the water)!

## Tolkien's Inspiration

It is well known that Tolkien drew a great deal of inspiration from Anglo-Saxon poetry and perhaps the most constantly quoted lines come from the work of the poet **Cynewulf**.

Four poems bear the 'signature' Cynewulf in runes. Judging by the use of these runes, the poet may have been a Mercian writing sometime from the late eighth century, or a Northumbrian writing around the ninth century. His work entitled *Ascension* also known as *Christ II* is the Cynewulf poem that famously inspired Tolkien.

The oft-quoted lines are: Eala Earendel engla beorhtast / Ofer middangeard monnum sende  
'Hail Earendel brightest of angels / above middle earth sent to men.'

It is easy to see how the OE words resemble those we use in MnE, and we can see how Tolkien took Middle-earth from middangeard. See also *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Book 2 Chapter 1.

Tolkien also took some of his inspiration from the OE epic poem **Beowulf**, of which more below, but he drew on other poems and writings too.

From the **Maxims or Gnomic Verses** (meaning verses of wisdom or lore) comes the startling phrase -

orþanc enta geweorc.

It means the cunning, or skilful work of giants: orþanc - cunning (adjective); enta - giants (plural noun and possessive form); geweorc (singular noun).

So **we** could now say Se hring is orþanc geweorc [Can you work out what this means?]

The same phrase orþanc geweorc occurs in the fragment of a beautiful OE poem known as *The Ruin*.

As we have already seen, lots of words in OE look and sound very like MnE words. The *Gnomic Verses* express the proper or natural state and behaviour of things, declaring:

- Winter byð cealdost = winter is coldest [Note that 'is' takes the OE form byð in this sentence. This form is used especially for wise sayings like these.]
- Lencten hrimigost = spring frostiest
- Swegel byð hatost = sun is hottest

Note the /ost/ ending that shows it is the superlative form, and hrimigost = hrimiyost >rimiest. Even today 'rime' is another word for frost. In the poem known as *The Ruin* the hrimgeat or 'frost covered gateway' is part of the monumental stonework of an old Roman city described as orþanc enta geweorc.

The rhythm and content of the *Gnomic Verses* bear a striking resemblance to Treebeard's Long List. See *The Two Towers*, Book 3 Chapter IV.

The *Verses* mention some of the animals in this list but not in the same way, and they comment on others of special importance to Anglo-Saxons. They declare for instance:

Hafuc sceal on glofe wilde gewunian. = the hawk shall (or must) remain wild on the glove. (Don't forget the /sc/ = /sh/ and the /ge/ = /y/, but NOT the /g/ of 'glove'.

Bera sceal on hǣðe eald and egesfull. = the bear shall [live] on the heath, old and terrible.

This is not Treebeard's bee-hunter, but something rather nastier. Note that the /g/ in egesfull is sounded as a /y/, and the verb 'live' is not given but understood. Note also the description of the bear as old and terrible comes at the end of the sentence. Tolkien uses this technique too. It has more poetic impact than simply saying 'the old and terrible bear'.

The *Gnomic Verses* are also like the Rhymes of Lore that Gandalf recites, they contain wisdom in rhythmical form and that makes it easier to remember. See *The Two Towers*, Book 3 Chapter XI

Although Tolkien certainly knew and drew on these texts, he worked on others such as *Beowulf* and *The Battle of Maldon*. **More can be found on these texts in the second part of this Introduction.**

Certainly the description of the king's hall and the arrival of the hero and his men in *Beowulf* are a source for the description of Meduseld and Gandalf's arrival there with his companions.

And Meduseld itself is OE and means a 'meadhall' - a descriptive name for the hall of a king or warrior lord where he and his men would gather to drink mead together and strengthen the bonds of loyalty between the lord and his men. Anglo-Saxon society depended for its strength on these bonds of loyalty. It was in these mead halls that storytellers or scopas [pronounced 'shops'] chanted or sang the stories that we know as the OE poems, and many others, to the accompaniment of a harp or lyre. The tomb of the 'Prittlewell prince' recently discovered near Southend contained one of these lyres.

In the poem known as *The Wanderer* the poet describes the longing of the outcast man for the companionship of the meoduhealle - another word meaning 'meadhall'.

Once the hero Beowulf has destroyed Grendel he takes the monster's head back to þæm goldsele - to the golden hall, a description Tolkien uses for Théoden's hall at Edoras. See *The Two Towers*, Book 3 Chapter VI.

This has been a tiny glimpse into the beauty of OE and I hope you have found it worthwhile. If you would like to know more about Old English, you could refer to the books this presentation draws on. They were Mitchell and Robinson's *Guide to Old English* for some grammar and vocabulary. Dorothy Whitelock's revised version of *Sweet's Anglo-Saxon Reader*, and J.R. Clark Hall's *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* have also been consulted. There are other good books of the same kind which will help you to learn more about the wonderful language and literature of the Anglo-Saxons which is full of surprises. There is a sense of sadness and longing in many OE poems, even the most 'heroic', and Christian devotion is apparent in some poems such as *The Dream of the Rood*, as well as in religious texts. Some of the rhyming Riddles are fun, and some are very rude! But if you want to find out how to be rude in OE you'll have to learn to read it for yourself, because to paraphrase Bilbo, this is the end!

The University of Oxford has worked on a simple-to-use online coursepack for Old English which is available for anyone to use at: [www.english.ox.ac.uk/coursepack/](http://www.english.ox.ac.uk/coursepack/). It brings together some of the main 'set texts' in Old English used by UK universities. Each text has a running gloss with links to further notes, translations, images, explanatory articles.

A second Anglo-Saxon study pack, which goes into more depth about Tolkien and OE, is available on the Tolkien Society website.