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ENGL 106: English Composition

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From Many, One

England is at its heart a nation of immigrants. When we dive into the annals of history, we see in England's distant past that they were not, in fact, simply English. Instead, we find Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Scandinavians, and various Celtic peoples. These populations did not originate from that ancient island across what is today the Irish Sea and English Channel. Over time these diverse groups fought with, enslaved, united against, and conquered one another; but ultimately, they came together after many centuries under one tribal calling and sharing one distinct speech, English.

According to author Richard Killeen, the Celts arrived in modern day Ireland between 1000 BCE and 500 BCE. The reasons for this arrival are unknown, but speculation states that the Gaelic Celts, who would go on to branch off into the Picts, Scots, and Britons (to name those of importance to this account), arrived from what is modern day Spain. Adventurers seeking new lands (unlikely), fishermen seeking new food sources, or castaways lost at sea--the reasons are not entirely known or important. What is important is that these Gaelic Celts arrived in Ireland and then spread to England, or Britannia as the Romans would soon call it, and brought with them their own distinct culture and language. For centuries to come this language and culture would be constant and would dominate the island frontier. Not even the Romans in all their might could conquer these untameable peoples.¹

¹ Richard Killeen, *A Brief History of Ireland* (Running Press Adult, 2012).

Rome entered Britain like a lion in the 40s CE, and in 410 CE under Emperor Honorius, left like a lamb. The Roman occupation of Britannia is important twofold. First, it rigs the situation for the native Celts of lower Britannia, the Britons. Second, it provided a faith that would come to be a uniting factor and a powerful motive for the residence of this island world as they attempted to unite only a few centuries later. To the first point, when the Romans invaded and subjugated the Britons in the 40s and then stayed around, the Britons were safely protected by Hadrian's Wall and legions of the emperor's finest. The once fierce Britons became pacified. For the next few decades the Britons were raided, plundered, and enslaved by their former kinsmen: the Picts, Scots, and Gaelic Irish. Some 400 years under the honeycomb of Roman rule had left the Britons in a poor state to defend themselves against the savage culture they had dissimilated from, and that had challenged even Rome's power to expand. With Rome's occupation of Britannia also came, by the end of their reign, the prospering faith of Christianity. Christianity had been made the state religion of the Roman Empire within a century before their departure from Britannia. Thus, when Pope Gregory I in 597 CE sent St. Augustine with a retinue of missionaries to convert the pagans of Britain, they were actually reintroducing the religion, not bringing it anew.²

With the Romans gone and Celtic raids becoming more and more frequent, villages sacked and people stolen away to work hazardously as slaves for the tribal clansmen, the situation was not bright for the Britons. Dire attempts were made to garner protection from the Celts of the north. In the mid-fifth century, Rome sent a single legion to aid in the Britons' defense. This was to little avail, as Rome itself was sacked by barbarians, forcing the single legion to break camp and head to what was left of their homes. In 449 CE came the Germanics.

² Killeen; Thomas Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language* (Harcourt, Brace & World, 1964).

A pagan warrior culture much like the Gaelic Celts of Britannia, the Germanics had been frequent visitors to the island, regularly raiding it so much so that the Romans took to calling them by the latinized 'Saxon.' Despite their initial hostilities, something in them appealed to the Britons and in 449 they pleaded with the Germanics to set sail permanently for Britannia. Protection was no doubt the motive, and for a time it worked superbly, for unlike the Britons who assimilated to the Romans and were made weak by their protection, the Germanics have an ancient history of giving everyone a hard time.³

When the Germanics arrived, they consisted of Angles, Saxons, Frisians, Jutes, and likely several other tribal groups of central and north central Europe. With a firm footing in Britannia and the wild Celts under wraps, the Germanics turned on their Briton hosts. What happened to the Britons is debated. Some believe they were all hunted down and killed or enslaved. Others, however, believe they assimilated into the Saxon ways. A law code written in the 600s CE by King Ine (c. 688 – 726) clears the water at least a little. The code is the oldest existing written law from pre-Viking England. Within it are provisions for what the Saxons called a *wergild*. The *wergild* was essentially a sum of money paid to the family of a slain freeman to buy off retaliatory efforts against the killer. As has been stated, this rule was for freemen only. According to Anglo-Saxon researcher Martin Grimmer, though the Britons were seen as inferior, referred to as *wealh* and *wyliscman* (both translating at first to 'foreigner' and by the tenth century to 'slave'), it still shows that the Britons and Saxons coexisted. What's more, within the law we also see provisions for the exact amounts to be paid as *wergild* based on the murdered individual's social status and land holdings. One example of these figures is for landless Saxons

³ Killeen, *A Brief History of Ireland*; Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*.

to be paid 200 shillings, while landless Britons were to be paid a mere 60 shillings. This is but one example from the document, yet exemplifies the gap between the Saxons and the Britons.⁴

In the late 700s CE came the pillaging men of the north, the Scandinavians. The Scandinavians began their attacks on Wessex decades later while Wessex was under the rule of Alfred the Great's brother Ethelred in 870 CE. By this time the various tribes that had originally conquered Britannia were integrated into one another enough to be called Anglo-Saxons, and these Anglo-Saxons were on uneven ground against the brutal warfare waged by the Vikings (having fallen victim to the same debilitating idleness the Britons had centuries before). The primary residence of the Scandinavians during their invasion of Britain was Northumbria and at one point, the Danelaw (northern and eastern modern England). Here lived not only Anglo-Saxons but also the Scots (in Northumbria and in Scotland). On these northern fringes of what became England began the long process by which Celts, Scandinavians, and Saxons would become English.⁵

It wasn't until the ascension of Alfred that the tides turned for a time in favor of Wessex and the infant English nation. Under Alfred the Great, Wessex was finally counting wins over the Viking warbands. One such battle against the Danish King of East Anglia, Guthrum, marked the great shift from a defensive war to an offensive repulsion. After the battle against Guthrum the Anglo-Saxons were successfully turning away Viking incursions. In the late 900s, however, the Norwegian King Olaf Tryggvason, followed soon by Danish King Svein Forkbeard, landed on Britain's shores and for twenty years pillaged England without opposition.⁶

⁴ Martin Grimmer, "Britons and Saxons In Pre-Viking Wessex: Reflections on the Law 77 of King Ine," *Parergon* 19, no. 1 (2002): 1–17, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pgn.2002.0093>.

⁵ Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*.

⁶ *Ibid.*

By the end of the grueling conflict between Scandinavia and what was truly becoming England in the late tenth century, Scandinavians had permanently set up shop all over the island. In Scandinavia the Norsemen were not simply warmongering Vikings and blood-lusting berserkers. Many were farmers, fishermen, traders, etc. The reasons for their departure are still argued, with greed, overpopulation, and poor harvest all being considered by some, and rejected by others. Whatever the reason, the raiding peoples who found their way to and settled on England began new farms and traded with the scattered cities of the seven kingdoms that ruled the island. They all soon assimilated to the Anglo-Saxon culture and language.⁷

The Viking presence in England was not miniscule in the slightest. Settlements dotted the island, and even today its influence is evident in various place names such as “geographical names ending in *by*, *beck*, *garth*, *ygte*, *toft*, *thiwaite*, and perhaps also those in *ey*, *ness*, and *thorpe*,” according to a discussion article by Albert E. Egge. The origins of all these endings is the Old Norse language the Vikings had brought with them. The influence of Scandinavian is visible in words we use today. For example, in Old English the word for sister is *sweostor*, but in Old Norse it is *systir*. The spellings are not far off from one another, and even in Modern English the pronunciation is close (and gets even closer when you use the German pronunciation of *w*, saying it like you would with the English *v*). We know today that Old Norse *systir* won out. The languages were not all that different though. Between the seven kingdoms of Britannia—Kent, Essex, Sussex, Wessex, East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria—there was a very strong relation among the languages spoken in each. When Old Norse arrived with the Vikings, that too we see had a strong comparison with the Old English that had evolved by their arrival. All the various people with their distinct languages understood each other to some degree. All of them spoke a

⁷ Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*.

form of the Germanic tongue, and it would be some time before the languages diverged to be as distinct as they are today, largely uninterpretable by a member of one to another.⁸

By the 900s West Saxon had become the language of the Anglo-Saxons. The Scandinavians had come and sort of gone. Those that stayed learned the Saxon tongue, donating bits and pieces of their own language to form Old English. When Christianity revisited England in the 500s, Latin became alive again on the island and over the centuries worked itself into the English we know today. When the Normans invaded England, Anglo-Saxon speech and identity continued to evolve. The Normans were linguistically and culturally French but descended from Scandinavian settlers of modern day Normandy, France (arriving there about the same time the Vikings plagued England). In short, when William the Conqueror bested the last descendant of Alfred the Great, King Harold II, at the 1066 Battle of Hastings, he effectively overthrew Anglo-Saxon rule in England. What happened, however, was not typical behavior of a victor's party after the conquest of a foe. Instead of forcing the English to adopt their own language, the Normans adopted English (likely because the French at that time had no literary, artistic, or other cultural intricacies as the English did). Words coming from French, such as *chef* and *cafe* are, of course, found in the English vocabulary, just as there are words adopted from Old Norse. The influence of the Normans eventually cast aside the Old English of Bede and let fly the banners of Middle English. Just as before, dialects still existed during these centuries. By the seventh

⁸ Albert E. Egge et al., "On the Scandinavian Element in English: Discussion," *PMLA* 12 (1897): lii–lv, <https://doi.org/10.2307/456243>; Julian D Richards and Dave Haldenby, "The Scale and Impact of Viking Settlement in Northumbria," *Medieval Archaeology* 62, no. 2 (July 3, 2018): 322–50, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00766097.2018.1535382>; Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*; Tania Styles, "Scandinavian Elements in English Place-Names: Some Semantic Problems," in *Vikings and the Danelaw*, ed. James Graham-Campbell et al. (Oxbow Books, 2001), 289–98, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt1kw29nj.20>.

century, the London dialect became standard and later prospered in England's colonies abroad (including America).⁹

Some would argue that all these various peoples were of Germanic origin and thus could not be considered different enough to be immigrants as was the case in the United States. To counter, if we peer far enough back into history, all people are of similar origins. They diverged, but even in America, the people that in the earliest centuries populated this modern nation of immigrants were mostly English, German, Irish, Scottish, and French,¹⁰ the same groups that founded England. Additionally, to further the point in regard to the relatedness of all European heritage, simply look at the word *mead* presented by researcher Dr. Eva Crane. *Mádhu* in Sanskrit, *mjød* in two of the Scandinavian languages (Danish, Norwegian (Swedish use *mjöd*)), *mee* (or *mede*) in Dutch, *met* (or *honigmet*) in German, *mid* in Old Irish, *mjod* in Russian, and *midus* in Lithuanian¹¹. This allows us to infer that they all originated from someplace with an abundance of mead (derived from honey). From the Near East to Northern Europe, these are vastly different languages and only a handful of them Germanic, yet they have a common root for mead.

All things considered, we can see how England was a nation of immigrants. Before England was Great Britain, just as before America was the United States, England was a collection of different peoples and cultures. Those who are now ancestrally English were once Angles, Saxons, Jutes, Scandinavians, Normans, or Gaelic Celts. Though similar in many ways,

⁹ A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, First Edition edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1959); Pyles, *The Origins and Development of the English Language*.

¹⁰ "Immigration Timeline - The Statue of Liberty & Ellis Island," accessed April 23, 2019, <https://www.libertyellisfoundation.org/immigration-timeline>.

¹¹ Ethel Eva Crane, "Terms in Indo-European Languages for Some Concepts Related to Honey, Bees and Hives," *Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies*, January 30, 2009, <https://www.dias.ie/celt/celt-publications-2/terms-in-indo-european-languages-for-some-concepts-related-to-honey-bees-and-hives/>.

all were different. Some spoke English, some Norse, some French, and others something else. Some were pagan and many were Christian. But as the sand trickles through the hourglass, grain by grain, they accumulated and became not a nation of many peoples, but a nation of English people.

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