Episode 96: What’s the Earliest English Word?

**Aven:** [00:00:00] Welcome to the Endless Knot Podcast where the more we know

**Mark:** the more we want to find out

**Aven:** tracing serendipitous connections through our lives

**Mark:** and across disciplines

**Aven:** Hi, I'm Aven

**Mark:** and I'm Mark.

**Aven:** And today we're asking "what's the earliest English word?"

**Mark:** Who knows?!

**Aven:** We'll get to that in a moment. But first we have some business to take care of. First thing, this is the start of a new season, season seven.

**Mark:** Oh my goodness.

**Aven:** I know. We don't actually mark the seasons in any meaningful way.

I don't even put it on the podcast feed, but it's a way of noticing how long we've been doing this six full years now.

**Mark:** Wow.

**Aven:** And we're also coming up on episode 100 pretty soon.

**Mark:** Holy moly!

**Aven:** Are you the squares of the Batman comic, with the exclamations?

**Mark:** [00:01:00] Holy episode count, Batman!

**Aven:** Exactly, but we'll probably try to do something to celebrate that, maybe involving some of our fellow podcast friends, but more on that soon. In the meantime, we also have a new patron to thank: Amanda Denman.

**Mark:** Thank you!

**Aven:** Thanks Amanda!

I know you're working your way through the backlog. So when you reach this, thank you so much. I hope you feel appreciated. And finally, Mark, you have another, or the same announcement that you had last time, to make.

**Mark:** Indeed, I am doing another session of the course I did with speakeasy. This is open to anyone.

It's all about the history of the English language and in particular, "how to think like an etymologist". So as I say, anyone can sign up for this. You don't need to have any previous background or experience or anything. This is of interest to anyone who likes our stuff. It will be four, one hour sessions that take place over the month of [00:02:00] September, starting on September 12th.

**Aven:** It's a hundred dollars for the course, which, you know, it'd be lovely if it were free, but we do these for free. And we're trying to branch into other ways to make this a bit of something that can support the work we do. One of the things we haven't talked about is some of the changes that have happened in our life in the last year, but maybe we'll save that for another episode, but suffice it to say that it's become a little more important that we find ways to make the work we put into this project a little better supported. So if you're interested in that, there'll be a link in the show notes, or you can just Google speakeasy Mark Sundaram and you'll find it. And it would be great if you want to sign up, there's still spaces available as of this recording. So if you hurry, you may be able to join Mark and his fellow language nerds.

**Mark:** It'll be lots of fun.

**Aven:** All right. So now to cocktail.

**Mark:** Indeed.

**Aven:** So for this, I actually managed to find a cocktail that was called the Old English. [00:03:00]

**Mark:** I have some, some

**Aven:** reservations about how English it is?

**Mark:** Well, yeah. Quibbles about the name and how accurate it is to the drink, but, you know,

**Aven:** but hey, the name is all I needed.

**Mark:** Yeah. So it's a riff on an Old Fashioned, but made with

**Aven:** scotch. First of all, scotch,

**Mark:** not really English, but

**Aven:** and honey. And marmalade as the sweetener. Marmalade is English.

**Mark:** Yep. Honey is an English thing. Yeah, for sure.

**Aven:** And then angostura bitters which is the normal for an old fashioned and a little bit of Campari, which is not normal nor particularly English, but sounds good.

Yup. So let us try these.

**Mark:** Hmm.

**Aven:** What do you think?

**Mark:** It's good.

**Aven:** You're not sure it was good enough to spend your, to use your fancy scotch on?

**Mark:** It was not my fanciest scotch. No, but it is a single malt, so

**Aven:** it's not as cold as it could be. I could've chilled it down better.

**Mark:** You could put more whiskey stones in it to cool it down. I suppose,

**Aven:** It's tasty though, I'm not sure that the marmalade comes through [00:04:00] very intensely, a

**Mark:** There's a lot of strong flavors.

I mean, between the single-malt and the campari, those are both very

strong.

**Aven:** There's not much Campari, but it's enough to give it that bitterness, which is good. And of course the marmalade will add a little bitterness too. Yeah, Yeah, it's tasty. What's JC. Yup. You're just not sold on it as a drink.

**Mark:** You know, so many things get called Old English that aren't old English, you know, Shakespeare gets called old English and, and

**Aven:** he's not Old English, he's old and English, but he's not Old English. Well, maybe that brings us to you introducing this video. Cause there's a little bit of setup you need to do isn't there.

**Mark:** Yeah. So this is kind of a slightly inane question that I asked. I asked myself knowing that it was sort of impossible to answer, but I thought it was a sort of question that even though the answer isn't really significant, going through the process of trying to answer it actually [00:05:00] tells you a lot.

So of course, you know, asking what the earliest word of anything is a sort of meaningless thing, because language just keeps going back and back and back and any, there's no starting point of any language. It just comes from some other language before it

**Aven:** only Klingon and Esperanto. Yeah.

**Mark:** Unless it's a constructed language, you know, there's no one starting point.

Nevertheless, as I say, I found the asking of the question and the exploration of it really quite fascinating. Now this was in part done as a collab with another YouTuber. So basically I made a YouTube video for my channel. And then I also wrote and presented a or, wrote, and then jointly edited a script about the invasion of Britain by the various Germanic tribes, the angles, Saxons and [00:06:00] Jutes and so forth with a YouTuber called Jabzy.

And so I kind of wrote the initial script and then we kind of tossed it back. Yeah. And then he animated it, and then he animated it and it went out on his channel and it was you know, kind of a neat collab. And the video that I made for, for my own channel was asking this question, what is the earliest English word?

Because it turns out that it ties in really interestingly with the sort of historical the story of how, the story of how England became England, became England. How, how people who spoke various closely related languages came to the island of Britain and founded England. Though, as will become clear.

It was not a unified country for long after they arrived. The other thing that I should say is that in the, in that original video, in fact, in both original videos, I use the term Anglo-Saxon to refer to these [00:07:00] various Germanic peoples who, who came to Britain.

**Aven:** Yeah. And, and in particular to the kingdoms that were created after they came.

**Mark:** Yeah.

And there are two problems with this. One is that the term Anglo-Saxon has a long history of racism basically from its very earliest usage. And the reason that is, is because the term Anglo-Saxon didn't really exist during the time of the people that it supposedly refers to. It was never used by the people themselves to refer to themselves.

It was very occasionally used in Latin, not in English, but in Latin, by foreign peoples to refer to them and in a very different sense. So to talk about the Anglo-Saxons, what it originally meant was the. English Saxons, as opposed to the old Saxons,

**Aven:** Yeah.

**Mark:** the continental Saxons. [00:08:00] So it doesn't even mean Anglo-Saxon, it really originally meant the English Saxons as in the Saxons of England,

**Aven:** which was one of the groups that were in England. Yeah.

**Mark:** And they did call themselves the English and they did call their, their place England. So that's the proper name to call them.

That's how they referred to themselves. That's how they were really thought of by everyone. They were the English in England. And so really to be accurate we should be calling the early medieval English or, you know, early medieval England, or what, but that's, both the historically accurate and the non racist term to use.

So, as I say, the term Anglo-Saxon really only came about in the sort of 16th, 17th century. And it was used in a racially charged sense, and that became even worse as the term was picked up on you know, it was very much a part of US history and their racial ideas,

**Aven:** [00:09:00] all of which we don't need to get into full details on now, because, because

**Mark:** you can, for one thing, listen to a previous episode of the podcast that we put out, which was a couple of presentations that we did,

**Aven:** that was a bonus episode.

It wasn't a numbered episode, but it's from December, 2019. And I'll put a link of course, in the description.

**Mark:** And so one of the pieces in that episode was a talk that I gave about this issue with this word.

And for even more detail, I have a video coming out soon, coincidentally, another collaboration. It won't be the next video. It'll be the one after that. So I can't say precisely when it's going to come out

**Aven:** sooner than the pace of video releases have been this year. Yeah. We hope to goodness.

See earlier comment about this year being a hard year. Yeah.

**Mark:** So it goes into quite a bit of detail about this term and related concepts. So, you can look at those,

**Aven:** there's a lot to say about it, [00:10:00] but, and the point is that when you did this collab, which is quite a few years ago now some of these issues had not been raised as prominently yet. And you didn't know as much about some of these issues and used the standard, the then standard term Anglo-Saxon. So when you hear that term in this video, and if you watch the other one or in this voiceover be aware of that, that's why, and that you don't use that term anymore.

**Mark:** I don't use that term anymore to refer to the people.

There are some texts that will undoubtedly continue to be referred to with that term. So like the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle is not going to change its title, title anytime soon. The main thing is to not use that term to refer to the period or the, the field of academic studies we don't talk about,

**Aven:** especially in sort of nonspecific ways.

Yeah. It's one thing. If you've got a particular scholarly discussion you really want need to have about something, but yeah, so

**Mark:** it's not Anglo-Saxon studies anymore. That implies something very different.

**Aven:** Anglo-Saxonist it's one of those terms that's particularly,

**Mark:** even [00:11:00] worse is when, you know, a scholar refers to themselves as an Anglo-Saxonist, it sounds like they're white supremacist.

And so we don't want to do that. So, you know, the, the practices has changed.

**Aven:** Is changing

**Mark:** is changing. There are still some holdouts, but a lot of people in a lot of official organizations have made the move.

**Aven:** And just for the record, there's lots of people who might not be professional scholars, who aren't aware of this discussion.

So it doesn't mean that if somebody does use the term Anglo-Saxon, that, that means they've chosen necessarily to do so in the face of all of this discussion. So I just don't want to tar everybody with the same brush on that one.

**Mark:** A lot of this discussion has happened very firmly within academia without a lot of outside notice or notice or whatever.

So a lot, you know, many people have probably never heard of this, this particular debate.

**Aven:** So yeah, we're not, we're not here trying to shame other people. We're just trying to explain the changes in your thinking and mine. Not that I'm anything but peripheral.

**Mark:** And [00:12:00] also of course, you know, excuse me. If I, I accidentally slipped in, into using the term while reading from notes that were written back then I'm going to try and on the fly, not do that, but it may come out.

**Aven:** All right. With all of those disclaimers, shall we listen to the episode? Which is fairly short one this time and fairly specific. And then we'll come back and talk more about early writing, early language sources, games, exciting things like that.

**Mark:** Language change is a bit like boiling the proverbial frog — you don’t notice how much a language has altered until you look back. It’s hard to pick the point when English became “English”. Broadly speaking, English is the language that grew out of the collection of dialects spoken by Germanic mercenaries, invaders, and settlers, such as the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes, who came to Britain in the 5th century. It has changed a lot since that earliest form, now known as Old English, spoken by the people [00:13:00] known as the Anglo-Saxons, but it is still all considered one language, English. Of course we can’t know what the first spoken word in this language was, so what we’re looking for is the earliest surviving written English word. So, what’s the earliest English writing we have?

It’s often said that the oldest Old English text to be written down was the Law Code of King Æthelberht of Kent, composed in the early 7th century, sometime before Æthelberht died in 616 but after Augustine came to England to become archbishop of Canterbury in 597 and converted Æthelberht to Christianity, making him the first Anglo-Saxon Christian king. The first sentence of the document reads: “þis syndon þa domas þe Æðelbirht cyning asette on Agustinus dæge” or “These are the laws which king Æthelberht established in Augustine’s day”. So then is the earliest word ‘þis’? Well, the problem is that the earliest surviving copy of this law code is a very late Old English manuscript from the early 12th century. And who knows how much it’s [00:14:00] changed in the recopying over the years, and if that sentence was even in the original.

For the earliest Old English text that survives in its original form, not a later copy, we have to go to an inscription on an artifact. One such artifact is the Franks Casket, a whalebone chest believed to date from the early 8th century. It’s richly decorated with both pictures and inscriptions, written mostly in Anglo-Saxon runes. There isn’t really a “beginning” to the various texts inscribed on the Frank’s Casket, but the front panel, which contains pictures of the Germanic legend of Wayland the Smith and the biblical story of the Adoration of the Magi, has inscribed on it a riddle about the make-up of the casket itself: “Fisc flodu ahof on fergen-berig, warþ gas-ric grorn þær he on greut giswom” or “The flood cast up the fish on the mountain-cliff, the terror-king became sad where he swam on the sand”. The answer to the riddle is given as “Hronæs ban”, “whale’s bone”, and it’s a whale to which the first word of the text, [00:15:00] “fisc”, is referring. By the way, the Franks Casket also contains a picture of the brothers Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she wolf, connected with the legendary foundations of Rome, and an obscure picture including a horse, which some have identified as a reference to the legendary foundations of Anglo-Saxon England with the two brothers Hengest [meaning “stallion”] and Horsa [meaning “horse”], the first two of those mercenaries invited to Britain. And it’s to that foundation period of Anglo-Saxon England that we turn next.

Because while the Franks Casket contains perhaps the earliest extended text of Old English literature, there are artifacts from the earlier migration period with shorter inscriptions. Such as the Undley Bracteate, found in Undley Common, near Lakenheath, Suffolk, which dates to sometime in the later 5th century, perhaps between 450 and 480. A bracteate is a coin-like medallion which was apparently worn as jewellery. The Undley bracteate contains a runic inscription which is the earliest example of the Anglo-Saxon variety of runes, [00:16:00] as opposed to the slightly different Common Germanic Elder Futhark, so this would therefore be a strong candidate for the earliest English writing. The inscription is a little hard to interpret, however. It reads “gægogæ mægæ medu”. The last two words are clear enough, meaning “reward for relatives”, presumably referring to the bracteate itself, similar to the Franks Casket whalebone riddle. Neither word really makes it to modern English except perhaps the fairly archaic meed, not the honey wine that the Anglo-Saxons drank, but M-E-E-D meaning “reward”.The first series of characters, however, has sparked much debate. One possibility is that it represents a war-cry. There is another artifact, called the Kragehul I lance shaft, which was found on Funen, Denmark, which also has a runic inscription that includes the similar string of runic characters gagaga. A war-cry would certainly make sense on a spear shaft. Another suggestion for the gægogæ of the Undley Bracteate is that it means “howling she-wolf” in reference to the picture on [00:17:00] the bracteate of the she-wolf suckling Romulus & Remus [just like that picture we saw before on the Franks Casket], so the entire phrase would then mean “this she-wolf to a kinsman is a reward”. A third possibility is that gægogæ represents some kind of magical incantation or formula. Another similar bracteate called the Seeland-II-C bracteate, which was found on Zeeland, Denmark, has an inscription which means “Hariuha I am called: the dangerous knowledgeable one: I give chance”, and that last phrase, “I give chance or luck” is often used to argue that bracteates are some kind of magical amulets. So perhaps the Undley Bracteate too is some kind of lucky charm, and gægogæ is our earliest English word—we just don’t know what it means!

Our next candidate is more understandable. At Caistor St Edmund in Norfolk, an urn was found containing over thirty astragalus bones, otherwise known as talus or ankle bones, presumably gaming pieces. [00:18:00] All but one of the bones in the urn are from sheep; that one exception is from a roe deer, and has inscribed on it the word “raihan” meaning “roe” [and in fact we get the modern English word “roe” from this], so again like the Franks Casket naming its material, this gaming piece names itself as the one roe bone in the bunch. The find was dated to ca. 425-475, so possibly earlier than the Undley Bracteate, making this potentially the earliest inscription found in Anglo-Saxon England. The catch with this word “raihan”, though, is that it’s inscribed in runes of the Elder Futhark variety, from the mainland, rather than Anglo-Saxon runes. It’s believed these game pieces may have been brought over by one of the invading Germanic warriors coming to Britain—so does it count as English?

Oh, and what game exactly were these used to play? Well, one popular game at the time is now known as knucklebones [though as we’ve seen, actually played with ankle bones!] much like modern jacks. You put one bone on the back of your hand, throw it up in the [00:19:00] air and pick up another from the ground then catch the one you threw up, continuing on like this adding one bone each time. So, do you want to place your bet on this word?

Both these inscriptions come from the Anglo-Saxon migration period, when it was said Hengist and Horsa arrived in England bringing their troop of warriors with them, around the middle of the 5th century. For our next candidate for the earliest English word, we turn to an account of that invasion itself—not from the Anglo-Saxons, but from the indigenous Britons. The Celtic British writer Gildas wrote about the fall of Britain to these Germanic invaders, and in doing so he seems to have preserved a word of these Anglo-Saxons. Gildas was writing in Latin, but he uses a non-Latin word in his text: “tum erumpens grex catulorum de cubili leaenae barbarae, tribus, ut lingua eius exprimitur, ‘cyulis’, nostra ‘longis navibus’” which means “Then a pack of cubs burst forth from the lair of the barbarian lioness, in three ‘cyulis’, as they call [00:20:00] long ships in their language.” Gildas presumably got this word cyulis meaning “long ships” from some Germanic source. And indeed the word reappears in Old English as ceol in later Old English texts, such as in the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, which was compiled starting in the late 9th century, recounting the arrival of Hengest and Horsa: “on þeora dagum gelaðode Wyrtgeorn Angelcin hider, & hi þa coman on þrim ceolum hider to Brytene” meaning “in their days Vortigern invited the Angle race here and they then came in three ships here to Britain.” So although the word first occurs in a Latin context, it could be said to be the earliest recovered word of written Old English.

But speaking of the Angles, what about them and their language? Well again we can turn to Latin contexts, specifically the ethnographic writings of the Roman author Tacitus, who way back around the year 98 wrote a book called Germania, in which he describes the various Germanic tribes that had come into contact with [00:21:00] the Romans. One tribe he mentions he called the Anglii, which seems quite plausibly to be the Angles who three and a half centuries later would invade Britain and give us the modern term English. And what does Angle mean? Well it seems to refer to their homeland, now known as Angeln [in the part of Germany known as Schleswig-Holstein], which kind of has a hook-like shape. And that’s what the name seems to mean, “fish hook”—remember that fishy whale on the Franks Casket? That name Angle is therefore related to the modern word angler, another word for fisherman. It in fact goes back to an Indo-European root which means “to bend” and gives us the other word angle, as in a corner, through Latin, as well as the word ankle—which by the way means that that previous possible ealiest English word “roe” is written on an ankle or “English” bone! As a name, in fact, it’s always been ripe for word play: Pope Gregory the Great, who sent Augustine to Canterbury to become archbishop and convert the Anglo-Saxons to Christianity, was [00:22:00] inspired to do so when he saw a couple of fair-haired and pale-skinned Anglo-Saxon boys for sale in the slave market in Rome, and upon hearing they were Angles punned that they were “non Angli, sed angeli”, “not Angles, but Angels”. And when he heard that they were from the Northumbrian kingdom of Deira he said that they should be saved “de ira”, “from the wrath”. And finally, on learning that the king of that land was named Ælla, he simply replied “Alleluia!”. Turns out Holy Father jokes are even worse than Dad jokes!

So perhaps in a sense ‘English’ itself is the earliest ‘English’ word, at least in the form Anglii, found in a Latin text—though one whose earliest surviving manuscript dates from the 15th century, well after the Anglo-Saxon period. But if we accept it anyway, the irony is that it predates the English language itself!

So what do you think, what is the earliest English word?

**Aven:** [00:23:00] I mean, it's an unanswerable question.

**Mark:** But you know, as I kind of did with, with the original video, I actually had a poll because YouTube allows you to do polls. So feel free to write in and comment and continue the discussion. What do you think is, yeah.

So what do you think is the earliest word of those various choices? And tell us why you think that. So some other details that I, want to sort of pick up on. The first of which is kind of a fun little sideline, fun in particular because it's about games. You know, one of these, words is connected to a game that the, early medieval English people played.

And in fact the Germanic peoples in general. So this was, a widely played game knuckle bones. In addition to knuckle bones, they had other games, of course such as riddles. So riddles were really important and there's a significant number of Old English riddles preserved in manuscript form.

**Aven:** Well, there's the riddle on the Franks casket.

**Mark:** There's a riddle on the Franks [00:24:00] casket. That's right. And there's a whole bunch of other riddles, mostly preserved in the Exeter book which is one particular manuscript. So they, they really enjoyed riddles. They also had other board games called collectively tæfl that's spelled Ash F L Ash is the sort of, it looks like an A and an E joined together.

It has the ' ah sound as in 'cat'. And tæfl game, tæfl literally means table. So these are table games. So this is like the original tabletop gaming ,for those tabletop aficionados out there. And, you know, unsurprisingly, I suppose the ancient Greeks and Romans had board games too, also kind of named after tables.

So there's tabula in Latin, and table is the Greek equivalent of that. So they, they were similar types of games. And in fact, tabula, the Roman board game, is [00:25:00] the direct ancestor of our modern backgammon.

**Aven:** Hm. And interestingly, we have surviving boards, but not on tables, on the ground, on roads.

I mean, we also have them elsewhere, but we actually have board games as it were etched or like carved into roadways where people clearly sat on the sidewalk and played. Right. So I know there's some in Pohnpei and there's some elsewhere as well. So. I mean, they are tabletop, but there's no table, so they made do.

But so they, they survive because they're, marked actually into, into the stone or the cement of the road, which is really cool.

**Mark:** And the second element of that modern word backgammon, Gammon, is just the old English form of the word game.

**Aven:** it's the back game because you send pieces back to the beginning.

Yeah.

**Mark:** Now dice have also been found in the archeological record of early medieval England. So we [00:26:00] can imagine them playing a variety of dice games, basically like craps. And in fact the direct ancestor to the game craps was medieval. We don't know if it goes back to pre conquest England but it was a game called hazard.

And in fact, that's where we get the modern word hazard as in risk or danger, that's where it comes from

**Aven:** because they were betting games, of course, dice games were all betting games,

**Mark:** all about gambling. So the word, and presumably the game were imported into English, through French, from Spanish, probably ultimately from the Arabic word for dice.

So hazard just means dice in Arabic. And as I say, the word doesn't appear in English until about 1300. So this is well after that pre conquest England, nevertheless we know they did have dice so they played some game. It could have been some form of that. We don't know, but you know, it could be some other dice game. Yeah. And there's so many different cultures that have a [00:27:00] form of dice gaming, but, you know,

**Aven:** Romans played dice, for instance, we know for sure, there's this whole narrative about it being banned most of the year, except during Saturnalia except clearly it wasn't, that's obviously not.

And that the emperor Augustus was very fond of dicing and liked to win money off other people. Right. So, yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** And so the, the word tæfl could also be used to refer to dice. It can also mean dice, it became associated with all games. Yeah. And this brings up the notion of gambling, therefore which no doubt the early English engaged in. There was an old English verb from this game root, gamenian, which means to play or joke.

And that eventually becomes our word gamble.

Another gambling related word that comes out of the middle ages is pool. Which originally referred to the collective stakes in any game of gambling. So you win the pool, [00:28:00] right? It's like a betting pool or, you know, that's the original sense of it before eventually coming to refer to a particular type of billiards game.

So playing pool, right? So it comes from the gambling to refer to that particular game. Right? That's the later sense of the word. Now the etymology of the word pool is quite surprising. It's not where you might think. You might think it somehow refers to a pool of water because you put money in like a whole pot of, you know, like, like a pot of water, something. That is not at all where it comes from.

Instead it comes from French from the word for chicken. Poule.

Why does it refer to a chicken?

**Aven:** Because obviously chickens were the only important thing to play for through most of human history. Right? That's how language works.

**Mark:** Well that's basically it actually! So [00:29:00]

**Aven:** I'm so upset that that wasn't just a joke.

**Mark:** Supposedly it comes from a game, called in French "jeu de poule", "game of chicken", in which believe it or not, the chicken is the target.

And if you hit the chicken, you win the chicken. So the pool referred to the winnings of that game. Well, the target and the winnings of that game and eventually it came to refer to the winnings in any game.

**Aven:** You know how people talk about how life was better before we all distracted ourselves with silly iPhone games and stuff.

I don't think that's true!

**Mark:** Hit the chicken and win a chicken! Woohoo!

**Aven:** I think, in fact, people play dumb games.

**Mark:** And they didn't even have like a fancy name for it. It was literally just game of chicken.

However, in English, it probably comes to be associated with the other type of pool, the pool of water reinforced supposedly by the fact [00:30:00] that the French word fiche in the sense of game counter sounds a lot like the English word fish and therefore pool of water.

**Aven:** And go fish, and go fish.

**Mark:** Yeah. Well, I mean, maybe, maybe,

So multiple sort of weird puns and wordplay going on,

**Aven:** Almost as if, the names of games are silly. I mean, it does make sense that there would be wordplay and sort of yeah, for this kind of stuff.

**Mark:** So, you know, that, that little set of etymology entertains me highly. But of course the word pool brings us back to the word English, in sort of a different sense.

We can use the word English to mean the spin on the ball in a game of billiards like pool. So you talk about giving the ball a little English, which makes a curve, makes it curve because it's spinning in a very particular way. So English comes to have this slang sense since angled in French, anglé, [00:31:00] surprisingly sounds like anglais, meaning English. So anglé, A N G L É, angled. But it sounds like anglais, A N G L A I S that means English. Right? So again, another crazy pun.

**Aven:** But I mean, but not actually in the end a pun, it goes back to the fact that angle may be, comes from the word for hook in the first place.

It's actually, I mean, it is a pun, but it's not a coincidence it's or it's a coincidence that they end up having those different meetings, but yeah, they, they come from the same root

**Mark:** probably. So, you know, you give the ball a bit of a hook-like trajectory, but then it comes to be reinterpreted as English and hence, that's what it's called.

There is a possible other etymology, the technique of putting English on the ball was supposedly introduced by English players. But I wouldn't bet on this one.

**Aven:** Yeah. Oh, sorry. That was supposed to be a [00:32:00] joke, I was supposed to laugh.

I have become inured to these puns.

**Mark:** You know, I had to add my own pun to the

**Aven:** the pile of puns.

Okay. Next.

**Mark:** So the, other kind of big theme from all of this is the idea of the migration of the Germanic tribes to Britain which as I said, was also the main focus of the paired video. So there are basically two stories about how the Anglo-Saxons ended up in England. The one told by archeology and the one told by our historical literary sources. All we know according to archeology is that there were Germanic mercenaries in

**Aven:** no, you don't actually know they were mercenaries.

Archeology tells you there were Germanic warriors.

**Mark:** Yeah. But we know they were part of the Roman army.[00:33:00] So I suppose what we know about how the Roman army worked. Yeah. They were probably paid

**Aven:** Okay. There's a whole other discussion to be had about the word mercenary when it comes to Roman armies, all of whom were paid. Yes. Right. Auxiliaries... what does a mercenary even mean when you talk about Roman armies? And they're very different things at different periods. There were Germanic soldiers, I think is all archaeology can tell you.

**Mark:** But in any case, we know that they were there as early as the three sixties. before Rome left, in other words, before Rome left, and there were larger numbers of Germanic settlers after the four thirties, which is after Rome left. Yeah. Now archeological evidence confirms that the primary Germanic tribes involved were the Angles, Saxons, and Jutes.

But they may not have been as ethnically distinct as traditional accounts suggested, particularly those literary accounts

**Aven:** and they may not have in fact called themselves those things necessarily. They, when you say those archeology tells you, you mean, archeology says people from this [00:34:00] region in Europe where the people who were in this region who moved into England.

Yeah. They

**Mark:** have as a constant cultural archeological remains that are consistent with certainty. Places with the, the remains in certain places, in the Germanic

**Aven:** area of some sorts of cultural connections to one another. Yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** So the situation on the ground may have been rather more multi-ethnic.

But the ancestral region on the mainland does seem to have been deserted around 450 due to rising sea levels, which may suggest that there was a large scale migration, right. It's not just, you know, a few guys joining the army or whatever, or, or a few warlords, you know, just looking for booty.

Sorry, they're on a booty call.

**Aven:** I use that word in my classes too, because it's a real word and it means real things, but I'm so 10 years old, I can't get over how silly it sounds.

**Mark:** So archeologically, we can see that there [00:35:00] are more so-called Anglo-Saxon burials found in the south and Midlands suggesting that settlement began in those regions while the Germanic rule in the north of the Thames are dated to the sixth century.

And that is confirmed by the textual evidence. You know, both by the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles and the archeological evidence. So. The increasing number of grave sites over time suggests that immigration continued throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. So it wasn't a, one and done, a bunch of boats coming and that was it.

It was a continual influx of peoples. Nevertheless, there is considerable scholarly debate as to whether it was a small scale invasion of sort of an elite ruling class who had therefore this profound cultural impact act

**Aven:** like the Norman invasion, essentially. Yeah.

**Mark:** Or whether it was a large scale migration which [00:36:00] largely supplanted the indigenous Celtic population.

**Aven:** The more indigenous

**Mark:** more indigenous, yeah, So we're going very far back here. Celtic people were, originally came from basically central Europe, Eastern Europe.

**Aven:** I only raise that to, to bring up the point that anyone who talks about sort of native English people is, is you have to go really far

**Mark:** back to those people.

Yeah. So there were pre Celtic people. We know about them from archeological evidence only from a very particular type of dwelling that they built. But they were supplanted by the Celtic peoples for a long time. And the English the various Germanic peoples came later yeah.

**Aven:** Along with the Romans before them.

So the models that are being sort of proposed and that it's hard to tell between are those of similar to the Norman invasion later, where yes, there were population movements, but to a large extent, it was simply the ruling class that came over or more like the Germanic and Gothic movements of peoples[00:37:00] on the continent that happened at the end of the Roman empire, where there were entire peoples.

Everybody lock stock and barrel families, groups, tribes, carts, horses and everything, and moved, and actually came in and either settled alongside or actually displaced people. So those both were happening. Those are both things that have happened historically in that

**Mark:** area. Yeah. And I think that the sort of traditional theory on this was that it was like all of the other migrations, because it was happening all at the same time.

So why would it be different? But you know, various other types of evidence have been brought up, but nothing has really solved nothing conclusive. Now if we want a more detailed story about this invasion slash migration we have to turn to the historians whose version is rather more colorful and sometimes contradictory in details, but by and large consistent with the archeological evidence one way or the other, it doesn't disprove anything, but it doesn't [00:38:00] prove anything.

Right. So according to the written sources that we have in the year 410, Alaric the Visigoths sacked Rome causing Roman troops to be pulled out of Britain to deal with domestic problems. Quite frankly, they didn't have the resources to defend their far-flung territories. So they had to pull all the troops back.

But not all ties to Rome were severed and Romano-British culture continued for some time. I mean, the Romans had held Britannia as a province for a good long while. Well, and

**Aven:** when we say they pulled the troops back, that doesn't mean everybody who was Roman or who considered themselves Roman left by any stretch of the imagination.

**Mark:** And we, we have to imagine there's some degree of intermarriage.

**Aven:** Oh, a very high degree, actually. and also while the question of Romanization is a fraught one in my field, whatever you want to call the sort of melding of cultures had been going on for a long period of time. So many people who were ethnically, you [00:39:00] know, these are all charged terms, but you know, by birth had come from Celtic backgrounds may have become, you know, Latin speaking and lived in towns and functioned like Romans and been Roman citizens and considered themselves Romans. And just because the troops left the barracks doesn't mean that they stopped being romance or thought of themselves as not Roman anymore.

So yeah, that's a much more gradual process.

**Mark:** And in fact, it's quite a long time that people in Britain considered themselves Roman, even Bede refers to himself as Roman in a sense. And certainly in the decades after the troop withdrawal you know, the people would have thought we're Roman of course we're Roman,

**Aven:** who else would like, what else would we be?

Yeah.

**Mark:** So, increasingly the Celtic Britons, these Romano Britons came under attack by various non Romanized peoples on the islands. So the Picts and the Scots from the north. And again, you know, it's not entirely clear who they [00:40:00] were but they were not under Roman control, is the important point.

And sometime between 446 and 454, they, as Romans, wrote home, sent an appeal,to the

**Aven:** putative leader of their people

**Mark:** to the Capital city, And it's known as "The Groans of the Britons" to the Roman general Flavius Aetius, who is in charge of the forces in Gaul. So the closest Roman military force

**Aven:** could theoretically come to help

**Mark:** and it famously read, quote, "the barbarians, push us back to the sea.

The sea pushes us back to the barbarians between these two kinds of death we are either drowned or slaughtered". However, no help was forthcoming as Aetius was too busy dealing with Attila the Hun in Gaul. All right. So, eventually political matters, you know, take a turn in Britain. A quote unquote, proud [00:41:00] Tyrant, as he is referred to simply in the earliest records, whose name is later on given as Vortigern, that was not mentioned until the Anglo Saxon monk and historian, the Venerable Bede gives that name. But in any case, this proud tyrant, supposedly invited Saxon mercenaries into the country to defend against the barbarian Raiders.

**Aven:** So Vortigern in that reading would be a Celt, inviting Saxons and Angles.

**Mark:** Yeah. And again, according to later sources the first wave of mercenaries came in three ships arriving in Ebbsfleet, and were led by the brothers Hengist and Horsa, who I mentioned are basically, you know, horse and his brother horse.

They were granted land in Kent and rations for their help. However, having turned back the Scots and the Picts, the Germanic mercenaries soon rebelled against their Celtic hosts due to [00:42:00] a dispute over the rations. And in 455 Hengist and Horsa fought against Vortigern at Aylesford and Horsa was killed, but Hengist and his son Æsc continued to lead the fighting. Hengist and Æsc fought against the Britons at Crayford killing 4,000 men after which the Britons abandoned Kent and fled to London in 457.

**Aven:** You're telling the story as told, big caveats here.

**Mark:** Yes, as told in the, you know, rather suspect literary sources

**Aven:** where things like numbers of dead are highly suspect.

**Mark:** Yeah. Yeah.

So what supposedly followed was ongoing fighting between the Celts and the Germanic peoples with each at times, gaining the upper hand until around the year 500. Over this period other semi legendary Germanic leaders are recorded as having arrived in Britain, including Ælle and his three [00:43:00] sons in 477 in Sussex, Cerdic and his son Cynric in Wessex in 495.

Now we don't know when or where the Germanic settlers of Northumbria landed, but it is recorded in the historical records that Ida succeeded to the kingdom of Bernicia in 547, dying in 559, and Ælle succeeded to the kingdom of Deira in 560, dying in the 590s. So certainly by the sixth century, the Germanic rule was established in Northumbria, if we are to believe the textual sources. Right. Now, out of this whole period of various different Germanic tribes and Celts battling and so forth, the story of the great British victory at Mons Badonicus or Mount Badon first appears. So in this battle the Celtic British forces were, according [00:44:00] to the sixth century monk Gildas, commanded by Ambrosius Aurelianus, though later more fanciful writers connect this event to the legendary story of king Arthur.

So that is the level of textual reliability that we have here.

**Aven:** Yeah. And important: take that as meaning that these historical sources are not very reliable, not as meaning that the king Arthur story is true. It's very important to go that direction.

**Mark:** And as I say, the king Arthur name doesn't occur until much later.

So the earliest sources just refer to Ambrosius Aurelianus. Now the date of this battle is disputed. It's ranging from 493 to 517, depending on the source, and the location of the battle or siege is unknown. Gildas tells us that what followed the British victory was 50 years of relative peace up to the time that he was writing, with the Germanic peoples living in their own kingdoms.

So we don't know exactly when, [00:45:00] we have no clue as to where, though some people have connected the name Baden with Bath. So that's probably one of the more plausible suggestions. But in reality, we don't know,

**Aven:** Later on it gets tied to Wales because of Arthur, but that's again,

**Mark:** Of course, you know, conflicts as they do flare up again.

And that's what happened. So there was a great Germanic victory in 571 under Cuthwulf at Bedcanford. We don't know exactly what it is, but possibly Bedford, which is a modern name for a place in England maybe this Bedcanford. And so with the, Germanic peoples taking four settlements: Limbury, Aylesbury, Benson, and Eynsham sorry, Eenshem, I think it should be pronounced. Then in 577 was the battle of Dyrham in which Cuthwine and Ceawlin fought against the Britons [00:46:00] killing three Kings: Coinmail, Condidan, Farinmail, and Farinmail, those three.

After this point, the Germanic kingdoms were fairly well-established. Now there were some Celtic enclaves that survived such as Strathclyde, Wales and Cornwall, but otherwise, basically England, as we know it now was ruled by numerous Germanic kingdoms.

They were not unified. They were individual little kingdoms

**Aven:** And they fought amongst themselves, et cetera, or had

**Mark:** treaties or whatever. And that gets very complicated in terms of, there's some evidence for there being a sort of Uber king, who sort of ruled the others, but it's all highly suspect, suspect. We don't know exactly what was going on.

So soon after in in 5 97, Augustine of Canterbury sent by Pope Gregory. The great, as I mentioned arrived in the Kentish kingdom of King Æthelberht to convert [00:47:00] these newly established English peoples. And according to Bede, writing in the eighth century, so quite a bit later, Kent and the Isle of Wight had been settled by Jutes; Essex, Sussex and Wessex in the south had been settled by the Saxons, and East Anglia, Mercia, and Northumbria in the Midlands and north had been settled by the Angles.

So that ethnographic information is given to us by a vaguely contemporary source. But it, you know, as I say, he's several hundred years later. And with that the stage was set for the development of England over the coming centuries. And eventually it becomes a unified kingdom and then falls to the Vikings and briefly under west Saxon control again, and then falls to the the Norman.

So yeah, all of that. Now, one of the challenges of putting together a coherent narrative of the arrival of the English in Britain is balancing the literary historical sources and the [00:48:00] archeological evidence. In broad outline, these sources of information are in agreement. They don't drastically, contradict each other.

**Aven:** Right. But lots of details. They don't quite mesh.

**Mark:** Yeah. So there are some inconsistencies. And so I mentioned a few of these textual sources and I thought I'd give just a brief historiographical account of these literary sources so that we know how to take them, how seriously to take them, what we should be, taking with a grain of salt or whatever.

So one of our earliest written sources that discusses the Germanic peoples is the Roman writer. And this is well before these migrations/ conquests, whatever, the Roman writer Tacitus in his book, Germania written around the year 98.

**Aven:** All right. So I'm going to take over here to talk a little bit about the Germania, because I wanted to talk about this anyway.

So very briefly Publius Cornelius Tacitus, roughly 56 to 120 CE. And he [00:49:00] wrote about the Julio-Claudian and later emperors and his history writing is very respected.

I would say he was definitely considered a better historian than his semi contemporary Suetonius, who's more of a gossip columnist. And his work is, considered to be quite legitimate. However, the Germania is an ethnographic work and it's a bit of a, something people are a little more suspicious of. Tacitus to our knowledge, never went to Gaul, which is what he's speaking of when he talks about the Germans he's talking about people in Gaul, as you say, they're not in England yet. And he's also not talking about them in their Scandinavian homelands because the Romans didn't get up there.

**Mark:** Now. I know Tacitus's father-in-law was in Britain. Was he also ever in Gaul?

**Aven:** He might've been a little bit, but mostly, no, he was governor of Britain.

He didn't, he didn't fight. And I mean, he presumably went through Gaul. But yeah, that was his, father-in-law. So the Agricola is about his father-in-law that he writes about, and so that's where we do have some source for some [00:50:00] interesting Celtic stuff.

**Mark:** So that that's not then probably the likely source.

**Aven:** No, I mean, it's, it's not clear why, and this is the other thing it's not clear why he's writing about the Germans. He doesn't have a, big preface that explains why he chose to write about this particularly. When he writes the histories he has a preface that sort of says, this is why I'm writing it so that everyone can understand how degenerate our times are now, you can obviously say he had other reasons too, but he at least gives a reason and we don't have that for the Germania.

His sources seem to be mainly literary as far as we can tell though, perhaps also quizzing soldiers who'd returned from there. And I mean, you know, there's certainly were people around who knew those groups of people, so he could have had firsthand information or secondhand information, but we don't know.

So it's just important to realize this is not Caesar in Gaul writing about the Gauls, right? I mean, obviously Caesar in Gaul had lots of ulterior motives there too, but at least he was genuinely fighting those people and sitting in that location. So when he [00:51:00] tells you about the Gauls, you feel like he has some basis for his knowledge.

So what's important is that primarily he's not an ethnographer. That's not what Tacitus is. Generally. This is a bit of an outlier in his work. And so why he wrote it, it's important to think about that as being probably for the Roman audience. I mean, obviously it was for a Roman audience, but in, in the sense of He had a point to make to the Romans about the Romans and he used the Germans to make that. And when he calls Germans, he talks about what seemed to be Gauls and Germans, pretty indiscriminately. He doesn't really see that there's a difference between them. He uses the term Germans to mean a whole bunch of different barbarian tribes.

**Mark:** Is it fair to call it polemic or is that going too far?

**Aven:** I think that's going too far, but I think some of the purpose may have been polemic. I don't think the work is itself. The work, you know, is framed as ethnographic, but what it does do is it provides a picture of a people who are untouched, mostly untouched by the degeneration of the current [00:52:00] Romans.

Right. So that's how it's generally been read by modern scholars. As being a way of saying to the Romans look what you could be if you weren't such degenerate losers, essentially.

**Mark:** It's a similar trope to what would later be called the noble savage.

**Aven:** Yeah. And in fact, in many ways that is exactly what it is, you know and that, by no means would Tacitus be the first person to do that.

That, that had been an ongoing trope of the Romans in particular, but also a little bit the Greeks, but the Romans, use that a lot. So in terms of thinking about it, therefore it's important to think of it, not primarily as documentary, but as being about the contrast between the Germans and the Romans of his day.

So when you look at the descriptions of the Germans, that's an important point, but before you get back to talking about your other sources, I just wanted to say a couple of words about the Germania's later importance. So interestingly it only survives in a single manuscript. it really did not have the influence or the importance that his other histories did. There's very little mention of it in the [00:53:00] medieval period. It seems to be used as a source in a couple of places, but basically it pretty much drops out of our record and, didn't really get picked up on. Nobody seemed to care very much about it. We have one manuscript that was found in an Abbey in 1425.

That's what we've got. That's the only reason we have the Germania. And that manuscript was brought to Italy, where someone who became Pope Pius the second later analyzed and examined it. And this kind of raised the interest of German humanists at the time. So, right, we're

15th century, we're at the beginning of the, well we're in the Renaissance and we're in the beginning of that sort of rise of humanism in Germany. And so

**Mark:** we are sure it's genuine, right? Like this is legit Tacitus?

**Aven:** It is mentioned in other places like, you know, we do have people mentioning it from time to time in earlier places.

Well, as far as I know, I mean, I'm no Tacitus expert, but as far as I know, there's no doubt that it's by him. And so what's interesting is the Germania; just the fact that it's [00:54:00] called the Germania. During the medieval period, the Germans did not call themselves Germani. First of all, there was no Germans.

There were a whole bunch of different groups and places and kingdoms and all the rest of it. There's no unified Germany, but there wasn't even an ethno, you know, like the Greeks didn't have a unified Greece, but they also, but they did have a term that they call themselves Hellenes. But the Germans didn't even have that.

They did not use that term. And it's literally this book that gave them that term again, because it was only in 1471, inspired by this text that they started to use the term Germania specifically, I'm quoting Wikipedia here, but "to invoke the warlike qualities of the ancient Germans in a crusade against the Turks".

So it was very specifically in a nationalistic, even though there was no nation yet, but you know an ethnic nationalist kind of way. And in this crusade against an Other that they started using the term Germani. Because of the way that they'd been portrayed. And from that point on [00:55:00] the book, the Germania becomes this really important text in the story of the development of German nationalism, development of German identity and the development of the German people.

There's a book from 2011 called "A most dangerous book: Tacitus's Germania from the Roman empire to the third Reich" by Krebs is his last name. C. Krebs. I didn't write down what his first name was, but anyway, maybe Charles let's go with Charles and

**Mark:** Could be Clara for all you know,

**Aven:** no, it's definitely a guy. Okay. I read a review. I have not read the book because I couldn't get my hands on it in time, but I read a couple of reviews and they said 'he' alot. Okay. But the, book talks about this development about how it was really integral to, And how early on there was this sort of ongoing struggle for manuscript copies of it and to try to get the manuscript.

And then later on the Nazis really wanted the actual original manuscript. They were hell bent on getting it from Mussolini to get it to, you know, [00:56:00] cause it was in the Vatican and they wanted it and all these stories about that. And so, read the book. I don't want to try to talk too much about it, but I think it's relevant to the points you were talking about earlier, even right at the beginning about Anglo-Saxons because the basic point here is that so much of our early history of many peoples in many places is an external narrative, is from outside.

And so we have to think, we have to keep that mind and remember that even with the best of intentions, external narratives are often wrong, they just don't know when they get things wrong, but also maybe they don't even care about getting stuff right. Like I think with Tacitus, we have to be aware that he probably didn't care that much how accurate his text was, but then it gets picked up.

The external narratives can become internalized. They can become really influential on the self perception of a people. And I bring that up because I think it is parallel to the Anglo-Saxon thing, that external narrative of the Anglo-Saxons as a people became really important to [00:57:00] later British. And it's specifically English self-perceptions as this particular group that was in contradistinction to the Europeans and was this native population, you know, whatever.

So an external narrative becomes important to this internal perception without being critical of where that external narrative first came from and what circumstances created it. And that happened definitely with German nationalism, I mean, not that German nationalism is only founded on Tacitus's view, but it became really important.

And just for people to understand why it was such a dangerous book, one of the very notable things Tacitus says is about how the German people were all very homogenous and all look the same because they did not deign to mix their purity of their blood with other people. So you can see, you know, you can see how, and how they were very tall and strong and red haired and blue eyed.

And you can see how that, is very tied to really problematic later narratives. Go that's the Germania.

**Mark:** So all that being [00:58:00] said the particular elements of Tacitus that are relevant and potentially useful to

**Aven:** try to reconstruct the actual early history

**Mark:** is that he does mention a tribe called the Angles. And of course it should be said that there's no guarantee that the people that were being referred to as Angles in Tacitus, hundreds of years earlier, are the same people. Right. And he mentions a number of other Germanic tribes, like the Frisians and other tribes the names of which. Crop up later, but again, you know, seeing the continuity there is who knows, but there is a group called the Angles and he goes into some detail about who they are and what they're like.

There are no Saxons mentioned in, in Tacitus. Right. Or Jutes, I don't think. So yeah, it's just the, the Anglii. Yep. Now our earliest more sort of fulsome account of the [00:59:00] invasion is from again, an external source: Gildas. Gildas was a Celtic monk writing perhaps some hundred years after the invasion itself happened.

And it should be remembered that his text is not meant to be a history. Right. He is not a historian. Yeah. So this is a polemic, absolutely a polemic. It's a religious polemic that basically paints the coming of the Saxons as divine retribution for the sins of the Britons. So again, he's got a very obvious ulterior motive.

He does not attempt to disguise this at all. He says, this is exactly what it is. Yeah. So Gildas refers exclusively to the Saxons, these Germanic peoples they're the Saxons, that's the word he uses. He's writing in, Latin. And Saxon seems to have been a generic term for the various north Germanic peoples in that time.

Right. So I don't think we can read a [01:00:00] whole lot into that. In fact Saxon appears to not be an ethnic distinction, but instead a Confederacy of various Germanic tribes. So it may not have ever been an ethnic group word. The name Saxon by the way, comes from favorite weapon, the saxe, a kind of sword or dagger, a word which appears to be related to the word section.

So it comes from that sort of cutting root from the idea of cutting or dividing. So, they were the, people of the saxe, they were the sax players.

**Aven:** Look, man, we don't need more of this and you're not going to be able to top Pope Gregory.

**Mark:** All right. So with the Angles being named after their fish hook shaped homeland the, term Anglo-Saxon as ahistorical as it is are literally the fish hooks and swords.

Now another source that I referred [01:01:00] to was Bede. So Bede is English. He's writing about 200 years later. And he bases his account of the invasion heavily on Gildas. You know, like it's very clear in the wording that he's, just taken it. He's just taking it from Gilda's. Though he may, well have had other sources as well.

We don't know for sure. Bede was a historian. He was trying to be a historian and a very careful historian who was clearly striving for accuracy. And he sort of even comments on, trying to work out what, what he can tell from the sources. Right. So we sort of see this in, the way he tells, these stories.

And so he does his best with the limited information that he had to establish a consistent chronology of events. As he knew them, he tries to rationalize it, figure it out. Okay.

**Aven:** Poor guy. Yeah. That's like people trying to make mythology work.

**Mark:** I know, I really feel for Bede, cause you know, he's really trying to be honest and accurate, I [01:02:00] think

**Aven:** to try to make this make sense. Yeah. Yeah. The sources he's got to work with are just not going to do it.

**Mark:** But it should be noted that Bede was specifically concerned with ecclesiastical history. That is the history of the church in England. So this can also be seen to color his depiction of the events, while he's not writing a polemic, exactly, like Gildas was, he is trying to tell the story from a Christian perspective.

**Aven:** Right. So obviously Christians good. non-Christians bad. That sort of stuff. Yeah.

**Mark:** Now he specifically names three groups of peoples arriving, the Angles, Saxons and Jutes. And so that's kind of where that comes from. But he also refers to the west Saxons as the Gewisse. So he does have an alternate name for them. Okay. Now, Bede also reports that the ancestral area of the Angles remained empty after they were left. And there does seem to [01:03:00] be, as I said, archeological evidence that would back that up.

So. that's interesting. Yeah. Who knows what source he had for that, but it seems to have been accurate. As for the Jutes the obvious place of origin for them would be Jutland. the Jutland peninsula, which is north of the Angles. But it's assumed that the languages spoken in that region at that time were north Germanic, more closely related to Old Norse rather than the Old English dialects.

So this is a bit of a linguistic puzzle. We don't know how that, this is one of these inconsistencies that we can't account for. One suggestion is that the Jutes who came to Kent stopped over for time with the Franks. And so it represented something of a hybrid group. Hmm. This would make sense as the archeological finds in Kent are kind of Frankish in nature.

There's also been attempts to connect the name Jutes with the Geats, or "yats" as it would be pronounced in old English. The people mentioned in Beowulf, Beowulf's [01:04:00] own people. But again, I think there are some phonological issues with that. So who knows? There are also a few other sources.

Those are the major ones, but there were a few other minor sources from early on that talk about the arrival of the Germanic peoples in Britain. So there's Procopius, who is a Byzantine historian writing around the same time as Gildas in the sixth century. And he reports that Britain was comprised of three races: the Angles, the Frisians and the Britons. So the Britons referring to the Celtic people but the Angles and the Frisians, the Frisians are another Germanic group. This would make good linguistic sense as Frisian is linguistically the closest Germanic dialect to Old English. So we talk about Anglo-Frisian as being the family, the sub family, that both Frisian, and Old English belong to.

**Aven:** You can find a bunch of YouTube videos of people speaking Frisian and saying like challenging English speakers to understand it, which is really interesting because it's way [01:05:00] easier to understand Friesian than it is to understand Old English, for an English speaker, whereas,

**Mark:** Because it's Modern Frisian, right.

**Aven:** Yeah. But well, yes, but Scandinavia, but Scandinavians and Dutch speakers can understand Old English better than English speakers can understand Old English, at least judging by our comments on this particular video. But I think that's generally true. So it's not just about time.

It's like about particular directions that change has happened in

**Mark:** well, and I think a number of the sound changes that happened to English after the arrival in Britain had already kind of begun. And so they continued both in Friesland and in England, England and went in the same direction. Yeah.

Another minor source is called the Gallic Chronicle, particularly for the year 441, which mentions Saxon invaders. Okay. For what that's worth. So the reality is likely that what we have is some multiethnic groups that settled in Britain [01:06:00] and that the divisions weren't as clear cut as Bede makes them out to be.

But in any case, the archeological evidence does more or less support this picture. And a much later source is the Anglo-Saxon Chronicles as they're called dating from around the time of King Alfred the Great .And in fact it was probably a royally appointed endeavor. He didn't do it himself, but he did produce a number of texts himself, but not this one.

It seems to be something that he sort of ordered done, and it was done. And it may have drawn on sources of information that is now lost, right? So there's a lot of stuff in there that we have nowhere else, from nowhere else. The Chronicles provide a rather detailed account of the progress of the various Germanic invaders as they penetrate more and more of the Celtic Britons' lands.

Most of that detailed info that I gave of the years, specific years, and all of that are drawn from the [01:07:00] Chronicles. In addition to the west Saxon foundation story of Cerdic and Cynric which I mentioned the Chronicles also mentioned two other west Saxon foundation stories.

So one about Port and his two sons Beida and Mægla arriving in Portsmouth. Know, so that may just be a retronym, a retronym. And that was according to the Chronicles in 501. And more west Saxons, including Stuf and Wihtgar arriving in 514. So many of these accounts may be rationalizations attempting to explain place names like the port in Portsmouth and so forth.

And indeed Cerdic's name is suspiciously Celtic sounding. So... and certainly the precision of the annalistic dates given in the Chronicles are really suspect. Like they give, you know, precise years, where are they getting this from? I mean, yes. Okay. There [01:08:00] must've been some source that I guess we lost, but, yeah. Who knows. Anyways. Nevertheless, the Chronicles are our best evidence for the progress of the Germanic invasion in that kind of detail, highly suspect as it is, it's the most detailed one. And that brings us to the issue that you know, I've kind of been dancing around a little bit, but I kinda mentioned before: are we talking about an invasion of a small number of elite warriors or a large-scale migration. And this is a hotly debated topic.

And one that I do not intend to try to answer here. I will say that archeological evidence suggests a slow process one way or the other with more Saxon burials found in the south and Midlands and Germanic rule north of the Thames only in the sixth century, as I said, which is consistent with the Chronicles.

The increasing number of grave sites over time suggests continued immigration throughout the fifth and sixth centuries. We [01:09:00] also have place name evidence such as place names ending in -ingas, like Hastings, Hæstingas originally, suggesting that they were followers of someone named Hæsta, Hæsta's people.

And we can work backwards from the Norman conquest in 1066 and the subsequent great census known as the doomsday book compiled in 1086, which suggests that by then England contained less than half of its late Roman population. So that would suggest a substantial deep population during the early English period.

So, you know, you can kind of theorize from that bit of evidence. Yeah.

**Aven:** But I mean, there can be lots of different reasons, right? Yeah. Yeah.

**Mark:** But I mean, I think we can assume that the Roman numbers are pretty accurate because Romans were pretty accurate,

**Aven:** Yeah, their censuses

**Mark:** And you know, the doomsday book was

**Aven:** [01:10:00] very detailed and

**Mark:** accurate.

**Aven:** Yeah, I just mean that there can be lots of different reasons for depopulation, right. That doesn't have to come from invasion or slaughter or something like that, but it could be tons of different reasons, but it's

**Mark:** a significant amount. So yeah, for sure something happened. And most recently, of course we have genetic evidence, but this is again, controversial and

**Aven:** complex to interpret, to say the least.

Yes.

**Mark:** So there have been genetic studies of the current population of England to determine the degree of Germanic settlement. The results of these, as I say, are contentious and uncertain, but they perhaps suggest only a small amount of Germanic impact on the genetic heritage of England so that people are mainly still Celtic there.

So that would suggest a smaller a number of elite people coming over, not the large wave of migration. Now I mentioned Mount Baden as I said, Gildas is the one who tells us that the Britons were led by Ambrosius Aurelianus. Gildas identifies as the last of the Romans whose [01:11:00] parents had quote "worn the purple."

Right. You can interpret that how you will. Traditionally in Roman context

**Aven:** it should mean they were an emperor in that context.

**Mark:** Yeah. But is Gildas using it in a different way. Who knows? Some have identified this guy Ambrosius Aurelianus as the inspiration for King Arthur. So that's one way to solve that problem. Or have made connections between Arthur and another proto-Arthur figure who is said to have been king of the Britons in Gaul, not Britain, but Gaul. But as I say, we don't really know when or where the battle was fought. So it's all difficult to interpret. Gildas dates it to the year of his birth. So 44 years before he wrote his account, but we don't know what year he was born.

He doesn't tell us that. So it's kind of a useless dating. Bede, as I say, dates it to 493 he's sort of working it out, I think just subtracting the years or something. So that's how he gets to that [01:12:00] number and the Annales Cambriae dates it to 517. So, I mean, you know, within 50 years we can sort of say, which

**Aven:** is a pretty good range.

Yeah.

**Mark:** There's a later Welsh writer called Nennius who just make shit up. So he's writing in the ninth century and he explicitly connects Arthur to the Battle of Baden. But yeah, Nennius's accounts of these events are very, very much tinged with romance and stuff. So you know, he's making shit up.

I wouldn't trust Nennius very far. And speaking of the Welsh, by the way, it should be pointed out that the word Welsh is an English word. It's not a Welsh word. And I know you have some things to, correct

**Aven:** about this. I'm not even going to start, but I am going to put a link to a video that somebody just today pointed us to of a Polish channel about linguistics and about etymology that talked about the origin of [01:13:00] the, the root that ends up giving us Welsh and Walloon and Wallachia and a whole bunch of other things and how it ends up being the word that's used to mean Italy in Polish and why. And it's much more, it's more nuanced than the, just that Welsh means foreigner. But it's also long and complicated and also in Polish, but with English subtitles.

So it, like, I found it really, really fascinating, but I'm just going to give a link to it rather than try to explain it because I can't.

**Mark:** But in any case, the Welsh themselves to this day they refer to Wales as Cymru. So that's their own designation. One way or the other Welsh is not a Welsh word.

It's an English word. Absolutely. It's an exonym. It's an exonym. And so I guess the takeaway from this whole story is that the Britons were made to be foreigners in their own country, foreigners or slaves. So the Old English word that gives us Welsh was also used to mean [01:14:00] slave and whatever the complex semantic, history of that word.

**Aven:** basically originally it was the name of a particular tribe of Celtic peoples. Some Germans started calling all Celtic peoples with this root because the particular nearest tribe happened to be called that or call themselves that.

Right. And so that root became the word for all Celtic peoples. And then since the Celts moved through such a huge part of Europe and, England, everywhere they went, this word went with them and as they changed being, you know, they got Romanized so now people use this word for the Romans because the nearest Romans they knew were actually also Celts and it got more complicated along the way.

So that's a very brief summary of what he was talking about.

**Mark:** So a last couple of things, I want to say a few final words about Old English, the language. As I said in the video originally, our manuscript evidence for Old English is all relatively late from the 9th to the 11th century.

Obviously there were [01:15:00] earlier texts, but they got recopied and stuff can change in the recopying. But we have various artifacts with earlier Old English inscriptions, including the ones that I mentioned. One such artifact that I didn't mention before is the Ruthwell cross.

It's a large stone cross located in Ruthwell in what is now Scotland. It has inscribed on it in runes, a part of a poem that we have a later manuscript copy and modern scholars refer to this poem as the Dream of the Rood,

**Aven:** Rood meaning cross.

**Mark:** Yeah. So we have the complete poem in its manuscript version.

There's only bits of it on this stone cross. It dates from, the cross that is, dates from around the same time as the Franks casket. So the early 8th century though from what I've read, I'm assuming it's presumed to be slightly later . I'm not an expert in the archeology of all of this, but I think that's the consensus, is it's slightly later than [01:16:00] the Franks casket.

I'm not going to get really at all into the dating of the poem Beowulf, possibly ranging from the early 8th century to as late as the 11th century. It is a hugely contentious issue on which I actually wrote an undergraduate paper on, but I do not care to wade into these waters again. Of course some have argued that it existed in some oral form even earlier than the eighth century.

And indeed there are arguments that it was composed at the time of the 11th century manuscript. I don't think a lot of people agree with that theory, but it has been proposed. So there's a wide range here .Who knows? Maybe someday I'll do a video just on the dating of Beowul or something.

I don't know. Probably not. And one last sideline. We saw in that earliest English word voiceover a, we saw that there was a running theme of the foundation of the Anglo-Saxons or Anglo-Saxon England, the early England the early English, as well as an [01:17:00] interesting parallel with the foundation story of Rome with Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf pictured on the Franks casket.

Right. And on the Undley Bracteate. Well, if you're therefore wondering what the earliest Latin word is, we actually seem to have an answer for this in an inscription on a Roman artifact called the Praeneste fibula. The inscription reads "MANIOS MED FHEFHAKED NVMASIOI, which means, which has been interpreted to mean “Manius made me for Numerius”. So this is like old Latin. This is very, you know. Archaic Latin. So a fibula by the way, is, a safety pin-like brooch for fastening garments. So like garments were basically just liengths of cloth.

**Aven:** Yeah. Used in particular for[01:18:00] attaching the tops of the two pieces together at the top of the shoulder for women's garments. You can also use it to hold a cloak shut, but the fibula, the really decorative ones are used on the stola that a Roman matron wore. And so that's why there are so many of them and why they're very decorative and important because they kind of mark the garment of a free citizen woman.

That way of holding that together at the shoulders.

**Mark:** Right. The word fibula is now also used to refer to one of the bones in the lower part of the leg running from the knee to the ankle and forming part of the ankle joint because of its resemblance to the brooch. So the bone is named after the brooch, I guess that's not hugely surprising when people went around figuring out anatomy words, they sort of compare

**Aven:** it to yeah, a lot of, a lot of comparisons.

**Mark:** Though I, connection to the ankle, I guess, brings us back to those ankle bones. But this might also remind us of the astragalus ankle [01:19:00] bone on which was written that Reihan, roe deer inscribed on it, which might be the earliest English word.

**Aven:** right.

I don't want to add too much to that because we've talked to him quite a long time. Also in an earlier podcast about the word rune and runes themselves, we already talked about the earliest Greek words. That's the episode 80 is the one about runes and early writing systems.

So I don't have much to add, I did talk in that one about the Nestor cup. I will just say very, very briefly that the earliest Greek alphabet writing. So obviously Greek words, if you've got to look for the earliest Greek words, you have to look in linear B, because linear B is a writing system that records early Greek.

And I don't know enough about, you know. We have linear B tablets in large accretions in burned out palaces. How would you say which one of those is the first, cause they're all the same age, right? So I don't think you can make a precise decision. But if you want to talk [01:20:00] about the earliest ones recorded in the Greek alphabet there's a number of different sites, none of which is precisely dated, but they're all dated to the second half of the eighth century BC.

And they're either graffiti or other kinds of inscriptions on pottery. And in particular, what they all say, or many of them seem to be, the earliest ones seem to be marks of ownership. So their names, they seem to be marking somebody. And I read a very interesting little article that I'll link, which was talking about non alphabetic graffiti on some of these things and pointing out that in our various earliest accretions of these sorts of rubbish dumps and stuff, where you have, you know, broken pots, there's alphabetic ones, where you have a few letters that are from the early Greek alphabet and seem to be names, but you also have non alphabetic signs that don't seem to be any particular letter form, including things.

One of the pictures was of a pentagram, a star. What I just wanted to mention that [01:21:00] seemed very appropriate that with little endless knot tie in there. But the point is that those could easily be ownership marks too. Right? So this person was arguing that this is sort of a little bit of evidence that maybe the first writing comes out of a non alphabetic, non writing system, like brands, right? Ways of marking ownership. I have my token, I have my mark. We have that in Homer, for instance, where when they draw lots, the warriors, all write their mark on a piece of something, and it gets dropped in, that doesn't have to be, we now would, would be my like initials or something, but it could, of course be anything.

It could be a circle or a triangle or a triangle with a dot in it or whatever. Right. It's your mark. And so it seems that the earliest writing we have tends towards that. Tends to be just a name or some other mark of ownership. And then the famous earliest ones are the cup of Nestor, which I mentioned in that other one, which has a couple of hexameter lines.

But still is really basically an ownership [01:22:00] thing. The inscription has "I am the cup of Nestor, good for drinking, whoever drinks from this cup desire for beautifully crowned Aphrodite will seize them instantly."

**Mark:** You know what that is in Greek? Like what could we say the first word of that sentence is?

**Aven:** Nestor, definitely, but it's probably not the earliest, there's another one that's considered to be slightly earlier. Which is another cup and it was a cup that was probably or it's not a cup. It's a, it's an oinochoe, names for different shapes of vessels is very important if you do pottery. And the fact that I am using the wrong names is extremely bad, but I'm not an archeologist.

What can I say? But it's a vessel that was used probably as a prize in a competition. And it says "whoever of all these dancers now plays most delicately, of him this", and then it's broken. So that the first word is hos, whoever. Right. So that's probably, and that first line is a dactylic hexameter again.

So both of those have these poetic lines. So these are some of the earliest more than one word inscriptions. They are the two earliest.

**Mark:** So the earliest Greek word then therefore would be [01:23:00] whoever, in an alphabet anyways, is it's either whoever or some random Greek dude's name. Yeah. Probably. And the earliest word in Latin is again, some random Roman dude's name, but not the guy who owned the thing.

It was the guy who made it well. And

**Aven:** that's the thing. We actually aren't sure necessarily that these names, aren't the names of potters because quite a lot later we have lots of names of potters. So it's there's some kind of claim of ownership, but at what stage in the life of the vessel, we don't know.

It could be the maker. It could be the the guy who filled it with the stuff. So it could, it could refer to what's in it. It could be the person who bought it, the person who uses it. Like sometimes we don't, if we only have a scrap, we don't necessarily know what kind of vessel it came from, even. So, some kind of claim of ownership.

and I think that is very consistent actually with a lot of what we've seen is that a lot of the very earliest uses of writing are to do that, to mark something as belonging to somebody in some way,

**Mark:** but it's at least a little more understandable, you know, [01:24:00] some name of someone who owns it in some way, then you know, GAEGOGA

what the hell.

**Aven:** Yeah.

So the other little point about both the Nestor's cup and the Dipylon oinochoe is the one that has the whoever of all these dancers that's, what it's known as, cause it was found in Athens actually by the Dipylon gate, is they're written from right to left? Okay.

Which is just an interesting little point. And the Dipylon one, the letters are mirror shaped. They're like mirrored compared to modern ones too. So like they had not worked out directions yet, or become consistent with it by any means.

Anyway, the point is early writing, hadn't worked out minor details, like a consistent reading direction. Right. But that's all I really wanted to add about that. So I think that's maybe a good place to leave it. Sure. Mark our ownership

**Mark:** And the earliest word in this podcast was "hi". The last word in this podcast [01:25:00] will be "goodbye".

Bye bye. For more information on this podcast. Check out our website, www.alliterative.net where you can find links to the videos, blog posts, sources, and credits, and all our contact info.

And please check out our Patreon where you can pledge to support this show and our video project. You can go directly to the videos at youtube.com/alliterative

**Aven:** our email is on the website, but the easiest way to get in touch with us is Twitter.

I'm AvenSarah A V E N. S A R A H,

**Mark:** and I'm Alliterative. To keep up with the podcast, subscribe on your favorite podcast app or to the feed on the website,

**Aven:** and if you've enjoyed it, consider leaving us a review on Apple podcasts or wherever you listen. It helps us a lot. We'll be back soon with more musings about the connections around us.

Thanks for listening.

**Mark:** Bye.