

The Story of English 3: Christianity Lands, so do the Vikings

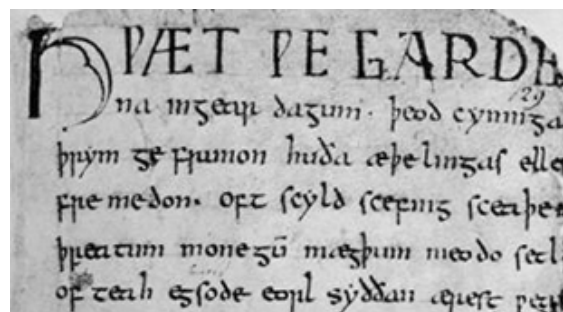
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In the city of Canterbury, not far from the renowned Cathedral, stands a small church named St Martins. This happens to be the very first church in England, a building constructed during the Roman times, and renovated by the Anglo Saxon king Ethelbert for his Christian wife Bertha. This ancient structure is every inch a history book, starting with the old Roman bricks used on its walls, and services are still held here, even after nearly two millennia of its existence. Ethelbert was the first English king to become a Christian, converted by Augustine, who arrived with the Pope's commission of Christianising the island. Already softened towards the new creed because of his wife, Ethelbert had little difficulty in accepting Augustine's proposal. Better known as Augustine of Canterbury, the Pope's emissary was allowed to use St Martin as his initial base, before he founded a monastery which grew to become the massive St Augustine's Abbey. All these adumbrated the systematic Christianisation of England, with Canterbury as its base, and Augustine as the first Archbishop of Canterbury. The time was late sixth century AD.

The events described so far led to a fresh wave of Latin influence on the fast developing language of the Anglo Saxons, English. The language of the Romans was

already in England when the English tribes arrived first on the island, but this time it was different. Latin slowly and systematically became the language of the church and of scholarship. The Anglo Saxons developed the script for their native language from the Latin alphabet, and this led to several thousand documents to be written down in Old English. The image shows the initial lines of *Beowulf*, as they



occur in the early eleventh century manuscript (the poem itself was composed some five centuries earlier). The letters used are largely of Latin origin, though a few 'runes' that the Anglo Saxons brought to the island centuries back can also be noted. Runes are rather rudimentary written symbols which were used by various Germanic people before the adoption of the Latin alphabet. Over the next few centuries, English emerged as a strong language with a lot of flexibility, and with a good fund of written literature. Much of these was preserved in the monasteries of the time. It

only needed a person like King Alfred for English to emerge as the most developed vernacular in the whole of Europe at that time.

King Alfred's services to English cannot be overstressed. In the period between the landing of Augustine and Alfred's kingship, there had been repeated inroads of Scandinavian tribes from the cold Northern Europe. Known in popular culture as the Vikings or the Danes, these invaders were also Germanic tribes and distant relatives of the Anglo Saxons themselves. By mid-ninth century their presence on the island was ominously large. The English people, along with their language, was threatened by the fate that befell the Celts, the total takeover and near obliteration by an invading hoard of relatives! The Vikings, also called Norsemen (people from the North) and notorious for their plunderous raids, ravaged the English lands, in the course of which they looted and burned several monasteries, destroying many of the documents meticulously written down and preserved by the monks over centuries. King Alfred, however, narrowly succeeded in putting an end to this rampage through tough guerrilla tactics tempered with common sense and diplomacy. The province of Danelaw was eventually allowed for the Danish invaders who went on to settle down, and begin a process of linguistic and cultural amalgamation with the Anglo Saxons. The present-day Yorkshire and several other parts of the UK have the cultural and

linguistic reminders of the Vikings. The city of York, the name itself of Norse origin, has rich archaeological evidence of the various settlers of England from the Roman times, including those related to the Vikings.

English names ending with '-son' reflect the Norse practice of deriving the name of a man by adding '-son' to his father's name, examples being Dickinson, Benson, Carlson and Jameson. Place names with '-by' ending, as in Whitby, Darby, Rugby and Grimsby, bear the Norse meaning of farm or village (*Darby* is literally a village with deer in it). The Vikings continued to be major players for power in the country for more years to come, and there were even periods when Danish kings ruled England, King Canute being the most famous of them. By eleventh century, however, the Anglo Saxons and Vikings more or less blended and settled down as one people. The influence of Latin via the church and the strong Scandinavian influence through the exchanges with the Vikings strengthened English language, and by 1050 AD, the language had undergone considerable changes since its beginnings in the fifth century. In the next part of this series we will have a glance at certain features of Old English which marked definitive stages in the evolution of English.

[Editor's Note: This is the third part of a series of articles tracing the history of the English language, to be continued in this column.]