

The First Thousand Years

5 In the country inns of a small corner of northern Germany, in the spur of land connecting Schleswig-Holstein to Denmark, you can sometimes hear people talking in what sounds eerily like a lost dialect of English. Occasional snatches of it even make sense, as when they say that the 'veather ist cold' or inquire the time by asking, 'What ist de clock?' According to Professor Hubertus Menke, head of the German Department at Kiel University, the language is 'very close to the way people spoke in Britain more than 1,000 years ago.' This shouldn't entirely surprise us. This area of Germany, called 'Angeln', was once the seat of the Angles, one of the Germanic tribes that 1,500 year ago crossed the North Sea to Britain, where they displaced the native Celts and gave the world what would one day become its most prominent language.

10 In about A.D. 450, following the withdrawal of Roman troops from Britain, the Angles and two other related groups from the same corner of northern Europe, the Saxon and the Jutes, began a long exodus to Britain. Those tribes settled in different parts of Britain, each bringing its own variations in speech, some of which persist in Britain to this day, and they variously merged and subdivided until they had established seven small kingdoms and dominated most of the island, except for Wales, Scotland, and Cornwall, which remained Celtic strongholds.

15 Although the Saxons were the dominant group, the new nation gradually came to be known as England and its language as English, after the rather more obscure Angles. Not only were the Anglo-Saxons relatively uncultured, they were also pagan, a fact quaintly preserved in the names of four of our weekdays, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, which respectively commemorate the gods Tiw, Woden, and Thor, and Woden's wife, Frig. (Saturday, Sunday and Monday, to complete the picture, take their names from Saturn, the sun, and the moon.)

20 Despite their long existence on the island – the Romans for 367 years, the Celts for at least 1,000 – they left precious little behind. Many place names are Celtic in origin (Avon and Thames, for instance) or Romans (the *-chester* in Manchester or the *-caster* in Lancaster both come from the Roman word for camp), but in terms of everyday vocabulary it was almost as if they had never been.

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25 England and her infant language were under attack again – this time by Viking raiders from Scandinavia and Denmark. These were people who were related to the Anglo-Saxons by both blood and language. In fact, they were so closely related that they could probably broadly understand each other's languages. These attacks on Britain were part of a huge, uncoordinated and mysterious expansion by the Vikings (or Norsemen or Danes, as history has variously called them).

30 In 850 some 350 heavily laden Viking ships sailed up the Thames, setting off a series of battles for control of territory that went on for years. After an unexpected English victory in 878, a treaty was signed establishing the Danelaw, a line running roughly between London and Chester, dividing control of England between the English in the south and the Danes in the north. To this day it remains an important linguistic dividing line between northern and southern dialects. The Danish influence in the north was enormous. The scale of their settlements can be seen from the fact
35 that more than 1,400 place names in northern England are of Scandinavian origin.

A great many Scandinavian terms were adopted, without which English would clearly be the poorer: *freckle, leg, skull, meek, rotten, clasp, crawl, dazzle, scream, trust, lift, take, husband, sky*. The Vikings spoke a language we identify as Old Norse which showed similarities with Old English as they were both from the northern Germanic language tree. It is estimated that about 1,400 Old Norse loanwords entered the English
40 language during the period. But most remarkably of all, the English adopted certain grammatical forms. The pronoun *they, them, and there* are Scandinavian. This borrowing of basic elements of syntax is highly unusual, perhaps unique among developed languages, and an early demonstration of the remarkable adaptability of English speakers.

