

## VOCABULARY IN OLD ENGLISH

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**Abstract:** This study explores the vocabulary of Old English as a crucial component in understanding the early development of the English language and the cultural history of Anglo-Saxon England. Old English vocabulary was primarily Germanic in origin, yet it expanded significantly through contact with Latin during Christianization and through interaction with Old Norse during the Viking Age. While Celtic influence remained minimal, Latin contributed religious and scholarly terminology, and Norse introduced everyday lexical items that reshaped the core of the language. The highly productive nature of Old English word formation, especially its compounds, affixes, and poetic kennings, reflects both linguistic creativity and cultural expression. Examining these native and borrowed elements reveals a dynamic and adaptable lexicon that laid the foundation for Middle and Modern English. The analysis demonstrates that Old English vocabulary is not merely a linguistic system but also a window into the social structures, values, and intellectual life of early medieval England.

**Keywords:** Old English, Anglo-Saxon vocabulary, Germanic roots, Latin borrowings, Norse influence, Celtic elements, word formation, compounds, derivational morphology, kennings, Christianization, language contact, historical linguistics, semantic development, vocabulary change, Proto-Germanic heritage, early medieval England, lexical creativity, English language history.

### Introduction

The vocabulary of Old English represents one of the most significant early stages in the history of the English language, offering deep insight into the cultural, social, and linguistic development of early medieval England. Spoken between the 5th and 11th centuries, Old English possessed a rich and highly expressive lexicon shaped by its Germanic roots and influenced by successive waves of contact with Latin, Norse, and, to a lesser extent, Celtic languages. Much of its vocabulary reflected the daily life, beliefs, and social structures of the Anglo-Saxons, while its extensive use of compounds and derivational morphology demonstrated the language's creativity and flexibility. As England underwent Christianization, political consolidation, and increased cultural exchange, the vocabulary of Old English expanded to accommodate new religious, scholarly, and administrative concepts. Understanding Old English

vocabulary is therefore essential not only for tracing the linguistic evolution of English but also for interpreting early English literature, law, religion, and material culture.

The vocabulary of Old English represents one of the richest and most historically significant lexicons in the Germanic language family, illustrating centuries of cultural contact, linguistic inheritance, and internal development. As the earliest documented stage of the English language, Old English relied heavily on a Germanic core inherited from Proto-Germanic, yet over time it incorporated a broad range of loanwords from Latin, Norse, and, to a lesser extent, Celtic. This mixture of inherited and borrowed elements created a flexible and expressive vocabulary capable of describing daily life, social structures, religious concepts, warfare, law, nature, and increasingly abstract ideas, especially following the Christianization of England.

At its foundation, Old English vocabulary was overwhelmingly Germanic. Scholars estimate that more than 80% of Old English words came from native Germanic roots, many of which survive in Modern English, especially in basic everyday vocabulary such as house, bread, mother, sleep, water, and stone. These core words demonstrate the deep continuity of English vocabulary across more than a thousand years. Characteristic features of native Old English vocabulary include strong reliance on compound formation and derivational morphology. Poets and prose writers frequently created compound nouns and adjectives to express nuanced concepts, for example *beadurinc* (“warrior”, literally “battle-man”), *heofoncandel* (“sun”, literally “heaven-candle”), or *bōcere* (“scholar, scribe”). Old English was a highly productive language, and its affixation system, including prefixes such as *æfter-*, *ofer-*, *ge-* and suffixes such as *-dom*, *-hood*, *-scipe* and *-ung*, allowed speakers to form new abstract nouns and verbs with ease.

Cultural and religious change had a strong impact on vocabulary growth. Prior to Christianisation, Old English already contained Germanic words describing pagan religious practices, mythological beings, and social structures rooted in earlier Germanic culture. However, after the arrival of Christian missionaries in the late sixth century, large numbers of Latin loanwords entered the language, often through the mediation of the Church, scholarship, and literacy. Words such as *munuc* (“monk”), *clærēc* (“cleric”), *messe* (“mass”), *psalm*, *tempel*, and *martyr* enriched the religious lexicon, while terms relating to learning and writing—*cæppe* (“cap”), *scōl* (“school”), *penn* (“pen”), *port* (“harbour”), and *mynet* (“coin”)—reflect the broader influence of Roman civilisation. Some of these words were borrowed directly from Latin, while others entered through Latinised forms used in ecclesiastical contexts. Despite the influx of loanwords, native Germanic vocabulary often persisted alongside newcomers, resulting in parallel systems of expression that offered stylistic flexibility.

Another major source of lexical enrichment was Old Norse, introduced through Scandinavian contact during the Viking Age. The influence of Norse loanwords is

visible in many everyday words still used today, including sky, egg, window, leg, law, take, give, and wrong. These borrowings were notably different from Latin loans: while Latin contributed primarily technical, scholarly, and religious vocabulary, Norse words entered the heart of the language, influencing basic verbs, pronouns, and abstract concepts. In several cases, Norse and Old English words co-existed for a period before the Norse forms eventually became dominant, such as give replacing Old English *giefan*, or take replacing *niman*. The close relationship between Old Norse and Old English facilitated borrowing, since both languages shared many cognates, similar grammatical structures, and mutually intelligible elements.

Celtic influence on Old English vocabulary was comparatively limited, despite centuries of geographical proximity. Most Celtic borrowings relate to place names - Avon, Thames, Dover - or landscape terms, while very few common nouns or verbs entered the language. The limited Celtic impact reflects the social and political dominance of Anglo-Saxon settlers and the persistence of distinct linguistic communities during the early medieval period. Stylistically, Old English vocabulary exhibited a rich poetic register distinct from everyday prose. Poets employed a system of variation and metaphorical compounds known as kennings, using creative periphrasis to elevate the tone of heroic and religious verse. For instance, the sea might be described as the “whale-road” (*hwæl-rād*), a king as a “ring-giver” (*bēaga-brytta*), and a warrior as a “shield-bearer”. This poetic vocabulary shows the imaginative potential of Old English word formation and preserves traces of earlier Germanic poetic traditions.

The semantic fields covered by Old English vocabulary demonstrate a society deeply concerned with land, kinship, warfare, religion, and everyday subsistence. Many words reveal fine distinctions in social rank, kin relationships, and legal obligations, illustrating the complexity of Anglo-Saxon social organization. Similarly, numerous terms describe agricultural tools, domestic objects, and natural environments, reflecting the daily lived experience of early medieval communities. Over time, the expansion of literacy, monastic scholarship, and political centralisation broadened the vocabulary to include more abstract, administrative, and technical terms.

### Conclusion

The vocabulary of Old English stands as a testament to the linguistic richness and cultural complexity of early medieval England. Rooted deeply in its Germanic heritage, the lexicon preserved the essential elements of everyday life while also demonstrating remarkable adaptability through contact with Latin, Norse, and limited Celtic influences. The coexistence of native word-formation processes—such as compounds and affixation - with borrowed terminology created a dynamic and multifaceted vocabulary capable of expressing concrete, abstract, religious, administrative, and poetic concepts. The presence of highly imaginative compounds

and kennings further illustrates the creative potential of Old English, particularly in its literary tradition. Over time, the shifts in political power, religious transformation, and social interaction shaped the evolution of the lexicon, preparing the ground for the dramatic changes of the Middle English period. Studying Old English vocabulary therefore provides valuable insight into the historical development of English and reveals the linguistic foundations that continue to influence the modern language today. In examining Old English vocabulary as a whole, it becomes clear that the lexicon was both conservative and adaptable. It preserved a strong Germanic core while absorbing new words from Latin and Norse, blending inherited tradition with evolving cultural influences. This dynamic balance contributed to the linguistic foundations upon which Middle English and eventually Modern English were built, shaping the character of the English lexicon in ways still visible today.

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