An Old English Grammar

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AN
OLD ENGLISH
GRAMMAR

by

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PREFACE

THIS *Grammar* is designed especially for the literary student of English, who has long been neglected in favour of his philologically inclined colleague and who is felt to be in need of a single compact grammar which will put the emphasis where he needs it most and serve as a companion to all his undergraduate studies in Old English. It has also been felt that Old English studies stood in need of a grammar which was primarily concerned with that form of Old English in which most of the literary remains of importance have come down to us—the Classical Old English of about A.D. 1000 rather than with 'early West Saxon' or the other Old English dialects, however interesting these may be to the philological enquirer.

With the aim, then, of presenting a grammar of literary Old English to literary students, we have forsaken the historical in favour of a descriptive approach wherever this seemed expedient and practicable, and we have tried to avoid assuming a knowledge of—or indeed interest in—Germanic philology as such. The treatment of inflexions, syntax, word-formation, and phonology represents an attempt to describe realistically the forms that occur most prominently in the important literary manuscripts, systematised in a manner that seems most significant for the Classical Old English which they generally present, though this has meant to some considerable extent the replacing of categories, classifications, and even technical terms that were evolved for and suited to the structure of the 'Germanic dialects' as a whole. On the other hand, we have resisted changes of this kind wherever the traditional framework seemed readily comprehensible to non-specialists and unlikely to mislead the student who has not had a philological training. Moreover, the *Introduction* aims not only at providing a minimum background of knowledge, but also at indicating the kinds of evidence on which the grammatical description is based.

Among the features to which we attach importance are the

relatively detailed and practical treatment of *Syntax* and the attempt to make naturally intelligible the actual processes of the sound-changes described in the *Phonology*. We have sought throughout to help the student who has deeper linguistic and mediæval interests to advance his studies by means of the notes set in small type, where more advanced matters could be touched upon and works of scholarship cited for further reading. In the treatment of *Inflexions*, these notes have often been used also to deal with the variant and exceptional forms, and by this means we have been able to keep the paradigms free from confusing by-forms. Particular care, too, has been taken with the typography throughout, with the aim of achieving clarity and ease of reference.

Our thanks are due to a long line of distinguished predecessors whose grammars of Old English we have been more eager to consult and copy than to replace; the many references in our notes by no means constitute an adequate expression of our debt. More specifically and personally, we should like to thank those colleagues and friends who have helped us with advice and criticism at various stages of our work: Mr G. N. Garmonsway, Professor Daniel Jones, Professor Helge Kökeritz, Professor Sherman M. Kuhn, Dr W. R. Lee, Professor Francis P. Magoun Jr., and Professor F. Norman. In particular, we are deeply grateful to Professor Norman Davis for his learning, patience, and labour in making detailed criticisms and improvements. Finally, we have special pleasure in acknowledging a most sympathetic and helpful general editor in Professor A. H. Smith.

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ABBREVIATIONS

a(cc).: accusative
adj.: adjective
adv.: adverb
Angl.: Anglian (see § 4)
AS: Anglo-Saxon
A.V.: Authorised Version
C: complement
Cl: Class
comp.: comparative
cons.: consonant
d(at).: dative
ed.: edition (by)
EETS: *Early English Text Society*, London
f(em).: feminine
Fr.: French
g(en).: genitive
Germ.: German
Gmc: Germanic (see §§ 3, 178)
Go.: Gothic (see § 178)
IE: Indo-European
imperat.: imperative
impers.: impersonal (see § 120e)
ind(ic).: indicative
infin.: infinitive
i(nstr).: instrumental
Ital.: Italian
J. Engl. and Germ. Phil.: *Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, Urbana
Kt: Kentish (see § 4)
l(WS, OE): late (West Saxon, Old English)
Lat.: Latin
lit.: literally
m(asc).: masculine
ME: Middle English
Mod.(E.): modern (English)
Mod. Lang. Rev.: *Modern Language Review*, Cambridge
MS(S): manuscript(s)

n(eut).: neuter
n(om).: nominative
Nb: Northumbrian
N.E.D.: *New* (or *Oxford*) *English Dictionary*, ed. J. Murray and others, Oxford 1888-1933
O: object
OE: Old English
OHG: Old High German
OIr: Old Irish
ON: Old Norse
p(ers).: person
P.B.B.: *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur* Halle
pl.: plural
PMLA: *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America*, Baltimore
pple: participle
pres.: present
pret.: preterite
Pr.OE: Primitive Old English (see § 178)
pron.: pronoun
reflex.: reflexive
resp.: respectively
RP: Received Pronunciation (the educated speech of Southern England)
S: subject
sc.: understand (Lat. *scilicet*)
sg.: singular
subj.: subjunctive
superl.: superlative
s.v(v).: under the word(s)
Trans. Phil. Soc.: *Transactions of the Philological Society*, London
V, vb(s): verb(s)
WS: West Saxon (see §§ 4f)

SYMBOLS

´ ` indicate heavy and secondary stress resp. (see § 12)
‐ ◡ indicate length and shortness resp. in vowels (see § 10)
[ ] enclose *phonetic symbols*, on which see § 176
 : after phonetic symbols denotes length; between forms denotes a correspondence
~ expresses a relationship, alternation, or correspondence
- - denote that the forms they precede, follow, or surround are partial; thus *gifan, -ie-*
/ between forms indicates alternation or equivalence; thus *ð/þ*
( ) enclose alternative forms or parts of forms; thus *sind(on)*
> means 'changed to' or 'becomes'
< means 'changed from' or 'derived from'
• denotes a reconstruction (see § 178)

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INTRODUCTION

General

1. *Old English* is the name given to the language or group of closely related dialects of the Germanic inhabitants of Britain from the first conquests in the middle of the fifth century till the close of the eleventh. The period of 'Old English' thus extends from the earliest permanent settlements of the Anglo-Saxons till the time when the effects of the Scandinavian invasions and of the Norman Conquest began to be felt on the language, and the changes in scribal habits threw into relief the linguistic changes that had been going on during the last century or so of the West Saxon tradition. But since the earliest surviving written monuments scarcely go back beyond the end of the seventh century, when the vernacular begins to appear in charters and in the one extant poem of Cædmon, the language to be studied in fact covers approximately the four centuries from A.D. 700 to 1100. Our knowledge of OE is inevitably limited in general to literary and learned usage, though some occasional glimpses of the spoken language may be had from such texts as Ælfric's *Colloquy* and from relics of an oral poetic tradition preserved in the formulaic style of *Beowulf*.

For a reliable succinct account of all the literary monuments of the period, see *A Literary History of England* (edited by Albert C. Baugh, New York 1948), Book I, Part I: 'The Old English Period' by Kemp Malone.

2. The Term 'Old English'

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries the term *Anglo-Saxon*, adapted in the early seventeenth century from Lat. *Anglo-Saxonicus*, was the commonest name for the language; but, although still sometimes used by scholars, it has gradu-

ally been replaced in the last hundred years by the more scientific term *Old English*. For the peoples, as distinct from their language, the Lat. *Anglo-Saxones* was the noun often used from the ninth century to distinguish the 'English Saxons' from the 'Old Saxons' or inhabitants of the Saxon homeland who had not migrated: and hence *Anglo-Saxon* is still properly used as the name of the pre-Norman Germanic inhabitants of Britain. Camden, the antiquarian scholar who first applied the Lat. *Anglo-Saxonicus* to the language, rendered it however into English as 'English Saxon'—a term which the Elizabethans had already used. The Anglo-Saxons themselves, though they did occasionally render as *Angul-Seaxan* the Lat. *Anglo-Saxones* in charters from the late ninth century, regularly called their language, including all its dialects, *Englisc*, though this term originally had meant Anglian (§ 4). While *Old English* preserves the idea of historic continuity in our language, it is also true that modern literary English descends more directly from an East Midland (Anglian) dialect than from the southern and south-western language of Anglo-Saxon Wessex in which nearly all the OE texts have survived—from the language of King Offa the Mercian rather than from that of King Alfred the Great. For literary monuments, therefore, the notion of a *direct* continuity from Old to Modern English is to some extent misleading.

Bede distinguished the *Angli Saxones* or Germanic conquerors of Britain from the *Antiqui Saxones*, the 'Old Saxons', and from this distinction the term 'Anglo-Saxon' ultimately arises. The term *Saxon* was applied to the conquered people of England by Latin-writing chroniclers of the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, and hence the use of 'Saxon' from the fourteenth century onwards to describe both the people and their language. Indeed, the first OE dictionaries and grammars, written in Latin in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, generally employ the term *Saxonicus*, which became 'Saxon' in the next century for such purposes and is still sometimes found. The popular, wider, non-technical use of *Anglo-Saxon* to cover the English-speaking world dates from early Victorian times. See N.E.D., s.vv. *Anglo-Saxon* and *Saxon*, and cf also Kemp Malone in *Review of English Studies* v (1929), pp. 173-85. In the S.W. Midland prose life of St Margaret, of about 1200, occurs the expression *ald Englis* for 'Old English' (*Seinte Marherete*, ed. F. Mack, EETS, p. 52, l. 32).

3. Position and Relationship

Old English is a member of the western branch of the Germanic family of languages and therefore belongs ultimately to the Indo-European stock. It shares the fundamental characteristics of IE with most other European languages, though these remoter basic qualities have been much obscured by distance in time and space. More clearly, it shares special Germanic features which distinguish it, together with the languages of Germany, Scandinavia and the Netherlands, from other branches of IE. Such special Germanic features include the following:

(*a*) the First Consonant Shift, by which Gmc consonants underwent characteristic changes in pronunciation, such as the voiced plosives *b*, *d*, *g*, *gw* becoming the voiceless plosives *p*, *t*, *k*, *kw* (see § 179);

(*b*) the fixing of the stress of words generally as near to the beginning as possible, or on the root-syllable (see §§ 12 ff);

(*c*) the strong tendency, resulting from (*b*) but varying in intensity among different Gmc languages, to weaken and lose inflexional endings;

(*d*) the development of derived or secondary verbs (consonantal or 'weak' verbs), formed from other words and distinguished by preterites and past participles formed by means of a dental suffix;

(*e*) the syntactical distinction between the two types of adjective inflexion—the indefinite and definite declensions (see §§ 50-4, 116);

(*f*) certain strata of vocabulary peculiar to the Gmc languages;

(*g*) the two-tense system. Verbs in the Gmc languages show by inflexion only two tenses, present and past; in OE, time-relations other than simple present and simple past had for the most part to be inferred from the context, just as in Mod.E. we allow a present tense form to indicate future time after *when*: 'When I come home I shall tell you my news'; even the complex Mod.E. expressions of time-relation like

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'I would have had' use only a two-tense distinction in the component verbs.

Within the Gmc group of languages, OE has further special characteristics which it shares with the group generally termed *West Germanic*, which comprises the languages of the Netherlands, Germany, and eastern Switzerland. Within this West Germanic group, OE has still closer affinities with Frisian (though the earliest Frisian texts go back only to the thirteenth century) and Old Saxon (the language of the continental Saxons).

For an effective presentation of the facts of the Gmc languages, see Antoine Meillet, *Caractères généraux des langues germaniques* (Paris 3rd ed. 1927), and Edward Prokosch, *Comparative Germanic Grammar* (Philadelphia 1939); cf also H. M. Chadwick, *Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge 1907). For a recent discussion, see Ernst Schwarz, *Goten, Nordgermanen, Angelsachsen* (Berne 1951). The best small handbook is still H. Hirt, *Handbuch des Urgermanischen* (Heidelberg 1931-4).

4. Dialects

It is possible that OE was already to some extent divided into three main dialects when the first settlements were made from the Continent. These would roughly correspond to the three racial or tribal divisions of the Gmc invaders described by Bede, and are therefore known as *West Saxon* or the Saxon dialect of the kingdom of Wessex (other Saxon dialects existed but did not attain to writing), *Kentish*, and *Anglian*, derived respectively from Saxons, Jutes and Angles. The Jutish or Kentish dialect covered a wide area in the S.E. of England, including for a time S. Hampshire and Wight; West Saxon expanded all over the S. and S.W. with the growing importance of Wessex; the Anglian dialects covered the Midlands and N.E. of England and parts of S. Scotland, and through geographical and political factors became divided into *Northumbrian* and *Mercian*. It is therefore customary to regard OE as comprising four principal dialects: *West Saxon*, *Kentish* or South Eastern, *Mercian* or W. Midland, and *Northumbrian*. Of the language of the E. Midlands almost nothing is known in the OE period, though ME evidence makes it seem that it must have had marked features distinguishing it from Mercian. Indeed, the

only OE dialect of which we can gain an extensive and continuous knowledge is West Saxon. Moreover, WS was the only dialect to become literary in prose, and in the later OE period it was Wessex that provided the dialect which became the cultural language of the whole of England, though somewhat influenced and modified by neighbouring dialects. It was in this literary or classical *koiné*, basically WS, that nearly all the earlier poetry was copied, and so preserved, at the time of the Benedictine Renaissance at the close of the tenth century and early in the eleventh century. It is therefore this WS, in which almost all writings of any real literary merit are to be read, that has always been taken as the basis for the study of OE and for the making of grammars and dictionaries.

On the origin of the OE dialects, see K. Brunner (ref. as in § 24), § 2 and Anm. 1.

For an important re-examination of some of the questions relating to classical OE and especially to the language of OE poetry, see K. Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford 1953).

5. Standard Language

The Elizabethans, Lawrence Nowell, Joscelyn, and others, who revived the study of 'Saxon' in the sixteenth century, took classical OE of the later period as their basis, and this practice was followed in dictionaries and grammars till the middle of the nineteenth century. Subsequently, from the pioneering work of Henry Sweet onwards, the language of King Alfred, generally under the name *Early West Saxon*, has become the regular medium for all grammatical text-books, and OE of the later period has often for teaching purposes been 'normalised' in spelling on this 'Early West Saxon' basis. Yet King Alfred's prose, though outstandingly important, survives only in one complete MS that is actually contemporary (MS Bodley Hatton 20 of his translation of St Gregory's *Cura Pastoralis*), and it is only in the common literary OE of a century later that prose becomes of really high literary value. It was into this same form of OE that nearly all earlier poetry was copied. While accepting, therefore, the traditional practice of taking WS as the norm of OE grammatical investigation, this book will, as far as is practicable and desirable, take the literary

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language of Ælfric (himself a grammarian) as its foundation, since almost all texts likely to be read by the literary student of OE are extant only in this classical OE *koiné*.

Of Sweet's writings, the most important for the question of WS in its Alfredian form as a basis for study are the following: the introductory apparatus to his ed. of *King Alfred's West Saxon Version of Gregory's Pastoral Care* (EETS, London 1871-2); 'Dialects and Prehistoric Forms of English', *Trans. Phil. Soc.* 1875-6; *History of English Sounds* (Oxford 1888). For a discussion of the whole problem of normalisation of OE, see C. L. Wrenn, 'Standard Old English', *Trans. Phil. Soc.* 1933, pp. 65 ff. Since this grammar is intended primarily for the literary rather than the philological student, the non-WS dialects will be noticed only incidentally.

6. Periods

The history of OE is usually divided into the two main periods, *Early OE* (from about A.D. 700 to 900) and *Late OE* (from about A.D. 900 to 1100). But in fact the only considerable work of 'Early OE' upon which any thorough grammatical study can be based is that of King Alfred, which came at the very end of this 'Early OE' period, and only in the case of his *Cura Pastoralis* translation (since the MSS of all his other works are later) does his work survive in the forms of a scribe who wrote in one of his scriptoria. Moreover the extant MSS of the Alfredian WS already shew marks of a transition to Late OE, just as, similarly, the OE of the eleventh century begins to shew marks of the transition to Middle English.

We take, then, classical OE as the literary standard language of England from about 900 to 1100, particularly as written at its best by Ælfric and his contemporaries, and with this form of OE as its normative basis, this grammar will, as far as possible, draw its illustrative material from the texts which the student will in fact normally read, such as *Beowulf* and the selections in the *Anglo-Saxon Readers* of Sweet and of Wyatt.

Before Alfred's reign there are only one or two charters in WS, while for the non-WS dialects there are scattered remains in Northumbrian, Mercian, and Kentish. For an account of these, see K. Luick, *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache* (Leipzig 1921) §§ 21-7. F. Mossé, in his *Manuel de l'Anglais du Moyen Âge: Vieil-Anglais* (Paris 1944), suggests dividing OE into four periods: (a) pre-Alfredian, (b) Alfredian,

(c) period of Ælfric and Wulfstan, (d) period of transition which he would end at 1150. Literary OE MSS continued to be copied till late in the twelfth century.

Orthography and Pronunciation

7. The Alphabet

The Germanic invaders brought to Britain a rough method of writing magical formulae and epigraphs called *runes*. This runic writing consisted at first of some 24 symbols to be scratched upon or coloured into stone or hard wood or metal— signs which generally by means of straight lines could very roughly represent common sounds. These runes, at first the secret of a priestly class (the OE word *rūn* means 'secret'), were employed in England to some extent after the conversion to Christianity for religious inscriptions such as that on the Ruthwell Cross, and also at times more widely; but they were unsuitable for any sort of continuous writing and remained only as tokens of antiquarian interest in the late OE period. The OE alphabet used throughout the MSS is the Irish form of the Latin letters, with some slight additions and modifica- tions. It was first employed to express the vernacular in writing in the early Christian centres in Northumbria, whence it spread, aided by the Roman missionary influences from Canterbury, throughout the country.

The late OE runic letters, with their meanings explained in order with a commentary, are to be found conveniently in Bruce Dickins, *Runic and Heroic Poems of the Old Teutonic Peoples* (Cambridge 1915), in the *Runic Poem*. See further, C. L. Wrenn, 'Late Old English Rune- Names', *Medium Ævum* i (1932), H. Arntz, *Handbuch der Runenkunde* (Halle, 2nd ed., 1944), and R. Dérolez, *Runica Manuscripta* (Bruges 1954).

8. This Irish-Latin alphabet (as adopted in England, com- monly known as *Insular Script*) had characteristic forms for *f, g, r,* and *s,* among other less individual features, and it may still be seen to some extent in the present-day forms of Irish letters. These Celtic-Roman letters were employed to repre- sent as phonetically as possible the sounds of OE, with the same values as they had when used to represent Latin in the

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