

# PRELIMINARIES: BEFORE ENGLISH

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## LANGUAGES ON THE MOVE

THE English language is at more than one point in its history a language which is being carried from one part of the world to another. This is true at the beginning of its existence as a recognizably distinct language—the phase which this and later chapters refer to as Old English. Migration of people and the consequent relocation of the languages they speak will therefore be one of the major themes of this chapter, which will focus on the pre-history of English and the various developments which underpin the creation of English as a language in its own right within the British Isles. We can, however, better understand some things about that early period, and what was happening to the language at the time, if we first take a look at certain events in the more recent past which can be seen to offer a number of useful parallels for the much earlier transmission of language varieties through time and space.

Early in the seventeenth century, a period which will be discussed in more detail in Chapters 8 and 12, speakers of English started to migrate from the British Isles to North America. This process of migration, once begun, continued on a significant scale over the best part of three centuries. The forms of English that the migrants took with them varied considerably according to such factors as the part of Britain from which they came, their social class, their age, and the date at which they migrated. Once settled in North America they had contact not only with users of forms of English which were similar to their own, but also with those who spoke different varieties of the language. Furthermore, they encountered

and, naturally, had occasion to communicate with speakers of quite different languages, which included those of the Native American inhabitants of the continent as well as the non-English languages of immigrants from other European countries and elsewhere around the globe.

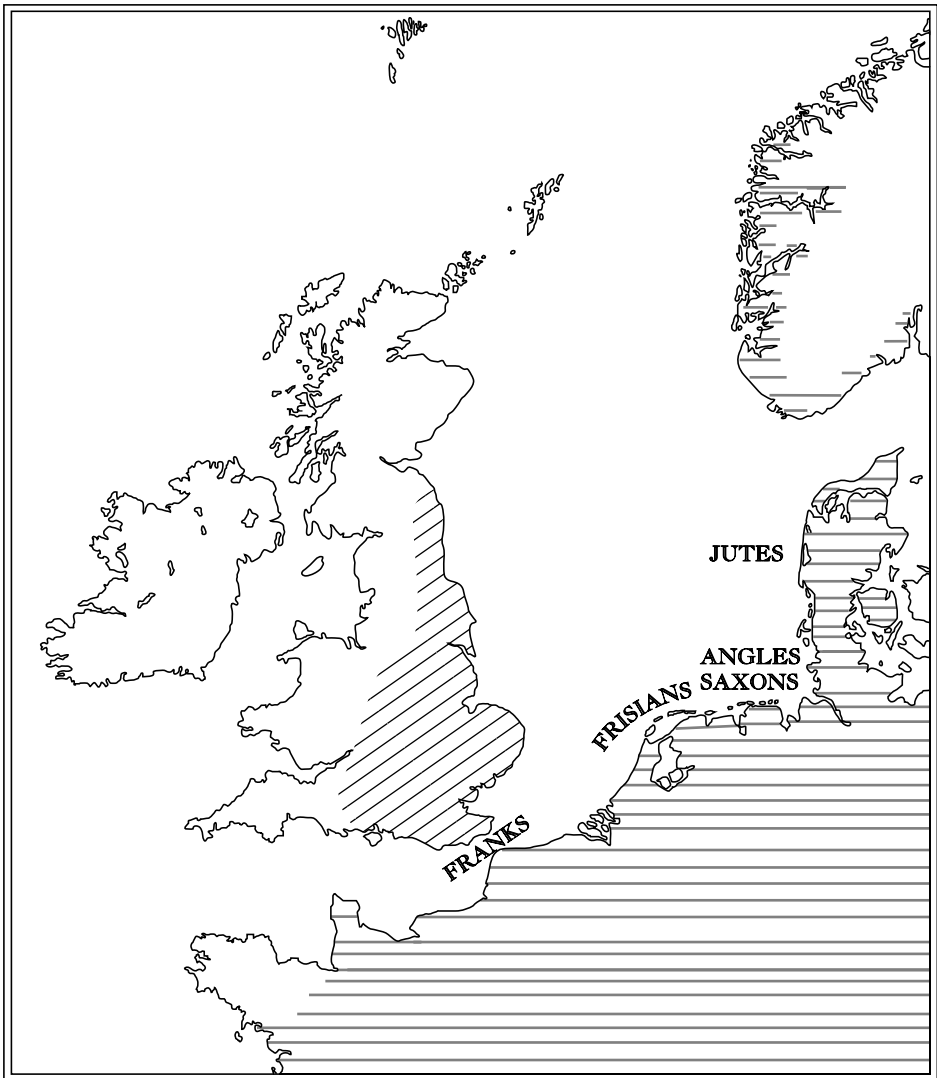
As a result of their geographical separation, the language of the English-speaking migrants began to differ from that of their previous neighbours in Britain. Given what we know of the natural development of languages, we can say with confidence that this would inevitably have happened, even without other factors playing a part. Differently shifting social alignments among English speakers in Britain on the one hand, and in North America on the other, would alone have been sufficient to ensure that. But the multilingual environment which arose in North America helped shape the particular directions of development for the English language as used there. Pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary were all subject to this interplay of inevitable 'internal' linguistic change with powerful influences from other languages also in use. One of the most obvious results of those influences was the adoption or 'borrowing' into English in North America (and later, in many cases, into English in Britain too) of words from other languages: *skunk* from one of the Native American languages, *cockroach* from Spanish, *prairie* from French. It seems right, though, to think of American English as remaining primarily based on the English of the British Isles. We now, for example, usually consider the forms of English spoken in Britain and in North America as different forms—different 'dialects'—of the 'same' language. We can nevertheless simultaneously be very conscious of how unlike British and North American English are.

The populations of English speakers on each side of the Atlantic were never, of course, completely cut off from contact with one another. There continued to be movement in both directions between Britain and North America; activities such as trade and warfare have alternately led to direct contact of varying degrees of friendliness, while letters, newspapers, books, the telephone, radio, television, and most recently email have successively been some of the main means whereby indirect communication has been maintained on a vast scale.

It is important to remember, too, that English in America did not remain the language solely of the migrants and their descendants. It was also adopted by people whose language, or whose parents' language, was entirely different. These people included other migrant groups from Europe and elsewhere, some of whom retained their ancestral languages (German or Italian, for example) in full and active use alongside the English which they had also acquired. These new speakers of English included many of the previous inhabitants of the continent and their descendants—the Native American peoples—who came to use English

alongside or, in many cases, instead of the languages which they and their forebears had previously spoken.

The situation was in many respects very similar at the beginning of the history of what we can call 'English'. In a wave of migrations which extended over a large part of the fifth and sixth centuries AD people from northern continental Europe brought to the British Isles a language of a kind which had previously



**FIG. 1.1.** Evidence of English presence in the fifth and sixth centuries from archaeological and historical sources (DIAGONAL SHADING). Germanic areas of cultural and linguistic influence through migration and contact on the continent and in Scandinavia (HORIZONTAL SHADING).

been unknown there. These migrants came, it appears, from a number of different places (see Fig. 1.1) no doubt being distinguishable from one another in the same kinds of ways as the British settlers in North America were to be many centuries later. They spoke a range of dialects and in their new home they each encountered and interacted with speakers of other varieties of their own language, as well as with people speaking quite different languages, namely the Celtic languages of the native British population, and the form of Latin which many of those people seem to have used under the recently ended Roman governance of Britain.

As these migrants (whom we call the Anglo-Saxons) started their new and separate life in the British Isles, their language began to develop in its own distinctive ways and to become different from the language of their previous neighbours on the Continent. It was also exposed to influences from the indigenous Celtic languages and from Latin, as will be discussed in a later chapter. But, again as in the history of modern English in America, the Anglo-Saxons were never completely isolated, and trade and other activities continued to keep them in contact with people across the channel and the North Sea.

## LOOKING BACK: INDO-EUROPEAN ORIGINS

The kinds of language which the Anglo-Saxons brought with them to the British Isles had previously been shared with other peoples, who remained behind in their Continental homelands. At that time, with two exceptions—runes and Gothic—which will be discussed below, these peoples (including the Anglo-Saxons) had not yet acquired the skill of writing their language. As a result, we have virtually no recorded evidence of most forms of it. By the time when, in the succeeding few centuries, they did start to write their language it had become divided. The separating off of the ‘English’ of the Anglo-Saxons has already been touched on, and by very similar processes there developed what we can, for example, recognize as the earliest stages of German and Dutch, and of the Scandinavian languages Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian. These languages are known collectively as the ‘Germanic’ group of languages, and linguists believe that it is possible to reconstruct a good deal of the history of these languages before they took written form. That history, they also believe, leads back to a time, perhaps before c200 BC, when different forms of Germanic were as closely similar as were the dialects of English when the later migrations to North America began. In other words, there seems to have been a time when we can reasonably think in terms of a single Germanic language to which

linguists have given the name 'Proto-Germanic' or, sometimes in the past, 'Primitive Germanic'.

This Proto-Germanic language is itself recognized by linguists as an offshoot from a still earlier language system which comprises the 'Indo-European' group of languages. Other branchings off from this group (for which see Fig. 1.2) gave rise to the majority of the known languages of Europe and Scandinavia, as well as some in Asia and Asia Minor. In some cases there is evidence, in the form of written texts, of individual languages having separated themselves off and taken distinguishable form at a very early date. Early forms of Greek, for example, survive in written texts from 1500–1200 years BC; in India, the most ancient form of the Indo-European language whose classical representative is Sanskrit can be traced back to 1000–500 years BC; for the Iranian branch of Indo-European, the oldest evidence is for the language known as Avestan, which is of comparable date; and in southern Europe, not much later, come the beginnings of Latin. Earliest of all are the records of Hittite and related languages in Asia Minor, which may start as early as 1700 BC or before.

As Figure 1.2 illustrates, other major branches of Indo-European include the Celtic, Baltic, and Slavonic languages, as well as Armenian and Tocharian (a language of Central Asia). Evidence for these all occurs rather later, in most cases well into the Christian era. The same is true of Germanic, the last major branch of the family to be mentioned, which will be the main concern of the later part of this chapter.

The starting point for the realization that the recorded Indo-European languages had a common source—a 'parent' language, if we use the common image of the family tree—was the recognition that individual words in one of the languages bore systematic resemblances to those in others. Such resemblances are seen, for instance, in many 'basic' words:

	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic
'house'	<i>dámah</i>	<i>dómos</i>	<i>domus</i>	<i>domŭ</i>
'new'	<i>návah</i>	<i>néos</i>	<i>novus</i>	<i>novŭ</i>
'three'	<i>tráyah</i>	<i>treîs</i>	<i>trēs</i>	<i>triye</i>

In these examples, the consonants have remained to a large extent the same in each language, while the vowels are often different. Having studied not just a few examples such as have been cited here but many thousands of cases which point in the same direction, linguists believe that in the Indo-European from which Sanskrit, Greek, and the other languages later developed, 'house' would have had a form something like *\*domos/domus*, 'new' would have been something like

Indo-European																
	Germanic			Celtic	Italic	Venetic	Albanian	Greek	Baltic	Slavonic	Anatolian	Armenian	Iranian	Indic	Tocharian	
Recorded pre-1000	Western group	Northern group	Eastern group													
	Old English Old Saxon Old Frisian Old High German	Old Icelandic Old Norwegian Old Swedish Old Danish	Gothic	Gaulish Old Irish Old Welsh Old Breton	Latin Faliscan Oscan Umbrian	Venetic		Ancient Greek		Old Church Slavonic	Hittite	Classical Armenian	Avestan Old Persian	Sanskrit	Tocharian	
Recorded in modern times	English Low German Dutch German	Icelandic Norwegian Swedish Danish	[None]	Irish Scots Gaelic Welsh Breton	Portuguese Spanish Catalan French Provençal Italian Romanian	[None]	Albanian	Greek	Old Prussian Lithuanian Latvian	Czech Croatian Serbian Polish Slovak Macedonian Belorussian Ukrainian Bulgarian Russian	[None]	Armenian	Kurdish Persian (Farsi) Pashto	Gujarati Punjabi Hindi Bengali	[None]	

FIG. 1.2. The Indo-European language group (the listing of individual languages is not comprehensive)

\**newos*, and ‘three’ would have been something like \**treyes* (the asterisks in these and other forms signify their hypothetical and reconstructed status). In Sanskrit the vowels *e* and *o* both underwent a change in pronunciation, becoming *a*, and a vast amount of other evidence confirms that this was a general feature affecting all Indo-European *e*’s and *o*’s in Sanskrit. In the word for ‘new’, both Latin and Old Church Slavonic have *o* where there had once been *e*, and this again can be shown to be a general feature of development in those languages when the vowel was followed by *w*.

Sometimes the consonants too differ from one ‘daughter’ language to another, as in the following example:

	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old Church Slavonic
‘brother’	<i>bhrātā</i>	<i>phrātēr</i>	<i>frater</i>	<i>bratrŭ</i>

The parent Indo-European form which can be reconstructed in this case is \**bhrātēr*, and Greek and Latin are believed to have regularly changed the initial *bh* to *ph* and *f* respectively (as in a series of other cases such as Sanskrit *bhārāmi*, Greek *phérō*, Latin *ferō* ‘I carry’, Old Church Slavonic *berŭ* ‘I gather’).

The historical relationship of the Indo-European languages to one another is not, however, seen merely in the fact that in many cases they use words which are demonstrably developed from a common source. The grammar of the various languages also clearly has a common starting point. In its very early stages, Indo-European had a grammar that was heavily dependent on inflections. That is to say, the grammatical relationship between the words in a sentence was—just as it would be in Old English—indicated primarily by the use of appropriate forms of the words (typically, forms with appropriate ‘endings’). This kind of grammatical device continued into many of the recorded languages. For example, in the Latin sentences

<i>homō</i>	<i>timorem</i>	<i>superavit</i>
the man	fear	overcame
‘the man overcame fear’		

and

<i>timor</i>	<i>hominem</i>	<i>superavit</i>
fear	the man	overcame
‘fear overcame the man’		

different forms of the words *homō* (‘man’) and *timor* (‘fear’) are used according to which word is the subject and which the object of the verb *superavit* (‘overcame’). The order of the words—the sole means of indicating the

difference between the equivalent sentences in modern English—is here more susceptible of variation for stylistic effect. In Latin, therefore, provided the forms of the words remain unchanged, the sense too will be unaltered, irrespective of the order in which the individual words are arranged. Inflections were also used in Indo-European to mark such features as plurality and tense:

<i>timor_</i>	<i>homines</i>	<i>superabit</i>
fear	the men	will overcome
'fear will overcome the men'		

In the later history of the Indo-European languages, the grammatical systems of some of them (for example, Russian) have continued to rely heavily on inflections, while others have greatly reduced their use of them. English, as later chapters of this book will show, now has very few inflections, although even English continues to mark most noun plurals in this way (*hands* vs *hand*), as well as to indicate tense (*walked* vs *walk*) and the third person singular of the present tense of verbs (*he writes* vs *I write, you write, they write*). The use of different forms to distinguish the subject of a sentence from the object moreover still survives in English with regard to personal pronouns (*He likes the girl* vs *The girl likes him*; *They called to the policeman* vs *The policeman called them*).

The sounds and grammatical forms used by a language, together with the principles according to which sentences are constructed, constitute the system which makes the language what it is and which enables its speakers to communicate with one another. While sounds, forms, and syntactic patterns are all liable to constant change, this necessarily happens in an evolutionary way which preserves the underlying integrity of the system. The vocabulary of the language, on the other hand, is an extremely large and far less tightly bound set of items which speakers are, in some ways, much freer to change. The introduction of a new word into the vocabulary, for example—whether by combining existing words or parts of words or by using a previously foreign word as though it were part of the language—is not likely to seriously disturb the process of communication. This is in part so, no doubt, because, while speakers need to share with one another a knowledge of the sounds and grammar of their language, they will inevitably not share a comparably complete knowledge of vocabulary. Occupation, education, interests, age, reading, experience of travel, and many other factors will affect the range of words which they actively use or which they can passively understand. So too will the dialect of the location in which they live. Furthermore, in any given situation there will frequently be a



range of words which a speaker might use more or less interchangeably to express his or her meaning—words which differ in, say, stylistic level (*man* ~ *bloke*) or which overlap in sense (*picture* ~ *photo*). And shifts in the material and other circumstances of the lives of the speakers of a language—technological developments, for example, or changes in social organization—will inevitably mean that corresponding alterations are required in the vocabulary to deal with new concepts. There is likely to be a good amount of continuity in vocabulary, but factors such as those mentioned here nevertheless contribute to making the vocabulary of the language a more fluidly variable entity than its sound or grammatical systems can be said to be.

There is therefore good reason to expect that, in the pre-history of English, Indo-European vocabulary will have undergone significant changes over time, and that it is likely to have differed also from one region to another. That it is helpful to reconstruct 'Indo-European' forms like *\*domos/domus*, *\*newos*, and *\*treys* does not have to imply that there was ever a single Indo-European language community in which those word forms were universally and exclusively used to express the meanings in question, far less that such forms will necessarily have continued (with whatever development of sound or inflection they may have undergone) as part of the vocabulary of any language which subsequently emerged from that 'Indo-European'.

Some items have been, nevertheless, both in very widespread use and extremely durable. For example, the modern English kinship terms *mother*, *brother*, *sister* continue words which are represented in all the branches of Indo-European apart from Hittite (the Greek word corresponding to *sister* is recorded only once, as a word needing explanation). They therefore come close, if no more, to being words that we can assume to have been in use throughout a hypothetical Indo-European speech community. The word which appears in modern English as *father*, however, is not only (like *mother*, etc.) unrecorded in Hittite but is also not evidenced in the Baltic languages (such as Lithuanian and Latvian), and only slight traces of it are found in the Slavonic branch of Indo-European. Words corresponding to modern English *son* and *daughter* are missing from what we know of Hittite, but they are also absent from Latin and the Celtic languages.

Rarely can linguists explain such gaps in the evidence for what seem otherwise to be elements of the most ancient Indo-European vocabulary, but they can occasionally see something of what is likely to have happened. For example, the Slavonic word for 'father' represented by Russian *otets* is generally believed to be in origin a nursery word, like English *daddy*, that has, for reasons we cannot now recover, come to replace the term preserved in more formal use in most of the Indo-European languages.

To look towards the other end of the spectrum, a word like the modern English verb *mow* has its only close correspondent in Greek *amáo* (one of the few other points of contact elsewhere in Indo-European is through the related word (*after*)*math*, which shares its origins with words of comparable sense in Latin and the Celtic languages). The Old English word *æðm* ('breath') clearly has a closely similar origin to that of Sanskrit *ātmā*, but otherwise the only (uncertain) Indo-European connection seems to be with Old Irish *athach*. It is not possible to know, in examples such as these, whether the words in question were once in use throughout the early Indo-European speech community, or whether they were always less widespread. If the former had been the case we cannot be certain when and why the word fell out of use among particular groups of speakers, although it may sometimes be possible to make an informed guess. For example, the modern English word *arse* corresponds to words in Hittite, Greek, Old Irish, and Armenian, but seems to be unrecorded in any of the other branches of Indo-European. As in other languages, there have at different times been strong restrictions on the circumstances in which it is acceptable to use such words as *arse* in modern English. It seems reasonable to suppose that similar taboos on naming certain parts of the body have at least played a role in the replacement of words like *arse* by other (often euphemistic) terms elsewhere in Indo-European.

## THE LESS DISTANT PAST: GERMANIC PRECURSORS

The speakers of the earliest form of a distinct Germanic branch of Indo-European appear to have inhabited an area covering parts of what are now Denmark and southern Sweden, although it is notoriously difficult to match evolving forms of language in pre-literary times with particular population groups in particular regions. Some possibilities do exist for tracing the histories and movements of population groups in the area during the relevant period (the last three centuries or so BC and the first century or two AD), and archaeologists can say much about the material cultures that existed in those regions at different times. But the links between the populations and the material cultures are not necessarily either exclusive or unbreakable, and the same is true of the association of particular languages with particular populations or material cultures. English has, in relatively recent times, been transported to distant places—the Indian subcontinent, for example—where it has become one of the languages used by people who previously spoke only a quite different language, and whose material culture was quite different from that of the people

who brought the language to them. Or to take an example in which the language has remained *in situ* but the population has changed, the Scandinavian and Norman French people who took up residence in England during the Old and early Middle English periods eventually (as Chapter 3 discusses) gave up their previous language in favour of English, just as immigrant groups from a range of other countries have done in more recent centuries.

There are several features of Proto-Germanic which mark it out as a language distinct from the other languages of the Indo-European group. Among the most striking are a number of significant changes in the verbs and adjectives which already serve to establish patterns that will later also be features of Old English. In Germanic, for example, verbs had only two different forms to make distinctions of tense, normally referred to as 'present' and 'past' tense forms (some writers use 'preterite' instead of 'past'). Other tenses had to be indicated by the use of another verb (such as 'have') alongside the verb in question. Furthermore, the simple 'present' and 'past' tense forms might themselves convey the sense of more than one tense. The situation can be illustrated with modern English examples, using the verb 'walk'. This verb has just two different tense forms, *walk* and *walked*:

You walk very quickly

He walked into the bank

Beyond that, further tense distinctions (often, in fact, involving other factors than just tense) can be made by the use of one or more 'auxiliary' verbs as in, for example:

I have walked all the way here

They had walked home after having dinner

We were walking side by side

She will walk down to the town

He will have walked there before the bus arrives

Serving even more clearly to mark off Germanic from the other Indo-European languages than this system of two basic tense forms, however, is the shape of the forms themselves. Germanic verbs fall into two groups, according to the way in which their past tense forms are made. (In what follows, modern English forms are used to represent the Germanic patterns.) Most verbs are like *walk*, in that their past tense form is made by adding a suffix including *d* (or sometimes *t*): *heal/ed*, *love/d*, *end/ed*, etc. In some cases the formation is less clearly visible, but originally it was essentially the same: *sent*, *left*, *bought*, *said*. But there is another, less numerous, group of verbs in which the past tense form is made not by adding a

suffix but by changing the main vowel from that found in the present tense form: *sing* ~ *sang*, *take* ~ *took*, *rise* ~ *rose*, *find* ~ *found*, *forgive* ~ *forgave*, etc. Verbs belonging to the *walk* type are traditionally called ‘weak verbs’ by linguists, and verbs of the *sing* type are called ‘strong verbs’. The weak verbs were, originally, formed from other parts of speech: *drench/ed* from the strong verb *drink* ~ *drank*, *fill* from the adjective *full*, etc. The strong verbs, on the other hand, were words which had been verbs from the outset and were not built on other words. Generally speaking, the strong verb group has not increased in number but has lost members as time has gone on: modern English *help(ed)* now follows the *walk* pattern, whereas at an earlier stage (and still in Old English) it was a strong verb. The weak verb group has increased enormously in size, since verbs coming into the vocabulary at various times have nearly always been added to that group: English *pray/ed*, *rejoice/d*, *discover/ed*, *tango/ed*, *televis/d*, *compute/d*, etc. The same pattern can be seen in the history and development of the other Germanic languages.

The Germanic strong verb system represents a particular development of a way of using alternations of vowels that had existed previously in Indo-European (and that can be seen in Sanskrit, Greek, and the other Indo-European languages). The weak verb system does not have such clear origins, although it no doubt also builds on features already existing in Indo-European. Those origins have been the subject of prolonged—and not yet resolved—debate among linguists.

Another distinctive characteristic of Germanic grammar, and one which remained a conspicuous feature of Old English is that the great majority of adjectives in Germanic may occur in two different forms, depending on the grammar of the sentence in which they appear. Broadly speaking, if an adjective is attached to a noun that is made ‘definite’ (as, most frequently, by the attachment to it also of a word such as ‘this’ or ‘my’ to specify a particular instance of whatever it is the noun signifies), the adjective will appear in one of the forms. In other situations, the other form of the adjective will be used. Somewhat confusingly, in view of the terminology used with regard to verbs, linguists have traditionally often referred to adjective forms of the first kind as ‘weak’ forms, and to forms of the second kind as ‘strong’ forms (others prefer ‘definite’ and ‘indefinite’ respectively). Thus, using examples from Old English to illustrate what was a pattern in earlier Germanic:

<i>Þær</i>	<i>wuniaþ</i>	<i>þa</i>	<i>haligan</i> (weak)	<i>menn</i>	
There	dwell	the	holy	men	
<i>Oft</i>	<i>halige</i> (strong)	<i>menn</i>	<i>wunedon</i>	<i>on</i>	<i>westene</i>
Often	holy	men	dwelt	in	(the) desert

During the medieval period, as Chapter 4 explores, English gradually lost this formal distinction between adjective forms, along with most other inflections. It continues even today, however, to be reflected in the grammar of modern German and other modern Germanic languages.

Because features such as those just discussed are found in the early stages of all the Germanic languages, it is reasonable to suppose that they were also found in Proto-Germanic, before the individual languages acquired separate identities. Conversely, because these features are not found in the other Indo-European languages, at least with the structural role which they have in the grammar of Germanic, it seems reasonable to suppose that they developed as or after Proto-Germanic became separate from the rest of the Indo-European group.

The same is true of a major contrast between the development of certain sounds in Germanic and in other early Indo-European languages. Pronunciation is very prone to change, even within what we might consider one and the 'same' language. The difference between various regional accents in modern Britain (see further, Chapter 12), or between characteristically British and characteristically American pronunciations, makes this immediately apparent. But there is one extensive, systematic set of differences between pronunciation in Germanic and in Indo-European which can be seen as a further particularly significant part of what made Proto-Germanic a distinct form of language.

This set of differences has been variously labelled the 'Germanic Consonant Shift', the 'First Consonant Shift', and 'Grimm's Law' (from the name of the German scholar Jacob Grimm [1785–1863], who gave one of the first systematic statements of it). In general, where Indo-European had *p*, *t*, *k*, Germanic had *f*, *þ*, *χ* respectively (*þ* stands for the sound represented by *th* in modern English *thin*, and *χ* stands for the sound represented by *ch* in modern German *nach*). Similarly, in place of Indo-European *b*, *d*, *g* Germanic had *p*, *t*, *k* respectively, and in place of Indo-European *bh*, *dh*, *gh* it had *b*, *d*, *g* respectively (*bh*, etc., stand for sounds supposed to have existed in Indo-European in which the sound *b*, etc., is accompanied by 'aspiration', i.e. a release of breath similar to that represented by *h* in modern English *house*).

This leads to such kinds of correspondence as:

	Sanskrit	Greek	Latin	Old English
( <i>p</i> ~ <i>f</i> ) 'father'	<i>pita</i>	<i>patēr</i>	<i>pater</i>	<i>fæder</i>
( <i>t</i> ~ <i>þ</i> ) 'three'	<i>trayas</i>	<i>treîs</i>	<i>trēs</i>	<i>þrīe</i>
( <i>k</i> ~ <i>χ</i> ) 'heart'		<i>kardia</i>	<i>cor</i>	<i>heorte</i>

and similarly for the other consonants.

One further feature common to the early Germanic languages (and which can therefore also be assumed to have been present in Proto-Germanic) is the fixing of the stress in most words on the first syllable. In Indo-European the stress fell on different syllables in different words, or in different forms of the same word. Thus Sanskrit has the forms *juhómi* ('I sacrifice'), *juhumás* ('we sacrifice'), *júhvati* ('they sacrifice'). Some modern languages of the Indo-European group show similar variation in the placing of the stress in different words or forms, as in Russian *slóvo* ('word') and *slová* ('words'). Because in Germanic the stress came to be always placed on the first syllable in most words, the prominence of the syllables at the ends of words was reduced. This seems to have played a part in the gradual loss of inflectional endings which came to be characteristic of the various Germanic languages.

## ENTERING THE HISTORICAL PERIOD: THE DIVISION OF PROTO-GERMANIC

From their early homeland in the southern parts of Scandinavia, the speakers of Germanic carried it in various directions over succeeding centuries. The process began, perhaps, in the third century BC, and was still active when the Anglo-Saxons came to Britain towards the middle of the first millennium AD. Entirely in keeping with the pattern of linguistic developments which were described at the beginning of this chapter, increasingly differentiated forms of Germanic developed as different groups of speakers became more firmly separated from one another. It has long been common for linguists to speak in terms of a fundamental three-way division of the Germanic speech community, into a North Germanic part, an East Germanic part, and a West Germanic part which, as Figure 1.2 illustrates, includes Old English. For some linguists, the picture has been of three groups of Germanic peoples, each detaching themselves from the previously united Germanic tribal cluster and in the process bringing into being three separate forms of Germanic language. As time progressed, each of the latter would have given rise to the various historically attested Germanic languages: North Germanic would have divided into Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian; East Germanic would have produced the no longer extant Gothic (together with some other now extinct languages of which relatively little is known); and West Germanic would have undergone a separation into the early forms of German, Dutch, Frisian, and English.

The movements of different groups of peoples in northern Europe during this period can be partially reconstructed—at first with considerable difficulty and uncertainty; later, as historical records come into being from the earliest centuries of the Christian era onwards, with somewhat greater confidence—and that reconstruction fits in some broad respects the three-way division outlined above. It is also the case that the historically attested Germanic languages fall rather easily into the three groups mentioned. Nevertheless, opinions on this matter have varied in recent times, with many scholars thinking it more likely that Germanic first split into two languages rather than three: into North West Germanic and East Germanic (or, perhaps, into North East Germanic and West Germanic). The following account, using for convenience a three-fold classification, does not make any claim about the details of the sequence of splits.

Peoples from the East Germanic grouping are believed to have moved eastwards and southwards during the first three or four centuries AD. The people about whom most is known, by far, are the Goths, who over that period and the following three centuries or so (when some of them moved westwards across southern Europe as far as the Iberian peninsula) played a major part in the history of the territories they inhabited. Their language is known mainly from a translation of parts of the Bible believed to have been made in the fourth century AD among a part of the Gothic people living at that time west of the Black Sea, in approximately the same area as modern Romania. That translation, as the first extensive written record of a Germanic language, is of very great importance for linguistic study. Gothic is distinguished from the other Germanic languages by a number of characteristics, some of which preserve features of earlier Proto-Germanic which have not survived into the other historically attested languages, while others are innovations. For example, Gothic has inflectional forms of verbs to indicate the passive voice:

<i>ni</i>	<i>afdomjaid,</i>	<i>jah</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>afdomjanda</i>
not	judge,	and	not	(you) will be judged
'do not judge, and you will not be judged'				

In other Germanic languages passive inflections no longer survive in recognizable form, and the passive voice is indicated (as in modern English) by the use of an auxiliary verb. One Old English translation of the gospels has, for the sentence just quoted:

<i>nelle</i>	<i>ge</i>	<i>deman,</i>	<i>and</i>	<i>ge</i>	<i>ne</i>	<i>beoð</i>	<i>demedede</i>
do not	you	judge	and	you	not	will be	judged
'do not judge, and you will not be judged'							

Gothic also makes use, in the past tense forms of a group of strong verbs, of what is known as reduplication; that is, the addition at the beginning of a word of a syllable consisting of the initial consonant of the word and a vowel (sometimes accompanied by a change of the main vowel as in the past tense forms of other strong verbs):

*haitan* ('call') ~ past tense *haihait*  
*gretan* ('weep') ~ past tense *gaigrot*

In other Germanic languages, only isolated remains of reduplicated forms are to be found and they no longer form a regular grammatical pattern.

These are just two examples from a range of features in which Gothic gives us very valuable information for reconstructing the nature of Proto-Germanic, and hence for the better understanding of what lay distantly behind Old English.

Peoples from the North Germanic grouping, who moved into the areas we now know as Denmark, Sweden, and Norway (and subsequently further afield, to Iceland and other places), left extensive texts dating from c1100 AD onwards. They also left a considerable number of much earlier texts (relatively short) carved in 'runes' on metal, wooden, bone, and other objects. The runic 'alphabet' is generally called the 'futhork', after the values of the first six characters of the sequence; this is illustrated in Figure 1.3. It varies in some particulars from one place or time to another and is of disputed origin. The earliest of these runic texts are reckoned no later than the second century AD, and frequently consist of just a name or one or two words. In many cases the identity of the words or the meaning of the texts cannot be confidently made out. In such circumstances it is not surprising that there is uncertainty surrounding the nature of the language in which they are written. Some scholars take it to be an intermediate 'Common Scandinavian' stage



FIG. 1.3. The first six letters of the early *futhork* found on a bracteate [thin gold medallion] from Vadstena in Sweden



between Proto-Germanic and the later separate Scandinavian languages, others that it is a 'North West Germanic' stage that subsequently gave rise not only to the Scandinavian but also to the West Germanic languages (including English).

Runes, with changes over time in their number, shapes, and sound values, continued to be used in Scandinavia into and beyond the Middle Ages, and longer texts came to be written in them. There are also some objects bearing runic inscriptions and possibly of dates between the third and the ninth centuries (although the datings tend to be uncertain) from various parts of continental Europe. Much relating to these objects and texts is very uncertain—from which direction runic writing reached the places in question, for example, or what languages the texts are in, or what the texts mean. The practice of writing in runes is also fairly well evidenced in Anglo-Saxon England, starting very early in the period. It seems likely that an ability to write in runes was simply brought with them by the Anglo-Saxon settlers. Some of the important English runic texts are dealt with in the next chapter.

This lack of clearly interpretable textual evidence until a relatively late date makes it difficult to reconstruct the process by which Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian became separate languages. The Norwegians took their language with them when they began to settle in Iceland in the second half of the ninth century AD. Much of the early literature from the North Germanic group consists of texts preserved (if not always originally composed) in Icelandic after that language had developed its separate identity from the period of settlement onwards, for example, the poems of the *Poetic Edda* and the many prose narratives of the *sagas*. It is a common practice to cite Old Icelandic forms as representative of the early North Germanic languages (which are often referred to collectively as 'Old Norse'), and since this often leads to thirteenth-century Icelandic forms being set alongside, say, fourth-century Gothic ones it can give a misleading impression to the unwary.

Some features of the early North Germanic languages are nevertheless quite clearly different from those found elsewhere in Germanic. Two affect the verb and pronoun systems. In the verbs, a set of 'mediopassive' forms arose in which a suffix in *-mk* (first person) or *-sk* (second and third person), or some variant, was added to the verb form. The suffixes were originally forms of personal pronouns: *mik* ('me', 'myself') and *sik* ('yourself', 'himself', etc.). The 'mediopassive' forms typically expressed a reflexive or passive sense, although this did not always remain transparent:

<i>síðan</i>	<i>búask</i>	<i>boðsmenn</i>	<i>í brottu</i>
then	prepare themselves	guests	away

‘then the guests prepare to leave’

<i>Ísland</i>	<i>bygðisk</i>	<i>fyrst</i>	<i>ór</i>	<i>Norvegi</i>	<i>á</i>	<i>dögum</i>
Iceland	was settled	first	from	Norway	in	days

*Haralds ins Hárfagra*  
of Harald the Fairhaired

‘Iceland was first settled from Norway in the days of Harald Fairhair’

<i>munu</i>	<i>vit</i>	<i>báðir</i>	<i>í braut</i>	<i>komask</i>
will	we	both	away	manage to go

‘we will both get away’

In a further distinctive feature, the North Germanic languages developed a definite article that was suffixed to its noun unless there was also an adjective attached to the noun: *maðrinn* (‘the man’), *á grindina* (‘to the gate’), *landinu* (‘[to] the land’), but *it fyrsta hogg* (‘the first blow’).

The peoples of the West Germanic grouping are those from among whom arose, as has already been mentioned, the forms of language that are eventually identifiable as German, Dutch, Frisian, and English. Before the Germanic peoples began their divergent migrations, the West Germanic group seem to have been located in what is now Denmark and in the more northerly and North Sea coastal territories of modern Germany, the Netherlands, and Belgium. It is difficult to reconstruct the evolving interrelationships between the tribes that constituted this group, or between them and the other Germanic peoples, and harder still to discover the connection between those tribal interrelationships and the gradually emerging different languages which are now generally labelled ‘West Germanic’. Another of the issues on which scholars today are divided is whether to posit a more or less unified West Germanic protolanguage at any stage intermediate between Proto-Germanic and the individual West Germanic languages. Some are inclined to believe that ‘West Germanic’ from the time of its separation from Germanic (or from North Germanic) fell into two parts, one of which was destined to become early German and the other to give rise to English, Frisian, and Dutch. It is at any rate reasonable to think in terms of a prolonged period of fluctuating divergences and convergences, both of peoples and of languages, in complex circumstances which again would have had many similarities to those described at the beginning of this chapter but which are now no longer recoverable in much detail.

The West Germanic languages of which we have early evidence are Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old English. Texts in Old High German and Old English survive from the eighth century AD onwards, whereas the first Old Saxon texts come from the following century. Old Frisian, which is of particular interest because of the number of close similarities which it bears to Old English, is not recorded until considerably later, in thirteenth-century copies of texts which originate in the eleventh century.

Old High German is known in a number of quite markedly different dialectal varieties, broadly classifiable as Alemannic, Bavarian, and Franconian. The two first of these (from the south-west and south-east of the Old High German area respectively) are grouped together as 'Upper German'; the Franconian dialects (further to the north) are referred to as 'Middle German'. A significant number of prose and verse texts survive, together with other records of the language in, for example, glosses in Latin texts and glossaries of Latin words.

Old High German is differentiated from the other West Germanic languages by what is known as the 'Second Consonant Shift'—a systematic set of developments which affected the consonants that had arisen as a consequence of the earlier 'First (or Germanic) Consonant Shift' (described above on p.19). This results in correspondences such as:

	Old English	Old High German
'tooth'	<i>tōþ</i>	<i>zan</i>
'make'	<i>macian</i>	<i>mahhōn</i>

The Second Consonant Shift affects a wider range of consonants in some dialects than in others, with the Franconian dialects tending to show less extensive changes than the Upper German dialects.

Old High German is also further distinguished from the other West Germanic languages (including Old English) in retaining from earlier Germanic a distinct form for each of the three 'persons' in the plural of the present and past tenses of verbs, where the other languages have reduced these to just one form, as in the following examples:

	Old High German	Old English
'we carry/carried'	<i>wir beremēs/bārumēs</i>	
'you (pl.) carry/carried'	<i>ir beret/bārut</i>	<i>wē, gē, hīe berap/bæron</i>
'they carry/carried'	<i>sie berent/bārun</i>	

Old Saxon is the name given to the language represented in two ninth-century scriptural narratives in verse, *Heliand* (nearly 6,000 lines) and *Genesis* (nearly 350 lines). It is not known where these texts were composed, although it may well

have been in an area where Franconian Old High German was in use, rather than in what may be thought of as an Old Saxon area. Some shorter texts of various kinds also exist, as do glosses explaining words in Latin texts. Until the beginning of the ninth century the Saxons as a people (or group of peoples) had been politically and militarily very significant in the northern parts of what is now Germany, and had experienced fluctuating fortunes in their dealings with the kings of the Franks, their powerful neighbours to the south. The submission of the Saxon leader Widukind to the Frankish ruler Charlemagne in 785, however, led soon after to the Saxons being finally incorporated into Charlemagne's Empire.

In these circumstances, it is not surprising that the status of the Old Saxon language, especially as represented in *Heliand* and *Genesis*, is uncertain. Scholarly debate has not finally decided on any one of the various possibilities, which include the language of these texts being a more or less direct representation of a local (spoken) dialect but its representing a local dialect but with the introduction by a copyist of written forms which are proper to Old High German, or its not being direct evidence of any spoken dialect at all but being instead a specifically written form of language.

Old Saxon is, however, of particular interest with regard to the origins of Old English, in part because it appears to lie on the supposed path of the earlier Germanic invaders of and migrants to the British Isles, but also since it seems to have been at that earlier time close in a number of respects to the kinds of language that are thought to have developed into Old English. The Saxons are, moreover, named as one of the Germanic peoples who were part of the movement to Britain of the 'Anglo-Saxons' (see further, pp. 34–5). It is nevertheless important to bear in mind that the Anglo-Saxon settlements in Britain took place some centuries before the first surviving evidence for an Old Saxon language. We must therefore be properly cautious about the possibilities of accurately reconstructing what the language of 'Saxons' might have been like at that earlier date.

One feature of Old Saxon which it shares with Old English and Old Frisian, but in which it stands in contrast to Old High German as well as to East Germanic, is that an original *n* or *m* is lost between a vowel and *f*, *b*, or *s*:

	Old Saxon	Old English	Old High German	Gothic
'five'	<i>fif</i>	<i>fif</i>	<i>fimf</i>	<i>fimf</i>
'journey'	<i>sīð</i>	<i>sīþ</i>	<i>sind</i>	<i>sinþs</i> ('time')
'us'	<i>ūs</i>	<i>ūs</i>	<i>unsih</i>	<i>unsis</i>

Old Frisian, even more than Old Saxon, is a language of which we have no direct knowledge at the period relevant to the Anglo-Saxon migrations to

Britain. The surviving Old Frisian texts, which are mostly legal in nature, may in some cases have their origins in the eleventh century although the earliest manuscript copies are from the late thirteenth century. The territory in which these texts came into being was the coastal region of what is now the Netherlands, together with neighbouring areas in modern Belgium and Germany. The former acceptance by scholars of the probability that Frisians were involved in the Anglo-Saxon migrations to Britain is now questioned, but at any rate the Old Frisian language, although known only from a much later date, appears to have some deep-rooted resemblances to Old English. For some earlier scholars these resemblances were sufficiently strong to justify the postulating of an 'Anglo-Frisian' language as an intermediate stage between West Germanic and the separate Old English and Old Frisian languages, but that view is not favoured these days. The traditional picture of a language undergoing successive splits into discrete parts may well be inadequate, and the similarities between Old English, Old Frisian, and Old Saxon are perhaps better seen as the result of parallel developments in a complex and changing social and linguistic situation.

Old English, finally, is the Germanic language that developed in Britain out of the dialects brought from the continent by the Anglo-Saxons during the period of invasions and settlements (principally the fifth and sixth centuries AD). Historical sources name the Angles and Saxons as two of the peoples who took part in those movements, and archaeological evidence has played a major part in the reconstruction of events (sometimes archaeology yields results not easily reconcilable with all the claims of written historical accounts). There is general agreement on the important role of the Angles and Saxons (the former from a homeland in the southern part of the Jutland peninsula), and also that other peoples involved are likely to have included, for example, Franks. But many details are unclear, including the varieties of language which were spoken by the invaders and settlers. Direct evidence for the continental Germanic languages becomes available only some time after the period of the settlements—for a language like Old Frisian, as we have seen, a long time after—which seriously limits the possibility for reconstructing the earlier linguistic situation. Comparison of the historically attested languages can nevertheless shed some light on the broader issues.

Some of the similarities between Old Frisian and Old English, or between those two languages and Old Saxon, are matters of phonology (the sound system), as in the case of the losses of *n* mentioned above. For example, Old Frisian and Old English have a vowel *ē* or *æ* (the latter representing a vowel similar to that in modern English *there*) where Old Saxon (usually), Old High German, and Old Norse have *ā* and Gothic has *ē*:

	Old Frisian	Old English	Old Saxon
‘were’ (pl.)	<i>wēron</i>	<i>wæron</i>	<i>wārun</i>
‘deed’	<i>dēd</i>	<i>dæd</i>	<i>dād</i>
	Old High German	Old Norse	Gothic
‘were’ (pl.)	<i>wārun</i>	<i>vāru</i>	<i>wēsun</i>
‘deed’	<i>tāt</i>	<i>dáð</i>	<i>gadēps</i>

There has been disagreement as to whether or not this indicates a particularly close relationship between Old Frisian and Old English. It is known that in Proto-Germanic the vowel in such words was *æ*. If, as some scholars think, West Germanic as a whole first changed this vowel to *ā*, and in Old Frisian and Old English it subsequently recovered something like its original sound, that may suggest a close connection between those two languages. Linguists look on ‘shared innovations’ as having some value for indicating relationships between languages. If, on the other hand, Old Frisian and Old English have merely preserved the Proto-Germanic vowel unchanged, along with Gothic, while the other languages have innovated with *ā*, the similarity between Old Frisian and Old English may be just a matter of coincidence. Linguists do not treat ‘shared retentions’ as normally of much help in determining relationship.

One important grammatical similarity between Old Frisian, Old English, and Old Saxon is to be found in the system of personal pronouns. For the first and second persons singular (‘I’ and ‘you’), Gothic, Old Norse, and Old High German have different forms for the accusative case (direct object: ‘Please help me’, ‘My friend saw you’) and the dative case (indirect object: ‘Send me [= to me] a letter’, or with a preposition: ‘The man gave the book to you’). In contrast, Old Frisian, Old Saxon, and Old English have just one form:

	Old Frisian	Old English	Old Saxon	Old High German		Old Norse		Gothic	
				acc.	dat.	acc.	dat.	acc.	dat.
first person	<i>mi</i>	<i>mē</i>	<i>mī</i>	<i>mih</i>	<i>mir</i>	<i>mik</i>	<i>mér</i>	<i>mik</i>	<i>mis</i>
second person	<i>thi</i>	<i>pē</i>	<i>thī</i>	<i>dih</i>	<i>dir</i>	<i>pik</i>	<i>pér</i>	<i>puk</i>	<i>pus</i>

However, accusative forms *mec* and *pec* are also found in some dialects of Old English, and the alternation between accusative *mē*, *pē*, and *mec*, *pec* could result either from both forms having been brought to Britain by the Anglo-Saxons, or

from *mec*, *pec* having been the only accusative forms brought with them and dative *mē*, *hē* having taken over that function after the settlement. Old Saxon also has, relatively infrequently, accusative *mik*, *thik*.

Once the individual Indo-European languages had begun to take separate form, the possibility arose that words would be borrowed from one language into another, as has happened in much more recent times as English has been carried around the globe. Identifying borrowings at a very early date (as distinct from two languages having each developed the same word from their common source) is usually a very uncertain business, and caution is needed in drawing any conclusions from supposed cases. An example which has been accepted by many scholars is the word which appears in Gothic as the noun *reiks* 'ruler', and both there and in the other Germanic languages as the adjective 'powerful' (Old Norse *ríkr*, Old High German *rīhhi*, Old Saxon *rīki*, Old Frisian *rīke*, Old English *rīce*; the word is the same as modern English *rich*). There exist elsewhere in Indo-European the corresponding forms Latin *rēx* and Old Irish *rí* ('king'). The vowel -ī- in Gothic *reiks*, etc. (Gothic *ei* represents ī), makes it easier to explain the Germanic word as having been borrowed from an early Celtic form \**rīgs* than as its having developed independently in Germanic from the same Indo-European origins as the Celtic and Latin words. Scholars have related this interpretation of the linguistic material to the question of the earliest movements and interrelationships of the peoples speaking Indo-European languages, believing the borrowing to have happened some centuries before the beginning of the Christian era as the Germanic peoples were expanding from their original homeland and encountering the Celts on their way. It has been assumed that it indicates something of the nature of Celtic political organization, relative to that of the Germanic speakers, at the time the borrowing occurred.

Another frequently cited example of what is very probably a borrowing from Celtic is the word that appears in modern English as *iron* (Gothic *eisarn*, etc.). Corresponding forms in Celtic are Old Irish *iarn* and Welsh *haearn*. If the assumption of borrowing from Celtic into Germanic is correct, that may contribute to an understanding of the transmission of iron-working capabilities from one people to another at an early date.

Subsequent contact with Roman traders and armies led to borrowing from that source, too. An early case would be the Latin word *caupō* ('peddler, shop-keeper, innkeeper') having been borrowed as the basis for Germanic words meaning 'merchant' (Old Norse *kaupmaðr*, Old High German *koufo*, *koufman*, Old English *cȳpa*, *cēapmann*), 'to trade, buy and/or sell' (Gothic *kaupōn*, Old Norse *kaupa*, Old High German *koufen*, *coufōn*, Old Saxon *kōpon*, Old Frisian *kāpia*, English *cēapian*, *cȳpan*), 'act of buying and/or selling' (Old Norse *kaup*,

Old High German *kouf*, Old Saxon *kōp*, Old English *cēap*), and the like. The adoption of this foreign word by early Germanic speakers no doubt reflects the circumstances in which they typically encountered people in the outer reaches of the Roman world.

Much the same can be said of another word that is generally accepted to be one of the early borrowings into Germanic from Latin, the word that in modern English is *wine*. This word, representing Latin *vīnum*, is found across the whole spread of Germanic languages: Gothic *wein*, Old Norse *vín*, Old High German, Old Saxon, Old Frisian, Old English *wīn*. While there is no guarantee that the word was borrowed at a time when the individual Germanic languages were still not fully differentiated from one another, or even that they each owe it directly to Latin rather than in one or more cases having reborrowed it from a neighbouring Germanic language, the pervasiveness of the term may suggest an earlier rather than a later date (for which other arguments have also been put forward). As with the 'iron' word in respect of Celtic, the borrowing of the word for 'wine' reveals something about the early contacts of the Germanic peoples with the more southerly populations and cultures of Europe.

The Anglo-Saxons, on their way to Britain, encountered the Romans and the material and non-material aspects of their way of life in a variety of circumstances, peaceful and less so. As they settled in what would eventually become known as England they would have found much evidence of the civilization of the Roman garrisons and officials who had been leaving as they arrived, and it is likely that a significant part of the Romanized Celtic population that remained spoke a form of Latin. The Anglo-Saxons and their ancestors had by that time had contacts with the Romans over some five hundred years. Those contacts were reflected in a sizable number of borrowings of words from Latin, although it is not possible to reconstruct with great precision the date at or circumstances in which those borrowings occurred. They come from the first phase of an engagement with the Latin culture which in one way or another would be an inescapable and incalculably influential presence in England, as in continental Europe, for centuries to come. The next and subsequent phases will be a major concern of the remainder of this book.

## SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

For brief descriptions of the various Indo-European languages see Baldi (1983), or with more emphasis on their external histories (with notes on linguistic characteristics and short illustrative texts) Lockwood (1972). Szemerényi (1996) is a fuller, quite technical



account of the sounds and inflectional forms of Indo-European. Benveniste (1973) discusses the Indo-European vocabulary related to a number of key areas of social organization.

Accessible and informative accounts of the Germanic language family are Bammesberger (1992) and Robinson (1992). Bammesberger provides, in particular, a more systematic account of the sounds and forms of Proto-Germanic than has been given here, while Robinson outlines the historical background relevant to the various languages and gives brief descriptions of their linguistic characteristics (with commentary on passages of text illustrative of each language). Useful too, although somewhat technical, are Jasanoff (1997) and Nielsen (1981, 1989, and 1998). Lass (1987) and (1994a) also give some attention to aspects of the Germanic and Indo-European antecedents to Old English.

Runes are dealt with briefly in Page (1987), and more fully in Elliott (1989) and (for English runes) Page (1999). See also pp. 41–4 of this volume.

On the history of the Scandinavian languages, from their Germanic and Indo-European origins to the later twentieth century, see Haugen (1976). For a similar treatment of German see Keller (1978).

Aspects of the vocabulary of the early Germanic languages, with reference to the cultural environment in which they developed, are dealt with in Green (1998).

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