

OLD NORSE PLACE-NAMES IN ENGLAND

LOCATING SCANDINAVIAN SETTLEMENT

THE FIRST VIKINGS TO ARRIVE from the middle of the 8th until the late 9th century engaged in hit-and-run attacks. Then larger armies began to take over control of large parts of England in East Anglia, the Midlands and the North. The area they controlled was called the Danelaw.

Even after the Anglo-Saxons retook these areas, a significant Scandinavian presence remained, particularly in the lands around York and in the Five Boroughs of Derby, Leicester, Lincoln, Nottingham and Stamford. Some place-names are still very clear reminders of their presence, for example:

Names ending in *-by*, like *Derby* or *Grimby*.
The Old Danish word was *bý* 'farm(stead)'.

Names ending in *-thorpe*, like *Kettlethorpe* and *Kirkthorpe*. The Old Danish word was *thorp* or *torp* 'hamlet, village'.

Names ending in *-thwaite* like *Kirkthwaite* or *Langthwaite*. Old Norse *þveit* (pronounced like modern English *thwaite*) meant 'clearing'.



The Danelaw

Scandinavian personal names also appear commonly in Danelaw place-names. Thus we see *Grimr* in *Grimston* and *Grimby*, and *Ketil* in *Kettleby* and *Kettlethorpe*.



Torksey treasure hoard



Place-names of Yorkshire

ENGLISH WORDS FROM OLD NORSE

TWO TYPES OF BORROWING

THE NORSE-DERIVED TERMS IN ENGLISH entered the language mainly between 850 and 1150, although most of them are first recorded in texts that were written after this period for a number of reasons: some of them might have been considered too colloquial to be included in literary texts, most of the texts that we have from before 1150 come from non-Scandinavianised areas and the West Saxon dialect had a significant influence on texts written in other Old English dialects.



Old English dialects



The Oseberg ship (10th century): Viking Ship Museum, Oslo

We see an important difference between the terms recorded before and after 1150. Those hundred and fifty or so recorded before 1150, during the Old English period, tend to be technical terms, particularly terms associated with Scandinavian artefacts or cultural practices. Those first recorded after 1150, during the Middle English period, tend to be everyday, non-technical terms with native equivalents and we still use many of them today.



EARLY BORROWED TERMS

OE *cneor* < ON *knörr* 'warship, cargo ship'

OE *dra* < ON *aurar*, a Scandinavian unit of account

OE *fēolaga* < *félagi* 'partner, shareholder; fellow, mate'

EVERYDAY WORDS

window < ON *vindauga* 'window'

ugly < ON *uggligr* 'to be feared'

scare < ON *skirra* 'to prevent'

they < ON *þeir* 'they'



The different character of the terms first attested during the Old and Middle English periods is likely to be the effect, to a great extent, of the ways in which the terms entered the language. On the one hand, most of those attested first are likely to have been brought over by the Old English speakers themselves, cultural terms being fairly easily borrowed because they often refer to new practices or artefacts (cp. *siesta*, *sangria*, *kamikaze*, *curry*, etc.). Most of those first attested in Middle English, on the other hand, are more likely to have been transferred when Old Norse speakers stopped speaking Old Norse and switched to English.

Above: 10th-century scales from Jätten, Jæren, Norway

Right: Södermanland Runic Inscription 292, Bräta, Sweden. A man called Vignarr raised this stone in memory of a man he describes as his kinsman, *félagr* (partner), and brother.



FINDING VIKING INFLUENCE

HOW DO WE KNOW WHICH ENGLISH WORDS COME FROM OLD NORSE?



THE FACT THAT OLD ENGLISH AND OLD NORSE were very close descendants of a common Germanic ancestor complicates the identification of Norse-derived terms. There are, however, various types of evidence that we can rely on:

1. FORMAL EVIDENCE

Old English and Old Norse had their own distinctive features in terms of their phonology and morphology. If a word shows the sounds or the inflectional endings that we would expect in Old Norse but not in Old English, we have strong evidence that we are dealing with a loanword.

For instance, the Germanic cluster */sk-/ in native words tends to be pronounced as /ʃ-/ while in Old Norse it remains as /sk-/; this is how we know that words like *skirt* < (ON *skyrta* 'garment for the upper part of the body'), *skin* (< ON *skinn* 'skin, hide, fur') and *sky* (< ON *ský* 'cloud') are Norse-derived, but others like *shirt*, *shame* or *show* are not.

2. NON-FORMAL EVIDENCE

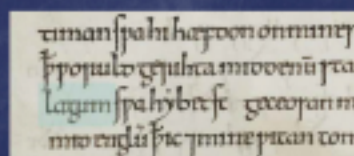
Here we rely mainly on issues to do with attestation. In English this means:

- Is the word first attested after the contact with Norse speakers started?



- Is it attested mainly in texts originating from the areas where the Scandinavian newcomers settled?
- Does it refer initially to Scandinavian cultural practices?

We also look beyond English to see if we have cognates (i.e. words that share the same origin) with the same meaning and form in Germanic languages other than Old Norse and Old English. For instance, we think that *law* is a loanword (cp. ON *lög* 'law') because OE *laga* is first attested around 950 as a term for Scandinavian laws, not English laws; and because, other than English, Old Norse is the only language where this root (Proto-Germanic **lag-*), which originally referred to something that is laid down (cp. OE *licgan* 'to lie'), means 'law'. Attestation is less reliable than formal evidence.



Left: IV Edgar law code in Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS 265, p. 224. This is the first attestation of the word *law* (*lagan*) in English.

Top: Viking style clothing

OLD NORSE INFLUENCE

ON ENGLISH DIALECTS



Middleton cross 2

MANY OLD NORSE BORROWINGS became part of standard English, and are used by all English speakers. But some are found mainly or only in regional English, and contribute to the rich and distinctive vocabulary of local dialects. This is especially true of the North, North Midlands and East of England, where Scandinavians settled in the greatest numbers.

Some of these words refer to features of the landscape that we associate especially with the northern parts of England. Good examples are:

dale < ON *dāl* 'valley' (perhaps partly also < OE *dæl*) and **fell** < ON *fjall*, *fell* 'mountain'; key words for the topography of Yorkshire and Cumbria; and **firth** < ON *fjörð*, which is also common in Scotland (and is the same word as *fjord*). Those who know northern and eastern England will also be very familiar with words like **carr** < ON *kjarr* 'marshy thicket' and **scout** < ON *skúti* 'projecting rock'.



This Scandinavian influence also extends to words used to name parts of towns and cities. The best known is **gate** < ON *gata* 'street' (a different word from English *gate* as in a garden or a city gate), which is part of many street names in towns and cities like York, Lincoln, Doncaster and Peterborough.



Settle station in the Yorkshire Dales

And there are many other originally Old Norse words too, which are important parts of the dialect vocabulary of regional speech. Some are well-known markers of 'northern English', likely to be recognized and understood by English speakers more widely, like **nay** 'no' (< ON *nei*) or **lass** 'girl' (probably < ON **lask* 'unmarried'). But many others are still restricted to local dialects, like **attle** (or **ettle**) 'to intend' (< ON *ætta*), **gowk** 'idiot' (< ON *gaukr* 'cuckoo'), **laik** 'to play' (< ON *leika*), **lig** 'to laze about' (< ON *liggja* 'to lie') and **mun** 'will, shall' (not a corruption of English *must*, but < the ON verb *mun*).

It is important to realise that, just as much as the Scandinavian borrowings in standard English, these words go back to one of the major languages of the Middle Ages. They are not 'bad English', but Viking cultural artefacts which tell us a lot about the rich history of the English regions.



Micklegate, York

OLD NORSE INFLUENCE

ON SIR GAWAIN AND THE GREEN KNIGHT



DIALECT WORDS OF OLD NORSE origin are not just part of the story of spoken English. In the Middle Ages, before the language of the South-East of England (especially London) took over as the model for writing English across the whole country, dialects from all over

England were used in writing. During this period, the North Midlands and the North of England were major sources of poetic storytelling, including famous poems like *Pearl*, the alliterative *Death of King Arthur* and *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*.

Sir Gawain and the Green Knight is one of the great romances of medieval England, written in the late fourteenth century in a dialect probably from Cheshire. It tells the dramatic and atmospheric adventures of one of King Arthur's greatest knights, and his encounters with the monstrous Green Knight whom he has to leave Camelot and travel far into the wilds of northern England to seek out. This poem is celebrated for the richness of its style, one of the key elements in which is the breadth of its

regional vocabulary, incorporating many words of probably Scandinavian origin. In the following passage, which



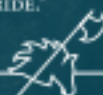
Below: © The British Library Board. Image of Gawain MS, British Library Cotton Nero A.x - f. 38r, miniature of Pearl dreamer and maiden with river

Left: © The British Library Board. Image of Gawain MS, British Library Cotton Nero A.x - f. 34v, miniature featuring Green Knight

describes how the Green Knight bursts into King Arthur's hall one Christmas, these words are highlighted:

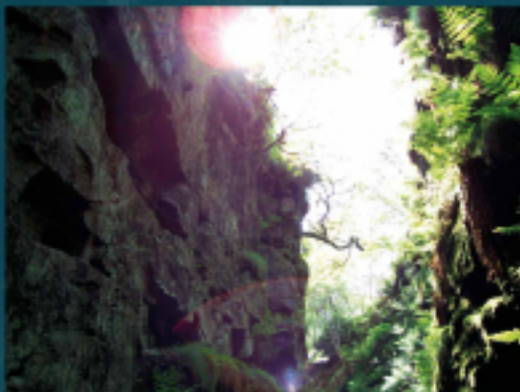
THEIR **HALES** IN AT THE HALLE DOR AN **AGHLICH** MAYSTER ...
FRO THE SWYRE TO THE **SWANGE** SO SWARE AND SO THIK,
AND HIS **LYNDES** AND HIS LYMES SO LONGE AND SO GRETE,
HALF ETAYN IN ERDE I HOPE THAT HE WERE.
BOT MON MOST I **ALGATE** MYNN HYM TO BENE,
AND THAT THE MYRIEST IN HIS **MUCKEL** THAT MYGHT RIDE.

THERE **RUSHES** IN AT THE HALL DOOR A **TERRIBLE** KNIGHT ...
FROM THE NECK TO THE **WAIST** SO WELL BUILT,
AND HIS **LOINS** AND HIS LIMBS SO LONG AND SO GREAT,
I SUSPECT THAT HE WAS HALF GIANT, ACTUALLY.
BUT AT **ANY RATE** I MUST **RECKON** HIM TO BE A MAN,
AND THE FAIREST FOR HIS **SIZE** THAT COULD RIDE."



HERE ARE SOME OTHER WORDS IN THE LANGUAGE OF THIS POEM WHICH COME FROM OLD NORSE:

bayn 'obedient'	bigge 'to settle'
brothe 'fierce'	busk 'to get ready'
frayst 'to ask'	hemez 'brains'
kayre 'to go, ride'	layt 'to seek'
muged 'drizzled'	tulk 'man'
thro 'intense'	wykez 'corners (of the mouth)'



Lad's Church, Staffordshire