

Reading Exercise – The Beginnings of English

Our understanding of the history of English began at the end of the eighteenth century when Sir William Jones, a British judge who lived in India, began to study Sanskrit. This is a very old language of India, and at the time was used in Indian law. Like others before him, Jones noticed many similarities between Sanskrit, Latin, Greek, and other European languages. For example:

SANSKRIT	LATIN	GREEK	ENGLISH
pitr	pater	pater	father
matar	mater	matr	mother
asti	est	esti	is
trayah	tres	treis	three
sapta	septem	hepta	seven

People had thought that Latin, Greek, and all European languages came from Sanskrit, but Jones disagreed. In 1786 he wrote that Sanskrit, Greek, and Latin all came from a 'common source', which had perhaps disappeared. There was a lot of interest in his idea and other people began to study these three languages. Their work proved that Jones was right. We now know that Sanskrit, Greek, Latin, English, and many other languages all belong to one enormous 'family' of languages called the Indo-European family.

Jones's 'common source' from which all these languages developed is now known as Proto-Indo-European. It is thought that a group of people called the Kurgans spoke this language, or dialects of it, and lived in what is now southern Russia from some time after 5000 BC. In about 3500 BC the Kurgans probably began to spread west across Europe and east across Asia. As groups of Kurgans travelled further and further away from each other, they began to develop stronger differences in their dialects. With the passing of time, these dialects became different languages. When some of them (the Greek, Anatolian, and Indo-Iranian languages) appear in written form in about 2000 to 1000 BC they are clearly separate languages.

Similarities between some languages as they are spoken today suggest that they probably come from Proto-Indo-European. For example, there are similar words in European and Indo-Iranian languages for people in the family (*mother*, *father*), animals (*dog*, *sheep*, *horse*), parts of the body (*eye*, *ear*), the weather (*rain*, *snow*), and for weapons. These similarities allow us to imagine something of the life of the Kurgans: they worked on the land some of the time, made clothes from wool, and used wheels.



More than 2 billion people speak an Indo-European language as their first language. The speaker of Hindi in India, the speaker of Portuguese in Brazil, and the speaker of English in Australia all express themselves in Indo-European languages.

The Celts were the first group of Indo-European speakers to move across Europe. Towards the end of the fifth century BC they began to leave their homeland north of the Alps in central Europe. They went to the Black Sea, Turkey, south-west Spain and central Italy, the whole of Britain, and Ireland. As they travelled, different dialects of their language developed. The Celts who settled in Turkey spoke Galatian, those in Spain spoke Celtiberian, and those in France, Italy, and northern Europe spoke Gaulish. The Celts who went to Ireland and later Scotland spoke Goidelic (Gaelic) and those who went to southern England and Wales spoke Brythonic (or British).

Unfortunately for the Celts in Britain, other people wanted to take advantage of the island's good farming land and valuable metals. In AD 43 the Romans invaded Britain. They remained there for almost four hundred years, and almost all of what is now England came under their control. (They never went very far into Wales or Scotland.) They introduced a new way of life and a new language – Latin. British Celts in the upper classes and the towns became used to life with laws and police, roads, baths, and theatres. Some learnt to speak and write Latin. However, a new language did not develop from Latin in Britain as French did in Gaul and Spanish did in Spain.

From the middle of the third century AD, the Romans grew weaker and weaker as the Germanic peoples of northern Europe invaded more and more Roman lands. In AD 410



the Romans finally left Britain. Without the Roman army to guard it, the country was in danger from other invaders.

In AD 449, people from Jutland in modern Denmark – the Jutes – arrived in southern Britain and the Angles – also from Denmark – came and settled in eastern Britain. In 477 the Saxons, from what is now Germany, came and settled in southern and south-eastern Britain. These three Germanic peoples were very different from the Romans. The Romans had governed the British Celts, but they had not taken their lands. The Jutes, Angles, and Saxons came in larger numbers and they settled on the lands belonging to the British Celts. Some of the British Celts left and went north, some went west into Wales and Cornwall, and others went over the sea to Brittany, in what is now northern France.

The Jutes stayed in Kent, in the south-east of Britain, but the Angles moved north and the Saxons went south-west.

They slowly organized themselves into seven kingdoms in what is now England and south-east Scotland. In the seventh century the kingdom of Northumbria, in the north, was very strong and a great centre of learning. In the eighth century Mercia, in the centre, became the most important kingdom, and in the ninth century Wessex, in the south and south-west, became the strongest kingdom.

The invaders called the British Celts **wealas** meaning *foreigners*. Later this meant both *Celts* and *servants*. From **wealas** comes the Modern English word *Welsh*. The British Celts called all the invaders ‘Saxons’ at first, but in the sixth century the word **Angli** was used to mean the whole group of invaders. Later **Angli** became **Engle**. Today we call them ‘Anglo-Saxons’. From the various Germanic dialects used by these people, English developed.

(Text taken from Viney, B. (2008) *The History of the English Language*. Oxford Bookworms Stage 4. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK)

A. Based on the previous text, put the following events in the correct order. The first event has been given for you. (Exercise taken from Viney, B. (2008) *The History of the English Language*. Oxford Bookworms Stage 4. Oxford University Press. Oxford, UK)

- _____ Some British people learned to speak and write Latin.
- 1 _____ The Kurgan people began to travel across Europe and Asia.
- _____ Wessex became the strongest kingdom in England.
- _____ The Celts began to leave their homeland in central Europe.
- _____ The Celts settled in Britain.
- _____ The Romans left Britain.
- _____ The Romans invaded Britain.
- _____ The people of England and south-east Scotland organized themselves into seven kingdoms.
- _____ Jutes, Angles, and Saxons from northern Europe settled in Britain.

B. Now, decide if the following statements are TRUE, FALSE or NOT MENTIONED based on the text above.

- _____ The understanding of English as a language started with Sir William Jones’ work.
- _____ It is thought that English, Greek and Latin come from Sanskrit.
- _____ Kurgans lived in west Europe and started moving east across Asia.
- _____ Proto-Indo European languages were spoken and understood easily by all the tribes.
- _____ The Celts travelled across Europe because they wanted to spread their languages.
- _____ Latin exerted an important influence in English language in Roman Times.
- _____ The Jutes, Angles and Saxons forced the British Celts to leave their country.
- _____ The most important and strongest kingdoms were not from the Celts.

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