

LEXICAL EVIDENCE FOR THE RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY OF OLD ENGLISH POETRY

Abstract: This article explores the dating implications of rare vocabulary attested in *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I*, and *Widsið*. It argues that these poems preserve an archaic lexical stratum, which consists of words that became obsolete before the composition of ninth-century poetry and prose. **Keywords:** *Beowulf*, Anglo-Saxon Literature, History of the English Language, Germanic Philology, Lexicology.

Resumen: Este artículo explora las implicaciones cronológicas de ciertos elementos léxicos poco frecuentes que se dan en *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I* y *Widsið*. El argumento principal es que estos poemas preservan un sustrato léxico arcaico consistente en palabras que se volvieron obsoletas antes de que la poesía y la prosa del siglo noveno fueran compuestas. **Palabras clave:** *Beowulf*, Literatura anglosajona, Historia de la lengua inglesa, Filología germánica, Lexicología.



LINGUISTIC ATTEMPTS TO ESTABLISH A RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY of Old English poetry can be divided into two broad categories: the metrical and the lexical.¹ Metrical studies are concerned with the distribution of verses in which words must scan according to their older phonological values. A poem abounding with verses requiring archaic phonology for scansion was probably composed much earlier than a poem exhibiting few or no such verses. Lexical studies, on the other hand, are concerned with the distribution of words whose restricted attestation might possess chronological significance. A poem containing a cluster of words that became obsolete early in the Anglo-Saxon period was probably composed well before a poem that lacks such words and exhibits neologisms or late borrowings. Although metrical and lexical studies fall under the umbrella of linguistic argumentation,

¹ Other forms of linguistic evidence tend to bear on the dating of individual poems rather than on the relative chronology of the poetic corpus; see, for example, the syntactic and morphological evidence discussed in Fulk 2007a. Because of the quantity of material involved, short titles and texts cited in this study are those used in the DOE. For the purpose of disambiguation, macrons are silently inserted over long vowels throughout.

they deal with separate phenomena whose dating implications derive from unrelated developments in the history of the English language. Accordingly, the conclusions drawn in metrical studies can be tested against the conclusions independently drawn in lexical studies, and vice versa. If lexical evidence contradicts metrical evidence, for example, this might provide some basis for querying or refining the conclusions drawn in metrical studies. If lexical and metrical evidence consistently demand the same chronological conclusions, however, then the probability that these conclusions are correct is considerably strengthened.

Metrical evidence has been studied far more intensively than lexical evidence, with the result that several metrical criteria are now recognized as reliable indicators of relative chronology. Perhaps the most reliable dating criterion is the incidence of verses requiring non-contraction or non-parasiting for scansion (Fulk 1992: 66–121). Non-contraction is evident in verses such as “on flett gæð” (*Beo* 2034b), where *gæð* must scan as disyllabic **gæ-iþ*, the form of this verb before it underwent contraction during the seventh century, since the verse would otherwise contain only three metrical positions (×SS). Non-parasiting is evident in verses such as “Ðær wæs hæleþa hleahtor” (*Beo* 611a), where *hleahtor* must scan as monosyllabic **hleabtr*, the form of this noun before it underwent parasiting in the seventh century, since the verse would otherwise contain five metrical positions (××S×S×). R. D. Fulk has demonstrated that the distribution of verses exhibiting non-contraction, non-parasiting, and other older phonological features is remarkably consistent throughout the corpus of longer Old English poems (1992: 348–351). Verses requiring archaic phonology for scansion occur with the highest incidence and greatest lexical variety in *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, and *Exodus*. The incidence of these archaisms generally declines in Cynewulfian poetry, regresses further in Alfredian poetry, and reaches its nadir in poems externally datable to the tenth and eleventh centuries. The consistent pattern of their distribution

indicates that metrical criteria such as contraction, parasiting, compensatory lengthening upon loss of *h*, and analogical lengthening in diphthongal stems can reliably adumbrate a relative chronology of Old English poetry.

Metrical dating scholarship has reached a fairly advanced state: the distribution of various kinds of chronologically significant verses throughout the corpus is well known and the validity of several dating criteria has been established. The arguments of Fulk's monumental *A History of Old English Meter* have been repeatedly validated in philological scholarship in the two decades since its publication.² Metrical studies from Geoffrey Russom, Michael Lapidge, and Thomas A. Bredehoft have identified additional criteria whose distribution lends independent support to Fulk's relative chronology of Old English poetry.³ Lexical dating scholarship, in comparison, remains somewhat underdeveloped. In 1952, Robert J. Menner published an illuminating study, in which he contrasted the vocabulary of *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* with that of late poems such as *The Meters of Boethius* and *The Paris Psalter*.⁴ Lexical argumentation of this sort received little attention in the dating controversies that erupted over the next few decades. The value of restricted vocabulary went largely ignored in scholarship until Dennis Cronan published a meticulous study in 2004, which refined and substantially augmented Menner's arguments. Cronan contended that the restriction of a cluster of rare poetic simplexes to *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I*, and *Widsið* is best explained by postulating a relatively early date of composition for

² In addition to the studies cited in the next footnote, see Clemons 1995: 1–67; Griffith 1997: 44–47; Lapidge 2000; Bremner 2004; Shippey 2005; Neidorf 2013b; Doane 2013: 37–41, 51–55; Neidorf 2014; Hartman 2014; Clark 2014; Neidorf & Pascual forthcoming [2015].

³ Russom 2002; Lapidge 2006; Bredehoft 2014.

⁴ Menner 1952 is reviewed favorably alongside other lexical dating studies in Amos 1980: 141–156.

these poems. His conclusion has commanded widespread assent from scholars, with the exception of Roberta Frank, who recently published an essay (2008) offering alternative interpretations of Cronan's data.

Because lexical investigation into the relative chronology of Old English poetry is still in its infancy, much work remains to be done both in identifying chronologically significant words and in articulating the methodological considerations governing the interpretation of their dating implications. The present article aims to advance both of these enterprises and is therefore divided into two sections. The first section gauges the relative probability of the competing hypotheses propounded by Cronan and Frank, and thereby reviews the existing lexical evidence for the relative chronology. Numerous methodological considerations emerge in this analysis, which then inform the interpretation of new lexical data adduced in the second section of this article. Because Cronan's study focused on poetic simplexes restricted to two or three poems, many words with potential chronological significance have been excluded from consideration. The second section of this article represents a preliminary attempt to identify words that fell outside of the purview of Cronan's study, but bear on the explanatory power of his hypothesis. Of particular interest are words whose distribution in the corpus of recorded Old English suggests that they became obsolete early in the Anglo-Saxon period. The presence of these words in various poems may constitute strong evidence for the falsification or validation of hypotheses concerning their dates of composition. The relative chronology erected upon other linguistic evidence will here be tested and found to generate data that either confirm or contradict its predictions.

I RESTRICTED POETIC SIMPLEXES

Before individual words and the competing interpretations of their chronological significance can be discussed, it is necessary first to

lay out the evidence as a whole. Cronan identified fourteen poetic simplexes whose restricted attestation establishes a connection between six poems. The simplexes and the poems in which they appear are as follows: *dybtig* (“strong”), *fær* (“vessel”), *freme* (“vigorous”), and *gombe* (“tribute”), restricted to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*; *eodor* (“protector”), *heoru* (“sword”), *wlenco* (“bravado”), and *umbor* (“child”), restricted to *Beowulf* and *Maxims I*; *subtriga* (“nephew”), restricted to *Genesis A*, *Beowulf*, and *Widsið*; *missere* (“half-year”), restricted to *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, and *Exodus*; *þengel* (“lord”), restricted to *Beowulf* and *Exodus*; *lufen* (“joy”) and *wæfre* (“restless”), restricted to *Beowulf* and *Daniel*; and *bresne* (“mighty”), restricted to *Genesis A* and *Daniel*. Cronan offered a chronological explanation for the restriction of these words: the poems in which they appear were probably composed at a relatively early date and therefore preserve a stratum of inherited poetic vocabulary unavailable to later Old English poets. As will become clear, the value of each individual simplex is not commensurate. Some of these words would constitute compelling dating criteria on their own, while others would not, but it is the ability of a hypothesis to accommodate the whole of the evidence that matters most.

The methodology of Cronan’s study and the rationale informing his conclusion can be illustrated with his analysis of *subtriga* (nephew), the word with perhaps the clearest dating implications. In poetry, *subtriga* occurs as a simplex only in *Genesis A*, where it is used four times in reference to Lot, the nephew of Abraham.⁵ The only other attestations of *subtriga* in the poetic corpus occur in *Beowulf* and *Widsið*, where the compound *subter(ge)fædren* (“nephew-and-uncle”) is applied to Hroðulf and Hroðgar.⁶ This word is a rare example of a dvandva or copulative compound: it is one of just four dvandvas recorded in the early Germanic languages and represents a type of word-formation that ceased to be productive in

⁵ *GenA* 1775, 1901, 2071, 2029.

⁶ *Beo* 1164, *Wid* 46.

prehistoric Old English.⁷ Elsewhere in the corpus of recorded Old English, the word *subtriga* appears only in glossaries, all of which derive from an eighth-century exemplar and reflect seventh-century *glossae collectae*.⁸ The restriction of *subtriga* to *Genesis A*, archaic glosses, and a fossilized compound leads Cronan to conclude that this word must have fallen out of the English language very early in the Anglo-Saxon period. A strong case for the obsolescence of *subtriga* can be made, moreover, since synonymous words, such as *brōðorsunu* and *nefa*, are attested in texts throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Later authors had ample opportunity to use *subtriga*, but only a seventh-century glossator and the poets of *Genesis A*, *Beowulf*, and *Widsið* seem to have been aware of the word's existence.

In her attempt to rebut Cronan's argument, Frank raised two objections to his interpretation of the dating implications of *subtriga*. One objection is that "*subtriga* and *brōðorsunu* are not exact synonyms; the poetic simplex refers to ancient founding fathers of the tribe, figures drenched in sacrality, not to Uncle Wally washing dishes" (2008: 7). There are several reasons why this assertion is not credible. First, the semantic parity of *brōðorsunu* and *subtriga* is indicated by the fact that both of these words are used in glossaries as the equivalent of *fratuelis*.⁹ Second, the *Genesis A* poet labeled Lot both a *subtriga* and a *brōðorsunu*; the words were evidently synonymous to him.¹⁰ Third, when Ælfric writes of

⁷ See Carr 1939: 40–42. The three other copulative compounds recorded are Old English *āpumswēoran*, "son-in-law and father-in-law" (*Beo* 84), Old Saxon *gisunfader*, "son and father" (*Heliand* 1176), and Old High German *sunufatarungo*, "son and father" (*Hildebrandslied* 4).

⁸ See Cronan 2004: 36–38; on the seventh-century origin of the *glossae collectae*, see Lapidge 1986: 58.

⁹ For example, cf. CorpGl 2 6.320: "*Fratuelis* brōðorsunu," CorpGl 2 6.319: "*Fratuelis* suhterga."

¹⁰ Lot is Abraham's *brōðorsunu* in *GenA* 1800. Twenty-five lines earlier, Lot is Abraham's *subtriga*.

Lot in his translation of Genesis, he refers to him as a *brōðorsunu*, not a *subtriga* (see Cronan 2004: 39). In short, the restriction of *subtriga* cannot be explained by arguing that this word could only be used in special or unparalleled contexts. Broader consideration of the relationship between *subtriga* and its synonyms suggests that *subtriga* was a mundane word for the *Genesis A* poet, who, like the early glossators, used it as a functional expression for nephew. Later authors refrained from using *subtriga* not because they lacked suitable contexts, but because the word had become obsolete.

Frank's second objection to Cronan's interpretation of *subtriga* is that "[i]f Cronan had selected another gloss-word of restricted poetic distribution," his conclusions would have been rather different (2008: 6). Frank then proceeds to discuss the distribution of *bune* ("cup"), which appears in the same glossaries as *subtriga* and in *Beowulf*, *Maxims I*, *The Wanderer*, and *Judith*.¹¹ The import of Frank's discussion is that since the distribution of *bune* is apparently meaningless—that is, the word appears both in poems presumed to be early and in poems presumed to be late—then the distribution of *subtriga* should be meaningless as well. She writes: "If the use of *bune* does not transform *Judith* and *The Wanderer* into eighth-century compositions, then the presence of *subtriga* in *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, and *Widsið* is no magic wand either" (2008: 7). One need not be much of a logician to recognize that Frank's conclusion does not follow from its premises. The distribution of *bune* reveals simply that *bune* remained in circulation throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. The same holds true for many words that appear both in glossaries and in poems, such as *mēce* ("sword") or *gār* ("spear").¹² Yet the long lifespan of certain words cannot be imagined to extend the short lifespan of others. The perseverance of *bune* has no bearing on the obsolescence of *subtriga*, and therefore

¹¹ *Beo* 2775; *Max* I 82; *Jud* 17; *Wan* 94; *HlG* C 339; *CorpGl* 2 3.266; *ClGl* 1 888.

¹² See *DOE Corpus* search: "mece," "gar."

does not diminish the probability that texts containing the latter are early compositions.

Several other restricted simplexes permit an analysis similar to *subtriga*. One word whose early obsolescence is probable is *gombe* (“tribute”), which appears only in *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*. In both poems, it is used in the formula *gomban gylðan* (“pay tribute”).¹³ In the *Heliand*, the Old Saxon cognate *gambra* is also collocated with *gelden* (355), which indicates that the formula is a common inheritance of West Germanic poetic tradition (Cronan 2004: 29). The restriction of *gombe* to a formulaic expression limited to two archaic poems suggests “that the word was obsolete in the colloquial language, if it had ever been used there, and was on its way to becoming obsolete in the poetry as well” (Cronan 2004: 29). Cronan’s analysis appears sound, since later poets use *gafol* and *gafolræden* in reference to the rendering of tribute.¹⁴ Frank objects to Cronan’s reasoning with the remark: “Perhaps *gombe* seemed a more appropriate word for the heroic, buccaneering days of Scyld and Abraham than its synonyms *gafol* or *gafolræden*, terms that in Old English prose also meant taxes, interest on loans, and rents” (2008: 8–9). The objection is leveled in error, however, since *gafol* actually appears alongside *gombe* in *Genesis A*. The two words alliterate and vary the expression of the same idea in the line *gombon gielðan and gafol sellan* (*GenA* 1978); the evident parity of the two words falsifies the notion that *gombe* reeked of antiquity, while *gafol* evoked bureaucracy. Frank’s objection also is untenable because Cynewulf and the *Andreas* poet composed about events set in the distant past, yet they used *gafol* or *gafolræden*, not *gombe*.¹⁵ The

¹³ *Beo* 11; *GenA* 1978.

¹⁴ In addition to the references in the following footnote, see *GuthB* 986 and *Mald* 33, 46.

¹⁵ *Jul* 529; *And* 296; it is worth noting that Cynewulf collocates *gafol* with *geárdagum* in *ChristII* 559.

restriction of *gombe* to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* lends clear support to Cronan's chronological hypothesis.

Like *gombe*, the simplex *fær* ("vessel") is found only in *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*.¹⁶ Synonymous words appear throughout the poetic corpus—including *bāt*, *cēol*, *cnear*, *flēot*, *flota*, *lid*, *naca*, and *scip*—therefore Cronan regards the restriction of *fær* to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* as strong evidence of a lexical connection between the two poems (2004: 28). Just as *subtriga* was evidently displaced by synonyms such as *nefa* and *brōðorsunu*, it is reasonable to think that *fær* was lost rather early amid the multitude of comparable words. Frank rejects this chronological explanation and argues instead that the restriction of *fær* is due to the particularized meaning of the word, which has hitherto gone unrecognized in dictionaries and glossaries. After observing that *fær* is used in reference to Noah's ark in *Genesis A* and in reference to Scyld Scefing's ship in *Beowulf*, Frank writes: "For some reason, *fær* seemed to two Anglo-Saxon poets the right word for a divinely propelled vessel" (2008: 8). The notion that *fær* is restricted because of this purported meaning is dubious: the poets of *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* vary the word with commonplace terms such as *cēol* and *scip*, which suggests that these poets did not regard *fær* as a semantically differentiated entity.¹⁷ But even if Frank's *ad hoc* redefinition of *fær* were admitted, and the word were taken to mean "divinely propelled vessel" rather than "vessel," this would hardly diminish the significance of its restriction to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A*. There are many references to divinely propelled vessels (typically arks) in later Old English texts, yet the word *fær* remains restricted to two archaic poems.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Beo* 33; *GenA* 1307, 1323, 1394(?), 1419, 1544.

¹⁷ *Scip*: *Beo* 35, *GenA* 1306, *GenA* 1417. *Cēol*: *Beo* 38.

¹⁸ See *DOE Corpus* search: "earc." It is worth noting that in *Andreas*, Christ himself propels a vessel, which is labeled a *cēol* (349). If *fær* were the precise term for a divinely propelled vessel, surely it would have been used in that context.

Of the four words restricted to *Beowulf* and *Maxims I*, *umbor* (“child”) is the clearest contender for early obsolescence. The simplex *umbor* occurs only in *Maxims I*, while the compound *umborwesende* (“being a child”) occurs only in *Beowulf*.¹⁹ Because synonymous words such as *cild*, *cniht*, and *bearn* are used throughout the extant corpus, Cronan treats *umbor* as strong evidence for a lexical connection between *Beowulf* and *Maxims I*. Like the thirteen other restricted simplexes, *umbor* would seem to belong to an archaic stratum of the lexicon lost before the composition of later works. Frank offers no alternative explanation for its restriction, which is not surprising, given the inconspicuous and inconsequential nature of this word.²⁰ It would be difficult to see in the use of *umbor* anything other than the straightforward deployment of a functional word that simply fell out of the language at a relatively early date.

The restriction of *þengel* (“lord”) to *Beowulf* and *Exodus* is significant, since synonymous words (*dryhten*, *frēa*, *hlāford*, *þēoden*, etc.) are used in virtually every long Old English poem.²¹ Because of the poetic status of the Old Icelandic cognate *þengill*, Cronan concludes that *þengel* “appears to be an old poetic word which was obsolete except for its use in the conservative diction of *Beowulf* and *Exodus*” (2004: 41). A similar explanation is given for the restriction of *missere* (“half-year”) to *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, and *Exodus*.²² This word, used in formulaic expressions for the passage of time, such as *fela missera* and *hund missera*, was evidently supplanted early by *gēar* and *winter*, which are used throughout the poetic corpus in parallel expressions (2004: 40). The probability of the early obsolescence of *missere* is considerable, since the existence of an Old Icelandic cognate (*missari*) and the formulaic use of the word indicate that

¹⁹ *Max I* 31; *Beo* 46. 1187.

²⁰ Frank (2008: 8) reiterates Cronan’s remarks (2004: 34–35) about *umbor* and adds nothing further.

²¹ *Beo* 1507; *Ex* 173.

²² *Beo* 153, 1498, 1769, 2620; *GenA* 1168, 1743, 2347; *Ex* 49.

it must have been part of the lexicon of prehistoric Old English, whereas its absence from all datable texts suggests that it had fallen out of the language by the ninth century. The restriction of *missere* to *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, and *Exodus* is another strong piece of evidence supporting the hypothesis that these poems preserve an archaic lexical stratum because they were composed at an early date.

Frank objects to Cronan's chronological interpretation of the restriction of *þengel* and *missere* by hypothesizing that the use of these words reflects the influence of tenth-century skaldic poetry (2008: 9). It is surprising to see the hypothesis of skaldic influence on these poems resurrected, since it has been repeatedly discredited and it involves a number of well-known improbabilities.²³ Chief among the reasons why skaldic influence is improbable is the fact that there is no linguistic rationale for regarding the words Frank deems "skaldic" to be late Scandinavian borrowings rather than common Germanic inheritances. As Matthew Townend wrote regarding *Beowulf*: "its 3,182 lines contain not a single clear loanword from Old Norse, and the proposed lexical parallels are almost certainly cognates and not loans or loan-translations" (2000: 357). Furthermore, although Old English and Old Norse were mutually intelligible to a limited degree, as Townend (2002) has demonstrated, it is not reasonable to imagine that Anglo-Saxons could comprehend skaldic poetry. That is rather like positing that a medieval Italian could comprehend the Latin poetry of Aldhelm at the speed of recitation. A limited degree of

²³ On the improbability of skaldic influence on *Beowulf*, see Fulk 1982: 343–345; Andersson 1983: 295–297; Harris 2007; Fulk 2014. The arguments of Hofmann (1957) for skaldic influence on *Genesis A* and *Exodus* were refuted in Irving 1959. Stanley 1969 also rejects the possibility of Scandinavian influence on *Exodus*. For a reliable account of linguistic interactions between speakers of Old English and Old Norse, see Townend 2002; and Kastovsky 1992: 320–336. Neither Townend nor Kastovsky nor any reputable linguist credits the notion that the influence of the Old Norse language or skaldic poetry is discernible in *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, or *Exodus*.

mutual intelligibility between languages hardly ensures that the most artificial and convoluted works composed in one language would be comprehensible to speakers of the other language.²⁴ An additional degree of improbability attends the hypothesis that *missere* is a late borrowing: the use of this word in formulaic expressions forces proponents of skaldic influence to believe that three poets independently chose to deploy a new word in identical verses. The formulaic status of *missere* confirms that this word had an ancient place in Germanic poetic tradition. For this reason and many others, the hypothesis of skaldic influence is untenable, and Cronan's interpretation of the data must be preferred.

Frank resorts to a different line of reasoning when attempting to explain the restriction of *dyhtig* ("strong") to *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* and the restriction of *heoru* ("sword") to *Beowulf* and *Maxims I*.²⁵ Cronan, for reasons similar to those propounded above in connection with the other simplexes, regards the restricted attestation of *dyhtig* and *heoru* as further evidence for the preservation of an archaic stratum of the lexicon in a set of poems composed at a relatively early date. Frank objects to his interpretation by arguing that *dyhtig* and *heoru* are not genuine signs of archaic composition, but rather are self-consciously archaizing gestures. In her view, *dyhtig* should be regarded as a "ye olde sign" and so should *heoru*, which was apparently selected over its numerous synonyms (*bil(l)*, *ecg*, *māce*, etc.) because it "evokes bedrock beginnings in a distant long-ago" (2008: 9–10). This line of reasoning, which for the sake of convenience might be labeled "the theory of conscious archaism," merits extended discussion in the present context, since it is one of the objections most frequently leveled at linguistic dating

²⁴ Ironically, Frank articulated this view in a book review: "although Opland expertly surveys the influence of Old Norse on Old English poetic traditions in the time of Athelstan, I remain unconvinced about the easy intelligibility of the skalds to their English audiences" (Frank 1982: 154). The remark is surprising, since unintelligibility would seem to obviate the possibility of lexical influence.

²⁵ *Dyhtig*: *Beo* 1287; *GenA* 1993. *Heoru*: *Beo* 1258, 1590, 2358; *Max I* 200.

studies. Because agnostic scholars tend to give some version of the theory of conscious archaism as a reason for not crediting linguistic argumentation, it remains necessary to demonstrate why that theory lacks explanatory power and reflects an inadequate understanding of the evidence.

The theory of conscious archaism might seem plausible at a theoretical level, but its implausibility becomes apparent when it moves from theoretical abstraction to concrete linguistic evidence. The theory generates gross improbabilities, for example, when it is deployed against the evidence for Kaluza's law in *Beowulf*. The poem carefully observes the law in sixty-two A2a verses like *goldwine gumena*, in which an etymologically short desinence is resolved, and forty-four D2 verses like *eald æscwiga*, in which an etymologically long desinence suspends resolution.²⁶ In 106 verses, the *Beowulf* poet observed distinctions of etymological length in twenty-five different desinences that became phonologically indistinct in Mercia by around 725.²⁷ This subtle regularity constitutes arguably the most compelling evidence for the early composition of *Beowulf*. Yet Frank, in a different paper, argued that the poem's adherence to Kaluza's law is not a genuine sign of archaic composition, but a conscious "ye olde sign" intended to evoke a bygone era (2007: 858–860). This application of the theory of conscious archaism fails, however, because there is no phonological reason why these verses should have sounded archaic to Anglo-Saxon ears. Resolution and its suspension were mundane features of Old English verse: the only distinguishing feature of Kaluza verses is that resolution is restricted to desinences that were short in Proto-Germanic (or shortened in prehistoric Old English). Unless poets and audiences consulted grammars of Proto-Germanic before a recitation of

²⁶ For a list of the verses in *Beowulf* adhering to Kaluza's law, see Bliss 1958: 27–30; and Fulk 1992: 160–162; the literature on Kaluza's law is reviewed in Neidorf and Pascual forthcoming [2015].

²⁷ See Fulk 1992: 381–392; and Fulk 2007: 321.

Beowulf, they would have no basis for associating Kaluza verses with deep antiquity. To believe that Kaluza's law is a conscious archaism, one must effectively believe that the *Beowulf* poet composed for an audience of Germanic philologists.

Theories of conscious archaism generally force their proponents to attribute to Anglo-Saxon poets an improbable degree of insight into the history of the English language. The attribution tends to be implicit, as above, but in the case of *heoru*, Frank explicitly compares the *Beowulf* poet and the *Maxims I* poet to John Milton, Seamus Heaney, and nineteenth-century philologists (2008: 10–11). Just as Milton chose to use the word *error* in its etymological sense (“wandering”), the poets behind *Beowulf* and *Maxims I* purportedly chose to use *heoru* in its etymological sense (“sword”) rather than in the generalized sense (“war, battle”) it later developed. Their preference for the word's etymological meaning allegedly reflects the desire of these poets to go “back to roots” and evoke an ancient era; as Frank notes, “Milton knew his Latin and Greek roots” (2008: 10). Yet is there any independent reason for us to believe that the *Beowulf* poet or the *Maxims I* poet possessed special insights into the etymology of poetic simplexes? The only evidence given for their purported etymologizing tendency is *heoru*. Frank's theory is thus entirely *ad hoc* and narrowly circular: it explains and finds support in no evidence besides the single word around which it was developed.

The *ad hoc* quality of the aforementioned argument is not surprising, since every iteration of the theory of conscious archaism is the product of *ad hoc* reasoning. The theory is in essence parasitic, because it can only be developed as an objection to a metrical or lexical dating argument already propounded. It is doubtful that any scholar would propose that a poem's adherence to Kaluza's law is a conscious archaism if another scholar had not previously argued that this adherence reflected a phonological regularity dating *Beowulf* to c. 700. The same holds true with regard to *dybtig*, *gombe*, and other words Frank considers to be conscious archaisms because

they appear in poems set in the distant past. Since the entire poem is set in the distant past, what independent method could be used for distinguishing words deployed as “ye olde signs” from words that are not? Was every word in *Beowulf* and *Genesis A* selected for its ability to evoke a bygone era? The parasitic nature of the theory of conscious archaism is clear from the fact that its methods cannot rationally be employed independent of efforts to critique linguistic dating scholarship. Marshaled in a study devoid of such an aim, Frank’s methods for identifying some phenomena, but not others, as conscious archaisms would appear to be as arbitrary and impressionistic as Sievers’s *Schallanalyse*.²⁸ No rational criteria can be extracted that enable one to distinguish conscious archaisms from regular words; the method thus belongs to divination rather than scholarship. The *ad hoc* origin of the theory of conscious archaism is made plain by its lack of reproducible methodology.

On the whole, there are two overarching reasons why Cronan’s interpretation of the restricted poetic simplexes must be preferred over Frank’s. The first is that Frank’s various alternative hypotheses uniformly fail to explain the restricted attestation of the words under consideration. The second is that Frank’s argumentation is the product of an *ad hoc* mode of reasoning, which is demonstrably inferior to Cronan’s holistic reasoning. Cronan developed a unitary hypothesis capable of explaining all of the data: the fourteen restricted simplexes belong to an archaic stratum of the lexicon preserved only in six poems composed at a relatively early date. The explanatory power of this hypothesis is elevated further by its ability

²⁸ *Schallanalyse* (“sound-analysis”) was an unscientific method for identifying interpolations developed by Eduard Sievers toward the end of his life. Sievers’s enthusiasm for *Schallanalyse* is generally regarded as an unfortunate byproduct of mental illness; it has no relationship to the *Fünffypensystem* for which the great philologist remains justly famous. For an account of *Schallanalyse* and the responses it generated, see Pope 1998: 185–189. Interestingly, Menner’s (1952) lexical study emerged as an effort to refute conclusions derived from *Schallanalyse* on the dating and authorship of *Genesis A*.

to accommodate a great deal of metrical and paleographical evidence beside the restricted simplexes.²⁹ Frank's several hypotheses, on the other hand, explain nothing beside the particular phenomena at which they are narrowly aimed. Disregarding Occam's razor, Frank discards a coherent hypothesis and replaces it with a multitude of incoherent hypotheses: we are to believe that one word is a late borrowing from skaldic verse, that another word is a "ye olde sign," that yet another word possesses a hitherto unrecognized meaning, etc. This is methodologically unsound reasoning, which evinces little real interest in ascertaining the most probable explanation of linguistic phenomena. Even if Frank's alternative hypotheses were individually plausible, it would be illogical to exchange a coherent hypothesis for a haphazard assemblage of hypotheses, especially when the former hypothesis is capable of explaining significantly more data than all of the others combined.

In sum, Frank's objections provide no rational basis for doubting Cronan's chronological hypothesis. It remains most reasonable to conclude that the fourteen aforementioned simplexes are restricted to *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I*, and *Widsið* because these poems preserve an archaic lexical stratum lost before the composition of later poetry and prose. The majority of the simplexes—*subtriga*, *gombe*, *fær*, *dyhtig*, *bresne*, *umbor*, *þengel*, and *missere*—are probably restricted because they ceased to be used in the spoken language and in poetic discourse at a relatively early date. The presence of synonymous words in texts composed throughout the Anglo-Saxon period makes obsolescence the most logical explanation for the restriction of these simplexes to poems judged to be archaic on the basis of independent metrical criteria. The other restricted simplexes Cronan discussed – *freme*, *eodor*, *beoru*, *wlenco*, *lufen*, and *wæfre*—are not as straightforward in their dating implications, for reasons too complex to explore

²⁹ See, for example, Fulk 1992; Fulk 2007b; Lapidge 2000; Doane 2013: 37–41; Neidorf 2013b.

here.³⁰ For example, *eodor*, *beoru*, and *wlenco* remained in use, but they underwent semantic shifts, and are found possessing their original (or poetic) meanings only in the corpus of archaic poetry. Obsolescence applies in these cases not to the words themselves, but to the meanings they possessed. These semantic archaisms reflect the variety of linguistic indications of chronological priority to be found in the earliest English poems.

2 THE ARCHAIC LEXICAL STRATUM

Cronan's study has demonstrated that lexical evidence corroborates the chronological conclusions independently drawn in metrical dating studies. Metrical criteria such as parasiting, contraction, and Kaluza's law provide a set of independent reasons for regarding *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, and *Exodus* as part of a corpus of archaic poetry composed early in the Anglo-Saxon period. The distribution of verses requiring archaic phonology for scansion adumbrates a relative chronology of Old English poetry wherein *Beowulf* and the Old Testament poems were composed prior to the Cynewulfian poems, which were composed prior to the Alfredian poems, which were composed prior to the poems datable to the tenth and eleventh centuries. If *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, and *Exodus* were genuinely composed prior to the majority of extant Old English texts, we might expect them to contain lexical indications of their chronological priority. That they do indeed contain such indications is powerful corroboration of the metrical dating criteria.

At present, the hypothesis that the corpus of archaic poetry preserves an archaic lexical stratum lost before the composition of later poetry and prose accommodates fourteen simplexes. The purpose of the remainder of this article is to examine the vocabulary of the earliest English poems and determine how many other restricted words are complementarily explained under the foregoing hypothesis. Does the archaic lexical stratum consist exclusively of

³⁰ For the discussion of these words, see Cronan 2004: 28–33, 42–49.

the fourteen words identified by Cronan? If a hypothesis formulated to explain one set of data were found to explain incidentally an array of other data, the probability that it is correct would be significantly strengthened. The present study focuses therefore on words that fell outside of the purview of Cronan's study, which sought to identify restricted poetic simplexes in order to establish a lexical connection between a set of poems. Because of this aim, Cronan necessarily excluded hapax legomena, compounds, and words that are attested in only one poem. Such exclusion was logical, since the interpretation of the restriction of these words involves a set of considerations that would not apply to restricted simplexes. For words attested in only one poem, the possibility that these words reflect the innovative tendencies of an idiosyncratic author is very real, whereas that possibility need not be entertained for words (such as *umbor*, *gombe*, etc.) attested in at least two poems.

The central question governing the interpretation of the ten restricted words to be discussed below is whether obsolescence or innovation is the more probable cause for the word's restricted attestation. To be sure, the restricted attestation of a given word is not inherently significant. *Teosol* ("die") is restricted to *Maxims I* and glossaries, but it would be foolish to advance a chronological explanation for the word's restriction, since the genuine cause for the restriction is plain enough: dice rarely appear in extant Old English texts.³¹ To regard a rare word as an indication of relatively early or late composition, a clear argument for obsolescence or innovation must be mounted. A fine example of an argument for lexical innovation can be found in Franz Dietrich's study of *hycgan* and *hopian*, in which he contended that the use of the verb *hopian* in *Judith* is a sign of the poem's late composition.³² Elsewhere in the poetic corpus, *hopian* is found exclusively in the *Meters of Boethius*, a work securely dated to the later Anglo-Saxon period. In earlier

³¹ *Max I* 183; ErfGl 1 998; CorpGl 2 18.84; EpGl 865.

³² See Dietrich 1853; cf. Amos 1980: 148–149.

Old English poetry and in other corpora of early Germanic poetry, the synonymous *hycgan* is preferred and *hopian* seems to have been either unknown to or consciously avoided by traditional poets. The restricted attestation of *hopian* suggests that its presence in *Judith* reflects a late innovation licensed by change in the poetic tradition. This interpretation of the data finds support in the metrical criteria, such as parasiting and contraction, which independently establish the probability that *Judith* is a relatively late poem.

Unless it is accompanied by a detailed argument for obsolescence or innovation, the observation that a word is restricted to one or two texts is meaningless and bound to generate erroneous conclusions. For example, Frank has observed that there are certain lexical affinities linking *Beowulf*, *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, and *Blickling Homily 16* (2008: 11–13).³³ She regards the restriction of *nicor* (“sea-monster”) to these three texts as a significant lexical connection between them (2008: 12).³⁴ Because Frank presumes that the prose texts are tenth-century compositions, she sees this lexical connection as evidence favoring a later dating of *Beowulf*. Yet in the case of *nicor*, no argument for innovation or obsolescence is made, nor could one reasonably be made: it cannot be imagined that *nicor* supplanted or was supplanted by another word, since references to sea-monsters are rare and no plausible synonym for *nicor* exists. But if the lexical connection between *Beowulf*, *Alexander*, and *Blickling 16* genuinely demanded a chronological explanation, it would be the opposite of what Frank proposed. The heavily Mercian language of *Alexander* and *Blickling 16* differs markedly from prose texts known to have been composed during the tenth

³³ Her evidence derives from Orchard 2003: 25–39, but it should be noted that Orchard attached no chronological significance to these lexical affinities.

³⁴ *Nicor*, in the sense of ‘sea-monster,’ is in fact the only lexeme restricted to these three texts. The other lexical affinities between them pertain merely to the collocation of words, such as *fen ond fæsten*, whose restriction cannot be imagined to establish a meaningful chronological connection.

century, which are uniformly composed in the West Saxon literary language, regardless of locale (see Fulk 2012). There are no reasons for presuming *Alexander* and *Blickling 16* to be late compositions, but there are strong reasons for thinking that their composition antedated the tenth century.³⁵ If the restriction of *nicor* to these three texts means anything, it would be that Mercians feared sea-monsters most intensely during the eighth and ninth centuries; but the restriction is more likely due to the rarity of sea-monsters than to chronological proximity.

Cronan's analysis of *subtriga* furnishes a sound model for the obsolescence argument. At one end, the presence of *subtriga* in seventh-century glosses establishes that this word had a place in the English language during the prehistoric period. Conversely, the absence of *subtriga* from prose of all periods suggests that this word fell out of use before the ninth century. The regular deployment in extant texts of synonymous words, such as *nefa* and *brōðorsunu*, indicates that later authors had ample opportunities to use *subtriga*. Obsolescence consequently emerges as the most logical explanation for the restriction of *subtriga* to *Genesis A*, archaic glosses, and a fossilized compound in *Beowulf* and *Widsið*. Furthermore, the higher the frequency of the synonyms' attestation, the higher the probability of obsolescence becomes. If seventy different authors needed a word for "brother's son" and consistently chose *nefa* or *brōðorsunu* rather than *subtriga*, the probability that *subtriga* was unknown to them is considerable. To propose that *subtriga* persisted into the later Anglo-Saxon period, one would have to credit an improbable coincidence: that every time *subtriga* could have been used, authors chose instead to use *nefa* or *brōðorsunu*, and hundreds of independent decisions accidentally resulted in a

³⁵ Reasons for dating *Alexander* prior to the tenth century are given in Bately 1988: 133, n. 121. The dating of anonymous, Mercian prose is explored most fully in Fulk 2010.

perfect distribution. While it is possible that *subtriga* remained in the language, probability is on the side of early obsolescence.

The first of the ten restricted words presented here for consideration is *wōcor* (“progeny, increase”), which occurs exclusively in *Genesis A*. The restriction of this word to a single poem naturally raises the question of obsolescence versus innovation. Is the word restricted to an early poem because it became obsolete or to a late poem because the poet invented it? Several considerations point decisively toward obsolescence. One is that the poet used *wōcor* four times: this suggests that the word was readily comprehensible and was not spontaneously generated.³⁶ More importantly, the existence of exact cognates in several Germanic languages confirms that *wōcor* is a word of common Germanic inheritance, which must have been present in the lexicon of prehistoric Old English. The absence of *wōcor* in later poetry and prose is significant, since these texts contain a wide variety of synonymous words, such as *cnōsl*, *gecynd*, *sēd*, *tēam*, *tūdor*, and *wæstm*.³⁷ Later authors had ample opportunity to use *wōcor*, yet the only author to use this word was the *Genesis A* poet, who did so four times. Assessing this distribution, Robert J. Menner observed: “Surely the most natural explanation is that *wōcor*, paralleled as it is in Gothic *wōkrs*, OFris. *wōker*, and OHG *wuohbar*, is an old word used by an early poet, a word that appears nowhere else in Old English because it had become obsolete” (1952: 288). The restriction of *wōcor* to *Genesis A* is readily explained under the hypothesis that this poem preserves words belonging to an archaic lexical stratum.

Similar to *wōcor* is the hapax legomenon *rēofan* (“break”), which occurs only in *Exodus* and only in its past participial form, in the verse *randbyrig wæron rofene*, “ramparts were broken” (464). The

³⁶ *GenA* 1312, 1342, 1409, 1490.

³⁷ Consultation of the *Thesaurus of Old English* (Roberts & Kay 1995) informs judgments concerning synonyms throughout this study. Consultation of Holthausen 1934 and Bammesberger 1979 informs comments about Germanic cognates.

existence of an Old Icelandic cognate *rjúfa* and the common use of the related verb *berēofan* (“deprive”) in Old English poetry indicate that *rēofan* is an ancient Germanic word, not an innovation of the *Exodus* poet. It is noteworthy that *berēofan*, like *rēofan*, is also attested exclusively in its past participial form (*berofen*) in formulaic verses such as *golde* (*since, gæste*) *berofen*.³⁸ This significant restriction led Edward B. Irving, Jr. to posit: “It seems probable that both *rēofan* and *berēofan* fell out of use early except in the one special formula” (1959: 8). The attestation of many synonyms for *rēofan*, including *brecan*, *rendan*, *slitan*, and *teran*, which are used hundreds of times in later texts, demonstrates that later authors could easily have used this word if it were available to them. Early obsolescence for *rēofan* is thus exceedingly probable, and one important cause for this might have been the widespread use of the weak verb (*a-*, *be-*) *rēafian* (plunder). The phonological similarity between these two verbs with similar meanings could have accelerated the process of obsolescence.³⁹ Regardless of the cause, the lifespan of *rēofan* plainly did not extend into the later Anglo-Saxon period. *Rēofan* is attested only in *Exodus* because *Exodus* is one of a handful of poems that preserves archaic vocabulary lost at an early date.

The distribution of *ōretta* (“warrior”) in the poetic corpus suggests that this word became obsolete relatively early, though perhaps not as early as *wōcor* and *rēofan*. *Ōretta* is attested twice in *Beowulf*, four times in *Guthlac A*, and two times in *Andreas*.⁴⁰ *Guthlac A* is not one of the poems discussed by Cronan, but there are strong reasons for including it in the corpus of archaic poetry: the narrator claims that Guthlac’s death (in 714) was a recent event and the poem’s archaic metrical features corroborate this claim (see Fulk 1992: 399–400). Metrical criteria locate the composition of *Andreas*, on the other hand, in the Cynewulfian period—that is,

³⁸ See *DOE Corpus* search: “berofen.”

³⁹ This possibility is recommended in Irving 1959: 8.

⁴⁰ *Beo* 1532, 2538; *GuthA* 176, 344, 401, 569; *And* 879, 983.

later than the archaic poems but prior to the reign of Alfred. To judge from the restriction of the Old High German cognate *urhëtto* to the *Hildebrandslied*, *ōretta* must have been an ancient word of Germanic poetic tradition, long obsolete in the colloquial language and on its way toward obsolescence in the poetry as well (see Green 1998: 73–74). Because *ōretta* possesses dozens of synonyms, which appear in virtually every Old English poem, it is probable that obsolescence is the cause of its restriction to two archaic poems and one Cynewulfian poem. The appearance of *ōretta* in *Andreas* might even be a consequence of the long-hypothesized influence that *Beowulf* exerted on *Andreas* (see Riedinger 1993). *Ōretta* therefore appears to have fallen out of poetic discourse during the ninth century, if not before.

The same explanation can be posited for the restriction of *friclan* (“desire”), which is attested only in *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, and *Fates of the Apostles*.⁴¹ Because *Fates* is one of the signed works of Cynewulf, the distribution of *friclan* mirrors that of *ōretta*: it is restricted to two archaic poems plus one Cynewulfian poem. The presence of *friclan* in three poems confirms that it cannot be an innovation, but must have been a part of the inherited poetic vocabulary. Because synonymous verbs—*giernan*, *lystan*, *willian*, *wilnian*—occur hundreds of times in later poetry and prose, obsolescence appears to be the probable cause for the restriction of *friclan* to three pre-Alfredian poems. Like *ōretta*, *friclan* was probably a poetic word that fell out of use during the ninth century.

The list of recognized archaisms in the language of *Beowulf* is now extensive, yet several obsolete words might merit a place on the list, including *hōs* (troop), one of the poem’s hapax legomena.⁴² *Hōs* is securely attested only in *Beowulf*, though it might also

⁴¹ *Beo* 2554; *GenA* 1841; *Fates* 107. The restriction of *friclan* is also noted in Menner 1952: 286–287. See DOE s.v. *friclan*.

⁴² Archaic linguistic features in *Beowulf* are reviewed in Fulk 2007a; Fulk et al. 2008: clviii–ix, clxv–vii; and Fulk 2014.

appear on the Franks Casket, depending on how the runes are construed.⁴³ Attestation on the Franks Casket would ensure the word's presence in the lexicon of the earliest Old English, but the antiquity of *hōs* is nevertheless confirmed by the existence of *hansa*, a Gothic and Old High German cognate. Wulfila's use of *hansa* as the equivalent of *σπεῖρα* and *πλήθος* (Lat. *cohors* and *multitudo*) suggests that *hōs* possessed an exceptionally large number of words with comparable meanings in Old English, including *cist*, *corþer*, *gedryht*, *gefērscipe*, *flocc*, *hēap*, *menigu*, *gemong*, *weorod*, and *teoh*.⁴⁴ The considerable frequency with which these synonyms appear in texts throughout the Anglo-Saxon period renders it probable that the restriction of *hōs* to *Beowulf* is a consequence of early obsolescence. One possible cause for this word's demise might be discernible in the context of its appearance in *Beowulf*. *Hōs* is used in reference to Wealhþeo's female retinue, her *mægþa hōs*, "troop of ladies" (924). This passage might hint at a process of semantic pejoration, which domesticated an otherwise standard word for a troop or a host. Whatever the cause for its demise, *hōs* belongs to the archaic lexical stratum preserved only in the earliest English poetry. The nasal consonant in Middle English *hanse* indicates that it does not derive from *hōs*, but rather reflects the borrowing of one of its continental cognates.⁴⁵

Fengel ("ruler"), like *hōs*, is another word that would have been useful to most Old English poets, yet it is attested only in *Beowulf*. The absence of exact Germanic cognates creates the possibility that this word is restricted because it is a neologism, but several considerations tell against that possibility. One is that *fengel* is used four times in *Beowulf*, which suggests that it was not spontaneously generated. Another is that this word appears to have been embedded

⁴³ *Beo* 924; RuneAuzon 5? For further discussion, see Bammesberger 1979: 83–84.

⁴⁴ On the Gothic cognate, see Feist 1939: s.v. *hansa*.

⁴⁵ See MED s.v. *hanse*, where the word is said to be a borrowing from Old French *hanse*, which must be of Germanic (presumably Frankish) origin.

in the formula *snottra fengel* (“wise ruler”), used twice in reference to Hrothgar, as is the similar *wīsa fengel*.⁴⁶ The repeated association of *fengel* with adjectives denoting wisdom indicates that the word had acquired certain connotations in poetic tradition. Obsolescence is therefore the more probable cause for the restriction of *fengel* to *Beowulf*. One word to consider alongside *fengel* is the hapax legomenon *strengel* “ruler” (3115) which is also restricted to *Beowulf* despite its obvious utility. Because *strengel* occurs only once in *Beowulf* and has no exact cognates, the case for its obsolescence is weaker. Yet in both *fengel* and *strengel*, the root vowel has undergone front mutation, a process that Luick dates to first half of the sixth century (1964: §291). While not outside the realm of possibility, it is improbable that a neologism should exhibit conformity to such an ancient sound change. *Fengel* and *strengel* appear to be inherited poeticisms that are restricted to *Beowulf* because they were lost from the poetic vocabulary at a relatively early date.

Gædeling (“kinsman, companion”) is not unique to *Beowulf*, but its distribution suggests that it too belongs to the archaic lexical stratum preserved in the earliest English poetry. In the corpus of recorded Old English, *gædeling* is restricted to *Beowulf*, *Daniel*, and the eighth-century Corpus Glossary, where it is used to gloss *fratuelis* (“nephew”) and *patruelis* (“cousin”).⁴⁷ The existence of an array of cognates, such as Gothic *gadiliggs* (“cousin”), confirms that *gædeling* was an ancient Germanic kinship term. The reason for the restriction of *gædeling* to three archaic contexts, however, is that it did not remain a straightforward kinship term in English: *gædeling* underwent semantic pejoration, as the regular use of the word in Middle English to mean “vagabond” indicates.⁴⁸ *Gædeling* must have lost the meaning “kinsman” as the meaning “companion”

⁴⁶ *Snottra fengel*: *Beo* 1475, 2156; *wīsa fengel*: *Beo* 1400; *bringa fengel*: *Beo* 2345. See DOE s.v. *fengel*.

⁴⁷ *Beo* 2617, 2949; *Dan* 420; CorpGl 2 6.318, 14.104. See DOE s.v. *gædeling*.

⁴⁸ See MED s.v. *gadeling*, sense (b); see also OED s.v. *gadling*, senses 2 and 3.

began to spread, and it is from the latter that the sense “vagabond, rascal, fellow” must have developed. To judge from the frequency with which kinship terms appear in Old English, *gædeling* probably stopped being a straightforward term for “kinsman” rather early. The standard use of the *mæg* and *gesibb* might have rendered the more ambiguous *gædeling* a superfluous term for consanguinity. If the process of pejoration revealed in Middle English began to take place much earlier, that would explain why *gædeling* is not used in later Old English poetry and prose, but is found only in *Beowulf*, *Daniel*, and the Corpus Glossary.

Another word in *Beowulf* probably indicative of chronological priority is *helrune* “demon” (163). Since this word is a compound, the possibility of poetic innovation looms large, but there are clear signs that the word is not a neologism coined by the *Beowulf* poet. One unambiguous sign of the antiquity of *helrune* is the existence of the Gothic cognate *haljarunae*, which is recorded in Jordanes’s *Getica*.⁴⁹ Outside of *Beowulf*, *helrune* is attested in five Aldhelmian glosses, all of which were generated during the eighth century. *Helrune* is consistently used to gloss *phitonissa* (“witch”) and *divinatrix* (“prophetess”), and in two of the glosses in which it appears, *wicca* (“witch”) is listed as a synonym beside *helrune*.⁵⁰ The semantic parity of these two words—supported not only by the glosses, but also by the *Getica*, where the *haljarunae* are witches—lends chronological significance to the fact that *helrune* is preserved only in *Beowulf* and in archaic glosses. The glossarial evidence suggests that *helrune* and *wicca* were standard, competing terms for “witch” during the eighth century. *Helrune* evidently

⁴⁹ See Wiersma 1961: 77–83; Chadwick 1959: 174–175; on the form *haljarunae*, see Fulk et al. 2008: 126.

⁵⁰ AldV 7.1 106; AldV 9 107; AldV 10 60; AldV 1 1902 (*belbrūnan*, *wiccan*); AldV 13.1 1926 (*belbrūnan*, *wiccan*). On the dating of these glosses, see Chadwick 1959: 175. She writes: “the ultimate relationship of the majority of them to glosses dating from not later than the eighth century on the works of Aldhelm is beyond doubt.”

suffered an early death, while *wicca* flourished and went on to be attested twenty-eight times in the corpus of Old English.⁵¹ *Wiccans* are common in the writings of Ælfric and Wulfstan, for example, where they are found alongside *wælcyrrian* (“valkyries”) and other demonic forces. The eighth-century circulation and apparent expiration of *helrūne* is one additional sign, minor but not negligible, that the earliest English poems preserve an array of obsolete words indicative of their chronological priority.

Widsið merited a place in Cronan’s corpus of archaic poetry because it is one of the three poems in which *subtriga* appears (in the dvandva *subtorfedren*). *Widsið* is typically omitted from metrical dating studies on account of its brevity, yet it has traditionally been considered one of the oldest poems in English, and there are strong reasons for regarding it as such (see Neidorf 2013c). Closer examination of the vocabulary of *Widsið* reveals that it contains two other items that belong to the archaic lexical stratum preserved in the earliest poetry. *Rōmwealh* (“Roman”), spelt with archaic *Rūm* for *Rōm*, is attested solely in *Widsið*, a gloss, and possibly the Franks Casket.⁵² Early obsolescence is the probable cause for the restriction of this ethnonym, since the corpus of recorded Old English contains hundreds of references to Romans. In texts from the ninth and tenth centuries, these Romans are regularly labeled *Rōmāne* or *Rōmware*—sometimes *Eotolware* or *Lædenware*—but are never labeled *Rōmwēalas*. Because of the considerable frequency

⁵¹ See *DOE Corpus* search: “wicca.”

⁵² *Wid* 69; *DurRitGlAbbrev* C2 189.7a; *RuneAuzon* 3. The names *Romulus* and *Remus* are rendered *Romwalus* and *Reumwalus* on the *Franks Casket*; it is possible that these spellings contain a punning or folk-etymological reference to *Rōmwealh*, but the similarity could be accidental. The gloss *reht Rōmwāla* (for *ius quirinum*) occurs in the tenth-century gloss on the Durham Ritual, but the vocabulary of this gloss probably derives from an archaic source; see Ross 1970. Elliott and Ross 1972 posit that Aldred relied elsewhere on archaic vernacular sources, including Bede’s translation of the Gospel of St. John. On the archaic spelling of *Rūm* for *Rōm*, see Fulk and Cain 2013: 216.

with which these synonyms are attested, the restriction of *Rōmwealh* is a probable sign that this word fell out of use.

Of greater significance than *Rōmwealh*, however, is the semantic archaism evident in the simplex *wealh*, which in *Widsið* possesses the specific meaning “Roman.” The poet affirms that Caesar wields the *Wāla rīce* (78), in other words, the Roman Empire. This usage is striking, since the other reflexes of Proto-Germanic **walbaz* indicate that *wealh* must have been a standard term for “Roman” in prehistoric Old English. In Old High German, for example, the cognate *uualha* is regularly used to gloss *Romani*, presumably because the continental Germanic peoples regarded the Romans as their principal foreigners (see Weisgerber 1953: 178–188). After the migration to Britain, the new environment for the English language led *wealh* to be used differently: the word underwent a semantic shift and came primarily to mean “Celt” or “slave.”⁵³ As early as the laws of Ine, issued in 694, *wealh* can be seen to possess precisely these meanings.⁵⁴ *Wealh* must have become an unacceptable term for “Roman” at an early date, since references to Romans in Old English literature are manifold, yet they are labeled *wēalas* only in *Widsið*. Obviously, authors in the ninth and tenth centuries could not refer to Romans as *wēalas*, since this would imply a Celtic or servile quality. The composition of *Widsið* must have antedated the completion of a semantic shift already discernible at the end of the seventh century. The obsolete meaning of *wealh* in *Widsið* lends powerful support to the hypothesis that the earliest English poems contain lexical indications of their chronological priority.

3 CONCLUSION

Cronan identified fourteen poetic simplexes whose restricted attestation establishes a lexical connection between *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I*, and *Widsið*. He explained the

⁵³ See Pelteret 1995: 43; and Faull 1975.

⁵⁴ See, *inter alia*, LawIne 23.3, 24.2, 33, 74.

connection by hypothesizing that these six poems were composed during the eighth century and therefore preserve words and meanings that became obsolete before the composition of later poetry and prose. The present study has demonstrated that this hypothesis satisfactorily explains considerably more lexical data than has been realized. The ability of a hypothesis to explain a wide array of phenomena in addition to the phenomena it was originally formulated to explain is a firm indication that it is correct. The corpus of archaic poetry preserves an archaic lexical stratum, which consists not only of Cronan's fourteen simplexes, but also of the ten additional words I have identified and analyzed above. Viewed in isolation, an individual word generally cannot yield decisive dating implications. Examined in the light of Cronan's hypothesis, however, an individual word can elevate its probability on an incremental basis. The addition or subtraction of a few words would not significantly change the picture. The preservation of twenty-four lexical archaisms in poems independently judged to be the earliest on the basis of metrical dating criteria invariably validates the conclusions drawn in metrical studies. The relative chronology appears to be correct: *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, and *Exodus* (among others) contain numerous lexical indications that they were composed before the Cynewulfian, Alfredian, and tenth-century poems.

The lexical evidence, like the metrical evidence, pertains both to relative and absolute dating. In relative terms, the preservation of the archaic lexical stratum broadly locates the composition of the corpus of archaic poetry in a period prior to the composition of later poetry and prose. The earliest poems are the only texts (besides glosses) to preserve words such as *wōcor*, *rēofan*, *hōs*, *fengel*, *helrūne*, and *Rōmwealh* because their composition antedated the obsolescence of these words. The distribution of *ōretta* and *friclan* also bears on relative dating: each of these words is restricted to two archaic poems and one Cynewulfian poem, which probably means that they fell out of use during or shortly after the Cynewulfian

period. The restricted simplexes of Cronan's study likewise possess relative dating implications. On the one hand, the preservation of obsolete words such as *missere*, *umbor*, *gombe*, and *þengel*, suggests that the corpus of archaic poetry was composed prior to their obsolescence, which appears to have taken place by the time of Cynewulf. On the other hand, the restriction of several simplexes to two poems—e.g., the restriction of four simplexes to *Beowulf* and *Maxims I*—suggests that the dates of composition for these poems are relatively similar. Because of the quantity of poetry and prose securely dated to the ninth century and later, the broad implication inherent in the lexical and metrical evidence for relative dating is that the corpus of archaic poetry—*Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Maxims I*, and *Widsiþ*—was composed prior to the ninth century.

There are now, however, many firm reasons for anchoring the composition of the earliest English poems in a period extending from the final decades of the seventh century to the middle of the eighth century. The regular observation of etymological length distinctions in *Beowulf* renders it probable that this poem was composed before 725.⁵⁵ The semantic archaism of *wealh* in *Widsiþ* demands a date of composition close to the year 700. The restriction of *subtriga* anchors the composition of *Beowulf*, *Widsiþ*, and *Genesis A* close in time to the period of the Theodorean glossators, who compiled glosses at the end of the seventh century. The restriction of *gædeling* likewise ties *Beowulf* and *Daniel* to the language of the earliest glossaries. Rafael J. Pascual has offered further evidence for this connection by demonstrating that the semantics of *scucca* and *þyrs* in *Beowulf* deviates considerably from ninth- and tenth-century usage, but conforms to the usage of eighth-century glossaries.⁵⁶ Linguistic dating argumentation received powerful independent

⁵⁵ See Fulk 1992: 381–392; Neidorf and Pascual forthcoming [2015].

⁵⁶ See Pascual 2014; other semantic archaisms in *Beowulf* are discussed in Robinson 1985: 55–57; Shippey 1993: 173–175; Fulk et al. 2008: clii.

corroboration, moreover, when Michael Lapidge argued on the basis of transliteration errors that *Beowulf* had been committed to parchment prior to 750.⁵⁷ A. N. Doane, borrowing Lapidge's methodology, has propounded a similar argument for an eighth-century archetype of *Genesis A* (2013: 37–41).⁵⁸ It cannot be an accident that so many independent forms of evidence align in dating these poems to a relatively narrow period of time, c. 675–750.

Because of the improbability that metrical, lexical, and text-critical indicators of chronology should each be in error, the probabilistic value of the chronological hypotheses they support approximates virtual certainty. Excessive precision is obviously not warranted; the evidence cannot enable poems to be dated to a particular year or decade. Yet the evidence is not so malleable as to license the belief that every date of composition proposed for *Beowulf* or *Daniel* is equally probable. The later that these poems are dated, the higher the degree of improbability becomes. For example, believing that the composition of *Widsið* or *Genesis A* could have been contemporary with Alfredian or tenth-century works generates several gross improbabilities: one being that the *Widsið* poet used the word *wealh* in a manner incomprehensible to an Alfredian audience; another being that the *Genesis A* poet composed exponentially more verses exhibiting non-contraction or non-parasiting than tenth-century poets.⁵⁹ To believe that the corpus of archaic poetry was composed in the tenth century, one must believe that six poets shared access to various words that were entirely unknown to their supposed contemporaries, but were known to glossators during the seventh and eighth centuries.

⁵⁷ See Lapidge 2000; his argument builds upon Gerritsen 1989 and Clemons 1995: 32–34. It is validated in Clark 2009 and Neidorf 2013b.

⁵⁸ Another reason for anchoring the composition of *Genesis A* close in time to *Beowulf* is the peculiar usage of *þā* in these two poems; see Fulk 2007c.

⁵⁹ For the disparity between *Genesis A* and late poetry in terms of non-contraction and non-parasiting, see the tabulations in Fulk 1992: 83, 103.

Statements about the inability of Old English poems to be dated to a period narrower than three centuries—typically uttered with regard to *Beowulf*—reflect deficient critical reasoning or inadequate understanding of the philological evidence.

To conclude, it may be fruitful to take stock of the relative chronology of Old English poetry as it presently stands. The distribution of verses requiring archaic phonology for scansion, which has been explored most thoroughly in Fulk's *A History of Old English Meter*, carves the poetic corpus into at least four distinct periods: (1) the archaic period; (2) the Cynewulfian period; (3) the Alfredian period; and (4) the late period. Poems belonging to the archaic period exhibit the highest incidence and greatest variety of metrical archaisms. Cynewulfian poetry—the signed works of Cynewulf and metrically similar poems—is less conservative than archaic poetry, but more conservative than poetry dating to the reign of Alfred. Verses requiring archaic phonology for scansion rarely occur in poetry composed during or after the tenth century. In addition to containing dramatically fewer metrical archaisms, the poems of late authorship exhibit various innovations conditioned by linguistic developments, which are not to be found in archaic or Cynewulfian poetry.⁶⁰ The consistent distribution of linguistic archaisms and innovations indicates that the relative chronology must be broadly correct. Many chronological variables independently confirm its predictions. For example: the adherence to Kaluza's law in *Beowulf* dates this poem prior to 725, whereas the spelling of Cynewulf's name situates his poetry after 750; the author of the metrically archaic *Guthlac A* claims to have been a contemporary of St. Guthlac, whereas the author of *Guthlac B*, a Cynewulfian poem, makes no such claim.⁶¹ This is not coincidental.

⁶⁰ See Fulk 1992: 251–268; see also Bredehoft 2014.

⁶¹ See Fulk 1992: 351–368, 381–392, 399–402; see also Roberts 1971.

The corpus of archaic poetry, encompassing works probably composed at various dates between roughly 675 and 750, consists chiefly of *Beowulf*, *Genesis A*, *Daniel*, *Exodus*, *Guthlac A*, and *Christ III*.⁶² These poems are of sufficient length for metrical criteria, buttressed by other evidence, to provide conclusive indications of early composition. Lexical evidence attaches *Widsið* and *Maxims I* to the archaic corpus. Evidence for the circulation and cessation of Germanic legend in England renders it probable that *Waldere*, *Deor*, *Finnsburh*, and *Wulf and Eadwacer* (like *Beowulf* and *Widsið*) are relatively early poems.⁶³ Metrical criteria suggest that the *Exeter Book Riddles* are predominantly of eighth-century origin (see Fulk 1992: 404–410). The early composition of at least some of the *Riddles* is supported by the preservation of the (linguistically) eighth-century *Leiden Riddle* in a ninth-century manuscript (see Smith 1978: 19–37). Other poems belonging to the corpus of archaic poetry on account of their preservation in archaic contexts include *Cædmon's Hymn*, *Bede's Death Song*, *A Proverb from Winfrid's Time*, *The Franks Casket*, and *The Dream of the Rood* (see Shippey 1993).

The corpus of Cynewulfian poetry consists first of the signed works of Cynewulf: *Juliana*, *Elene*, *Christ II*, and *Fates of the Apostles*. Metrical criteria locate the composition of *Andreas*, *Guthlac B*, and possibly *The Phoenix* in the Cynewulfian period, which encompasses works probably composed at various dates between roughly 775 and 850 (see Fulk 1992: 348–368, 400–404). It is reasonable to set a *terminus* for the Cynewulfian period at around 850, since a considerable span of time is needed to account for the drastic loss of metrical archaisms evident in the Alfredian *Meters of Boethius*, composed in 897. Other poems composed during or after the reign of King Alfred include the *Preface* and

⁶² On *Christ III*, see Fulk 1992: 397–399.

⁶³ For a survey of this evidence, see Neidorf 2014; see also Chadwick 1912: 42–66; Wormald 2006; Neidorf 2013a; and Shippey 2014.

Epilogue to the Pastoral Care, Judith, Metrical Psalms of The Paris Psalter, Judgment Day II, Battle of Brunanburh, Capture of the Five Boroughs, Coronation of Edgar, Battle of Maldon, Death of Edward, and Durham. Further philological research, building upon the considerable foundations of known lexical and metrical evidence for relative chronology, will surely identify additional poems as relatively early or late.

The discipline of Old English studies, as it is presently conducted, exhibits selective adherence to probability. In scholarship on *Genesis A* and *Judith*, linguistic dating criteria are tacitly lent credence on a regular basis. *Genesis A* is routinely regarded as a relatively early poem, whereas *Judith* is ubiquitously presumed to be a relatively late poem. The only decisive evidence for the dating of either poem, however, is metrical and lexical evidence.⁶⁴ It is surprising, then, that so much literary scholarship on *Beowulf* should proceed from the assumption that this poem cannot be relatively dated. The uncertainty surrounding the dating of *Beowulf* should not be imagined to reflect uncertainties in linguistic dating scholarship. To the contrary, there is much firmer linguistic evidence for the relative and absolute dating of *Beowulf* than there is for *Genesis A* or *Judith*. If scholars regard *Judith* as a late poem on account of its lexical innovations, its violation of Kaluza's law, and its dearth of verses requiring non-contraction or non-parasiting for scansion (*inter alia*), then consistency would demand that *Beowulf* be regarded as an early poem for the opposite reasons. There can be no principled basis for the varying degrees of credence granted to linguistic dating criteria in the scholarship on *Genesis A*, *Judith*, and *Beowulf*.

The controversy over the dating of *Beowulf* is a product not of ambiguous linguistic evidence, but of the tendency of literary scholars to ignore linguistic evidence and frame the question of dating in ambiguous terms not conducive to rational debate.

⁶⁴ For *Genesis A*, see Doane 2013: 51–55; for *Judith*, see Griffith 1997: 44–47.

When conceptualized as a purely non-linguistic issue, the dating of *Beowulf* appears rather like an amateurish guessing game, incapable of principled resolution, as in the following remark (Earl 1994: 17):

Does *Beowulf* reflect the conversion, express the Golden Age of Bede, pay tribute to Offa or Wiglaf of Mercia, legitimize the West Saxon royal line, conciliate the Danish settlement, respond heroically to the Vikings, or praise the Anglo-Danish dynasty of Cnut?

Framed in these nebulous terms, the question of dating naturally elicits an agnostic response, since no decisive criteria can be employed to render the competing hypotheses more or less probable. Non-linguistic considerations can play an important role in the dating of a text, but in the case of *Beowulf*, linguistic evidence provides by far the firmest indications of date. One sign of the unambiguous nature of this evidence is that there has never been a controversy about the dating of *Beowulf* in linguistic scholarship.⁶⁵ The notion that *Beowulf* could be a late poem has never appeared credible to linguists; only literary scholars unwilling or unable to comprehend linguistic argumentation have taken the hypothesis of late composition seriously. As research into the relative chronology of Old English poetry advances, disregard for linguistic evidence will prove increasingly perilous. Treating early poems as if they were late, or datable poems as if they were undatable, is a recipe for impeding knowledge and generating improbable claims. Rationally crediting the linguistic evidence for the relative chronology, on the

⁶⁵ Fulk has observed that linguists uniformly regard *Beowulf* as a specimen of archaic Old English in diachronic studies; see the references compiled in 2007a: 278, fn. 2. Fulk concludes from his survey of linguistic archaisms in *Beowulf* that “the data presented here suggest that linguists are largely justified in ignoring the debate among literary scholars about the poem’s date” (2007a: 278).

other hand, is bound to yield important insights into the history of Old English literature.⁶⁶

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⁶⁶ The prospects are illustrated, for example, in Shippey 1993; Wright 1996; Orchard 2007; Frantzen 2014.

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