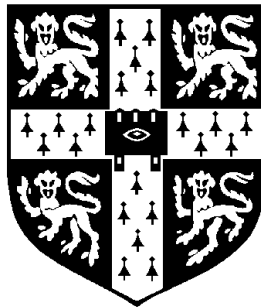


E. C. QUIGGIN MEMORIAL LECTURES 17

MATTHEW TOWNEND

**Antiquity of Diction in Old English and
Old Norse Poetry**



DEPARTMENT OF ANGLO-SAXON, NORSE AND CELTIC

UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

Edmund Crosby Quiggin (1875-1920) was the first teacher of Celtic in the University of Cambridge, as well as being a Germanist. His extraordinarily comprehensive vision of Celtic studies offered an integrated approach to the subject: his combination of philological, literary, and historical approaches paralleled those which his older contemporary, H. M. Chadwick, had already demonstrated in his studies of Anglo-Saxon England and which the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic continues to seek to emulate. The Department has wished to commemorate Dr Quiggin's contribution by establishing in his name, and with the support of his family, an annual lecture and a series of pamphlets. The focus initially was on the sources for Mediaeval Gaelic History. Since 2006 the Quiggin Memorial Lecture is on any aspect of Celtic and/or Germanic textual culture taught in the Department.

Antiquity of Diction in Old English and Old Norse Poetry

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As members of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic hardly need telling, as soon as one starts to gain a competence in Old English and Old Norse, and to read texts in the two languages side-by-side, on the same syllabus, it is impossible not to perceive many parallels between the two languages, not least in terms of vocabulary. There are, of course, two possible ways to explain these linguistic parallels between Old English and Old Norse. One is in terms of contact and influence during the Viking Age — a subject which has greatly occupied a number of researchers in the last decade or two, not least Richard Dance and Sara Pons-Sanz, as well as myself.¹ So, to give a couple of obvious examples, the Old English word *lagu* ‘law’ is indubitably a borrowing from Old Norse, while the Norse word *bjalla* ‘bell’ is, contrariwise, a borrowing from Old English.

But explanation in terms of loanwords and Viking Age influence only accounts for a very small proportion of the linguistic, or lexical, parallels between Old English and Old Norse. The vast majority, of course, are to be explained systemically, in terms of descent from a common ancestor and the status of Old English and Old Norse as cousinly languages in the Germanic family tree: *stān* and *steinn* (‘stone’), *gōd* and *góðr* (‘good’), *dēop* and *djúpr* (‘deep’), and so on.

How far, though, can these shared origins account for the vocabulary and diction of Old English and Old Norse poetry, and what might a focus on shared origins, rather than on contact and borrowing, reveal about a communal, and ancient, poetic diction? That is the issue which I wish to explore in this lecture: in other words, rather than thinking about the evidence and effects of Anglo-Norse contact, I want to contemplate, and theorize upon, the many English and Norse poetic parallels that can’t be reasonably explained in terms of Viking Age influence. My presuppositions and methodology are the classic ones of comparative philology. To quote Calvert Watkins:

¹ See especially M. Townend, *Language and History in Viking Age England: Linguistic Relations between Speakers of Old Norse and Old English*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 1 (Turnhout, 2002), R. Dance, *Words Derived from Old Norse in Early Middle English: Studies in the Vocabulary of the South-West Midland Texts*, Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies 246 (Tempe, 2003), and S. M. Pons-Sanz, *Norse-Derived Vocabulary in Late Old English Texts: Wulfstan’s Works, a Case Study*, North-Western European Language Evolution Supplement 22 (Odense, 2007) and *The Lexical Effects of Anglo-Scandinavian Linguistic Contact on Old English*, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 1 (Turnhout, 2013).

Put simply, the comparatist has one fact and one hypothesis. The one fact is that certain languages show similarities which are so numerous and so precise that they cannot be attributed to chance, and which are such that they cannot be explained as borrowings from one language into another or as universal or quasi-universal features of many or all human languages. The comparatist's one hypothesis, then, is that these resemblances among certain languages must be the result of their development from a common original language.²

Or, in this case, a common original poetic language.

There is no better place to begin than the opening lines of *Beowulf*:

Hwæt, wē Gār-Dena in gēardagum,
 þēodcýninga þrym gefrūnon,
 hū ðā æþelingas ellen fremedon.³

As a point of entry into the topics to be discussed, I want to focus attention on the first word of the second line, *þēodcýninga* — *þēodcýning* in the nominative singular. The glossary to the 4th edition of *Klaeber's Beowulf* offers for this word 'king of a people, king (over wide dominions)' and marks it with a bracketed obelus, to indicate a word or meaning that is normally restricted to poetry but occasionally recorded in prose.⁴ In fact, *þēodcýning* occurs 17 times in our extant corpus of Old English, 15 times in poetry and twice in prose. 8 of these — nearly half the overall total — are in *Beowulf* itself. In poetry, the word also occurs twice in *Genesis A*, and once each in *The Fates of the Apostles*, *Soul and Body I*, *Riddle 67*, *Judgement Day II*, and *The Death of Edward* (so, its attestations continue well into the eleventh century).⁵ In prose, it occurs once each in *The Letter of Alexander to Aristotle* and Napier Homily 29. *The Letter of Alexander*, of course, occurs in the *Beowulf*-manuscript, and its affinities with *Beowulf* have been well probed, not least by Andy Orchard, while Napier 29 is a homily that stands in a close textual relationship with *Judgement Day II*.⁶ So the

² C. Watkins, *How to Kill a Dragon: Aspects of Indo-European Poetics* (New York, 1995), p. 4.

³ All quotations from *Beowulf* are taken from R. D. Fulk, R. E. Bjork and J. D. Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 4th ed. (Toronto, 2008), though I have not reproduced the editors' policy of marking palatal consonants.

⁴ Fulk, Bjork, and Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 445.

⁵ Information derived from the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>).

⁶ On *Beowulf* and *The Letter of Alexander*, see A. Orchard, *A Critical Companion to Beowulf* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. 25–39. On Napier 29, see R. Frank, 'Poetic Words in Late Old English Prose', in *From Anglo-Saxon to Early Middle English: Studies Presented to E. G. Stanley*, ed. M. Godden, D. Gray, and T. F. Hoad (Oxford, 1994), pp. 87–107 (at pp. 106–7), and G. D. Caie (ed), *The Old English Poem Judgement Day II: A Critical Edition with Editions of De die iudicii and the Hatton 113 Homily Be domes dæge*, Anglo-Saxon Texts 2 (Cambridge, 2000), esp. pp. 22–32.

two prose occurrences don't shake the view that the word is fundamentally a poetic one: its distribution is significant. As for its meaning, the rather unspecific gloss given in *Klaeber's Beowulf* seems fair enough ('king of a people, king (over wide dominions)'), and — bearing in mind its poetic status — it is debatable whether the word had a more precise constitutional meaning, or signalled fine discriminations with other terms for 'king' or other types of kingship.⁷

A parallel word, *þjóðkonungr*, occurs also in Old Norse. It is recorded 9 times in the Poetic Edda, always in the 'heroic' rather than 'mythological' poems.⁸ So, for example, the concluding stanza of *Atlakviða* states that Guðrún *hefir þriggia / þjóðkonunga / banorð borit* ('caused the death of three *þjóðkonungar*'), while in *Hamðismál* 4 she goads her sons Hamðir and Sörli by telling them that *Eptir er ykr þrungit, / þjóðkonunga* ('You have been crushed back, you *þjóðkonungar*').⁹ *Atlakviða* and *Hamðismál* are generally thought to be among the earliest of the recorded Eddic poems.¹⁰ But the word also enjoyed a thorough use in skaldic poetry, especially among some of the *höfuðskáld* or 'chief poets' of the early eleventh century, including Sigvatr Þórðarson, Þormóðr Kolbrúnarskáld, Þórarinn loftunga, and Arnórr Þórðarson.¹¹ Snorri Sturluson includes the word in his (perhaps over-rigid) discussion of different words for 'king' in *Skáldskaparmál*: 'An emperor is highest of kings, but after him any king who rules over a nation [*þjóðland*] is indistinguishable in all kennings from any other in poetry. Next are the people that are called earls or tributary kings [*skattkonungar*], and they are indistinguishable in kennings from a king [*konungr*], except that those that are tributary kings must not be called *þjóðkonungar*'.¹² Snorri, then, invites his audience to identify the first element of the compound as *þjóð* 'people, nation'; but while this is formally correct, it is important to note that, in compounds, Old Norse *þjóð-* can function as an intensifying prefix (as can Old English *þēod-*), thus yielding 'great king' rather

⁷ See D. H. Green, *Language and History in the Early Germanic World* (Cambridge, 1998), pp. 137–8.

⁸ Old Norse *þjóðkonungr* occurs three times in *Grípisspá*, three times in *Sigurðarkviða in skamma*, and once each in *Atlakviða*, *Guðrúnarhvöt*, and *Hamðismál*. Information on occurrences in the Poetic Edda is derived from R. Kellogg, *A Concordance to Eddic Poetry* (East Lansing, 1988), pp. 521–2. Also of value is B. La Farge and J. Tucker, *Glossary to the Poetic Edda, Based on Hans Kuhn's Kurzes Wörterbuch* (Heidelberg, 1992).

⁹ U. Dronke (ed.), *The Poetic Edda: Volume I, Heroic Poems* (Oxford, 1969), pp. 12, 161.

¹⁰ See the consensus views reported in R. G. Finch, 'Atlakviða', and O. Gschwantler, 'Hamðismál in fornu', in *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. P. Pulsiano (New York, 1993), pp. 23–4, 264–5.

¹¹ Information from Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum: Antiquæ Linguae Septentrionalis*, 2nd ed. (Copenhagen, 1931), p. 641.

¹² A. Faulkes (ed.), *Snorri Sturluson: Edda, Skáldskaparmál*, 2 vols (London, 1998), I, 79; A. Faulkes (trans.), *Snorri Sturluson: Edda* (London, 1987), p. 128.

than ‘king of a people’.¹³ Snorri’s inclusion of the term in his discussion of poetic diction also suggests that, in Old Norse as in Old English, the compound was primarily to be found in poetry rather than prose, and this is indeed the case.¹⁴

So here we have two terms, Old English *þēodcýning* and Old Norse *þjóðkonungr*, seemingly cognate with one another and enjoying a comparable distribution in terms of literary — indeed, poetic — language. But before we can conclude definitively that the two words are descended from the same shared origins in a common poetic diction, there are, of course, two alternative explanations that need to be entertained.

First, then, is it possible that *þēodcýning* and *þjóðkonungr* are independent coinages, having arisen separately in England and Scandinavia? This can’t be disproved for certain, but it is extremely unlikely, for a number of reasons. First, the two words are well attested in each language, across a range of texts, which makes it unlikely that we are simply seeing the individual creativity of two separate poets, on two separate occasions, in two different languages. Second, in each language the relevant word has a distinctively poetic distribution, which would mean that in each language the compound would have to have been not just coined, but rather coined and then picked up and generalized through the poetic diction. And third, as something of a clinching point, a cognate form, *thiodcuning*, is also attested in the poetry of a further Germanic language, in the Old Saxon *Heliand*; so to imagine independent coinage on three separate occasions, and independent adoption within three poetic traditions, is to multiply improbabilities.¹⁵

As a second alternative, then, is it possible that Old English *þēodcýning* has been borrowed from Old Norse *þjóðkonungr*, or vice versa? Roberta Frank, as part of her argument for the influence of skaldic diction on *Beowulf*, and for an accordingly late date for the poem, suggested — or at least strongly implied — that Old English *þēodcýning* was a loan from *þjóðkonungr*.¹⁶ But this seems impossible, unless one is also to posit skaldic influence on *Genesis A*, *The Fates of the Apostles*, and all the other Old English poems attesting the word; and

¹³ Faulkes (ed.), *Skáldskaparmál*, II, 434.

¹⁴ Information on Old Norse prose occurrences is derived from the database of the *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog / Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (<http://onp.ku.dk/>): see the entry s.v. *þjóð-konungr* (sb. m.).

¹⁵ O. Behaghel (ed.), *Heliand und Genesis*, 10th ed., rev. B. Taeger (Tübingen, 1996). On the strength and value of Old Saxon parallels see R. L. Kellogg, ‘The South Germanic Oral Tradition’, in *Franciplegius: Medieval and Linguistic Studies in Honor of Francis Peabody Magoun, Jr.*, ed. J. B. Bessinger, Jr. and R. P. Creed (New York, 1965), pp. 66–74.

¹⁶ R. Frank, ‘Skaldic Verse and the Date of *Beowulf*’, in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 123–39 (at pp. 129–30, 135). For disagreement, see G. Clark, *Beowulf*, Twayne’s English Authors Series 477 (Boston, 1990), p. 47, and M. Townend, ‘Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry in Viking Age England’, *Review of English Studies* New Series 51 (2000), 349–70 (at pp. 357–8).

whatever the debate about *Beowulf*, *Genesis A* is generally regarded as being among the earliest of our extant Old English poems.¹⁷ Proving that Old Norse *þjóðkonungr* is not a borrowing from Old English *þēodcyning* is, methodologically speaking, a harder task, for the simple reason that our extant Old Norse corpus is later in date than (at least some of) our Old English corpus; and this point applies to all studies of Norse poetic diction. But in light of the occurrence of the word in Old Saxon as well, and the fact that there are no phonological, distributional, or contextual grounds for suspecting an English origin, there seems to be no reason to propose that *þjóðkonungr* is a borrowing from *þēodcyning*, and as far as I am aware, no scholar has done so.

Þēodcyning, then, occurring in line 2 of *Beowulf* and with cognates recorded in Old Norse and Old Saxon poetry, can be fairly securely regarded as an item of poetic vocabulary that derives from an antecedent and communal poetic diction. But as soon as one appreciates this, then other words and phrases in the opening lines of *Beowulf* start clamouring for attention, above all *in gēardagum*. The compound *gēardagas* occurs 24 times in Old English, 17 times in poetry (in 11 different poems), 6 times in prose, and once in a gloss.¹⁸ All 6 prose occurrences are in the works of Archbishop Wulfstan II of York, in the phrase *on gēardagum*, and thus they indicate a clear example of Wulfstan's tendency sometimes to pick compounds out of Old English poetry.¹⁹ So *gēardagas*, we can say with equal confidence, is a poetic compound (even though the glossary to *Klaeber's Beowulf* does not mark it as such), and one that normally occurs in the phrase *in* or *on gēardagum*. Turning to the Old Norse evidence, we find that the cognate compound, *árdagar*, occurs 13 times in the Poetic Edda, always in the phrase *í árdaga*: once in *Völuspá*, twice in

¹⁷ See for example R. D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, 1992), pp. 348–51, 391–2, G. Russom, 'Dating Criteria for Old English Poems', in *Studies in the History of the English Language: A Millennial Perspective*, ed. D. Minkova and R. Stockwell, *Topics in English Linguistics* 39 (Berlin, 2002), pp. 245–65, and D. Cronan, 'Poetic Words, Conservatism and the Dating of Old English Poetry', *Anglo-Saxon England* 33 (2004), 23–50.

¹⁸ See *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>). In my quotation and discussion, I have assumed, with the *Dictionary of Old English* (see <http://doe.utoronto.ca/pages/index.html>, s.v. *gēardagas*) and Frederick Klaeber (see F. Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Lexington, 1950), p. 338), that the first element of *gēardagas* is the noun *gēar* 'year' rather than the adverb *geāra* 'of yore' (as suggested tentatively by Klaeber's revisers: see Fulk, Bjork and Niles (eds), *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 384). In any case, the adverb seems to have developed from the noun, albeit with a change in the medial diphthong (see A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), p. 69 (§185 n. 2), R. M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English: Volume I, Phonology* (Oxford, 1992), p. 111 (§5.60)), so the distinction may be unimportant; but we will see that the existence of a probable Norse cognate suggests that the original first element of the compound was indeed *gēar*.

¹⁹ See R. Dance, 'Sound, Fury, and Signifiers; or Wulfstan's Language', in *Wulfstan, Archbishop of York: The Proceedings of the Second Alcuin Conference*, ed. M. Townend, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* 10 (Turnhout, 2004), pp. 29–61 (at pp. 60–1).

Vafþrúðnismál, three times in *Grímnismál*, twice in *Skírnismál*, three times in *Lokasenna*, and once each in *Reginismál* and *Hyndluljóð* (in *Völuspá in skamma*).²⁰ Finnur Jónsson's *Lexicon Poeticum* makes it clear, however, that, in contrast, the word did not form part of the skaldic word-hoard, and there are no attestations at all in Old Norse prose.²¹ So here, in contradistinction to *þēodcyning*, we have an instance where the parallels are specifically between Old English poetry and the Poetic Edda, not Old Norse poetry more generally.²²

Not quite as clear-cut, but still worth noting, are three further items of vocabulary in the opening lines of *Beowulf*. First, the cognate of Old English *æðeling* is *öðlingr*, a word only rarely found in Old Norse prose but very frequent in poetry, both Eddic and skaldic.²³ Second, the use of *Gār-* as a martial honorific in *Gār-Dene* is paralleled in the well-known description of Gunnarr in *Atlakviða* st. 25 as a *geir-Niflungr* (*Mærr kvað þat Gunnarr, / geir-Niflungr* 'Glorious, Gunnarr spoke, spear-skilled Niflung');²⁴ it should also be noted that Old English *gār* is a poetic word, while Old Norse *geirr* also has a distribution heavily weighted towards poetry. And third, a lesser example is *þrymm*: although *þrymm* is not a poetic word in Old English, its Old Norse cognate — *þrymr*, with the meaning 'din, clamour of battle' — has a marked skaldic distribution.²⁵

The opening three lines of *Beowulf*, then, give us several compelling examples of parallel diction in Old English and Old Norse poetry, and the

²⁰ Kellogg, *Concordance to Eddic Poetry*, p. 22. The Old Norse use of the accusative (after the preposition *i*) rather than the dative (as in Old English, after *in/on*) is standard for expressions of time (see M. Barnes, *A New Introduction to Old Norse: Part I Grammar*, 2nd ed. (London, 2004), p. 193).

²¹ Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, p. 30, H. Degnbol et al, *Ordbog over det norrøne prosasprog / Dictionary of Old Norse Prose: Volume I a-bam* (Copenhagen, 1995), p. 530.

²² It should be acknowledged that the equivalence between Old English *gēardagas* and Old Norse *árdagar* is not beyond dispute, in that the first element of the Norse compound could be either the noun *ár* 'year' (as in *gēardagas*) or the adverb *ár* 'early', and there exists an Old English compound *ærdagas* which would form an exact parallel if one takes the first element of the Norse word to be the adverb 'early'. But even if *árdagar* is cognate with *ærdagas* rather than *gēardagas*, this does not affect the point being made here, as the compound *ærdagas* is also a dominantly poetic term in Old English: it is recorded 6 times in poetry (in 5 different poems) and 4 times in prose, but all the prose occurrences are in the same text, the Old English *Orosius*. It always occurs in the prepositional phrase *in/on ærdagum* (information from the *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (<http://tapor.library.utoronto.ca/doecorpus/>)).

²³ Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, p. 659, Kellogg, *Concordance to Eddic Poetry*, p. 536, J. Fritzner, *Ordbog over det gamle norske Sprog*, 2nd ed., 3 vols (Oslo, 1954), III, 1080, *Dictionary of Old Norse Prose* (<http://onp.ku.dk/>). See also D. Cronan, 'Poetic Meanings in the Old English Poetic Vocabulary', *English Studies* 84 (2003), 397–425 (at pp. 412–13).

²⁴ Dronke (ed.), *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 8. *Geir-Njörðr* in *Guðrúnarhvöt* st. 8 is a somewhat different case, as here it is used to create a skaldic-style kenning ('spear-Njörðr' > 'warrior') (Dronke (ed.), *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 147).

²⁵ See Finnur Jónsson, *Lexicon Poeticum*, p. 649, R. Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., rev. W.A. Craigie (Oxford, 1957), p. 747.

subsequent 3,179 lines offer many more. These parallels can't be explained as Viking Age loans — indeed, there are no certain loanwords from Old Norse to be found anywhere in *Beowulf* — and there are far too many correspondences for them all to be explained as coincidences or independent coinages in the two languages (or rather, more significantly, in the two poetic dictions). The only plausible way of explaining them is as shared inheritances, descending from an earlier poetic diction that was ancestral to both Old English and Old Norse poetry. This is the essential point that I want to stress in this lecture: in many and important ways, Old English and Old Norse poetry share a common, inherited diction — as the experience of reading *Beowulf* and the Poetic Edda side-by-side soon reveals. It is, of course, banally obvious to note that, as languages, Old English and Old Norse are descended from a common ancestor — this is hardly news — but there has been surprisingly little scholarship on this circumstance as it applies to poetic diction in particular (with a few distinguished exceptions, which I'll come on to). In recent decades, there has been far more written about the relatively few instances of Norse influence on Old English poetry that can be attributed to Viking Age contact, such as skaldic influence on *The Battle of Brunanburh*, than there has on the vast and systemic parallels between the diction of the two poetries.²⁶

Where, then, should we begin? Before we go on to ask what exactly we can say about this shared poetic diction, it is probably best to start with the question of date — or rather, of age. How old is this ancestral diction? Or at least, at what point in time did distinctive English and Norse traditions begin to separate and branch out from one another (if indeed they ever did fully separate prior to their re-contact during the Viking Age)? The shared poetic vocabulary must have come into being prior to the point of separation, so a consideration of that point will give us a first indication of how antique this poetic language is, at least by a minimal estimate. The approach to this question must be twofold, linguistic and archaeological.

A great deal of work by philologists and historical linguists has, of course, been directed to the grouping and separation of the Germanic languages. Two models — to simplify greatly — have normally been invoked.²⁷ The first proposes a tripartite split in Common Germanic into East Germanic (Gothic),

²⁶ See for example J. Harris, 'Brunanburh 12b–13a and Some Skaldic Passages', in *Magister Regis: Studies in Honor of Robert Earle Kaske*, ed. A. Groos (New York, 1986), pp. 61–8, J. D. Niles, 'Skaldic Technique in *Brunanburh*', *Scandinavian Studies* 59 (1987), 256–66, R. Frank, 'Anglo-Scandinavian Poetic Relations', *American Notes and Queries* New Series 3 (1990), 74–9, Townend, 'Pre-Cnut Praise-Poetry', and S. Zacher, 'Multilingualism at the Court of King Æthelstan: Latin Praise Poetry and The Battle of Brunanburh', in *Conceptualizing Multilingualism in Medieval England, c. 800–c. 1250*, ed. E. M. Tyler, *Studies in the Early Middle Ages* 27 (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 77–103 (at pp. 96–103).

²⁷ See for example H. F. Nielsen, *The Germanic Languages: Origins and Early Dialectal Interrelations* (Tuscaloosa, 1989), pp. 67–107, and O. W. Robinson, *Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages* (London, 1992), pp. 247–64.

West Germanic (Old English and the continental Germanic languages), and North Germanic (Old Norse). The second — which enjoys greater currency in contemporary scholarship — proposes two successive bipartite splits, the first into East Germanic on the one hand and what has been termed North-West Germanic on the other, and then the second, within North-West Germanic, into West Germanic and North Germanic. There is no need to rehearse the extensive scholarship on this issue, but two particular bodies of evidence should be noted as having been pivotal in the recognition that characteristic West Germanic and North Germanic languages had not substantially differentiated themselves from one another prior to the *adventus Saxonum*, the Anglo-Saxon migration to Britain. The first is the language of the earliest runic inscriptions (dating from c. 200-500 AD), which shows a variety of Germanic which can arguably be regarded as the ancestor of both later West Germanic and North Germanic.²⁸ The second is the structural similarities (phonological and morphological) between Old English and Old Norse which Hans Frede Nielsen in particular has catalogued: these reveal a close resemblance between the two languages, suggesting a significantly shared evolution in the pre-migration, or pre-separation, period.²⁹ In a recent Quiggin Lecture, moreover, Carole Hough, building on work by W. F. H. Nicolaisen, has demonstrated that North-West Germanic had a communal onomasticon as well as a communal lexicon: in other words, the fact that there are lexical items used distinctively as place-name elements in both Old English and Old Norse suggests strongly that such items had developed their onomastic function and meaning in the pre-migration period.³⁰

But archaeological evidence for contact between England and Scandinavia diminishes rapidly in the sixth century AD, and is largely reduced to elite objects only.³¹ It then more or less disappears in the seventh century, after Sutton Hoo, and the movement of elite goods between England and

²⁸ See H. F. Nielsen, *The Early Runic Language of Scandinavia: Studies in Germanic Dialect Geography* (Heidelberg, 2000), and I. Garcia Losquino, *The Early Runic Inscriptions: Their Western Features*, Berkeley Insights in Linguistics and Semiotics 92 (New York, 2015).

²⁹ See H. F. Nielsen, *Old English and the Continental Germanic Languages*, 2nd ed., Innsbrucker Beiträge zur Sprachwissenschaft 33 (Innsbruck, 1985), esp. pp. 187–204. See also several chapters in Volume I of O. Bandle et al (eds), *The Nordic Languages: An International Handbook of the History of the North Germanic Languages*, 2 vols, Handbücher zur Sprach- und Kommunikationswissenschaft 22.1 (Berlin, 2002).

³⁰ W. F. H. Nicolaisen, 'Is There a Northwest Germanic Toponymy? Some Thoughts and a Proposal', in *Nordwestgermanisch*, ed. E. Marold and C. Zimmermann, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 13 (Berlin, 1995), pp. 103–14; C. Hough, *Toponymicon and Lexicon in North-West Europe: 'Ever-Changing Connection'*, E. C. Quiggin Memorial Lecture 12 (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 5–8.

³¹ See J. Hines, *The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England in the Pre-Viking Period*, British Archaeological Reports British Series 124 (Oxford, 1984) and 'The Scandinavian Character of Anglian England: An Update', in *The Age of Sutton Hoo: The Seventh Century in North-Western Europe*, ed. M. Carver (Woodbridge, 1992), pp. 315–29.

Scandinavia in the seventh and eighth centuries is likely to have been taking place in a series of coastal transactions along continental emporia, not through direct contact: in the pre-Viking Age, the North Sea really does seem to have been a barrier, and not a highway.³² We should, of course, regard poetry as an elite product, comparable to the gold and glass that were being exchanged and traded in the early North Sea world, and so we might hypothesize that poetic culture could be shared and exchanged without significant personal contact; but unlike artefacts such as gold and glass, poetry can't be passed from hand to hand without native-speaking tradition-bearers: it passes from mouth to ear, through contact between speakers and listeners, and this is even more true of a system of poetic diction than it is of individual poems.

So what date should we give for the separation between the English and Norse poetic traditions? Naturally, it is not possible to give a very firm answer on this, but it seems that substantial contact between significant numbers of speakers was coming to an end by perhaps the close of the fifth century, while elite contact may have been maintained for another century or so. And at the other end we should not think that 793 — the date of the attack on Lindisfarne — instantly inaugurated a new, intense phase of Anglo-Scandinavian cultural exchange: that is not likely to have begun until later in the ninth century. So we can say provisionally that most of the shared diction of Old English and Old Norse is likely to have come into existence by the seventh century. But this is the latest point: it may, of course, have been created very much earlier.

With this rough chronology in view, I want now to try and dig a bit further into the nature of the shared diction, and to do so, at least to begin with, by means of what I would regard as an inspiring, but strangely little-known, article from 1986, Dennis Cronan's 'Alliterative Rank in Old English Poetry'.³³ The term 'rank' means the frequency with which certain words alliterate in Old English poetry compared with other words. Cronan demonstrates that, on the whole, so-called poetic words or meanings in Old English — that is, words or meanings which are never or only rarely recorded in prose — have a higher rate of alliteration than non-poetic words, though the difference between the two classes is not as great as in Middle English alliterative poetry. So, for example, the poetic word *bord* 'shield' alliterates on 83% of its occurrences in the extant corpus of Old English poetry (24 out of 29), whereas the non-poetic (near-)synonym *scyld* only alliterates in 64% of occurrences (14 out of 22).

³² See for example U. Näsman, 'Vendel Period Glass from Eketorp-II, Öland, Sweden: On Glass and Trade from the late 6th to the late 8th Centuries AD', *Acta Archaeologica* 55 (1984), 55–116, and M. Carver, 'Intellectual Communities in Early Northumbria', in *Early Medieval Northumbria: Kingdoms and Communities, AD 450–1100*, ed. D. Petts and S. Turner, Studies in the Early Middle Ages 24 (Turnhout, 2011), pp. 185–206 (at pp. 198–9).

³³ D. Cronan, 'Alliterative Rank in Old English Poetry', *Studia Neophilologica* 58 (1986), 145–58. For a recent re-appraisal, see M. Griffith, 'On the Lexical Property Termed "Rank" in Old English Poetry and its Later Development', *Notes and Queries* 60 (2013), 1–14.

Some words have a 100% rate, including a number which occur with high frequency: for example, *hrūse* ‘earth’ (45 out of 45), *gūð* ‘battle’ (57 out of 57), and — most impressive of all — *beorn* ‘man, warrior’ (128 out of 128). Accordingly, Cronan argues that words with a higher alliterative rate were, on the whole, somehow felt to be more ‘poetic’ than words with a lower alliterative rate — a vague characterization, but nonetheless probably a justified one. As an appendix, Cronan presents his corpus of words organized according to meaning or semantic field: words for ‘war, battle, fight’, words for ‘treasure’, words for ‘hall’, and so on, in each case including non-poetic words that occur in the poetry alongside formally ‘poetic’ ones. For every item, Cronan indicates whether or not a word is ‘poetic’ (that is, not normally occurring in prose), how many times it occurs in the extant corpus, and how often it alliterates. Of course, debate is occasionally possible as to whether an item should be regarded as ‘poetic’ or not, but on the whole his appendix is not likely to present a misleading picture.³⁴

Cronan’s lists are fascinating, and invaluable. For one thing, what they amount to is a sort of poetic thesaurus: they enable us to see which word-groups had a large number of synonyms or near-synonyms, and which had only a few. So, for instance, Cronan lists 15 words in the category ‘war, battle, fight’ (8 poetic and 7 non-poetic), 8 for ‘hall’ (4 poetic and 4 non-poetic), and 8 for ‘sword’ (7 poetic and only 1 — *sweord* itself — non-poetic). If we take an evolutionary view, and assume that such lists tell us the purposes, or the subject matter, for which Old English poetic diction came into being, then we can see that it was peculiarly suited, or designed, for martial or heroic subjects: ‘treasure’, ‘hall’, ‘death’, ‘blood’, ‘sword’, ‘shield’, ‘spear’. It was also very strongly aristocratic: Cronan lists 19 words for ‘lord, king’, of which as many as 14 were poetic. And it was overwhelmingly masculine: in his overlapping categories of ‘man’, ‘man, warrior, retainer’, ‘warrior, hero’, and ‘son, young man’, Cronan lists no fewer than 25 words (16 poetic and 9 non-poetic). Contrast this with the 8 words for ‘woman’, of which only 4 were poetic (*ides*, *mæg*, *mægð*, and *meowle*) — the same number as for ‘horse’ (*blanca*, *eoh*, *meorh*, and *wicg*).

But this characterization, it should be stressed, tells us what the diction may have evolved for, not necessarily what it is used for in our extant poems. It is surely certain that the chosen subject-matter of our extant Old English poetry was not always well served by the traditional word-hoard that Anglo-Saxon poets had inherited. We can see this especially clearly if we look at Cronan’s list of words for ‘sea, water’. 18 words are included here — a remarkably high number — of which 12 are poetic words. But several of these poetic words

³⁴ On Old English poetic words, see further M. Griffith, ‘Poetic Language and the Paris Psalter: the decay of the Old English tradition’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 20 (1991), 161–86, esp. pp. 183–6, and ‘Old English Poetic Diction not in Old English Verse or Prose — and the curious case of Aldhelm’s five athletes’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 43 (2014), 99–131.

occur only in our extant corpus with very low frequency: *ear* (4 occurrences), *hæf* (2), *hærn* (1), *wæd* (7), *wær* (2), and *waðum* (5). On all of their occurrences, however, these 5 low-frequency words alliterate (100%). What this indicates, I would suggest, is that at the time of the genesis of Old English poetic diction (or its antecedent) a considerable need was felt for poetic words meaning ‘sea, water’, and so a repertoire of poetic synonyms evolved. But such poetic words are not much called on in our extant poetry (which, in any case, often prefers the prosaic *wæter*). So what Cronan’s lists show us is not so much the subject-matter of extant Old English poetry, but rather the subject-matter of the poetry at the time when the fundamental system of poetic diction evolved. These lists, that is to say, have an archaeological value, and it is hard not to link this set of words for ‘sea’ with other indications of a certain ‘sea-centredness’ in some of our Old English poetry: for example, the distinctive Old English idiom *be sĕm twēonum* (literally ‘between two seas’ — the North Sea and the Baltic? — but often apparently meaning ‘throughout the world’), or the habit of the *Beowulf*-poet to imagine all bodies of water, and all long journeys, in terms of the sea.³⁵

In a separate listing, Cronan also offers 35 Old English poetic simplexes whose Old Norse cognates are also poetic words. Moreover, such words, he demonstrates, have a higher alliteration rate in Old English than poetic words which don’t have poetic cognates in Old Norse — a very interesting observation — and they form the core of what he calls the ‘heroic’ vocabulary. (These 35 words, we might note, include all 4 of the poetic words for ‘horse’, but none of the poetic words for ‘woman’.) And the set of Old English words with the highest alliterative rate of all, a sub-set of these 35 core words, are those which have poetic cognates in Old Norse, but do not have non-poetic cognates in other Germanic languages (and where, therefore, the likelihood of independent development as a poetic word in Old English and Old Norse is lowest). That is to say, such words, of which Cronan offers 20, only feature in the Germanic languages as poetic words in Old English and Old Norse (and sometimes in Old Saxon as well); these words include *brim/brim* ‘sea’, *eoh/jór* ‘horse’, *gūð/gunnr* ‘battle’, and *þengel/þengill* ‘king’. In looking at such words, Cronan suggests, we may be seeing ‘the products of a Northwest Germanic poetic tradition, out of which the Old English and Scandinavian poetries developed’.³⁶

This is a powerful idea, and the questions or comparisons that it opens up are of a very wide scope. In a footnote, Cronan acknowledges that the idea of a North-West Germanic poetic tradition ‘is, of course, highly speculative’.³⁷ But it is a speculation I would like to pursue here, albeit with a definition of ‘North-West Germanic’ that is slightly revised along linguistic lines, potentially to

³⁵ See Klaeber (ed.), *Beowulf*, pp. xlvi–xlvii, J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Old English Exodus: Text, Translation, and Commentary*, ed. J. Turville-Petre (Oxford, 1981), p. 68, and A. Hiatt, ‘*Beowulf* off the map’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 38 (2009), 11–40.

³⁶ Cronan, ‘Alliterative Rank’, p. 147.

³⁷ Cronan, ‘Alliterative Rank’, p. 156 n. 7.

include all the Germanic languages except Gothic, rather than simply Old English and Old Norse. For of course it is a natural desire to want to try and co-ordinate these signs of a common poetic tradition with the linguistic assessment of a North-West Germanic language grouping (within which, it may be recalled, Old English and Old Norse showed particularly close links or affinities).

So: what more might we be able to say about this proposed North-West Germanic poetic culture? How well can we characterize it?

The most obvious point we can make about it is, of course, metrical. The various Germanic poetries — Old English, Old Norse, Old Saxon, Old High German — shared a common alliterative metre, and a good deal of scholarly work has been done in recent years (for example by Geoffrey Russom and Seiichi Suzuki) on tracing the various ways in which the common Germanic metre developed differently in the different cultures.³⁸ This metre is usually held to be first attested on the famous Gallehus runic inscription of c.400 AD, which supplies us with a *terminus ante quem* for its evolution.³⁹ (And the existence of the runic alphabet itself is, of course, also powerful evidence for a shared North-West Germanic linguistic culture more generally.) The way in which Old English and Old Norse metre evolved separately from a common ancestor may be a good analogy (though not a perfect one) for the manner in which poetic diction evolved and diverged as well.⁴⁰

But there is also a good deal more we can say about diction, if we return to the category of compounds with which I began this lecture — such as *þēodcýning* and *gēardagas*. Cronan's corpus of poetic words is restricted to simplexes (since he is interested in frequency of alliteration, and all compounds

³⁸ See G. Russom, *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 23 (Cambridge, 1998), and S. Suzuki, *The Meters of Old Norse Eddic Poetry: Common Germanic Inheritance and North Germanic Innovation*, *Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde* 86 (Berlin, 2014).

³⁹ See for example W. P. Lehmann, *The Development of Germanic Verse Form* (Austin, 1956), pp. 28–9, and Russom, *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre*, pp. 1–3; see also, however, B. Mees, 'Before *Beowulf*: on the proto-history of Old Germanic verse', *Journal of the Australian Early Medieval Association* 3 (2007), 207–23 (at pp. 221–2).

⁴⁰ Some metricists, following the arguments of Hans Kuhn, subdivide the Poetic Edda into two categories, the supposedly 'foreign' poems of the Sigurðr legend on the one hand, and the 'native' poems of Norse mythology (plus the Helgi poems) on the other, in the belief that the 'foreign' poems are translations from southern Germanic exemplars (see J. Harris, 'Eddic Poetry', in *Old Norse-Icelandic Literature: A Critical Guide*, ed. C. J. Clover and J. Lindow, *Islandica* 45 (Ithaca, 1985), pp. 68–156 (at pp. 104–5), Russom, *Beowulf and Old Germanic Metre*, p. 10 n. 37, and Suzuki, *Meters of Old Norse Eddic Poetry*, pp. 5–8). Bjarne Fidjestøl, however, gives robust reasons for doubting the validity, or at least the sharpness, of Kuhn's distinction, and outside of metrical studies the distinction does not seem well entrenched in Eddic studies more widely (B. Fidjestøl, *The Dating of Eddic Poetry: A Historical Survey and Methodological Investigation*, *Bibliotheca Arnarnagnæana* 41 (Copenhagen, 1999), pp. 155–7, 294–323). Accordingly, I have not observed or tested this distinction in my examination of Eddic diction.

alliterate 100%), but for a comparable body of compounds we can turn to a remarkable monograph from 1939, C. T. Carr's *Nominal Compounds in Germanic*.⁴¹ In this work, Carr attempts to list, and to characterize, the compound nouns and adjectives in the early Germanic languages, with an especial desire to discriminate which compounds are likely to be co-incident innovations and which are likely to be old, communal terms ('before the dispersion of the peoples', in Carr's phrase).⁴² The scope of Carr's book is compendious, and it makes interesting reading in the light of Cronan's more recent work on poetic simplexes: like Cronan, Carr finds a particular connection between Old English and Old Norse (specifically Eddic) poetry, and regards such parallels in diction as being best explained as features of a shared, historic poetic diction.⁴³ Naturally, Carr's methodology is not able to deliver a definitive answer in every case as to whether parallel attestations in Old English and Old Norse poetry are shared inheritances or independent formations (or even, conceivably, loans), and in any case, it is the general picture that is important here, rather than the exact figures. But he offers somewhere in the region of 40 parallel compounds in the two poetries which he would attribute to shared inheritance, of which the following is a selection:

<i>brimlād</i>	<i>brimleið</i>	'sea'
<i>ealdorlegu</i>	<i>aldrlag</i>	'death'
<i>eormengrund</i>	<i>jörmungrund</i>	'the earth'
<i>fācenstæf</i>	<i>feiknstafir</i>	'treachery'
<i>firinweorc</i>	<i>firinverk</i>	'evil deed'
<i>foldweg</i>	<i>foldvegr</i>	'the earth'
<i>goldbeorht</i>	<i>gollbjartr</i>	'bright with gold'
<i>goldhroden</i>	<i>gollhroðinn</i>	'ornamented with gold'
<i>gūðbord</i>	<i>gunnbord</i>	'war-shield'
<i>gūðhwæt</i>	<i>gunnhvatr</i>	'bold in battle'
<i>hrīmceald</i>	<i>hrímkaldr</i>	'ice-cold'
<i>meduærn</i>	<i>mjöðrann</i>	'mead-hall'
<i>rædsnottor</i>	<i>ráðsnotr</i>	'wise in counsel'

⁴¹ C. T. Carr, *Nominal Compounds in Germanic*, St Andrews University Publications 41 (London, 1939). Carr (1901–76) was Professor of German at the University of St Andrews; during the Second World War he also worked as a code-breaker at Bletchley Park (C. Brewer, *Treasure-House of the Language: The Living OED* (New Haven, 2007), pp. 80, 88).

⁴² Carr, *Nominal Compounds*, p. xxx.

⁴³ Carr, *Nominal Compounds*, p. xxxv; for lists, see pp. 45–55, 58, 61, 63, 66–7 (common inheritances, in Carr's view), also pp. 71–82, 86–92, 94–5 (independent formations). See also, more briefly, F. P. Magoun, Jr, 'Recurring First Elements in Different Nominal Compounds in *Beowulf* and in the *Elder Edda*', in *Studies in English Philology: A Miscellany in Honour of Frederick Klaeber*, ed. K. Malone and M. B. Ruud (Minneapolis, 1929), pp. 73–8, Kellogg, 'South Germanic Oral Tradition', pp. 72–3, and M. R. Godden, 'Literary Language', in *The Cambridge History of the English Language: Volume I, The Beginnings to 1066*, ed. R. M. Hogg (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 490–535 (at p. 500).

<i>þēodcýning</i>	<i>þjóðkonungr</i>	‘great king’
<i>werþēod</i>	<i>verþjóð</i>	‘nation’
<i>wīgheard</i>	<i>vīgharðr</i>	‘brave in battle’

In addition, one might wish to add further examples such as the following, which Carr hesitates to regard as poetic or inherited:

<i>bençpel</i>	<i>bekkpili</i>	‘bench-plank’
<i>beorsele</i>	<i>bjórsalr</i>	‘beer-hall’
<i>ealubenc</i>	<i>ölbekkr</i>	‘ale-bench’
<i>folcdryht</i>	<i>folkdrótt</i>	‘company of warriors, people’
<i>lofgeorn</i>	<i>lofgjarn</i>	‘eager for praise’

As can be seen, the shared poetic compounds are, like the simplexes, overwhelmingly heroic in content — martial and aristocratic. Carr’s attempt to sort his corpus of Old English/Old Norse poetic compounds into semantic groups also results in a set of results very similar to Cronan’s groupings (so, for example, lots of terms for weaponry and the sea, but few for women).⁴⁴

Other shared features of a putative North-West Germanic poetic culture, in addition to metre, and compounds and simplexes, can readily be suggested. I will sketch them out only briefly here, in an impressionistic exercise of reconstruction; my goal is not to achieve a full account of North-West Germanic poetics, but rather simply to indicate how many features of our extant Old English and Old Norse poetry are of demonstrable antiquity. Such as formulae, for example, for we should recognize that the parallel phrases *in gēardagum* and *í árdaga* are not just cognate compounds: they are also, of course, formulae, and half-lines — the basic building-blocks of alliterative verse.⁴⁵ Another example would be the formulaic half-line *giellende gār*, found in Old English in *Widsith* l. 128 and in Old Norse (*af geiri giallanda*) in *Atlakviða* sts 5 and 14.⁴⁶ Or, to continue with *Atlakviða*, note the identity between the formulaic half-line *gumna dróttinn* st. 23 and *Beowulf*’s *gumena dryhten* l. 1824 — an heroic formula if ever there was. Or take the half-line *Nū is se dæg cumen*, found in Wiglaf’s famous speech at *Beowulf* l. 2646, and paralleled in *Helgakviða Hundingsbana I*

⁴⁴ Carr, *Nominal Compounds*, pp. 441–8. It should, perhaps, be noted that the occurrence of a compound in only Old English or only Old Norse poetic diction does not necessarily indicate that it is an innovation: it could equally well have been a shared item that was subsequently lost from, or not recorded in, the other language (especially as many of the terms are of such low frequency in our extant corpus).

⁴⁵ For classic accounts, see for example D. K. Fry, ‘Old English Formulas and Systems’, *English Studies* 48 (1967), 193–204, and A. Orchard, ‘Oral Tradition’, in *Reading Old English Texts*, ed. K. O’Brien O’Keefe (Cambridge, 1997), pp. 101–23.

⁴⁶ Ursula Dronke terms it ‘a venerable heroic formula’, and notes other occurrences elsewhere (Dronke (ed.), *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 57).

(st. 6) as *nú er dagr kominn*.⁴⁷ These are, of course, just examples; but I hope they serve to make the point.

Or we could consider collocations. A famous poetic parallel is that between Old English *frēond* and *feoh* in *The Wanderer* (l. 108), and Old Norse *frændi* and *fé* in *Hávamál* (sts 69, 76, 77). But a similar recurrent collocation, this time of antonyms, can be found between *Hávamál*'s *ljúfr* and *leiðr* (sts 35, 40) and the Old English pairing of *lēof* and *lāð*, found in *Beowulf* (three times) and *The Seafarer* (once) — and also in the Old Saxon *Héliand* (*liof* and *lêð*).⁴⁸ Or we could consider the Old English collocation of *rūn* and *ræd* with their Old Norse equivalents (compare *rūnwita* and *rædbora* in *Beowulf* l. 1325 with *rýnendr* and *ráðendr* in *Atlakviða* st. 9/3).⁴⁹ As with formulae and collocations, so also with the larger technique of variation or apposition, which functions in a very similar way in Old English and Eddic poetry, as Rory McTurk demonstrated 30 years ago.⁵⁰ Similarly, at larger elements of composition, there are a number of shared themes or ‘typescenes’ between the two poetries, most obviously in terms of the ‘beasts of battle’ motif — though here as elsewhere, we should note that the two traditions often developed in divergent ways in the post-separation period.⁵¹ A well-known study of the same type is Joseph Harris’ attempt to reconstruct a common Germanic ancestor for Old English and Old Norse elegy.⁵²

In terms of subject-matter, too, there are striking commonalities — not just in terms of a fundamental preoccupation with martial heroism but also,

⁴⁷ For further parallels see R. North, *The Origins of Beowulf: From Vergil to Wiglaf* (Oxford, 2006), pp. 56–7.

⁴⁸ See further P. Acker, *Revising Oral Theory: Formulaic Composition in Old English and Old Icelandic Verse*, Garland Studies in Medieval Literature 16 (New York, 1998), pp. 14–16, 19–21. Acker terms *lēof* and *lāð* a ‘syndetic formula’, as the two words usually collocate within a half-line, rather than across half-lines. See also E. Weiskott, ‘*Beowulf* 2910A “leofes ond laðes”’, *Notes and Queries* 62 (2015), 188–90.

⁴⁹ And see also *Hávamál* sts 111 and 142. For further examples of other collocations, see L. Lönnroth, ‘*Iorð fannz æva né upphiminn*. A formula analysis’, in *Speculum Norroenum: Norse Studies in Memory of Gabriel Turville-Petre*, ed. U. Dronke et al (Odense, 1981), pp. 310–27 (*eorð* and *upheofon* or *uprodor* / *jörð* and *upphiminn*), and P. Clemons, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry*, Cambridge Studies in Anglo-Saxon England 12 (Cambridge, 1995), pp. 69–73 (*eafoð* and *ellen* / *afl* and *eljun*).

⁵⁰ R. McTurk, ‘Variation in *Beowulf* and the Poetic *Edda*: A Chronological Experiment’, in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 141–60.

⁵¹ See M. S. Griffith, ‘Convention and Originality in the Old English “Beasts of Battle” Typescene’, *Anglo-Saxon England* 22 (1993), 179–99, J. Jesch, ‘Eagles, Ravens and Wolves: Beasts of Battle, Symbols of Victory and Death’, in *The Scandinavians from the Vendel Period to the Tenth Century: An Ethnographic Perspective*, ed. J. Jesch (Woodbridge, 2002), pp. 251–80, and J. Harris, ‘Beasts of Battle, South and North’, in *Source of Wisdom: Old English and Early Medieval Latin Studies in Honour of Thomas D. Hill*, ed. C. D. Wright, F. M. Biggs, and T. N. Hall (Toronto, 2007), pp. 3–25.

⁵² J. Harris, ‘Elegy in Old English and Old Norse: A Problem in Literary History’, in *The Vikings*, ed. R. T. Farrell (London, 1982), pp. 157–64.

significantly, in terms of a shared story-world. The surviving corpus of Germanic legendary tales was a subject for investigation much beloved by early twentieth-century scholarship, including such giants of the field as Axel Olrik, H. M. Chadwick, and R. W. Chambers.⁵³ It is undeniable, of course, that the same stories, and the same heroic actors, are recorded in both English and Norse sources (and also in German ones). The ‘ancestral’ nature of such stories, and what they might tell us about a shared literary culture in the early Germanic world, has been rather neglected in recent decades (where a ‘contact’ explanation has often been preferred), but the subject has come back to the forefront of scholarly attention as a result of the archaeological discoveries at Lejre in Denmark; and Tom Shippey in particular has been revisiting some of these old questions — with worthwhile results.⁵⁴ Again, the stories, like the styles, and indeed the metres, have diverged in significant ways in Old English and Old Norse, but the heritage looks to have been a common one, suggesting a shared origin. More narrowly and philologically, it should also be noted here that, on the whole, it is hard to believe that, as some have suggested, the *Beowulf*-poet derived the names of his legendary Scandinavian characters from contemporary Viking Age contact: the forms of names such as *Onela*, *Hrōðulf*, and *Ongenþēow* (corresponding to Old Norse *Áli*, *Hrólfr*, and *Angantýr*) are better explained as shared inheritances from an earlier period.⁵⁵

Something else we can say about this North-West Germanic poetic culture, very interestingly, is that it had a connection with the system of personal names; and there are two points to make here. The first is that there was a communal Germanic system of name-giving, with the same names recorded in both English and Norse (as well as other languages) — for example, *Ōsmund* and *Ásmundr*, or *Ēadwulf* and *Auðúlfr*.⁵⁶ This indication of a common

⁵³ See for example H. M. Chadwick, *The Origin of the English Nation* (Cambridge, 1907), R. W. Chambers, *Widsith: A Study in Old English Heroic Legend* (Cambridge, 1912) and *Beowulf: An Introduction to the Study of the Poem* (Cambridge, 1921), and A. Olrik, *The Heroic Legends of Denmark*, trans. L. M. Hollander (New York, 1919).

⁵⁴ J. D. Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, *Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies* 323 (Tempe, 2007); T. Shippey, ‘Afterword’, in Niles, *Beowulf and Lejre*, pp. 469–79, ‘*Hrólfs saga kraka* and the Legend of Lejre’, in *Making History: Essays on the Fornaldarsögur*, ed. M. Arnold and A. Finlay (London, 2010), pp. 17–32, and ‘Names in *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon England’, in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. L. Neidorf (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 58–78.

⁵⁵ See E. G. Stanley, ‘The Date of *Beowulf*: Some Doubts and No Conclusions’, in *The Dating of Beowulf*, ed. C. Chase (Toronto, 1981), pp. 197–211 (at p. 207), R. D. Fulk, ‘Dating *Beowulf* to the Viking Age’, *Philological Quarterly* 61 (1982), 341–59 (at pp. 343–4), and L. Neidorf, ‘Germanic Legend, Scribal Errors, and Cultural Change’, in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. L. Neidorf (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 37–57 (at p. 46).

⁵⁶ See H. B. Woolf, *The Old Germanic Principles of Name-Giving* (Baltimore, 1939). For more recent discussion (and references), see for example J. Insley, ‘Early Germanic Personal Names and Onomastic Dialects’, in *Language and Text: Current Perspectives on English and Germanic Historical Linguistics and Philology*, ed. A. J. Johnston, F. von Mengden and S.

anthroponymicon among the Germanic-speaking peoples (or at least their elites) can thus be put alongside the shared language, shared toponymicon, and shared runic alphabet, as part of a compelling picture of a common or co-ordinated linguistic culture in the pre-migration or pre-separation period — quite apart, of course, from the shared poetry. But the second point is that this system of personal names had a distinctive connection with North-West Germanic poetic diction, as has long been recognized.⁵⁷ Very curiously, what we find is that a significant number of lexical elements are used only in poetry, and in personal names, but nowhere else.

John Insley has recently supplied a very helpful itemization of the main ‘protothemes’ (that is, first elements) used in Old English personal names, organized according to semantic fields.⁵⁸ One of Insley’s fields is ‘war, battle, etc’, for which he lists 15 elements: *Æsc-*, *B(e)adu-*, *Beorn-*, *Dryht-*, *Ecg-*, *Gār-*, *Gūð-*, *H(e)aðu-*, *Helm-*, *Heoru-*, *Here-*, *Hild-*, *Ord-*, *Sige-*, and *Wīg-*. To these one could reasonably add a sixteenth, *Bil(l)-*.⁵⁹ What is remarkable is that no fewer than 11 or 12 of these 16 elements are poetic words in Old English (or possess distinctive poetic meanings): *æsc*, *b(e)adu*, *beorn*, *bill*, *dryht*, *ecg*, *gār*, *gūð*, *h(e)aðu*, *helm*, *heoru*, and *hild*.⁶⁰ None of Insley’s other fields shows anything like such a high correlation between name-elements and poetic vocabulary, though some other elements which are also poetic words do show a connection with heroic culture in some way (for example, *Sele-*, *Tīr-*, and *Torht-*).

What does this mean? How do we explain this connection between personal names and poetic diction, especially in the category of ‘war, battle’? One view could be that it is just a coincidence that the same items are preserved only in poetry and names, but lost in prose; in other words, we could argue that poetry and names independently preserved archaic lexical items. But this seems unlikely, when one considers that both systems go back to a North-West

Thim (Heidelberg, 2006), pp. 113–31, and P. A. Shaw, ‘Personal Names from Ethnonyms? Scandinavia and Elsewhere’, *Nomina* 36 (2013), 53–73.

⁵⁷ See G. Schramm, *Namenschatz und Dichtersprache: Studien zu den zweigliedrigen Personennamen der Germanen* (Göttingen, 1957), and C. Clark, ‘Onomastics’, in *The Cambridge History of the English Language: Volume I. The Beginnings to 1066*, ed. R. M. Hogg (Cambridge, 1992), pp. 452–89 (at pp. 457–8).

⁵⁸ J. Insley, ‘Personal names in place-names’, in *Perceptions of Place: Twenty-First-Century Interpretations of English Place-Name Studies*, ed. J. Carroll and D. N. Parsons (Nottingham, 2013), pp. 209–49 (at pp. 219–23). See also the very full and helpful information in Volume II (*Linguistic Commentary*) of D. Rollason and L. Rollason (eds), *The Durham Liber Vitae: London, British Library, MS Cotton Domitian A.VII*, 3 vols (London, 2007).

⁵⁹ Rollason and Rollason (eds), *Durham Liber Vitae*, II, 94.

⁶⁰ The uncertain case is *helm*: the distinctive poetic meaning is ‘lord, protector’, but it may be that the name-element preserves the prosaic meaning ‘helmet’ (Cronan, ‘Alliterative Rank’, p. 157, Griffith, ‘Poetic Language and the Paris Psalter’, p. 184, Rollason and Rollason (eds), *Durham Liber Vitae*, II, 126).

Germanic past, and that the fit between the two systems is so striking in the field of ‘war, battle’. It is very hard, though, to work out in which direction we should see the influence moving — were personal names derived from poetic diction, or poetic diction from personal names? — or whether we should be entertaining the idea of some sort of category of special, perhaps even numinous, words in early Germanic culture, upon which poetic diction and personal names both drew. The two categories are not co-extensive, though: outside of the field of ‘war, battle’, there are many poetic words which don’t feature as personal name elements, and vice versa.

To take stock of where we have got to. The evidence that I have reviewed suggests strongly, to my mind at least, that there existed a well-developed North-West Germanic poetic culture in the pre-separation period, the reflexes of which can be observed in our extant Old English and Old Norse verse (and also Old Saxon and Old High German) — transmuted, fossilized, augmented, but still recognizable nonetheless. This is not to say that pre-migration or pre-separation Germanic poetry must have been unitary and uniform, any more than the language was, but its later reflexes do indicate that there must have been a remarkably developed set of shared features. (And to repeat: by ‘pre-migration or pre-separation’, I mean before the diminution of cross-North Sea contact that seems to have taken place in the sixth and seventh centuries.)

The key here may be the elite, aristocratic, martial nature of North-West Germanic poetry, at least as we are able to re-construct it. *A priori*, it seems highly unlikely that martial heroism should have been the only subject about which poetry was composed in the first half-millennium AD; but that does seem to have been the exclusive subject-matter for which this shared North-West Germanic poetry was designed. Presumably we should imagine that poems and songs on other subjects, by other sectors of the population, used different words and may even have been in different metres. Even in the recorded Anglo-Saxon period, there is, I think, no reason to assume that the entertainments at Caedmon’s famous beer-party were in formal alliterative metre.⁶¹

So the North-West Germanic poetic culture that was the ancestor of our extant Old English and Old Norse poetry may have been the deliberate, elite creation (or perhaps, rather, re-creation) of a specific period, part of the militarization of barbarian culture in the first half-millennium AD, and not immemorially old in its current form, let alone some sort of pan-Germanic folk-art. Possible parallels might include the adoption of a common system of personal names, the development of Germanic animal art, and perhaps even the cult of Woden. The earliest attestation of Germanic alliterative poetry is the Gallehus inscription of c.400. How many centuries back the history of such

⁶¹ B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds), *Bede: Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford, 1969), pp. 414–17.

poetry stretched, and whether and how far it was re-shaped and re-formed in the so-called ‘age of migrations’, I am not myself competent to say.

For although I have been focusing on the pre-migration, or rather pre-separation, period, I should stress again that my object of attention in this lecture, and my vantage-point or perspective, is Old English and Old Norse poetic diction in the historical period; and that is what I want to return to in my conclusions. For although early Germanic poetry may have been a highly elevated, and specific, art-form — aristocratic, and on a martial theme — it later, though still at a pre-historic period, underwent an elaboration of function: it ceased to be exclusively warrior art, and, although it retained many of its elite or aristocratic qualities, it came to be used in other spheres, for other subjects and for other reasons (and on the whole it is, of course, this later, generalized version that our extant corpus of poetry represents, especially in Old English). And it is the history of the diction, rather than the history of the metre, that points to this elaboration of function — as revealed powerfully by the frequency lists (or rather, infrequency lists) in Dennis Cronan’s poetic thesaurus.

So this brings me back to issues of antiquity and archaism — issues which I can only sketch out in these concluding comments.

In the history of our discipline, probably the scholar who has thrilled most eloquently to the ancient, archaic nature of Old English poetic diction in particular is J. R. R. Tolkien, as for example in a well-known passage in his essay ‘On Translating *Beowulf*’:

If you wish to translate, not re-write, *Beowulf*, your language must be literary and traditional: not because it is now a long while since the poem was made, or because it speaks of things that have since become ancient; but because the diction of *Beowulf* was poetical, archaic, artificial (if you will), in the day that the poem was made. Many words used by the ancient English poets had, even in the eighth century, already passed out of colloquial use for anything from a lifetime to hundreds of years. They were familiar to those who were taught to use and hear the language of verse, as familiar as *thou* or *thy* are to-day; but they were literary, elevated, recognized as old (and esteemed on that account).⁶²

Not all of Tolkien’s claims here are quite as self-evident as his rhetoric makes them seem, but in general terms this is as fine an evocation of the antiquity of Old English poetic diction as one can find; and that Tolkien perceived, and wished to explore, the diction shared by Old English and Eddic poetry is strongly suggested by the fact that he attempted to translate *Atlakviða* into Old English verse — not such an eccentric undertaking as it may seem.⁶³

⁶² J. R. R. Tolkien, ‘On Translating *Beowulf*’ (first published in 1940), in his *The Monsters and the Critics and Other Essays* (London, 1983), p. 54.

⁶³ Posthumously published in J. R. R. Tolkien, *The Legend of Sigurd and Gudrún* (London, 2010), pp. 368–77. The translation is of varying degrees of lexical closeness.

To repeat one of the key points I have been making: the co-occurrence of cognate words as poetic vocabulary (both simplexes and compounds) in Old English and Old Norse must indicate that such words had already attained their marked status of being ‘poetic’ in the North-West Germanic period; they did not arise independently in the two languages, and two poetries, after separation. So this means that North-West Germanic poetic diction must already have been different from everyday language — specialized and rarefied — in the pre-separation period. One common explanation for the origins of individual poetic words or meanings is that they either arose metaphorically or else were preserved in poetry after they had vanished from other discourse (so, for example, the poetic word *beorn* originally meant ‘bear’).⁶⁴ This in turn means that, unless Germanic poetic diction was somehow invented from scratch, all at one stroke, some poetic words, or poetic meanings, must already have been archaic or fossilized in the pre-separation period itself. This is a dizzying thought, and we should remind ourselves of one of the poetic compounds with which we began: *in gēardagum*. In other words, North-West Germanic poetry itself was not only characterized by specialized vocabulary that may already have been archaic or fossilized; it also looked back to an older time, presumably in an idealization of the past. The *Beowulf*-poet, in his elegiac backward glance, was using the compound *in gēardagum* to do exactly what other poets had already been doing for hundreds of years.⁶⁵

The conclusions advanced here, however tentatively, do of course generate a whole other set of questions — which would form the material for a whole other lecture. But here, at least, are four questions to be going on with in the meantime. First, how far should we accept Tolkien’s assertion that poetic words in our extant Old English (and Old Norse) poems were ‘literary, elevated, recognized as old (and esteemed on that account)’? ‘Literary’ and ‘elevated’, yes, with a clear separation from the language of prose; but whether they were ‘recognized as old’ is more open to debate. Did Anglo-Saxon and Norse poets and audiences possess the linguistic ability to recognize the time-depth of the archaic, and have a taste for it, or was it simply an elevated distance from

⁶⁴ See further Cronan, ‘Poetic Meanings’.

⁶⁵ The Old Norse cognate of this phrase, *í árdaga*, is recorded mostly in the mythological poems of the Edda, but for a comparable perspective in Norse legendary poetry see st. 2 of *Hamðismál*: *Vara þat nú / né í gær, / þat hefir langt / liðit síðan — / er fátt fornara, / fremr var þat hálfu* (‘It was not today / nor yesterday, / much time has passed / since then — / few things are so ancient / that this was not twice as old’) (Dronke (ed.), *Poetic Edda: Heroic Poems*, p. 161). The term and idea persisted: the Middle English poem *Havelok the Dane* begins *bi are-dawes* (l. 27) — apparently a loan from Old Norse *árdagar* (W.W. Skeat (ed.), *The Lay of Havelok the Dane*, 2nd ed., rev. K. Sisam (Oxford, 1915), p. 122, G.V. Smithers (ed.), *Havelok* (Oxford, 1987), p. 175). This is the only occurrence of the compound recorded in the *Middle English Dictionary* (<http://quod.lib.umich.edu/m/med/>, s.v. *āre dawes* (n. (pl.))).

everyday language which they appreciated?⁶⁶ A second question, not unrelated to the first, is whether the preservation and continued use of archaic diction across centuries was the result of inertia or of positive choice.⁶⁷ A third question, appealing to me at least, is the speculative issue of what a speaker of Old Norse might have made of Old English poetry, or a speaker of Old English of Eddic verse, had they encountered them, in the light of the common diction between them. And a fourth question is whether our recognition of the antiquity and kinship of Old English and Old Norse poetic diction might have implications for dating individual poems, and thus for constructing a larger literary history.⁶⁸

Before I conclude, though, it is important to stress what I have *not* been saying in this lecture. I certainly don't want to suggest that Old English and Old Norse poetry were fundamentally static and unchanging; they weren't. Old Norse, after all, invented the whole genre of skaldic poetry. But I do want to suggest that certain core elements were both antique and enduring, and that we miss something important if we choose to focus only on innovation and change. Nor do I want to deny that at least some of our extant Old English and Old Norse poetry owes some of its character to Viking Age contact and mutual influence. Quite the reverse: I do believe that there was something like a North Sea culture zone in the ninth to eleventh centuries, or at least at certain times within that period; and much of my research over the past two decades has been directed towards emphasizing and understanding the importance of Anglo-Norse contact.⁶⁹ But it is for that very reason that I think that the extensive parallels I have been exploring in this lecture can't be adequately explained in terms of Anglo-Norse contact; that's not what they look like.

Of course Old English and Old Norse poetry and poetic diction didn't remain static. There were many changes, and in Old English we can observe that the tenth century formed something of a watershed: as Tom Bredehoft has shown, Old English poetry from after about 950 is distinguished by a range of differences from what had gone before — metrical, linguistic, and lexical.⁷⁰ But

⁶⁶ See, for comparison, Thorlac Turville-Petre's comments on Middle English alliterative vocabulary: on the grounds that fourteenth-century poets 'could have had no sense of [its] lineage', he argues that such vocabulary 'is not archaic and has no archaizing effect' (T. Turville-Petre, 'Alliterative Horses', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 112 (2013), 154–68, at 166–7).

⁶⁷ For some discussion, see E. M. Tyler, *Old English Poetics: The Aesthetics of the Familiar in Anglo-Saxon England* (York, 2006).

⁶⁸ On the possible dating implications of poetic words and meanings see Cronan, 'Poetic Words', and L. Neidorf, 'Lexical Evidence for the Relative Chronology of Old English Poetry', *SELIM* 20 (2013), 7–48.

⁶⁹ See further R. Dance, 'North Sea Currents: Old English-Old Norse Relations, Literary and Linguistic', *Literature Compass* 1 (2004), 1–10.

⁷⁰ See T. A. Bredehoft, *Early English Metre* (Toronto, 2005), *Authors, Audiences, and Old English Verse* (Toronto, 2009), and 'The Date of Composition of *Beowulf* and the Evidence of Metrical Evolution', in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. L. Neidorf (Cambridge,

even in late poetry, the antiquity of diction that I have been exploring in this lecture remains. Mark Griffith has demonstrated, with reference to *The Battle of Maldon*, that one of the things that happened when compounds and formulae began to fade away in the late Anglo-Saxon period is that poetic simplexes, and the attendant system of alliterative rank, became even more important than it had before.⁷¹ This tendency continued even more strongly into late Middle English alliterative poetry, such as *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*: in such fourteenth-century verse, we can see poets using poetic words — such as *burne*, from Old English *beorn* — that are at least 1,000 years old *as poetic words*.⁷²

This is, I would submit, a remarkable state of affairs, and as we contemplate it we should neither take such a circumstance for granted nor be immune to its philological glamour. In a recent book, the distinguished archaeologist Richard Morris has eloquently proposed that his discipline of archaeology should be properly characterized as being part hard science, but part Gothic romance: as it ponders the past, he writes, it ‘brings moments of exciting surprise and evokes uncertainties’.⁷³ I would suggest that the discipline of philology is much the same — part hard science, part Gothic romance — and that few textual survivals offer us as much Gothic delight as the antique diction of Old English and Old Norse poetry. Moreover, as members of the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic don’t need to be told, one of the surest means of discovering this excitement and uncertainty is to read Old English and Old Norse poetry side-by-side.⁷⁴

2014), pp. 97–111. See also M. E. Hartman, ‘The Limits of Conservative Composition in Old English Poetry’, in *The Dating of Beowulf: A Reassessment*, ed. L. Neidorf (Cambridge, 2014), pp. 79–96.

⁷¹ Griffith, ‘On the Lexical Property Termed ‘Rank’’, pp. 12–14.

⁷² See M. Borroff, *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight: A Stylistic and Metrical Study*, Yale Studies in English 152 (New Haven, 1962), esp. pp. 27–90.

⁷³ R. Morris, *Time’s Anvil: England, Archaeology and the Imagination* (London, 2012), p. 52.

⁷⁴ This lecture was delivered in the Department of Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic on 4 December 2014. I am grateful to members of the Department for discussion on that occasion, and also to audiences in York and Aberdeen, where I presented other versions of the lecture. For help of various kinds I am further grateful to Margaret Clunies Ross, Richard Dance, Filip Missuno, and Elizabeth Tyler.

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