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EVIDENCE FOR PHONETIC WEAKENING IN INFLECTIONAL SYLLABLES IN BEOWULF

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1.0. *Orthographic evidence for phonetic change.*

Among the means of detecting phonetic/phonological changes not immediately fully represented by spelling, as summarized by Herbert Penzl,[1] are the "occasional" or "naive" spellings (including reverse spellings). These apparently occur when a careless scribe lapses into spelling "by ear" and so deviates from the orthographic norm at a point of breakdown in correspondence between the phonemic and orthographic system. The deviations are based on a reduction of distinctive sound units to a common graphic representation. According to Samuel Moore,[2] "these occasional 'incorrect' forms are our best (and almost our only) evidence of the actual speech of the period from about 1050 to 1100".

For Old English, Kemp Malone[3] listed linguistic forms from four vernacular MSS of the late tenth century (Vercelli Book, Exeter Book, Junius MS, and *Beowulf* MS) which give, by way of occasional spellings, evidence for the reduction of vowels (and even loss of a final nasal) in inflectional syllables. He concludes that if the extensive loss of distinctive inflections due to phonetic reduction of unstressed vowels is one of the chief characteristics of the Middle English linguistic period, then the period of transition from Old English to Middle English, during which the orthographic norm increasingly deviated from the spoken language, will have to be set as much as a century earlier than has ordinarily been supposed.

However, in using occasional spellings as evidence for phonetic/phonological change one must be careful in individual cases to distinguish other possible factors such as scribal error in copying or accepted graphical variants within a system. To such factors as listed by Penzl,[4] there can be added the further complication of spellings which may indicate only analogical shifts or realignments within paradigms. Thus, as was pointed out by A.H. Marckwardt,[5] the relatively early and considerable spellings of *-on/-an* for the *-en* ending of the preterite plural subjunctive of weak and strong verbs in West Saxon may not indicate reverse spellings due to graphemic *-on/-an* having become phonetically indistinguishable from *-en*, but rather may point to an early analogical development proceeding from the third person singular of weak verbs and the second person singular of strong verbs. Here the forms of the indicative and subjunctive were the same in their ending (*ic, he demde, fremede, lufode; ðu rise, bude, sunge*), thus yielding an *-e* which alternated with *-on/-en* in the plural.[6]

Small wonder then that F. Klaeber[7] gives under the rubric *Language: Manuscript*, subheading *Unaccented Syllables*, a listing of forms designated as cases of "weakening (and interchange) of vowels (and inflexional syllables)", concluding: "The weakening (leveling) of unstressed vowels, accompanied by orthographic confusion, has been dealt with by Malone, A. liv 97 f. and L 6.6 a. However, all the cases cited are not equally clear. A typically ambiguous instance is *fyrene* corrected to *fyrena* 879."

What is needed then is a sifting of the evidence. I shall first comment upon the validity of the evidence in individual cases and then consider in conclusion the general force of the evidence. The purpose here is twofold: first, by applying cross-textual studies such as Malone's, Moore's and Marckwardt's to text-internal analysis, to provide a contribution to the study of the orthography of *Beowulf*; second, to demonstrate how evidence from cross-textual study and from text-internal analysis complement each other.

2.0. *A consideration of the evidence.*

2.1. Relatively clear cases of *e* for expected *a*:

1) þa hine on morgentid
on Heaþo-Ræmes holm up ætbær (518-9)

(then in the morning the sea bore him up [onto the shore] among the inhabitants of the Raumarike)

2) ne bið þe nænigr*e* gad
worolde wilna (949-50)

(nor will you be wanting for any of the desirable things of life)

3) gyf þonne Frysna hwylc frecnen spræce
ðæs moþorhetes myndgiend wære (1104-5)

(if any Frisian were in emboldened speech to come to mention the murderous hostility)

4) þær he worna fela
Sige-Scyldingum sorg*e* gefremede
yrmð*e* to aldre (2003-5)

(where he had continually wrought so very many griefs and miseries on the Danes)

2.2. Cases of *e* for expected *a* calling for further comment:

5) uncuþes fela
Wælsinges gewin wide siðas
þara þe gumena bearn gearwe ne wiston
fæhðe ond fyren*e* (so corrected in MS; 876-9)

(much that was new, the struggles of the Völsungr, [his] ventures far and wide, which men did not at all know, enmity and wicked deeds).

Since the corrected *a* has been added in the hand of the scribe, this case would be a particularly valuable piece of evidence if we could believe that the scribe had caught himself at an orthographic mistake, having written *fyrene* under the influence of the preceding *fæhðe*, since he pronounced the unstressed vowel of the inflection the same or approximately the same in both cases. The scribe may however have momentarily let an Anglianism of his "Vorlage" slip past him, having otherwise carefully corrected the *-e* ending for *ō*-stem nominative and accusative plurals to *-a*. The correct *e*-ending of the preceding *fæhðe* had influenced him before he decided that *fyrene* was indeed plural. As long as this possibility exists, no conclusion can be drawn from this particular case.

6) þæt he syðþan wæs
on meodubence maþma þy weorþre
yrfelafe (1901-3)

(that he was from then on the more honoured at the mead bench by virtue of the treasure, the heirloom)

Since the form with *-e* for expected *-a*, *weorþre*, here stands in direct connection, in a common phrase, with one in which *-a* stands for expected *-e*, *maþma*, (dative/instrumental singular, following *yrfelafe*), the two cases may well be related in the sense of a simple transposition of the endings always potentially inherent in the mechanics of copying.

7) þæt ðam þeodne wæs
siðast sigehwile sylfes dædum (2709-10)

(that was for the prince a last one of victories by virtue of his own deeds)

The reading *siðast sigehwila* is consonant with the principle of textual criticism that the emendation which involves the fewest factors and thus does least violence to the preserved text is to be preferred. It is therefore to be preferred to the proposed emendations *siðes sigehwil* or *siðast sigehwil*[8] and consequently offers another case of *-e* for *-a*, genitive plural. Any argument from metrical considerations in favour of a reading which deletes the *-e* of *sigehwile* could only be motivated by a desire to reduce the number of metrically unstressed syllables following the stressed *sige-*, x́x, of 2710a, but this presupposes too narrow a view of metrical regularity in Germanic alliterative verse even within Sievers's framework.[9]

One might include here the following cases noted by Klaeber (p. lxxxi) but not included by Malone:

8) þa þæt onfunde se þe fela aeror
modes myrðe manna cynne
fyrene gefremede (809-11)

(when he would find that out, he who had before wrought many troubling afflictions and wicked deeds on mankind)

where a genitive plural for at least *fyrene* is practically certain from the parallel passage:

9) swa fela fyrena feond mancynnes
atol angengea oft gefremede
heardra hynða (164-6)

(so many wicked deeds, bitter harms the foe of mankind, the horrid outcast often wrought).

A similar passage in which the syntactic connection is not broken despite the isolation of *fela* occurs in the *Dream of the Rood:*

Feala ic on þæm beorge gebiden hæbbe
wraðra wyrda (50-1)

(many adversities I experienced on that mount)

2.3. One relatively clear case of *-a* for expected *-e*:

10) he ð(am) frætwum feng ond him fægre gehet
leana (mid) leodum ond gelæst*a* swa (2989-90)

(he received the treasures and, fittingly, promised him rewards there before the assemblage and fulfilled as promised).

Yet, it is also possible in the light of the similarity in structure of the two sequences *-ste* and, immediately following, *swa* that mechanical replacement of the *-e* of *gelæste* occurred in anticipation of the *-a* of *swa*, especially since the two words form such a close syntactic and conceptual unit.

2.4. Cases of *-a* for expected *-e* requiring comment:

11) gyf him edwend*an* æfre scolde
bealuwa bisigu bot eft cuman (280-1)

(if reversal of and remedy for afflictons and distress should ever return to him)

This case is probably similar to that in line 1774 (cf. 16) ff. below), namely, plausible misinterpretation of the construction as containing an infinitive. I discuss there whether the misinterpretation is likely to have involved a reverse spelling of *-an* for /ən/.

12) no ic me an here*wæsmun* hnagran talige
guþgeweorc*a* þonne Grendel hine (677-8)

(in martial matters I do not reckon myself stingier with warlike deeds than Grendel [reckons] himself)

Since Malone lists this as a case of *-a* for *-e*, I take it that he understands it as a dative (instrumental) singular or as a dative singular coordinate with (plural) *herewæsmun*, dependent upon *an*. It is however more likely a genitive plural of "reference or circumstance" modifying *hnagran*.[10] Support is lent to this interpretation

by the passage:

13) næs hio hnah swa þeah,
ne to gneað gifa Geata leodum
maþmgestreona (1929-31)

where the genitives *gifa* and *maþmgestreona* may be equally dependent upon the coordinate adjectives *hnah* and *gneað*.

14) ac he wæccende wraþum on andan
bad bolgenmod beadwa geþinges (708-9)

(but he keeping watch in fierce anger awaited
enraged the issue of battle)

The sense of the text seems to demand a singular (= *beadwe*), thus Klaeber's question mark behind the entry in the glossary (p. 302). If indeed there are cases of genitive plurals in *-e* (cf. above, 2.0.) in the MS in noun and adjective inflections, then this may well be a case of a reverse spelling of *-a* for *-e*.

15) sælace gefeah
mægenbyrþenne þara þe he him mid hæfde (1624-5)

(rejoiced in the sea-booty, the mighty burden
which he had with him)

In his discussion of the Old English relative pronoun, S.O. Andrew[11] lists as one type the so-called "epanaleptic" form, compounded of stressed (and inflected) *se*, *seo*, *þæt*, *þa*, etc. plus relative particle *þe*. E. Closs Traugott[12] claims that the structure is actually such that the first element is a demonstrative pronoun always in grammatical agreement with the head of the relative construction (referent), *þe* the undeclined relative pronoun/particle functioning actually within the relative clause (referens). Some examples from *Beowulf* (with congruence between the head of the relative construction and the demonstrative pronoun in italics) are:

ðonne sægdon þæt *sæliþende*,
þa ðe gifsceattas Geata fyredon
þyder to þance (377-9)

ac he hraþe wolde
Grendle forgyldan *guðræsa* fela
ð*ara* þe he geworhte to West-Denum (1576-8)

hyrde ic þæt he *ðone healsbeah* Hygde gesealde
wrætlicne wundurmaððum, *ðone* þe him Wealhðeo geaf
(2172-3)

þa wæs æt *ðam geongan* grim andswaru
eðbegete *þam* ðe ær his elne forleas
(2860-1)

Thus, the form of the demonstrative which one would expect in line 1625,b, is *þære* (*þare*), genitive or dative singular; Malone consequently lists this as a case of reverse spelling of *-a* for *-e*, and Klaeber (p. lxxxvi, §22) suggests that *þara* is dialectal or late

usage.

Since the genitive or dative singular feminine of the demonstrative pronoun otherwise always appears as *þære* (whereas there are several cases of *þæra* for *þara*, genitive plural, and *þam* for *þæm*, dative singular, masculine and neuter, and dative plural), I doubt the correctness of Klaeber's suggestion, and would propose as an alternative that a *þare* of the "Vorlage" could have been normalized by the scribe either as *þære* or *þara*. *(ge)feon* is regularly construed with either genitive or dative, and there are two feminine nouns (although admittedly the second is likely in apposition to the first, the one functioning as an elaboration of the other) standing as the head of the relative construction. The *þara þe* construction is a quite common one (cf. list in Klaeber's glossary, p. 394, and Andrew, pp. 105-7) and would have readily suggested itself.

16) hwæt me þæs on eþle edwendan cwom (1774)

(Lo, reversal of that came to me in my homeland).

The connection to the verb *cuman* of an infinitive further specifying the nature or direction of the motion involved is relatively common, e.g. (from *Beowulf*):

þa cwom Wealþeo forð
gan under gyldnum beage (1162-3)

(then Wealtheo came walking forth beneath the golden crown)

syððan Higelac cwom
faran flotherge (2914-5)

(when Higelac came travelling with a naval force)

or, expressing the goal of the motion:

gæst yrre cwom
eatol æfengrom user neosan (2073-4)

(the angry spirit came, dire and hostile in the evening, to seek us out).[13]

Therefore a reinterpretation of the construction with noun *edwenden* (cf. lines 2188-9 of scribe B) must be considered a distinct likelihood. Scribe A interprets *edwendan* in similar circumstances in line 280 (cf. 11) above). If it were assumed that Scribe A wrote *-an* for *-en* as a reverse spelling because the two endings were for him essentially homophonous this would be the only case of such a reverse spelling involving the *-an* of an infinitive either in the *Beowulf* text or in the preceding texts in the *Beowulf* MS which were also copied by Scribe A.[14] While sporadic spellings of *-en* for *-an* would be normal following phonetic reduction of the unstressed *a*, especially in related lexical items which thus become homonymous, as *edwendan* ~ *edwenden*, reverse spellings of, in this case, *-an* for *-en*, should presuppose the more common existence of the unetymological spelling of *-en* for *-an* in the same context. In the case of the

infinitive the essential evidence is lacking for West Saxon of the period in question, as noted by Marckwardt: "The four Old English poetic texts [examined by Malone] contain but five instances of levelled infinitives in *-e* or *-en*. The eleventh-century texts [cf. below] agree in pointing to a relatively late change in this category, for although there are scattered instances in the earlier texts, a regular progression does not manifest itself until the very close of the period. There are in the 15 texts only 35 instances of *-en* infinitives as against 1458 *-an* forms, and only in the very latest text, no. 15, is the proportion of levelled forms even calculable; it amounts to about 10%".[15]

The eleventh-century texts to which Marckwardt alludes are those which he examined for evidence of phonetic reduction in the vowels of verbal inflections - five texts each roughly from the early, mid- and late-eleventh century, beginning with Bede's *Ecclesiastical History*, Corpus Christi College MS 279, and ending with Ælfric's *Homily on Judith* and *Passio Beatae Margaretae*, Corpus Christi College MS 303. The list of cases of *-en* for the *-an* ending of the infinitive shows only one example in the first five texts, one example each in two of the MSS from the middle group; only in the five MSS from the late-eleventh century are there more numerous examples.[16]

The most we can say then is that Scribe A "corrected" *edwenden* to conform to his conception of the construction; phonetic identity of *-an* and *-en* for Scribe A need not be assumed.

17) þæt he syðþan wæs
on meodubence maþma þy weorþre
yrfelafe (1901-3)

For this case, cf. above, 2.0., esp. 6).

18) oðres ne gymeð
to gebidanne burgum in innan
yrfeweardas (2451-3)

(he was not disposed to await within fortress walls another heir)

With this case goes the following similar one:

19) us wæs a syððan
Merewioingas milts ungyfeðe (2920-1)

(the favour of the Merovingian was denied us ever after).

Malone is probably correct in rejecting the suggestion that the *-as* genitives represent early Anglian dialect forms surviving in late West Saxon texts. They are, he notes, rather to be considered variant spellings, deriving from the nominative/accusative plural of masculine *a*-stems, for an ending with a phonetically reduced (mid-central) vowel plus *s*. The *-es* accusative plural *heaþo-Ræmes* (cf. above, 2.1) is then, in this sense, a reverse spelling.

20) hwilum he on lufan læteð hworfan
monnes modgeþonc (1728-9)

There is a strong temptation to see a parallelism between *lufan* in this passage and *lufen* in line 2886:

Nu sceal sinc-þego ond swyrd-gifu
eall eðel-wyn eowrum cynne
lufen alicgean (2884-6)

where C.L. Wrenn[17] sees *lufen* as "parallel to and variation of *eðel-wyn* in the line above". Since the full form occurs in line 692 as *eard-lufan* with second element *lufu/lufe*, this leads Wrenn to list *lufen* in his glossary (p. 256) as synonymous with *lufu*. Conversely, one can, like R.W. Chambers, extend the semantic range of *lufu* to include a meaning of "delight", making it thus partially synonymous with a general meaning of "joy, comfort" for *lufen*.[18] As noted, both of these views have in common the equation of *lufu/lufe* and *lufen* (although not actual identity of *lufan* and *lufen*, as proposed by Malone). But one can only guess at the general meaning of OE *lufen* from its two recorded occurrences - here and in *Daniel* 73, where it is apparently synonymous with its proposed Gothic cognate, *lubains* 'hope'.[19] Thus one can argue that OE *lufu/lufe* and *lufen* are synonyms without accepting the view that *lufan*, *Beow.* 1728, and *lufen*, *Beow.* 2886, are an identical lexeme. In addition, there are at least two suggestions for the interpretation of *on lufan* (in addition to that of [*eard*] *lufan*) which operate within the closer semantic field surrounding OE *lufu*.[20]

21) ridend swefað (2457)

Since *ridend* may not be singular,[21] this case is not valid without further corroboration.

22) ðæs ðe ic (wen) hafo
þe us seceað to sweona leod*a* (3000-1)

(which it is to be expected, the Swedes will seek at our hands)

23) þa ymbe hlaew riodan hildedeore
æþelinga bearn ealra twelf*a* (3169-70)

(then warriors rode around the barrow, noblemen, twelve in all)

Examples 22) and 23) may arise from simple scribal error, repetition of the *a*-ending due to inattentiveness. Whether a similar pronunciation of the unstressed vowels *a* and *e* contributed to the confusion, cannot be decided from these cases.

2.5. Cases of *-e* for expected *-u*:

24) cynna gehwylcum þara ðe cwice hwyrfaþ

(for all the peoples who go about alive)

25) hlyn swynsode
word wæron wynsume (611-2)

(there was cheerful sound, there were pleasant words)

These forms are likely to be due to morphological levelling based upon the masculine plural paradigm. This process may have been accelerated by vowel-reduction in unstressed syllables, but was not necessarily dependent upon it. The originally endingless nominative and accusative plural forms of long-stem neuter adjectives had taken on by analogy with the masculines and feminines an *-e* ending, which might then appear as *-u* due to the analogy of short-stem plurals in *-u/-e*; at this stage it probably was a matter of merely variant spellings for the phonetically reduced vowel marking the nominative and accusative plural of the neuter form of adjectives.[22]

2.6. *One case of -e for expected -o occurs:*

26) wyrsan wigfrecan wæl reafeden (1212)

(more unscrupulous warriors plundered the dead on the battlefield)

The appearance of *e* in place of *o/a* as the connecting or thematic vowel in the preterite plural indicative of second class weak verbs has been explained[23] as a special case, due to a rule of vowel harmony, and so probably independent of a general phonetic reduction of vowels in unstressed syllables in Old English. The question then is whether the existence of a mid-central, reduced vowel, both phonetically and graphemically, in the penultimate syllable led the scribe to reveal unwittingly something about his pronunciation of the vowel of the final syllable. Since this concerns the considerations raised in 2.72. below, I reserve discussion here.

2.7. Cases pointing to loss of final nasal in inflectional syllables.

2.71. *-an* for expected *-e*:

27) ond him help*an* ne mæg
eald ond infrod ænige gefremman (2448-9)

(and he, old and wise as he is, can not perform any help for him)

Since line 2448b taken by itself, or even with 2449a, makes perfect good sense ("and he can not help him"), and is regular syntactically,[24] this is sufficient to account for the scribal error. For the reason outlined above (in the case of *edwendan*, 2.4. 11)), the view that the common pronunciation /ə/ where *-an* was written produced a reverse spelling of *-an* for *-e* must remain uncertain.

28) ac in cemp*an* gecrong cumbles hyrde
æþeling on elne (2505-6)

(and the guardian of the banner fell in battle, the hero valiantly)

cempan (= *campe*) here too clearly indicates a misunderstanding or misinterpretation involving *cempan* on the part of the scribe to be admissible as evidence for Malone's theory. Interestingly, the form *cempan* (as dative singular) occurs just above in:

Dæghrefne wearð
to handbonan Huga cempan

2.72. Cases of -*e* for expected -*on* (preterite plural indicative:

29) hine sorhwylmas
lemede to lange (904-5)

(surging sorrows oppressed him too long)

30) ofereode þa æþelinga bearn[25]
steap stanhliðo (1408-9)

(the noble warriors then traversed steep rocky slopes)

31) hyrde ic þæt þam frætwum feower mearas
lungre gelice last weardode (2163-4)

(I heard that four steeds followed behind the treasures in formation [lit: at an equal pace]).

These three cases along with the case of *reafeden* for *reafedon* (cf. 26) above), seem to offer relatively clear evidence for Malone's thesis, yet there are two considerations which tend to cast doubt on the validity of this interpretation.

Marckwardt[26] states that all but one of the eleventh-century texts he examined show cases of levelling in the inflectional syllable of the preterite plural indicative - 306 cases of -*an* (as the frequency indicates, probably the earliest of the three changes recorded here; cf. n.14); 35 cases of -*en*; 28 cases of -*e*; giving a total of 369 occurrences of an indication of levelling of some degree or sort as against 2006 cases of traditional -*on*. It is clear (as Marckwardt points out [p. 86]) that a sound change in the vowel of the inflectional syllable is reflected in the orthography as shown by the progressive movement from -*on* to -*an* to -*en*/-*e*. Whereas the overall total for occurrences of levelled forms as against older -*on* throughout the texts of the eleventh century is 15%, the ratio in the seven earliest is 8%, in the eight later ones 25%. The listing indicates the following relationship of the -*an* to -*en*/-*e* spellings: in the five earliest texts only one, the *Rule of Chrodegang*, exhibits -*en* spellings, whereas four, including the *Rule of Chrodegang*, exhibit -*an* spellings.[27] From the mid-eleventh century on, with four exceptions, -*en*/-*e* spellings occur always alongside -*an* forms.[28]

It is however exactly the point that four out of five of the earliest eleventh-century texts examined by Marckwardt exhibit no cases of -*en* for -*on*, preterite indicative plural, which raises the question of how early the centralizing process to /ə/ began and became generalized. (As noted already, there are several instances of -*an* spellings for -*on* in the *Beowulf*; Klaeber, p. lxxxii.)

In addition to the four preterite plural indicatives in *-en/-e* found by Malone in *Beowulf* (29)-31) above), there are the following: Vercelli Book: *flowen* (= *-on*), *Homilies*; *galen* (= *golon*), *Andreas*; *funden* (= *-on*), *Elene*; Junius MS: *moten* (= *-on*), 2x, *mosten* (= *-on*), *þanceden* (= *-don*), *Christ and Satan*; Beowulf MS: *geweorþeden* (= *-don*), *Letter of Alexander*; and the inverted spellings *sceawedon* (= *-de*), *Elene*; Exeter Book: *fremedon* (= *-de*), *Whale*. This gives a total of four cases of strong verbs (including *gan* with its weak preterite *eode*), one preterite-present, and five weak verbs (all of class II).

This list of forms - including, as noted, some cases of texts exhibiting only weak preterites - contradicts the evidence of Marckwardt that levelling of the *-on* preterite plural indicative ending to *-an*, *-en/-e* in the seven earliest eleventh-century texts which he considered occurs much more often among strong verbs, preterite-presents, and anomalous verbs than among weak ones - the exact ratio is fifty-seven to five. His explanation is:

> In any grammatical category, one factor which would make for resistance to a sound change would be the utility of the inflectional ending. If the distinction indicated by an inflectional suffix were highly meaningful, and if the inflectional suffix were the only means of showing such a distinction, we might expect a considerable amount of resistance to any change which would destroy or obliterate it . . . . In the preterite indicative generally, the ending *-on* served to signal the difference between singular and plural, a distinction more important to the verb at that time than today because of the frequent separation of verb and subject. In the weak verbs this was the only way that such a distinction was indicated. In most of the strong verb classes, however, the ablaut variation served the same purpose.[29]

I intend to treat the problem posed by these verbal inflections in a subsequent paper. Nevertheless I comment briefly on Marckwardt's observations here. Admittedly, the evidence in diachronic linguistic research against the Neo-Grammarian hypothesis in its full strictness needs no detailed repetition. It should by now be accepted that a sound change can have a phonetic origin but be restricted either morphologically or even lexically (and be correspondingly hindered in distribution).[30] Although Marckwardt's argument seems convincing from his data, it is undeniable from the number of spellings of *-að* for the third person singular present indicative and, vice versa, of *-eð* for the plural present indicative inflection in Malone's material, that the distinction of singular and plural as specially marked verbal inflections had not hindered the reduction of *a* in this category already during the tenth century. One could argue that here the system was not so endangered, but could be maintained in so far as the third person singular (except for weak verbs of Class II and some short-stem weak verbs of Class I)[31] could show syncopated forms as opposed to non-syncopated ones in the plural. But this ignores the fact that the non-syncopated third person singular present indicative forms of strong and weak verbs, which were obviously indistinguishable in their ending from the (originally exclusively)

plural ending *-að*, as the confusion of *-að*, *-eð* attests, belonged to the system as much as the syncopated ones. That is, they were regarded as synonymous with the syncopated (and thus unambiguously marked) third person singular forms only because they occur with a singular subject *he*, *heo*, or *hit*, not a plural one. This means that the distinction between singular and plural inflection had indeed been discarded in these forms of the present indicative.

One might wish to extend Marckwardt's observation on the functional value of the *-on* plural inflection among the weak verbs to include maintenance of the indicative/subjunctive marking in the preterite. However, the *-on/-en* distinction marking indicative versus subjunctive had been early and widely given up in favour of an overall singular/plural marking *-e/-on*, *-en* (cf. above, 1.0.), resulting in a system where *-on* and *-en* are merely variants of the plural subjunctive inflection, and the presence or absence of the final nasal distinguishes plural from singular in both the indicative and the subjunctive.[32]

The data presented by D.W. Reed[33] also cast doubt on the interpretation of *-e/-en* as indicating an actual levelled preterite plural inflection in *Beowulf* (and the other tenth-century occurrences recorded by Malone as noted above). Reed's data indicate a retention of the final nasal in the preterite plural (subjunctive and indicative) inflections vis-à-vis the earliest eleventh-century indications of loss of the final nasal in the present plural (subjunctive) in the non-Northern texts he examined. His statistics of retention of the final nasal are: five early-eleventh century texts - pret. 100%, pres. 93.1%; mid-eleventh-century texts - pret. 98.7%, pres. 92.7%; late-eleventh-century texts - pret. 98.9%, pres. 84.5%. He concludes that the onset of loss of final nasal in the preterite plural indicative and subjunctive inflections is to be fixed around 1050 for non-Northern dialects.[33]

The reason for this selective conservatism may well be that the final nasal was the only inflectional marker (except for ablaut among the strong verbs) to keep at least two of four inflectional categories in the preterite distinct: singular/plural, indicative/subjunctive, whereas *-e* in the present tense still marked off singular or plural subjunctive from the *-eð/-að* of the third person singular/general plural indicative; and the loss of singular/plural distinction within the subjunctive paradigm merely paralleled the loss already completed in the present indicative with the levelling of *-a/-e*. But this suggestion is only tentatively offered here.

2.8. One case of *-um* for expected *-e*:

> hafast þu gefered þæt þam folcum sceal
> Geata leodum ond Gar-Denum
> sib gemæn*um* (1855-7)
>
> (you have brought it about that peace and
> friendship shall be shared between those peoples,
> the Geats and the Danes)

This is too clearly a case of dittography (*folcum* . . . *leodum* . . . *Denum* . . . *gemænum*) to be accepted as evidence for loss of a final nasal.

3.0. *Summary of the evidence.*

Outside strictly traditional orthography the spelling of genitive plurals in *-e* rather than *-a* must not have been unknown. This relaxation of scribal tradition may have been furthered by the existing spelling tradition of *-e* where non-Northern dialects had *-a* in the nominative and accusative plural of *ō*-stems.

There must also have been numerous spellings of *-es* for the nominative and accusative plural of *ā*-stem nouns (producing the reverse spellings of *-as* for genitive singular *-es*). The consistency in the orthographic deviation in these cases - they alone account for some forty-nine of the forms listed by Malone - means that we are safe in rejecting Campbell's doubt that significance should be attached to spellings of *-as*, genitive singular, and *-es*, nominative and accusative plural, in MSS as early as that including *Beowulf*.[34]

No doubt the reduction of vowels in inflectional syllables was not confined to these cases,[35] but they are the ones which seem to have been particularly likely, for whatever reason, to escape normalization to the strict orthographic standard. Otherwise, *Beowulf* is so markedly conservative in the spelling of its inflections that other examples of irregularity have a plausible alternative explanation. The cases of the *-e/-en* preterite plural indicative endings face counter-evidence and require further study. They would supply the only reliable evidence in *Beowulf* for the loss of a final nasal in inflectional syllables.

NOTES

1 "The Evidence for Phonemic Changes", in *Studies Presented to Joshua Whatmough* ('s-Gravenhage: Mouton, 1957), pp. 193-208; rptd. in Roger Lass, *Approaches to English Historical Linguistics: an Anthology* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1969), pp. 10-24.

2 "Earliest Morphological Changes in Middle English", *Language*, 4 (1928), 239.

3 "When did Middle English Begin", in *Curme Volume of Linguistic Studies*, Language Monographs, 7 (Baltimore: Linguistic Society of America, 1930), pp. 110-7. Stefan Sonderegger later listed this kind of evidence for Old High German in "Das Althochdeutsche der Vorakte der älteren St. Galler Urkunden", *Zeitschrift für Mundartforschung*, 28 (1961), 251-86.

4 Ibid., p. 198.

5 "Verb inflections in Late Old English", in *Philologica: the Malone Anniversary Studies* (Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1949), p. 81; cf. also Karl Brunner and Eduard Sievers, *Altenglische Grammatik*, 3rd ed. (Tübingen: Niemeyer, 1965), §365, and Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1959), §735, g.

6 Even granted the highly improbable proposition that the interchange of *-on* and *-en* in the preterite subjunctive plural is due to phonetic reduction of the vowel in the inflectional syllable at such an early date and that *-on* and *-en* were then merely variant spellings for a phonetically identical inflection, one would have to explain what othographic quirk could have caused the uneven distribution of the *-on* and *-en* spellings. In the fifteen texts examined by Marckwardt the ratio of forms in *-on* to forms in *-en* is approximately four times greater in the earlier texts.

7 *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, 3rd ed. (Boston: D.C. Heath, 1968), from which all quotations are given, pp. lxxxi-iii.

8 Klaeber, p. 102.

9 Klaus von See, *Germanische Verskunst* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1967), pp. 3-36, passim.

10 For examples of this usage of the genitive cf. Ferdinand Holthausen, *Altsächsisches Elementarbuch*, 2nd ed. (Heidelberg: Winter, 1921), p. 487; W.B. Lockwood, *Historical German Syntax* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1968), pp. 8-9.

11 *Syntax and Style in Old English* (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1940), p. 102.

12 *The History of English Syntax* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1972), p. 103-5. Thus the status of a special form of the relative pronoun is reserved for Andrew's "pleonastic form", a compounding of declined *se*, *seo*, *þæt*, etc., and undeclined *þe*, both actually together in the relative clause functioning as the *referens* (rather than the form of *se*, *seo*, *þæt* having a demonstrative function). This special form is, as Closs Traugott notes (p. 103, n. 17), very rare in Old English: *Beow.* 1296-8 Se wæs Hroþgare hæleþa leofost / on gesiðes had be sæm tweonum / rice rand-wiga þone ðe heo on ræste abreat / .

13 Morgan Callaway, Jr., *The Infinitive in Anglo-Saxon* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Institution, 1913), pp. 89-92, 132 ff.

14 Klaeber, pp. lxxxix-xc; Malone, p. 115. One must be careful to separate here cases of *-an* spellings for *-en* of the preterite subjunctive plural, such as Malone lists for Scribe A of *Beowulf* in the *Letter of Alexander* (Malone, p. 115), since this is not a reverse spelling, but rather (in agreement with Brunner, §364, 2, Anm. 4; Campbell, §735 [*e*]) a variant of *-on* levelled early (as previously noted) from the preterite indicative plural into the subjunctive. The spelling of *-an*, perhaps Kentish in origin (Campbell, §377), possibly indicates an early step in the phonetic weakening of vowels in inflectional syllables in Old English - namely, loss of distinction in rounding between back vowels, perhaps coupled with lowering (cf. Campbell, §377; Karl Luick, *Historische Grammatik der englischen Sprache* [Leipzig, 1914], I, 1, pp. 489-90; and above, 2.72.). To suggest that such cases represent a reverse spelling for *-en* is to ignore the evidence for the early, extensive levelling of *-on* into the preterite plural subjunctive paradigm. I suggest rather that these *-an* spellings are no different from the ones explained as "normal late West Saxon spellings" for *-on* of the preterite indicative plural (Klaeber, §18, 4, b, note).

15 Op. cit., pp. 87-8.

16 Ibid., p. 86.

17 *Beowulf with the Finnsburg Fragment*, 3rd ed. rev. W.F. Bolton (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1973), p. 256.

18 *Beowulf* (London: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1933); cf. Klaeber, p. 191, footnote to line 1728, and Glossary, p. 369.

19 T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford Univ. Press, 1898), p. 647, and *Supplement to an Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* etc. (Oxford Univ. Press, 1921), p. 621; John Richard Clark Hall and Herbert D. Meritt, *A Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary*, 4th ed. (Cambridge Univ. Press, 1960), p. 222.

20 Wrenn, op.cit., p. 161, footnote to lines 1728-31.

21 Klaeber, pp. 213-4.

22 Brunner, §293, Anm. 3; Samuel Moore and Albert H. Marckwardt, *Historical Outlines of English Sounds and Inflections* (Ann Arbor: George Wahr, 1951), p. 89.

23 By Brunner, §142 and 413, and Campbell, §385 and 757.

24 Closs Traugott, pp. 106 ff.

25 Since this passage continues: "he feara sum beforan gengde" (1412), Klaeber, referring to line 3170, justifiably suggests that *æþelinga bearn* is probably plural here also, for such expressions as *ylda bearn*, 70, *gumena bearn*, 878, and *Geata bearn*, 2184, are always plural; the singular is always: *æþelinges bearn* (= Sigemund), 888; *þeodnes bearn* (= Heremod), 910; *þeodnes bearn* (= Hreþric), 1837.

26 Op.cit., pp. 85-6.

27 Ibid., p. 86.

28 As M.L. Samuels (*Linguistic Evolution with Special Reference to English* [Cambridge Univ. Press, 1972], p. 113) remarks, the exact relationship of phonemes to graphemes is rarely capable of absolute proof. He continues however that it would be perverse to deny that the spread of a phonological change from one dialect area to another (and he adduces a case in point) is indicated by the occurrence of orthographic confusion in the one dialect area which finally is resolved in favour of the indication of a new phonological value if the new phonological value previously existed with the same orthographic designation in the other, neighbouring, dialect area. I agree, and suggest that it would be just as perverse to deny that stages in a phonological change *within* a dialect area are being indicated when one finds a consistent, unidirectional change in orthography from an earlier attested stage to a point that is consonant with what is known about a later stage.

29 Marckwardt, op.cit., pp. 86-7.

30 E.g. Samuels, op.cit., pp. 120 ff.

31 Campbell, op.cit., §751.

32 Reflected perhaps in the fact that in early Middle English in the Midlands, where loss of distinction between *he* and *heo* 'she/they' was taking place widely, the inflectional ending *-en* with its plural-marking final nasal replaced earlier -eþ (< -aþ) in the present indicative plural; cf. Samuels, op. cit., pp. 85-6.

33 *The History of Inflectional "n" in English Verbs before 1500*, Univ. of Calif. Publications in English, 7:4, 157-328; Reed uses the same texts as Marckwardt in *Philologica*.

34 Campbell, op.cit., §379.

35 Cf. the case of *swefað* for likely *swefeð*, *Beow.* 2457, in view of the numerous instances of confusion of *-eð/-að* amongst Malone's material. It probably escaped emendation since it can be construed as a plural in a general, rather than a specific, reference.

APPENDIX

Malone (see n. 3 of my discussion) lists only one other alleged example of the loss of a final nasal in an inflectional syllable in the *Beowulf* MS from the *Letter of Alexander*: "þa fyr ðonne feollon on þa eorþan swelce byrnende þe celle . . . " (vise nubes ardentes de caelo tanquam faces decidere). Malone lists only *þecelle*. The full passage is from Malone's facsimile edition of the *Nowell Codex: British Museum, Cotton Vitellius A XV*, (Copenhagen, 1963), f. 116r, 13-4; and in my opinion the separation of *þe* and *celle* strongly suggests some scribal misunderstanding.

Otherwise Malone lists examples of loss of final nasal in the following proportions: *Elene*, 2x; *Christ*, 2x; *Seafarer*, 1x: *Juliana*, 1x; *Whale*, 1x; *Wonders of Creation*, 1x; *Wanderer*, 1x; *Riddles*, 2x, *Daniel*, 1x. They are: sceawed*on* (= *-e*), bit*rum* (= *-e*), mær*e* (= *-an*), god*e* (= *-um*), fremm*an* (= *-e*), gecyð*e* (= *-an*), fremed*on* (= *-e*), halg*e* (= *-an*), hrus*e* (= *-an*), genamn*e* (= *-an*), bet*an* (= *-e*), gædelingｅ (= *-um*). This gives six verbal forms and (including *þe celle*) seven non-verbal ones. The non-verbal ones cover the noun and adjectival inflections ending in a nasal examined for loss of the nasal in eleventh-century texts by Moore ("Loss of Final *n* in Inflectional Syllables of Middle English", *Language* 3, (1927), 232-59): weak noun, singular and plural; weak adjective; strong adjective, dative singular and plural; and strong noun, dative plural.

Indubitably, the first of the three phonological changes in inflectional syllables noted by Moore ("Earliest Morphological Changes", 239-40) for the eleventh century has already taken place by the production of our only extant text of *Beowulf*; cf. the spellings *-an/-on* for *-um*, dative plural (Klaeber, §18,1) and, vice versa, forms such as *banū* for *banan* (*Beow.* 158; cf. Klaeber, lxxxiv, footnote 2). The spelling, with the other evidence for developments in inflectional syllables, indicates a reduced back vowel with nasal element. The interchange of the spellings is due to the fact that *-um* and *-an*, *-on* and early *-un* are the only spellings deriving from early OE inflections which indicate a back vowel plus nasal. This is the common feature they shared and to which they had been reduced by this time.

Just how much further this process in unstressed syllables had gone is difficult to determine. Although the evidence from the eleventh century is not conclusive, Moore ("Earliest Morphological Changes, 246-7) believes that the completion of the process of levelling of the distinction between *a*, *o*, *u* and *e* in unstressed syllables was likely contemporaneous with the early stages of the loss of final nasal in inflectional syllables. Although there is then nothing in principle against accepting the *-e* spellings noted above as reflections of current pronunciation, it is less clear whether loss of a final nasal in inflectional syllables was as widespread as the spellings seem to indicate. For we must take into account the inconsistent development of orthography due to disturbance, deriving apparently from morphological conditioning, of the pattern of graphic indication of loss of final nasal throughout the

eleventh and twelfth centuries (Moore, "Loss of Final *n*"). Thus one would be more willing to accept the evidence of a form such as *hruse* for *hrusan* or *mære* for *mæran* since there is a general lack of distinctive function of the final nasal in the oblique cases of the singular of weak noun and adjective inflections, whereas it would have distinguished plural from singular in the dative of strong nouns (gædeling*um* > *-en*) and the nominative of weak nouns (þecell*an* > *-en*) (Moore, "Loss of Final *n*", 251 ff.).

With regard to the cases of verbal inflections with unetymological *-e* (< *-an*, *-on*) noted in the text, section 2.72, there are two factors difficult to harmonize with the orthographic evidence for loss of final nasal in verbal inflections collected from eleventh century material by Reed. Firstly, the ratio of non-finite to finite verb forms (4:5), since there are no occurrences of infinitives which show loss of final nasal in the five early-eleventh century texts examined by Reed (*History of Inflectional "n"*, pp. 199, 263). Secondly, no evidence of loss of a final nasal in present subjunctive inflections vis-a-vis the preterite indicative (Reed, pp. 262-3). Possibly also the fact that the ratio of verbal to non-verbal forms is considerably higher than in Moore's material from the eleventh century (6:7 vs. 28:100; cf. Moore, "Loss of Final *n*", 242 ff.) should be added here, although, in this case, the small number of examples in Malone's material probably renders statistical comparison with material from the eleventh or twelfth century unreliable.