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Introduction

The author of Beowulf composed in an ancient verse form also inherited by Scandinavian and continental West Germanic poets. The oldest surviving line in this form illustrates its essential features:

\[ \text{ekhlewa} \text{gasiR : holtijaR : horna : tawido :} \]

Line (1) was carved in runes on a golden drinking horn. The character \( R \) represents a sound derived from Germanic \( z \) that had not yet merged with \( r \). The language is probably an early form of Norse, and the artefact dates from about 400 AD.\(^2\) Like the lines employed in Beowulf, line (1) falls into two natural syntactic constituents of about the same size. The first constituent, a grammatical subject, contains a personal pronoun and two proper nouns. The second constituent, a grammatical predicate, contains a noun object and a finite verb. Word order is SOV (subject–object–verb), generally regarded as the basic pattern for early Germanic.\(^3\) Each half of the line includes two stressed words separated by a boundary marker, indicated above by a colon.\(^4\) No punctuation appears between the unstressed pronoun \( ek \) and the first stressed word. The stressed nouns in the first half of the line both begin with \( H \)- and are said to alliterate. These two words also alliterate with \( horna \) in the second half of the line.

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\(^1\) ‘I, Hlewagast, Holr’s son, made the horn.’ The text is cited from Krause, Runenin- 
schriften, p. 596. The translation is from Elliott, Runes, p. 80. Krause, Runen, p. 72, 
gives essentially the same translation in German.

\(^2\) Düwel, Runenkunde, pp. 15, 17 and 28; Krause, Runen, §52.

\(^3\) See CHEL I, §2.6.

\(^4\) Copies of the runic passage made before the horn was lost represent this marker as a 
column of four points. See Krause, Runeninschriften, pp. 596–8; Morris, Epigraphy, §4.7.
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THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In a work devoted to Old English metre, I proposed four fundamental principles to explain the verse form of Beowulf. These principles can be stated in a general form applicable to the cognate Germanic traditions:

P1 Foot patterns correspond to native word patterns. The foot patterns most easily perceived correspond to the most common word patterns.

P2 The verse consists of two readily identifiable feet. Foot patterns corresponding to unusual word patterns add to the complexity of verses in which they appear.

P3 Assignment of alliteration corresponds to assignment of stress in Germanic compounds and serves to bind smaller metrical constituents into larger constituents. The integrity of the larger constituent is marked by alliteration on its first subconstituent.

P4 The line consists of two adjacent verses bound by alliteration. The first of these is the a-verse; the second is the b-verse.

The second half of line (1) obviously constitutes a well-formed b-verse of two word feet, since each of its subparts consists of a single stressed word. There are also two stressed words in the first half of the line. The runemaster's decision not to place a word boundary after the pronoun ek suggests that this unstressed constituent did not count as an additional word, i.e., that it was regarded as an anacrusis. The stress rule for Germanic compounds assigns primary stress to the first constituent and subordinates the second constituent. This linguistic rule reapplies at a higher level in compounds with more than two constituents. Rule P3 applies to the metrical constituents of (1) in exactly the same way. As with stress assignment, assignment of alliteration confers special prominence on some constituents and subordinates neighbouring ones. At the level of the verse, P3 assigns alliteration to the first foot and subordinates the second foot. At the level of the line, P3 subordinates the b-verse to the a-verse. The subordinate foot of the dominant a-verse, occupied by boltiaR, remains fairly prominent, and may contain an alliterating syllable. A-verses with two alliterating syllables appear in all Germanic traditions, though there are also many a-verses in which the subordinate

5 OEM, §0.2.  6 OEM, §7.4; cf. Sauer, Nominalkomposita, §4.1.1.
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foot fails to alliterate. Significantly less prominent is the subordinate foot of the subordinate b-verse, occupied in (1) by tawido. None of the early Germanic traditions permits alliteration in such a doubly subordinated foot.

Although example (1) has important affinities with lines from Beowulf, there are differences in detail. Personal pronouns comparable to runic ek do not appear as anacrases in the Old English epic. The Beowulf poet usually employs the least conspicuous unstressed constituents for anacrusis, such as verbal prefixes and preverbal negative particles. In addition, the a-verse of (1), with its two long proper names, would be rejected as unacceptably large by the Beowulf poet. The less strict constraints on verse size attested by (1) must result in part from the large average size of early Germanic words, as compared with words of the historical period. It is interesting to note, however, that the line remains deviant from an Old English point of view even when translated into Old Danish, a language later spoken in North Schleswig, where the runic horn was found. The Old Danish translation provided in a standard introductory text is Ek, HløgestR HøltiR, born tāda. By Old English standards, HløgestR HøltiR is a perfectly good a-verse, but we still have pronominal anacrusis, and the b-verse has become too short, falling below the absolute minimum of four syllables that applies in Beowulf. The detail rules evidently differed from one tradition to another. As we shall see, Old Norse metre of the historical period employs short verses of a type not found in Beowulf, and Old Saxon metre employs many non-prefixal anacrases.

PERCEPTION OF METRICAL FORM

In a literate tradition, rules for poetry can be published by acknowledged authorities and studied by poets who wish to conform. Germanic metre, on the other hand, clearly developed in a preliterate era. Although non-literate poets often adhere to strict standards of versecraft, they are typically quite unable to state the metrical rules they follow. Rules of oral-traditional metre are acquired by intuition, like linguistic rules. Metrists can scan a written text at leisure, consulting reference works if

7 See Cable, Meter and Melody, ch. 3.
8 OEM, §2.5.
10 See Jakobson, Selected Writings V, 195–6.
necessary. When poetry of any kind is recited, scansion must take place at the speed of performance, like analysis of linguistic form during ordinary speech. An explanatory account of Germanic versecraft is therefore subject to severe constraints. It would be quite implausible to argue, for example, that the poet’s audience memorized a long, arbitrary list of acceptable patterns and checked each verse against the list during performance. Such mental operations could hardly take place with the necessary speed. The detailed classifications of scholars like Bliss show that strict metrical constraints existed, but do not explain how such constraints could be appreciated or transmitted, as Bliss himself realizes. One way to explain fundamental principles of verse construction is to show that they correspond to linguistic principles already internalized by the native speaker. Principles P1–4 attempt this kind of explanation. Speakers of a language can identify native word units instantaneously in an acoustic signal, so it seems reasonable to suppose that they could identify metrical units comparable to native words at the speed of performance. Recognition of word feet is utterly trivial, of course, in the second half of example (1), where each foot consists of a single stressed word. Rule P3 operates exactly like the compound stress rule internalized by all native speakers of early Germanic languages and should have been quite easy to learn. In a metrical system with P3, moreover, P2 and P4 follow as a matter of course. Because linguistic compounding is a binary operation, the larger metrical domains bound together by alliteration are most naturally constructed in a binary fashion. Note that the units bound by alliteration (word feet) correspond to the units bound by the compound stress rule (words). In this sense, P1 also follows from P3. Thus P1–4

11 The audience’s ability to scan in real time is commonly presupposed even by metrists who confess that they are unable to account for it. Thus for example McLintock, ‘Metre and Rhythm’, p. 567: ‘An educated audience (by a process which is difficult to describe) can recognize well-formed verses. It will be content (but no more) if it discerns such verses and can pronounce the poet competent in his craft; it will applaud him if he can exploit his craft in performance.’

12 See Jackendoff, Consciousness, §4.2. This problem would arise in any verse form intended for recitation, even if poet and audience were fully literate and had received some explicit training in metrical analysis. According to Kendall, Metrical Grammar, p. 5, metrical constraints of the kind observed in Beowulf were unlikely to be codified as explicit rules, and the poet, though probably literate, used an oral-traditional metre.

13 Bliss, Metre, §122.
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have the kind of coherence that allows internalized rule systems to function at high speed.\textsuperscript{14}

The detail rules of a coherent system follow from its general principles. In \textit{Beowulf}, a number of detail rules guide the audience to correct interpretation of unstressed prefixes in anacrusis, preventing confusion about the number of feet in the verse.\textsuperscript{15} These rules represent an intuitive rejection of verses that lack a clear two-foot structure, and thus follow from P2. Observe that a strong prediction is made about what would happen to a Germanic metre if unstressed prefixes were lost from the poet's language. In that case, the related detail rules would serve no purpose, and should be lost as well. We can test this prediction because Old Norse lost unstressed prefixes just before the Eddic poems were composed. As it turns out, the old detail rules were in fact lost, and verses of a kind avoided by the \textit{Beowulf} poet began to appear in significant numbers.\textsuperscript{16}

\textbf{METRICAL COMPLEXITY IN THE WORD-FOOT THEORY}

Good poets often deviate from standard verse patterns, in part because what they wish to say makes it necessary to do so and in part to avoid metrical banality.\textsuperscript{17} In a poetic form intended for recitation, however, deviance must not create verses too complex for intuitive scansion. The complexity of an individual verse must be kept within tolerable limits, and a poem must not contain an intolerably high frequency of the most deviant verses. An ancient Germanic verse can be complex in two quite different ways. First, there may be one or more \textit{mismatches} between the linguistic material occupying the verse and its underlying two-word pattern. A verse with more than two words may have an acceptable stress contour and the usual number of syllables, but it will not be a perfect match for the underlying pattern. Second, a verse may have an \textit{inherently complex} pattern in which one of the feet corresponds to a word of relatively low frequency (see P1). Both types of complexity can occur in a single verse, but the more complex verse patterns are relatively intolerant of mismatches.\textsuperscript{18}

\textsuperscript{14} See Dresher and Lahiri, 'Germanic Foot', p. 283; \textit{OEM}, p. 156.
\textsuperscript{15} \textit{OEM}, ch. 3 and §6.4. \textsuperscript{16} See below, ch. 4.
\textsuperscript{17} See Kiparsky, 'Rhythmic Structure', p. 224.
\textsuperscript{18} In general, a poet who deviates from the norm in one way is less likely to do so in other ways simultaneously. See Kiparsky, 'Rhythmic Structure', pp. 201–2. Deviations from the norm similar to those discussed here are recognized in \textit{AGM} by Sievers, who
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The two types of complexity are illustrated by the following examples:

(2) lange / þræge\(^{19}\) \hspace{1cm} (Beo 114a)
(3) sinc æt / symle\(^{20}\) \hspace{1cm} (Beo 81a)
(4) hær / hilderinc\(^{21}\) \hspace{1cm} (Beo 1307a)
(5) enta / ærgeweorc\(^{22}\) \hspace{1cm} (Beo 1679a)

Sievers posits two trochaic feet in verses like (2), which he classifies as type A1 in AGM. A verse like (3), which has the same stress pattern as (2), would also be classified as type A1 within Sievers’s system. Hofmann objects to Sievers’s scanning as unnatural, pointing out that the caesura or major syntactic break in (3) does not coincide with the posited foot boundary (indicated above with a slash).\(^{23}\) For similar reasons, Bliss would assign (2) and (3) to distinct classes.\(^{24}\) The critiques of Hofmann and Bliss might at first glance seem applicable to the word-foot theory, which represents (2) and (3) as expressions of the same verse pattern and divides them as Sievers does. Unlike Sievers’s theory, however, the word-foot theory distinguishes (2), the direct, two-word realization of the pattern, from (3), which is represented as deviant despite the fact that it has the normal stress pattern and number of syllables for an A1 verse. The difference between (2) and (3) is captured as a difference in metrical complexity. The preposition æt in (2) does stand closer syntactically to symle than to sinc, as Hofmann observes. Note, however, that the stressed syllable following æt is rendered more prominent by alliteration, which reinforces the foot boundary obscured by the syntax. Kendall proposes a categorical rule requiring a second alliteration in all Old English a-verses of type A1 with this kind of syntactic structure.\(^{25}\) Kendall’s rule has genuine empirical force because type A1 verses that are free of unstressed function words usually have single alliteration, like (2). If (2) and (3) represent unrelated verse patterns, there is no obvious explanation for their differing alliterative requirements. If (3) counts as a complex variant of the pattern expressed directly by (2), we can explain the second alliterating syllable as an aid to intuitive scansion.

ranks his verse types in approximate order of complexity (A–E) and identifies certain verses with an unusual stress contour (e.g. those in which anacrusis is posited) as complex variants of a given type.

\(^{19}\) ‘a long time . . .’  \(^{20}\) ‘treasure at the feast’.
\(^{21}\) ‘old man of battle . . .’  \(^{22}\) ‘ancient work of the giants . . .’
\(^{23}\) Versstrukturen I, 29.  \(^{24}\) Metre, §43.  \(^{25}\) Metrical Grammar, p. 208.
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The kind of analysis applied to (2) and (3) can be applied to all verse patterns within the word-foot framework. In general, poets impose the fewest constraints on paradigmatic two-word realizations of a given pattern. Special constraints may apply to other variants of the pattern, since the effort of associating these variants with two-word paradigms must not become unpleasantly burdensome to the audience. In a metrical theory with explanatory ambitions, of course, a variant subject to a special constraint should have an unnatural scansion. The unnaturalness of the scansion notates the metrical complexity of the variant, illustrating the need for the constraint. This advantage of word-foot notation seems to require emphasis.26

The verse pattern corresponding to (2) and (3) is designated as type A1 by Sievers because of its high frequency. Within the word-foot framework, the priority of type A1 follows directly from P2, which states that feet corresponding to unusual word patterns add to the complexity of verses in which they appear. Since the most common Old English word pattern is trochaic, the verse pattern with the least inherent complexity will have two trochaic feet. Example (2), with a trochaic word in each foot, realizes the simplest pattern in the simplest way. Hofmann rejects the idea that type A1 has priority for metrical reasons. He claims that trochaic words are about as common in Germanic prose as in Germanic poetry, and argues that the high frequency of A1 verses results from unrestricted employment of a high-frequency word pattern.27 This hypothesis might be difficult to refute with evidence from Old Saxon poetry, Hofmann’s special interest, but it fails to explain some important facts about poetic word choice in other Germanic traditions. Natural syntactic constituents of exactly two trochaic words, with no clitics, have a far higher frequency in Beowulf than in a comparable prose text.28

Whitman, for example, rejects my scansion of Beo 1696a, gestet end gesæd, which he characterizes, without argument, as incredible (Comparative Study, p. 156, n. 6); but the unnaturalness of the scansion usefully notates the unnaturalness of type B verses with an isolated verse-initial prefix, which are very rare in Old English poetry (as I had pointed out in OEM, §3.5). Sievers’s notation for type B, which Whitman adopts, represents verses like Beo 1696a as natural realizations of a pattern with rising rhythm in each foot, predicting incorrectly that such verses will be common (as von See observes in Germanische Verskunst, p. 5).

Versstrukturen I, 32–3. 27 OEM, §10.5.

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encounter verses like (2) so often not because they correspond to high-frequency grammatical constructions but because they have the kind of metrical simplicity defined by P1–2. In the heavier verse types, moreover, the poet usually pairs a stressed word of greater than average length with a lexical monosyllable rather than a lexical trochee.\(^{29}\) If the frequency of verse patterns reduced to the frequency of word patterns, verses like (4) would occur less often than those like (5). In fact, the Beowulf poet employs about five verses like (4) for every verse like (5).

In general, we would expect metrical constraints to limit the placement, not the frequency, of words with a given pattern. Later English poets, at any rate, are quite reluctant to restrict their vocabulary, and will even stretch the rules slightly to accommodate an unusual word.\(^ {30}\) Ancient Germanic poets did not try to avoid words deviating from the trochaic norm. Instead, they made a significant effort to balance the less common word types against one another, increasing the frequency of verses comparable to (2) in length and stress count. It seems quite legitimate, therefore, to represent the pattern of (2) as a metrical norm. Other verse patterns will be represented as inherently complex to the extent that they deviate from this norm.

**Organization of the Comparative Project**

In this book I attempt to explain the development of Germanic verse form at the level of fine detail, using P1–4 as a theoretical framework. The anchor of our investigation is the Old English Beowulf, a unique long poem in traditional style dealing with traditional subject matter. Of equal importance are Eddic poems on native Scandinavian subjects in fornyrðislag, generally regarded as the Norse equivalent of Old English metre. Comparison of Old English and Old Norse materials occupies chs. 2–9 and yields a complete set of rules for fornyrðislag. Eddic poems based on material from south of Scandinavia are excluded from consideration, in part because they form a distinct metrical group possibly influenced by continental Germanic norms.\(^ {31}\) Such works also had to be excluded to

\(^{29}\) OEM, §2.5.  
\(^{31}\) See Kuhn, 'Westgermanisches'.

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provide a fair test for Kuhn’s laws, which have received much attention in recent studies of Old English metre.32

The Old Norse materials show what happens to a Germanic metre when the natural language has an especially forceful primary stress, the kind of stress that weakens non-primary stresses within a word or phrase and tends to reduce the number of unstressed syllables. In chs. 10 and 11 we turn to continental West Germanic verse, which shows the metrical consequences of a weakened primary stress that allows unstressed syllables to proliferate.33 The *Héliand* does not deal with heroic subject matter, and some traditional verse-making strategies seem to have been inconsistent with its sacred content. Nevertheless, this Old Saxon poem provides valuable evidence bearing on many issues that arise in analysis of cognate traditions. The length of the *Héliand* is a distinct advantage for the metrist, and parallel manuscripts of the poem make it possible to clarify some problems that are difficult to study in *Beowulf*, notably those associated with elision. The last poem to be considered is the continental West Germanic *Hildebrandslied*, a short, fragmentary work that does have traditional heroic content.

Treatment of Norse tradition is selective, emphasizing features with obvious comparative significance. Readers interested in the whole range of Norse metres can consult AGM and a number of other studies.34 In dealing with the *Héliand* and *Hildebrandslied*, I have founded my arguments primarily on clear cases, sidestepping some notorious difficul-

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32 See Kendall, *Metrical Grammar*, and Donoghue, *Style*, which provide references to previous work. According to Kuhn, ‘Wortstellung’, pp. 36 and 46, his laws are well observed in native Edda fornyrðislag but are frequently violated in fornyrðislag with exotic content. Kuhn provides ample evidence to show that legendary matter from the south was expressed in a distinct metrical dialect. His claim that heroic poems of the Edda were translations of West Germanic originals is controversial, however. See Fulk, *History of Old English Meter*, §273. H. Momma kindly allowed me to see page proofs of *The Composition of Old English Poetry*, forthcoming as CSASE 20, an important study of Kuhn’s laws as they apply (or fail to apply) within the whole corpus of Old English verse. Here I will be concerned with Kuhn’s-law effects in the cognate Germanic traditions and with the purely metrical issues systematically excluded by Momma from her study (p. 182).

33 See DGV, ch. 3.

ties of metrical classification. I have not reiterated all the evidence for
the word-foot theory provided in OEM, but I use similar headings here
and adopt a similar order of presentation. The reader can often find
additional Old English evidence for theoretical claims made below by
consulting the table of contents in OEM. As in OEM, rules introduced
during the argument are repeated at the end of the book for the reader's
convenience. Unless the reader is notified to the contrary, verses are
scanned as they appear in Klaeber (for Beowulf), Neckel–Kuhn (for Eddic
verse), or Braune–Ebbinghaus (for Hildebrandslied). Verses from the
Heliand are usually cited from Behaghel–Taeger. Citations of Old
English poems other than Beowulf come from the ASPR. Indications of
vowel length are sometimes added when not supplied by the editor, and
editorial punctuation is deleted occasionally. In many cases, the word-foot
theory isolates as particularly complex or unmetrical a verse emended by
modern editors. I often cite emendations as independent witnesses to the
problematic character of a verse, though usually without attempting to
justify or critique them as emendations.

Some function words in each manuscript were probably added by the
scribes, though it is difficult to achieve certainty about particular cases.
My counts of unstressed syllables may be slightly too high for all the
poems studied here, but such imprecision probably has no comparative
significance. It has seemed most important to ensure that statistics for a
given tradition should be derived from a consistently edited body of
material. My Norse statistics are based exclusively on poems in Neckel–
Kuhn, which yield a corpus of material about half the size of Beowulf.
This is perfectly adequate for our comparative purposes because the Norse
poems differ quite dramatically from West Germanic poems. Our
corpus certainly includes works by several Norse authors, and the metrical

35 For informative discussion of these difficulties, see Hofmann, Versstrukturen I, ch. 5.
36 Variants, however, are routinely cited from the parallel-text edition, Heliand, ed.
Sievers.
37 The corpus contains the following poems in fornyrðislag with native content: Vǫluspá
(V), Hymisqvísla (Hym). Prýmsqvísla (Prk), Helgaqvísla Hundingshána í fyrrri (HH1),
Helgaqvísla Hiðurvarðssonar (HHv), Helgaqvísla Hundingshána ðennor (HH II), Baldris
draumar (Bdr), Ríglþula (Rþ), Þyndloðið (Hdl), and Grottaspýr (Gr1). The Helgi poems have an ad-bac
connection with Southern legend, but are based primarily on Norse
material and are classified as native Eddic fornyrðislag in Kuhn, ‘Wortstellung’,
pp. 25–8. Heliand is abbreviated as Hel and Hildebrandslied as Hld.