

## On the Epistemology of Old English Scholarship

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**Abstract** This article analyzes a recent dispute over the dating of *Widsið* in order to discuss the epistemological and methodological issues involved. Its first half concerns the protocols of hypotheticism, which researchers employ in order to explain anomalies and generate insights into their objects of study. Its second half concerns obscurantist argumentation, which is employed to generate unreasonable doubt and leave explicable phenomena unexplained. Throughout these discussions, the hypothesis that *Widsið* is an archaic composition is shown to merit credence from reasonable observers.

**Keywords** Epistemology · Hypotheticism · Obscurantism · *Widsið* · *Beowulf* · Old English literature

The vernacular literature of Anglo-Saxon England has generated a famously contentious field of scholarly inquiry. Scholars routinely disagree about the interpretation of poems such as *Beowulf*, *The Seafarer*, and *The Wife's Lament*, but such disagreement tends to be civil and is to be expected, considering the complexity and sophistication of these works. A far more intense level of disagreement attends the philological questions that inform interpretation and delimit our objects of study. Discussions of when texts were composed and how they should be edited often become vitriolic. The scholarly literature on dating and editing abounds with papers that take extreme positions and reach antithetical conclusions about the same data. To some extent, such discord is a consequence of the uncertainties that are inherent in the material being studied. Yet to a much larger extent, ongoing controversies reflect confusion about the epistemological basis of

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philological argumentation and have little to do with genuine ambiguities presented by the evidence. Many prominent disputes have been engendered and are continually fueled by nothing other than the untenable reasoning of certain participants. The annals of Old English scholarship reveal that it is possible to learn the intricacies of a dead language without ever learning how to think critically.

The dating of *Widsið* has given rise in the pages of this journal to a dispute that will serve here to illustrate several methodological points pertaining to the epistemology of Old English scholarship. The dispute originates with an article I published (2013c), in which I adduced four categories of evidence—orthographic, lexical, onomastic, and cultural—in support of the argument that *Widsið* was composed relatively early in the Anglo-Saxon period. The reasoning in my article was straightforward: because the hypothesis of early composition economically explains a diverse array of independent pieces of evidence, the probability that it is correct is considerable. Recently, however, Eric Weiskott (2015) published a critique of my article that sought to dispose of the hypothesis of early composition and to replace it with a series of alternative hypotheses. Weiskott reviewed the evidence that I adduced and argued that, although a unitary hypothesis can satisfactorily explain this evidence, a collection of five or six ad hoc hypotheses could be strung together to explain the same data. The present article responds to Weiskott's critique by demonstrating that his alternative explanations are untenable and that his argumentation reflects a fundamental misunderstanding of hypotheticism and probabilistic reasoning. Because similar misunderstandings fuel many philological disputes,<sup>1</sup> it is to be hoped that this analysis of Weiskott's erroneous reasoning will prove edifying to the field at large.

## On Hypotheticism

In the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences, scholars advance knowledge of their respective subjects through the protocols of hypotheticism. They aim to acquire insights into their objects of study by formulating hypotheses and gauging their ability to explain apparent anomalies and regularities in the data. Critical scholarship, whether directed at plant biology or ancient Greek, is the product of an explanatory enterprise, in which probable explanations are sought and improbable explanations are discarded. Most practitioners of Old English scholarship are intuitively aware of these basic characteristics of the academic enterprise, but some of the subtler methodological consequences of hypotheticism are less widely appreciated. In Old English studies, there is particular confusion about the significance of competing hypotheses and the methodology for choosing between them. Weiskott, for example, presents his counterarguments in the evident belief that the mere existence of a competing hypothesis provides sufficient grounds for invalidating a prevailing hypothesis. This belief, which plays a role in many philological controversies,<sup>2</sup> stems from a failure to recognize that the existence of

<sup>1</sup> For related philological controversies, see those surveyed in Fulk (2003); other examples can be extracted from Pascual (2014).

<sup>2</sup> Examples are presented and analyzed in Fulk (1992: 13–15); see also Neidorf (2014: 6–8).

multiple explanations is not inherently significant, but is rather an essential feature of hypotheticism. George Gale has aptly characterized the situation:

In any scientific area there is a series of alternative theories which must be decided among. I cannot overemphasize this logical point. *Every* set of observable data has at least two possible explanations. But, obviously, we must believe that not both explanations are true. Consequently, the scientist is every time forced into making a decision between alternative explanations (1979: 68).

Far from invalidating a hypothesis, the ability of an observer to devise an alternative explanation for the same phenomenon simply confirms that the question at hand belongs to the realm of the hypothetical, rather than the factual, and is therefore worthy of scholarly attention. A hypothesis to which no alternative explanation is conceivable would not be hypothetical: it would be self-evidently true and would not constitute a contribution to knowledge. The purpose of scholarly argumentation is not to register the mere existence of alternative explanations, but to gauge the relative probability of competing hypotheses by comparing their internal consistency and explanatory power.

In my article on the dating of *Widsið* (2013c), I observed that the poem exhibits many linguistic peculiarities that distinguish it from works known to have been composed during the ninth and tenth centuries. The text of the poem contains several archaic spellings, which reflect the conventions of the earliest English orthography: most notably, *Mearchealf* (with *ch* for *h*) (l. 23), *Moidum* (with *oi* for *e*) (l. 84), *Amothingum* (with *th* for *þ*) (l. 85), *Rum-* (for *Rom-*) (l. 69) and *Eatule* (for *Italia*) (l. 70). A simple explanation for these and other aberrant forms is that *Widsið* was first committed to parchment during the seventh or eighth century and that the extant tenth-century manuscript represents a late copy of the poem. Indeed, there are a variety of corruptions and dialectal forms in the transmitted text whose presence suggests that the composition of the poem substantially antedated the copying of the extant manuscript.<sup>3</sup> In addition to the orthographic signs of extensive textual transmission, the poem contains three lexical items with important dating implications. One is the copulative compound *suhforfædran* (l. 46), which represents a type of word-formation that became unproductive in prehistoric Old English. The other two are *Rumwealh* (l. 69) and *Wala ric* (l. 78), terms for Romans and the Roman Empire that distinguish the *Widsið* poet in significant ways from all other authors of extant vernacular texts.<sup>4</sup> The linguistic peculiarities of *Widsið*, like the onomastic and cultural evidence discussed below, are economically explained together under the hypothesis of early composition.

The ability of a single hypothesis to explain what caused a wide array of disparate phenomena is the clearest sign that it is probably correct. Rational observers readily credit such a hypothesis, since doubting it demands credence in an improbable coincidence: in this case, one would need to believe (as Weiskott does)

<sup>3</sup> See Neidorf (2013c: 167–169) and Malone (1962: 112–116).

<sup>4</sup> For discussion of the lexical archaisms in *Widsið*, see Neidorf (2013c: 169–171), Neidorf (2013b: 33–34), and the references therein.

that each of the archaic forms in *Widsið* has an independent cause unrelated to chronology and that the poem's apparent antiquity is an accidental illusion. The problem with this belief is not that it is theoretically impossible, but that it involves an irrational multiplication of hypotheses that betrays ignorance of the law of parsimony (Occam's Razor), which is central to the protocols of hypotheticism. Although contributions to knowledge are always conjectural in origin, the purpose of scholarship is not to proliferate conjectures needlessly. To the contrary, rational scholars aim to minimize the amount of conjecture required to explain particular phenomena by championing elegant explanations and rejecting convoluted ones. This methodological principle reflects more than an aesthetic preference for simplicity over complexity: a collection of ad hoc hypotheses that requires belief in a stunning confluence of independent causes is far less likely to be correct than a holistic hypothesis that requires no elaborate coincidences to be credited.

When I argued for an early dating of *Widsið*, I introduced no new conjectures into the scholarly literature on the poem. The purpose of my article was to gauge the relative probability of the longstanding hypothesis of early composition. Its novelty inhered not in the generation of this hypothesis, but in the demonstration that it was capable of explaining more data than had previously been noted. In validating this hypothesis and showing why it demands credence from rational observers, my arguments simultaneously falsified some improbable hypotheses that had entered into the literature on *Widsið* in order to support a later dating of the poem (2013c: 172–173, 176–177, 180, n. 15). In sum, my article exemplified the law of parsimony, in that it effectively reduced the amount of conjecture attending the study of *Widsið*. The same cannot be said for Weiskott's critique of my article, where precisely the opposite is true. Disposing of the elegant hypothesis of early composition forces Weiskott to stack conjecture upon conjecture and propose various ad hoc explanations that no scholar had ever previously conceived (or deemed worthy of publication). *Widsið* scholarship has been home to many wild speculations, yet Weiskott's conjectures have no precedent in the literature. There is a simple reason for their novelty: they are the products of the antiprobabilistic reasoning that is necessitated by unreasonable doubt. No scholar seeking to arrive at the most probable explanations for linguistic phenomena would advance such ideas; only a scholar willfully committed to doubting the hypothesis of early composition could champion them.

Weiskott's alternative explanation for some of the archaic spellings in *Widsið* illustrates the ad hoc quality of his reasoning. Instead of regarding these spellings as indications that the poem had been committed to parchment in the early Anglo-Saxon period, Weiskott proposes: "perhaps these [names] were copied from some older list or text when *Widsið* was composed" (2015: 143). He then adds in a footnote: "That *Moidum* and *Amothingum* appear within the space of three lines supports the possibility that this section has a different written source from the rest of the poem" (2015: 144, n. 1). The amount of conjecture that is required to sustain credence in this explanation is remarkable. First of all, it is necessary to believe in the existence of archaic lists that contained the ethnonyms found in *Widsið*. Since no such lists are attested, and there is no independent reason to hypothesize that they existed, this is a desperate conjecture. Furthermore, since archaic spellings and signs

of extensive transmission pervade the text of *Widsið*, the hypothesis that the poem is a homogenous late composition occasionally reliant on archaic written sources cannot be imagined to accommodate the evidence particularly well. Unless one intends to dissect *Widsið* arbitrarily into early and late portions, as Weiskott recommends, the hypothesis of an archaic written source for parts of the poem cannot be sustained.

A similar form of ad hoc reasoning informs Weiskott's attempt to deprive *suhtorfædran*, "uncle and nephew," of its apparent chronological significance. After noting that "another familial dvandva compound, *gisunfader* 'son and father,' occurs in the ninth-century Old Saxon *Heliand*," Weiskott contends that rare words such as *suhtorfædran* "probably remained available to late authors" (2015: 144). This is an entirely faith-based explanation, since there is no evidence to suggest that copulative compounds like *suhtorfædran* could be generated in English after the eighth century. In the entirety of Old English literature known to have been composed during the ninth and tenth centuries, not a single copulative compound is attested. Accordingly, to credit Weiskott's hypothesis—that such words were available to late authors, but never committed to parchment—one must believe that the entire corpus of surviving Old English texts gives an erroneous impression of the linguistic material available in the later Anglo-Saxon period. Since there is no independent reason to believe that copulative compounds were productive in the later Anglo-Saxon period, Weiskott has added this conjecture to the literature on *Widsið* solely to cast doubt on the hypothesis of early composition, not to offer a plausible explanation of linguistic phenomena.

Weiskott's reasoning betrays, moreover, a misunderstanding of the linguistic rationale for regarding *suhtorfædran* as a sign of early composition. The antiquity of this word and the type of word-formation it represents cannot reasonably be doubted. In the corpora of the early Germanic languages, only four copulative compounds are attested: *sunufatarungo* in the *Hildebrandslied*, *gisunfader* in the *Heliand*, *apumsweoran* in *Beowulf*, and *suhtor(ge)fædren* in *Beowulf* and *Widsið* (Carr 1939: 40–42). The conclusion that linguists have uniformly drawn from such sparse attestation is that the copulative compound became an obsolete formation in the prehistoric period of these languages (Carr 1939: 40; Kastovsky 1992: 365). The few forms that survive are linguistic relics preserved in the conservative diction of poems composed relatively early in the histories of their respective languages. Furthermore, *suhtor(ge)fædren* is a sign of early composition for *Beowulf* and *Widsið* not only because of the rare category to which it belongs, but also because of the early obsolescence of the simplex *suhtriga* (nephew). Elsewhere, this word is attested only in *Genesis A*, a probable eighth-century composition, and in glosses that derive from seventh-century *glossae collectae*.<sup>5</sup> The complete absence of *suhtriga* from later poetry and prose suggests that it underwent obsolescence before the ninth century. Overall, there are powerful independent reasons for regarding *suhtorfædran* as a sign of archaic composition and no comparable reasons for regarding it as anything else.

<sup>5</sup> On the obsolescence of *suhtriga*, see Cronan (2004: 35–40); on the dating of *Genesis A*, see Doane (2013: 51–55); on the origin of the *glossae collectae*, see Lapidge (1986: 58).

Another word in *Widsið* that appears to have become obsolete at an early date is *Romwealh*, “Roman.” Extant Old English literature abounds with references to Romans, who are generally labeled *Romane* or *Romware*, occasionally *Eotolware* or *Lædenware*, yet never *Romwealas*. The one exception to this generalization besides *Widsið* is a gloss preserved in the tenth-century *Durham Ritual*, where *reht Romwala* glosses *ius quiritorium* (Stevenson 1840: 189). Weiskott regards this gloss as evidence for his belief that the word *Romwealh* “probably remained available to late authors,” but it may in fact carry the opposite import. Glossaries tend to contain obsolete words because glossators rely on *glossae collectae* compiled at a much earlier date; indeed, it has been argued that the interpretamenta of the *Durham Ritual* gloss derive in part from an eighth-century source (Elliott and Ross 1972). In any event, even if this gloss were generated *ex nihilo*, one exception does little to alter the import of the overall distribution of the evidence. Romans appear hundreds of times in homilies, histories, and hagiographies composed during the ninth and tenth centuries, yet the word *Romwealh* occurs only in *Widsið* and a gloss. The simplest explanation for the word’s restricted attestation is that it became obsolete at an early date. To believe that it remained in use, as Weiskott does, is to demand credence in an extreme coincidence: that in the hundreds of late references to Romans, authors could have labeled them *Romwealas*, but arbitrarily elected not to do so, and hundreds of independent lexical decisions accidentally yielded a perfect distribution. Once again, the amount of conjecture required to cast doubt on the antiquity of *Widsið* is extraordinary.

The hypothesis that *Widsið* was composed at an early date receives one of its strongest supports from the archaic semantics of the simplex *wealh*. The *Widsið* poet states that Caesar has control of the *Wala ric* (l. 78), in other words, the Roman Empire. This use of *wealh* to mean “Roman” is singular in the corpus of Old English and it is significant for several reasons. As noted above, there are hundreds of extant English references to Romans, yet they are nowhere labeled *wealas*. Prior to the migration of the Anglo-Saxons, however, *wealh* must have been a standard term for a Roman. The other reflexes of Proto-Germanic *\*walhaz* are often used in this sense: Old High German *uualha*, for example, regularly glosses *Romani*, presumably because the continental Germanic peoples regarded the Romans as the quintessential foreigners (Weisgerber 1953: 178–188). After the Anglo-Saxons migrated to Britain, *wealh* underwent a process of semantic narrowing and came primarily to mean “Celt” or “slave.”<sup>6</sup> In the *Laws of Ine*, issued in 694, *wealh* can already be seen to possess precisely these two meanings, which it would go on to bear in texts composed throughout the Anglo-Saxon period. Naturally, texts composed after the semantic range of *wealh* had narrowed do not use this term to refer to Romans, since it would imply that they possess a Celtic or servile quality. The composition of *Widsið* must therefore have antedated the completion of a semantic shift that had already begun to take effect before the end of the seventh century.

<sup>6</sup> See Pelteret (1995: 43) and Faull (1975).

As an alternative to this chronological explanation, Weiskott proposes that *wealh* does not reflect contemporary semantics, but rather “*Wala ric* projects stylized cultural conditions onto a distant past” (2015: 148). In attempting to construe *wealh* as a deliberate archaizing gesture rather than a genuine sign of archaic composition, Weiskott is once again forced to adopt a highly conjectural explanation that has no basis in the available evidence. There is simply no independent reason to believe that a late Anglo-Saxon poet would have regarded the phrase *Wala ric* as an archaic term for the Roman Empire, nor is there any reason to believe that an Anglo-Saxon audience of the ninth or tenth century would have perceived deep antiquity in this expression. To the contrary, the numerous attestations of the word *wealh* provide ample reason to believe that if a late poet used the term *Wala ric*, it would have been understood as “the kingdom of Celts or slaves”—a nonsensical construction in the context of *Widsið*, where it refers to the subjects of Caesar. Like all of Weiskott’s alternative explanations, the claim that *Wala ric* is a deliberate archaism is the product of purely ad hoc reasoning: this hypothesis explains and finds support in no phenomena other than the single piece of evidence it was narrowly formulated to explain. The hypothesis of early composition, on the other hand, holistically explains the archaic semantics of *wealh*, while collaterally explaining the other orthographic and lexical indications of the poem’s antiquity.

Because multiple explanations for observable phenomena can always be conceived, the mere existence of competing hypotheses is not inherently significant. Let us suppose that two doctors were to examine a patient who exhibits twenty symptoms associated with cancer. One doctor naturally hypothesizes that the patient has cancer, while the other contends that the twenty symptoms are caused by twenty independent illnesses. The ability of the second doctor to link each symptom to an independent illness might be taken as a sign of this doctor’s ingenuity (or insanity), but it could not be imagined to diminish the probability that the patient has cancer. When deciding between the two diagnoses, rational observers will invariably prefer the cancer diagnosis, because it holistically explains all of the evidence and it does not force adherents to believe in an incredible coincidence. The hypothesis of twenty independent illnesses is disfavored not because it is impossible—theoretically, a patient could suffer from twenty illnesses at once—but because it is far less probable than its alternative. That is to say, extreme coincidences can occur, but the probability of their occurrence is so minuscule that it would be irrational to explain phenomena in this way when a simpler explanation is viable. The relevance of this probabilistic consideration to the controversy over the dating of *Widsið* should be apparent.

The basic methodological error that drives Weiskott’s argumentation and sustains many philological controversies in Old English scholarship is the belief that the ability of an observer to devise an alternative explanation is inherently significant. Weiskott regards his collection of alternative explanations as if their mere existence falsified the hypothesis of early composition. This is tantamount to believing that the ability of the second doctor to propose the twenty-illness hypothesis is inherently significant and that the existence of his hypothesis provides a rational basis for doubting that the patient has cancer. In actuality, the existence of a competing hypothesis affects the credibility of a prevailing hypothesis only if the

competitor is shown to possess more coherence and explanatory power than the hypothesis it was intended to displace. Because Weiskott's alternative hypotheses are incoherent and incapable of explaining more evidence than the hypothesis of early composition, their existence cannot be imagined to provide any rational basis for doubting the antiquity of *Widsið*. Weiskott's demonstration that the human mind is capable of conceiving of alternative explanations for the evidence is in essence a demonstration of nothing, since all observable phenomena permit the formation of multiple explanations. Genuine contributions to knowledge consist not in registering the conception of improbable alternatives, but in identifying the most probable explanation for the phenomena under scrutiny.

There is some pedagogical value in Weiskott's article, however, in that it illustrates the considerable improbabilities generated by withholding credence from the most probable hypothesis. In order to doubt that *Widsið* is an early composition, Weiskott is forced to credit several hypotheses that invite far graver doubts. He conjures into existence archaic lists containing the ethnonyms found in *Widsið*; believes that the poet required such lists; divines a distinction between early and late portions of the poem; asserts on the basis of no evidence that copulative compounds and archaic ethnonyms remained available to late authors; and thereby contends that the entire written record, with the sole exception of *Widsið*, offers a misleading impression of the linguistic material available in the later Anglo-Saxon period. No independent considerations justify credence in these wild conjectures; they are purely ad hoc arguments, motivated by nothing other than the desire to cast doubt on the antiquity of *Widsið*. In contrast, credence in the hypothesis of early composition is justified by several independent linguistic considerations, including: the evolution of English orthography; the loss of the copulative compound in Germanic; the obsolescence of *suhtriga*; the restricted attestation of *Romwealh*; and the semantic history of *\*walhaz* and *wealh*. It is irrational to proliferate unmotivated explanations when all of the evidence can be economically explained with one holistic hypothesis.

### On Obscurantism

As the preceding discussion indicates, misunderstandings about the epistemological framework of philological argumentation subvert and obstruct the explanatory mission of the academic enterprise. By casting doubt on probable hypotheses without offering superior explanations, Weiskott effectively urges the scholarly community to leave observable regularities and anomalies in the data unexplained. Much of the scholarship that expresses doubts about the relative antiquity of certain Old English poems, particularly *Beowulf*, shares this obscurantist quality: it prefers to leave linguistic phenomena unexplained rather than to credit the chronological explanations that the evidence demands. Arguments that call for agnosticism to surround linguistic dating scholarship reflect an obscurantist agenda, since they are intended to promote a sense of wonder and mystery in situations where a sense of understanding is readily attainable. The methodological error that gives rise to the agnostic position is the familiar belief that the existence of competing hypotheses is



inherently significant.<sup>7</sup> Agnostics regard the multitude of hypotheses about the dating of *Beowulf* as a sign that this question is undecidable, when in actuality the existence of competing hypotheses is an invariable feature of hypotheticism.<sup>8</sup> Confronting a multitude of possible explanations, rational scholars determine which hypothesis is most probable; they do not conclude that a question is insoluble just because disagreements exist.

The refusal to credit chronological explanations of linguistic phenomena essentially returns Old English scholarship to a less advanced state in which the evidence was available, but the edifice of conjectural knowledge erected upon this evidence—the fruits of collaborative scholarship—was less developed. For much of the history of *Beowulf* scholarship, for example, the metrical regularity known as Kaluza's law had not been adequately explained. After Kaluza (1896) published his observations at the end of the nineteenth century, some scholars were aware that the meter of *Beowulf* regularly observed etymological length distinctions, but it was not until Fulk's meticulous study (1992) that the extent and the significance of this regularity were fully understood. It is now clear that in 106 verses in *Beowulf*, the poet distinguished between etymologically long and short desinences that became phonologically indistinct before 725 in Mercia. To explain this impressive regularity, it is necessary to credit the hypothesis that *Beowulf* was composed at a relatively early date (Neidorf and Pascual 2014). To regard *Beowulf* as a late composition is to fly in the face of the evidence, yet to regard the dating of *Beowulf* as an insoluble mystery is little better. Agnosticism may appear to be value-free, but it is here an obscurantist and tendentious position, since it leaves unexplained the regular adherence to Kaluza's law as well as the regular presence of other archaic linguistic features in the poem (Fulk 2014). There can be no principled rationale for leaving such regularities unexplained, when a holistic explanation has been available since 1992.

The tendency for erroneous reasoning to obscure the achievements of collaborative scholarship and leave regularities unexplained is illustrated further in Weiskott's attempt to discount the onomastic evidence bearing on the dating of *Widsið*. In my article on *Widsið* (2013c) and in an independent onomastic study (2013a), I substantiated the arguments of Chadwick (1912) and Wormald (2006) concerning the use of names from Germanic legend in England and their value as evidence for the early circulation of legendary material. Weiskott rejects the conclusions derived from this tradition of explanatory research on the grounds that its arguments are “pure speculation” (2015: 144). He contends that names do not “necessarily indicate familiarity with heroic legend,” since alternative explanations for the motivations that prompt their use can be conceived: men named *Ætla* or

<sup>7</sup> For the history of the dating of *Beowulf* controversy and the spread of the agnostic position, see Neidorf (2014).

<sup>8</sup> The reasoning of the agnostic is well illustrated in the following statement from Stanley: “As we have seen, the date of composition of *Beowulf* is unknown, and in the last 50 years scholars have assumed or proposed dates of composition from the eighth to the eleventh centuries. *Beowulf*, therefore, cannot be fitted into a chronology” (1994: 70). Another quote that exemplifies such reasoning is from Earl: “After reading Kiernan's book and Colin Chase's and articles by David Dumville and Michael Lapidge, I now consider it axiomatic that *the problem of the poem's date is insoluble*” (1994: 16). Similar reasoning is evident in Howe (1997).

Ingeld might be named after relatives who bore those names rather than the legendary heroes who made them famous (2015: 144). The operation of this motivation could certainly account for some of the onomastic data, but one would need to credit a remarkable coincidence to regard the entire cluster of heroic-legendary names in the *Durham Liber Vitae* (Rollason and Rollason 2007) as an accidental byproduct of this phenomenon rather than as a genuine indication that children were named after legendary heroes. Yet Weiskott's objection is ultimately irrelevant to the central issue at hand, since it does not explain how the linguistically peculiar names of legendary heroes entered the Anglo-Saxon onomasticon in the first place.<sup>9</sup>

My study of the names from Germanic legend attested in the original core of the *Durham Liber Vitae*—names borne by historical Anglo-Saxons during the seventh and eighth centuries—demonstrated that many of these names consist of elements that were foreign to or unproductive in the Anglo-Saxon onomasticon.<sup>10</sup> Such names could not have been accidentally generated from linguistic material already present in the onomasticon. For example, the names *Ætla* and *Widia* derive from Gothic lexemes; and names such as *Wyrmhære*, *Ingeld*, *Beowulf*, and *Theodric* each contain an element that was not commonly used to form personal names on English soil (*wyrm-*, *-geld*, *beow-*, *þeod-*). Of special note in the present context is the name *Widsið*, borne by an early cleric: both of the elements that constitute this name were unproductive in English namegiving. To explain the circulation of this set of linguistically peculiar names in the early onomasticon, it is necessary to credit the hypothesis that these names derive from familiarity with heroic legend and that their use reflects a custom of naming children after legendary heroes. To reject this hypothesis on the grounds that it is “pure speculation” yields no superior insights into the onomastic data. To the contrary, the consequence of rejecting this hypothesis is the standard consequence of obscurantist argumentation: regularities in the data are left unexplained; the presence of anomalous material in the onomasticon becomes a mystery, though an explanation has long been available.

Accordingly, the hypothesis that the presence of heroic-legendary names in the early onomasticon is a consequence of the early transmission and circulation of legendary material in England is not “pure speculation.” It is a hypothesis that reasonable scholars have credited for the past century because it adequately explains patterns in the data that would otherwise need to be regarded as inexplicable coincidences. This hypothesis is indeed speculative, like all hypotheses that constitute contributions to knowledge, but it is not “pure speculation,” since evidence and reasoning justify credence in it. Weiskott's belief that copulative compounds remained available to late authors would be more suitably characterized

<sup>9</sup> The use of heroic-legendary names in early Anglo-Saxon England provides significant evidence not only for the circulation of legendary material, but also for the transmission and genesis of that material. As I noted (2013c: 172–173), the name-stock confirms that legendary material was known to the Anglo-Saxons during the seventh century, and this indication falsifies various hypotheses pertaining to Viking or Carolingian transmission that have been marshaled in efforts to date the composition of heroic-legendary poetry to the later Anglo-Saxon period.

<sup>10</sup> For a list of these names and for the data to which this paragraph refers, see Neidorf (2013a: 571–573), which is informed by the linguistic commentary in Rollason and Rollason (2007).

as “pure speculation,” since no evidence supports this claim and there are no independent reasons to believe it—it is an entirely faith-based explanation. Yet to invalidate credence in a hypothesis, one must do more than allege that it is “pure speculation.” Rejecting a hypothesis on the grounds that it is hypothetical puts an end to the scholarly enterprise; it is tantamount to justifying disbelief in the theory of human evolution on the grounds that it is “only a theory.” A rational basis for belief or disbelief in hypotheses can be established only through considerations of relative probability. Weiskott’s hypothesis about the enduring presence of copulative compounds in the English lexicon is rejected above not because it is hypothetical, but because of the gross improbabilities that credence would generate.

When probabilistic considerations justify credence in a hypothesis, one obscurantist strategy that can be used to make credence appear unreasonable is to associate a sound hypothesis with ideas that are unfashionable or less probable. Weiskott pursues this strategy in his elaborate, but ultimately unsuccessful, attempt to refute an idea that I mentioned in passing in my article on the dating of *Widsið*. In a brief discussion of *Romwealh* and the archaic semantics of *Wala ric*, I wrote: “One way to account for these unusual appellations is to concur with earlier critics who held that portions of *Widsið* were composed prior to the Anglo-Saxon migrations” (2013c: 170). Shortly thereafter, I went on to offer my preferred explanation of these terms as post-migration usages that reflect composition in a period before *wealh* exclusively denoted Celts or slaves, perhaps “the seventh century, when Anglo-Saxon migrants were only beginning to use this old word in its new insular senses” (2013c: 170). This explanation is the one expounded above in the present article and it is the only explanation of the two that is consistent with and pertinent to the argument that *Widsið* was composed at a relatively early date. The belief that portions of *Widsið* once circulated as independent, oral compositions is an interesting idea that was ubiquitous in earlier scholarship on the poem, but my article obviously did not champion this idea or launch an investigation into prehistory. My sole concern was to gauge the explanatory power of the hypothesis of early composition.

Nevertheless, Weiskott spent half of his critique of my article vainly attempting to refute the idea that portions of *Widsið* could have existed in oral tradition during the migration period. He believes that such a refutation is achieved by showing that several verses in *Widsið* are rendered “unmetrical” according to the rules of classical Old English poetry when certain words are converted into the forms they possessed in the prehistoric period (2015: 146–147). His argument is thus predicated upon the belief that the metrical rules of prehistoric Old English poetry were identical to the rules that can be deduced from texts composed in the historical period. This belief is untenable, however, since there is evidence that incontrovertibly indicates that the rules governing the composition of prehistoric verse *must* have differed from those that obtained in historical times. For example, the poetic line inscribed on the Gallehus horn around the year 400—*ekhlewegastiR: holtijaR: horna: tawido*—is metrically defective in several respects if scanned according to the rules that governed the composition of alliterative poetry three centuries later.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>11</sup> For the text, see Krause (1937: 596); on the formal differences between this line and the lines found in historical early Germanic poetry, see Russom (1998: 1–3).

Similar problems regularly emerge in the scansion of early runic verse inscriptions—which is not surprising, since their composition antedated the sound changes that enabled the classical four-position verse to come into existence (Mees 2007: 222). To expect verse from the sixth century to have been metrical according to Sieversian standards is thus to disregard the most basic conclusion of metrists about prehistoric verse: that its formal qualities necessarily differed from verse composed during the historical period.<sup>12</sup> Consequently, the premise of Weiskott’s refutation is untenable, and the elaborate arguments erected upon it are nothing more than smoke and mirrors.

Throughout his attempt to cast doubt on the hypothesis of early composition, Weiskott adduces no evidence in support of a later dating of *Widsið*. His contention that the poem’s composition postdates the operation of prehistoric sound changes amounts to the trivial claim that *Widsið* was not composed before the year 600.<sup>13</sup> Weiskott offers no reasons to regard *Widsið* as a relatively late composition, nor does he advocate for credence in any dating hypothesis. This significant omission is yet another manifestation of the epistemologically incoherent character of Weiskott’s reasoning. Because hypotheticism continually requires researchers to choose between alternative hypotheses, it is irrational to focus on discrediting one hypothesis without explaining the merits of a superior alternative. Indeed, Marvin Harris identified this procedure as the central method of obscurantism, which aims “to cast doubt on all existing scientific theories without providing plausible scientific alternatives” (1979: 315). This procedure effectively puts an end to scholarship, since hypotheses are validated not on an absolute basis, but on the basis of relative probability, that is, whether they appear more or less probable than the available alternatives. Doubting a hypothesis without supporting an alternative forces that hypothesis to compete with nothing, and there can then be no basis for assessing its relative probability. Because of the role that relative probability plays in the validation of hypotheses, it is not surprising that Weiskott refrained from arguing for a later dating of *Widsið*. Had he mounted such an argument, its relative improbability in comparison to the hypothesis of early composition would have become apparent, and this would have undermined the narrow purpose of his article.

## Conclusion

Regardless of disciplinary divisions, explanation is the essential purpose of productive academic research. Scholars aim to advance understanding of their respective subjects by formulating and testing hypothetical explanations for problems and patterns discernible in their material. It is through the explanation of regularities and anomalies that insights into objects of study are achieved. This is obvious with

<sup>12</sup> See Lehmann (1956: 77–80); Fulk (1992: §402); Russom (1998: 1–3); Mees (2007); and Mees (2012).

<sup>13</sup> On the dating of the pertinent sound changes, see Luick (1914–40: §350) and Carr (1939: Ch. 3). Weiskott labels the dating of prehistoric sound changes “a matter of conjecture” (1939: 147)—as if our knowledge of prehistoric phonology could be anything other than conjectural in origin. This tactic is plainly intended to obscure the fact that his metrical argumentation is, in addition to being untenable, completely irrelevant to the dating of *Widsið*.

regard to physical or medical research, where the identification of laws or the diagnosis of illness is an explicit objective, but it remains true of textual scholarship. In literary criticism, for example, a standard procedure for generating insights into a text is to seek to explain how an ostensibly aberrant passage can be reconciled to a prevailing interpretation. Likewise, lexicographers pursue patterns in a word's attestations to reconstruct its semantic history and textual critics restore sense to corrupt passages by bringing them into line with authorial regularities. In short, understanding textual material necessitates the formation of explanatory hypotheses. When scholars develop competing hypotheses in attempts to explain the same textual problem, the rational response is not to deem the problem insoluble, but to mediate the dispute through the methodological protocols of hypotheticism. The relative probability of the two explanations must be gauged: a hypothesis that is simple, coherent, and capable of explaining more evidence merits credence, whereas a hypothesis that is ad hoc, incoherent, and contingent upon improbable coincidences is rejected. The fact that the weaker hypothesis has been conceived and registered in the scholarly literature provides no rational basis for doubting the superior hypothesis.

Hypotheticism is thus the mechanism that advances the explanatory mission of the academic enterprise, whereas obscurantism subverts that mission by encouraging observers to leave explicable phenomena unexplained. Research that implements the methodology and reasoning entailed by hypotheticism promotes a sense of understanding, while the rhetoric of obscurantists aims to replace understanding with mystery and confusion. The rational scholar speaks about what is probable in the light of the available evidence, whereas the obscurantist raises doubts by speaking in the epistemologically inappropriate terms of certainty and uncertainty. Because a hypothesis retains aspects of its hypothetical character even after validation, it will always be uncertain to some extent; it is therefore misleading to raise doubts about a probable hypothesis by labeling it uncertain or rhapsodizing about the uncertainties of our knowledge.<sup>14</sup> The aim of research governed by hypotheticism is never to obtain the certainty associated with absolute proof, since non-mathematical hypotheses cannot be strictly proven, they can only be rendered more or less probable than their alternatives. When relative probability is not recognized as the criterion for validation and absolute proof is vainly demanded, any hypothesis can be made to appear dubious. Scientists working for tobacco companies, for example, raised doubts about the hypothesis that smoking caused lung cancer by ignoring the probabilistic force of the evidence and emphasizing that definitive proof remained elusive:

The industry's position was that there was 'no proof' that tobacco was bad, and they fostered that position by manufacturing a 'debate,' convincing the mass media that responsible journalists had an obligation to present 'both

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<sup>14</sup> In essays that take an agnostic position regarding the dating of *Beowulf*, it is common to see knowledge falsely dichotomized as either certain or uncertain, with no consideration of relative probability. Howe, for example, writes: "Our uncertainty about the shape of an Old English literary career stands on a small scale for our uncertainties about the shape of Old English literary history. We have firm dates for some of the prose, many conjectures about the poetry, and an unspoken habit of pretending to more certainty about such matters than the evidence warrants" (1997: 214).

sides' of it... This was the tobacco industry's key insight: that you could use *normal* scientific uncertainty to undermine the status of actual scientific knowledge... 'No proof' became a mantra that they would use again in the 1990s when attention turned to secondhand smoke. It also became the mantra of nearly every campaign in the last quarter century to fight facts (Oreskes and Conway 2010: 16, 34).

The same strategy is employed in argumentation that pleads for agnosticism to attend philological questions where absolute proof remains elusive, though informed decisions can be reached on a probabilistic basis.

Enumerating reasons why a hypothesis is uncertain without demonstrating the superiority of an alternative hypothesis reflects a misunderstanding of the epistemological character of claims generated through probabilistic reasoning. When a scholar states that it is probable that *Widsið* is a relatively early composition, the scholar is claiming only that this hypothesis is superior to its alternatives and thereby merits tentative credence from rational observers. No claim of absolute certainty inheres in the statement, however. The absence of certainty is implied in the term "probable," in fact, since probability judgments can be formed only under conditions of uncertainty, in reference to a reality that is partly known and partly unknown.<sup>15</sup> Probabilistic reasoning is not a medium for accessing absolute truth, but for determining what it is rational for observers to believe about an unknown reality on the basis of the available evidence. One can believe that *Widsið* was composed on the evening before the Exeter Book was compiled, but there is no compelling reason to hold such a belief and there are several strong reasons to doubt it. Belief in such a late dating would therefore be based entirely in faith, whereas belief in the hypothesis of early composition is based in the rational effort to explain linguistic phenomena. This hypothesis makes no claims to absolute certainty, but its claims to probability are far stronger than those of any of its alternatives. Rational observers credit this hypothesis because doubting it comes at the heavy cost of leaving the text's linguistic peculiarities unexplained.

Readers of this paper will naturally wonder about the ideological or institutional motivations that generate and sustain obscurantist argumentation in Old English scholarship. Questions of motivation are best left to historians of the discipline, but the causes of much of the agnosticism surrounding linguistic dating scholarship are well known. In the 1980s, a handful of scholars staked a portion of their reputations on the argument that *Beowulf* was a relatively late composition. Some of these scholars went on to become influential and powerful figures in the profession. Consequently, many of their close friends and doctoral students remain unwilling to lend credence to philological scholarship concerned with the dating of Old English poetry. These scholars do not contend that poems like *Beowulf* or *Widsið* are late compositions—such arguments are rarely made in current scholarship—but they are

<sup>15</sup> The link between probability and uncertainty is fundamental, as one can tell from the two definitions of probability provided in Haigh's introduction to the subject: "Probability is the formalization of the study of the notion of uncertainty...Probability is the key to making decisions under conditions of uncertainty" (2012: 1, 14). For perceptive remarks on the relationship between probability judgments and partly known realities, see Hirsch (1967: 174–175) and Keynes (1921: 7).

committed to keeping the dating controversy alive by regarding competing hypotheses as if they were equally probable. I acknowledge the operation of these historical forces in the present context not in a final effort to discredit agnosticism, but to discourage readers from speculating about and fixating on the rather banal human drama that surrounds these issues. The explanatory mission of the academic enterprise is advanced not by contemplating the personal motivations behind the formulation of hypotheses, but by gauging their relative probability once they have been propounded. As Fulk writes:

[B]iased reasoning is never defeated by exposure of the bias, but by demonstration of the improbabilities that it produces. Thus it is not bias but antiprobabilistic reasoning that requires correction; and when such faulty reasoning is discovered and corrected, that is all that is required, since the causes of bad reasoning are, as Popper says, a ‘private matter’ (1992: 23–24).<sup>16</sup>

Scholarly controversies are often construed as emotional rather than intellectual contests, in which participants intransigently reiterate their positions and observers regard the matter as a stalemate. This paper has focused on the epistemological and methodological issues involved in the dating of *Widsið* controversy both to resolve the present dispute and prevent similar misunderstandings from emerging elsewhere in Old English scholarship. Whatever the personal causes of manufactured controversies may be, the intellectual forces at work invariably are antiprobabilistic reasoning and obscurantist argumentation. The improbabilities generated by these forces can—nay, must—be patiently and publicly exposed. Our understanding of Old English language and literature depends upon it.

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<sup>16</sup> Fulk is quoting here from Popper (1957: 135).

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