NURD 'UPROAR' IN THE *AB* LANGUAGE

THE AB language has 'an idiosyncratic local word-hoard with its own favourite lexical ploys'.[1] Amongst these ploys is *nurd*, otherwise unknown. It occurs six times. *Seinte Katerine*, as quoted by *OED*, mentions hearing of a great *nurd* towards an accursed pagan temple (*maumetes temple*); *Hali Meidhad* describes how the hateful *nurd* and ill-bred racket of a husband at home make his wife shudder; *Sawles Ward* allegorizes thoughts as servants, with their *nurd* and disordered clamour, who constantly itch to revolt against the mistress of the house, Reason. Beside *OED*'s instances are three in *Ancrene Wisse*. An anchoress should put every 'disturbance (*nurd*) of the world away from her heart, for it is God's chamber'; and this *nurd* enters the heart only from what is seen, heard, tasted, smelt, or felt. The author also forbids his charges to have lavish entertainments or encourage unruly strangers to come to the gate. Though there may be no harm in it beyond their immoderate 'noise' (*nurd*), it would jar spiritual thought.[2]

Nurd has perplexed medieval scribes and modern scholars. Bennett noted that the scribe of the Titus manuscript substituted *mur(h)d* 'mirth' for it in both *Hali Meidhad* and *Sawles Ward* (ruining the sense), though its meaning is clear from the translation *noise* in the French version of *Ancrene Wisse* and from *sonus* in *Seinte Katerine*'s Latin source. He added that Smithers linked it to Middle Dutch *norren* 'to wrangle' and Middle Low German *nurren* 'to grumble, grunt, growl'. However, Norman Davis in his glossary doubted this

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etymology.[3] Millett quotes Zettersten for another derivation, taking *nurd* as a native word related to Middle English *nurne* 'to announce, propose' (and notes further that the phrase where *nurd* occurs in *Hali Meidhad* and *Sawles Ward* may have appeared too in *Seinte Marherete*, now corrupt at this point).[4]

Yet the derivations of Smithers and Zettersten are not compelling. Another approach is possible. Citing Dobson, Millett comments on how the Titus scribe dropped *cader-clutes* 'cradle-clouts, baby-clothes' for a phrase of his own, probably because he did not understand *cader* (from Welsh *cadair* 'chair; cradle').[5] If *cader* is one baffling Welsh loan, *nurd* might be another. Why, otherwise, should *nurd* (if Germanic) mystify scribes, so that it appears corrupted not only in Titus, but also in Nero, where *murhde* 'mirth', *noise* 'noise', and *mud* 'mouth' substitute it?[6]

If *nurd* were a Welsh borrowing, it would be from *nyrth*, a variant singular or archaic plural of *nerth*, normally meaning 'strength', but also 'host, military force, army, military reinforcement or support'. This appears early. The seventh-century *Gododdin* tells of a North British battalion advancing on Catterick, 'a force (*nerth*) of horses with dark-blue armour and shields'.[7] Verses in a thirteenth-century manuscript commemorate Talan (otherwise unknown), a hero who was 'slayer of the head of every force (*nyrth*)', but at home a generous host.[8] *Nyrth* occurs in the sardonic 'Dream of Rhonabwy', where ravens 'in their strength' (*yn eu nyrth*) lift King Arthur's men into the

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[3] *Early Middle English Verse and Prose*, ed. J. A. W. Bennett & G. V. Smithers, 2nd ed. (Oxford, 1968), 419, 542.

[4] *Hali Meidhad*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 284 (1982), xx, 44.

[5] Millett, 48.

[6] *The English Text of the Ancrene Riwle*, ed. Mabel Day, EETS o.s. 225 (1952), 39, 189; *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. J. R. R. Tolkien, EETS o.s. 249 (1962), 49, 211.

[7] *Canu Aneirin*, ed. Ifor Williams (Caerdydd, 1938), 15; K. H. Jackson, *The Gododdin: The Oldest Scottish Poem* (Edinburgh, 1969), 130.

[8] Thomas Jones, 'The Black Book of Carmarthen "Stanzas of the Graves"', *Proceeding of the British Academy*, liii (1967), 97-137, at 128, 129.

air, tear them to bits, and let the remains fall to earth. The form here is either a variant of singular *nerth* or an old plural.[9] The standard plural of *nerth* appears in 'The Chronicle of the Princes', on Henry I's action in 1102 against treason by Robert de Bellême and his brother Arnulf, who occupied castles and summoned forces (*nerthoed*) from all sides (even Wales).[10] The Welsh version of the tale of Bevis of Hampton (in a fourteenth-century manuscript) tells of a king doomed to lose a battle unless he gets reinforcements (*nerth*), and of a commander who declares, 'I shall give you five hundred horsemen as military support (*yn nerth*)'.[11] *Neart* 'strength', the Irish cognate of *nerth*, can also mean 'military force', as in the twelfth-century Book of Leinster.[12] In the Gaelic of Argyll it kept this sense into modern times.[13] The martial applications of *nerth* and *neart* were thus widespread.

The AB language is persistently located on the Welsh border, in Herefordshire or Shropshire.[14] In the middle ages this was a military zone studded with castles.[15] When in *Sawles Warde* the author calls the Devil's henchmen his *keis* (referring to native Welsh police who maintained order by drastic means), he shows awareness of local hazard.[16] *Nurd* may likewise reflect border insecurity. The Black Book of Carmarthen shows *nyrth* used in the sense 'army' or 'armies', while in Welsh prose *nerth* means 'army, reinforcements'. *Nyrth* 'military force(s), host(s)' might thus be a Welsh word familiar on both sides of the frontier. Hence *nurd*.

[9] *Breudwyt Ronabwy*, ed. Melville Richards (Caerdydd, 1948), 16, 57; *The Mabinogion*, tr. Gwyn Jones and Thomas Jones (London, 1949), 148.

[10] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Caerdydd, 1950-2002), 2572; *Brut y Tywysogyon*, tr. Tho. Jones (Cardiff, 1952), 25.

[11] *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, 2572.

[12] Williams, 167.

[13] J. L. Campbell and D. S. Thomson, *Edward Lhuyd in the Scottish Highlands 1699-1700* (Oxford, 1963), 200.

[14] Dance, 71.

[15] A. C. Breeze, 'Cefnllys and the Hereford Map', *Transactions of the Radnorshire Society*, lxix (1999), 173-5.

[16] A. C. Breeze, 'Welsh *Cais* "Sergeant" and *Sawles Warde*', *NQ*, ccxxxviii (1993), 297-303.

But why the English sense 'uproar, disturbance'? There seems a ready answer. A medieval Welsh army was an animating rabble, guaranteed to perturb equanimity. So *nurd* might soon gain the sense 'tumult, uproar, disturbance', which the AB language links with rowdies of all sorts (servants, brutal husbands, and others). We could thus reject the forms meaning 'wrangle; grumble, grunt, growl' or 'announce, propose' advanced by Smithers and Zettersten. These senses are feeble and do not fit the context of latent aggression. But Welsh *nyrth*, an army intent on rapine and murder, is another matter. Like *keis*, used of beadles-cum-hangmen, *nyrth>nurd* would imply alien violence. No wonder then if, in the border community that produced the AB language, Welsh *nyrth* 'army' should give *nurd* 'uproar', applied to elements of disorder: a pagan mob, a wife-beater, mutinous servants, sturdy beggars, and the distractions of this world.

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