OLD ENGLISH *? ERU* AND MODERN ENGLISH *THARF-CAKES*

In a recent article in *Notes and Queries,*[1] Andrew Breeze tackles the mystery word *peru* which occurs in a list of commodities which the king was entitled to receive from an estate at Westbury-on-Trym, formerly in Gloucestershire. The source text is a grant of the reversion of land at Westbury and Henbury to the Church of Worcester, granted by King Offa of Mercia at a date of 793-6.[2] By presenting evidence from similar lists in the Welsh and Breton records, Breeze convincingly argues that *peru* means 'loaves'.

I propose to make a further suggestion in support of this argument, namely, that *peru* is a cognate of OE *peorf,* ME *therf* and ModE *tharf,* adjectives meaning 'unleavened'.[3] These adjectives are cognate with ON *þjarfr* 'unleavened, insipid' and OHG derp 'unleavened'. Significantly for the following discussion, OE *peorf* also occurs as a noun meaning 'unleavened bread'. Also relevant are OE *Íeorfling,* ME *therfling-bred* and ModE *therfling, tharfling* 'unleavened bread or loaf', as well as ModE *tharf-cake* 'a cake of unleavened bread; now *spec*. a flat circular cake of oat-, rye-, or barley-meal, unleavened, and sometimes flavoured with butter and treacle; in the latter case = PARKIN'. *Íeorfling* is first attested in c. 1050, and *tharf-cake* dates from the fourteenth century.

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1 Andrew Breeze, Old English *? eru* 'Loaves' in a Westbury Charter of 793-796. *Notes and Queries,* ccxl (New Series, xlii), no. 1 (1995), 13-14.

2 P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (London, 1968), no. 146.

3 Old English definitions will be taken from Joseph Bosworth and T. Northcote Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* (Oxford, 1898), Middle English definitions are from Hans Kurath and Sherman M. Kuhn, ed., *Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1956-), and Modern English definitions are from J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, ed., *The Oxford English Dictionary,* 2nd ed., 20 vols (Oxford, 1989), hereafter referred to as OED.

Carole P. Biggam, *Selim* 5 (1996): 109—115

The obvious difficulty in connecting the Old English forms *peru* and, *peorf* is the apparent loss of *-f* and this problem must now be addressed.[1] *? eru* occurs in the phrase, *Vl lang pero* 'six long *pero*', in a list of commodities due to the king.[2] The context makes it clear that the mystery word must be in the plural, and it is to be interpreted, therefore, as a neuter noun with short stem.[3] If *peru* had a paradigm like *scip,* which would be typical of short-stemmed neuter nouns, it would have a nominative singular form **per*, but, if it had the rare paradigm demonstrated by *searo,* for example, it would have a nominative singular in **pero* or **peru.*

If my suggestion, based an Breeze's insight, is correct, the nominative singular would, indeed, be **per,* but after the loss of final *-f* from the earlier *perf.* To find an explanation for this loss, I further suggest that OE *peorf* 'unleavened' had a close etymo logical, semantic, and phonological connection with the Old English verb **purfan* which expresses need and obligation. The OED describes the loss of final *-f* in *tharf, thar,* a verb which, today, survives only in Scots, and which derives from OE **purfan.* The loss of final -f occurred in Middle English, the process apparently beginning with the second person singular of the present tense which was *pearft* in both Old and early Middle English. The difficulty of pronouncing three contiguous consonants resulted in the form *peart tu* and then *per tu,* which left the impression in the minds of Middle English speakers that the verb stem was *per-*.[4] The new stem spread by analogy to other parts of the verb, and was, eventually, so well established that *thar* became confused with *dare*.

The earliest recorded example of final *-f* loss in *tharf,* however, is given in the OED as c. 1290, and this is considerably later than the date of *peru.* The grant in which the word *peru* appears occurs in three manuscripts, one of which dates to the seventeenth century, and has not been considered here,[5] and one of which does not include the list of commodities in which *peru* oc-

[1] I gratefully acknowledge the kindness of James M. Y. Simpson of the Department of English Language, University of Glasgow, in discussing philological points with me.

[2] Benjamin Thorpe, *Diplomatarium Anglicum aevi Saxonici* (London, 1865), p. 40.

[3] Dorothy Whitelock, ed., *English Historical Documents c 500- 1042,* 2nd ed. (London, 1979), p. 507, note 16.

[4] Variant spellings resulted in the additional stems of *par-, por-* and *pur-*.

[5] London, British Library, Cotton Vitellius C ix, fo. 130v.

curs.[1] The sole source for *peru* is, therefore, a manuscript of the first half of the eleventh century, London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius A xiii, often referred to as Hemming's cartulary.[2] From internal evidence, Ker believes that Tiberius I, the part of the manuscript in which the Westbury grant occurs, dates to 'not much, if at all, later than 1016'.[3] It must now be considered whether it is reasonable to project back the known loss of *-f* in *tharf* from c. 1290 to c.1016.

The dislike of three contiguous consonants was not limited to Middle English. Campbell includes six types of consonant loss in Old English from such groups, one of which includes the loss of *-f,* and he writes 'Groups of three or more consonants were often reduced in OE in pronunciation, though the full form generally continues to be written'.[4] It is suggested, then, that the sporadic reduction of *tharf, thar* recorded for Middle English had also occurred in late Old English.[5] Clearly, the reduction was not carried out by all speakers in either Old or Middle English, and both forms are instanced into the nineteenth century.[6]

For some speakers of Old English, the stem *per* was, apparently, well-established, since *peru* exhibits a short-stem case ending. If the stem had been understood as *perf,* the nominative and accusative plurals would have had a zero case ending, that is, *perf,* unless uncertainty over this word had resulted in an irregular paradigm for some speakers. It is also possible that the reduction of *perf* indicates extreme familiarity with this word in certain circles, since Zipf's law shows how, the more frequently used a word is, the more

1 London, British Library, Cotton Nero E i, pt 2, fo. 181v.

2 The Westbury and Henbury grant appears on fos. 48-9.

3 N. R. Ker, 'Hemming's Cartulary', in *Studies in Medieval History Presented to Frederick Maurice Powicke,* ed. R. W. Hunt, W. A. Pantin and R. W. Southern (Oxford, 1948), p. 49-75, at p. 69. He later gave the date as s. xii, meaning c. 1025. See N. R. Ker, *Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), p. 250.

4 A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar,* corrected 1st ed. (Oxford, 1962), p. 190-2. The example of *-f* loss is *Íorleas* from *Íorfleas,* at p. 192.

5 I am referring here to the date of the manuscript of the Westbury grant, and avoiding any assumptions about the form this word took in the original late eighth century text.

6 See the OED under *tharf-cake.*

susceptible it is to being shortened in speech.[1] The word may have been a rarity for some speakers of Old English, but to a scribe working on estate records, a word concerning payments in kind to the king may have been constantly on his lips. It is just possible, therefore, that *peru* represents a pronunciation common among estate managers and record keepers.

In his article, Breeze writes '… it is likely the six Westbury loaves were of the best quality, for the king's table'.[2] This is certainly a reasonable assumption, but how can it be reconciled with the fact that unleavened bread is heavier and more difficult to digest than leavened bread, and that it is usually made from types of cereal grain, such as barley, oats and rye? which are generally considered to be inferior to wheat? Quotes from modern times leave us in no doubt of the general opinion of tharf bread: *They never gat owse better than thaaf keahyk* (1850), and *As thodd'n as a tharcake* (1740).[3] The EDD, in fact, shows that the adjective *tharf* acquired some fairly uncomplimentary connotations in the context of human personality, for example, 'lumpish', 'reluctant', 'forbidding', 'unsociable' and others.[4]

This unfavourable impression of unleavened bread is not evident in Anglo-Saxon sources, mainly because of its religious significance. This type of bread had an important religious role among the Hebrews, and, after their conversion to Christianity, the Anglo-Saxons would have been well aware of this from several passages in the Bible. They would read, for example, in Exodus 12: 15-20 that the Hebrews were commanded by God to put all leaven out of their houses and eat only unleavened bread for seven days during the Passover, and, in the New Testament, they would read that Christ warned his disciples to 'Take heed and beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and of the Sadducees'.[5] Ælfric shows that this concept of leaven as a metaphorical contaminant of pure unleavened bread was well understood in Anglo-Saxon England: *? eorfe hlafas we bringaÍ gode to lace, Íonne we buton yfelnysse*

[1] George Kingsley Zipf, *Human Behavior and the Principle of Least Effort: an Introduction to Human Ecology* (New York, 1949).
[2] Breeze, 'Old English *? eru*', 14.
[3] Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary,* 6 vols. (Oxford, 1898-1905), VI, p. 75. Hereafter referred to as EDD.
[4] EDD, VI, 74.
[5] Matthew 16: 6.

beorman, on Ġeorfnysse, syfernysse and soĠfæstnysse faraĠ.[1] 'We bring unleavened loaves to God as an offering, wherefore we depart without the leaven of wickedness, in purity, cleanliness and truth'. Thus the Biblical tradition must have suggested to the Anglo-Saxons that unleavened bread was purer and of higher status than leavened bread.

I now return to my earlier suggestion that the semantic connection of *peorf,* adjective and noun, was much closer to the verb **purfan* than is evident from dictionaries of Old English. One semantic feature of **purfan* concerns obligation, expressed by Bosworth and Toller as 'to need to do something … where the need is based on grounds of right, fitness, law, morality, etc., to be bound to do something because it is right, etc., … with the idea of compulsion, or where the inevitability of a consequence is expressed … to be obliged, … to owe'.[2] This sense of obligation, presumed to be present in *peorf* explains the use of the word for a type of bread connected with religious observances, and with dues payable to the king from certain estates, and it is easy to understand that such bread, because of its purpose rather than its digestibility, would be a high status commodity.

The suggestion that *peorf* included a semantic element concerned with obligation does not necessarily contradict Heyne's theory that the Old English, Old Norse and Old High German adjectives indicated flatness.[3] ON *pjarfr* is defined by Zoëga as 'unleavened (of bread), fresh (of water), insipid, flat',[4] and De Vries declares the etymology uncertain, but suggests the presence of semantic elements concerning rigidity ('steif, starr'), bitterness of taste ('bitter, scharf, sauer') and firm strength ('wohlernährt, fest').[5] I suggest that the superordinate semantic concept is a sense of compression similar to the effects of a weight restraining a person or object. Unleavened bread is flat, as though it had been compressed, a body of fresh water sits, apparently heavy and unmoving as though compressed, and quite unlike the apparent

[1] Malcolm Godden, ed., *Ælfric's Catholic Homilies: the Second Series* (London, 1979), p. 120, lines 364-6.

[2] Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary,* under *purfan,* meanings II: 2 and 3, and III.

[3] Moriz Heyne, *Funf Bücher deutscher Hausaltertümer von den ältesten geschichtlichen Zeiten bis zum 16. Jahrhundert: ein Lehrbuch,* 3 vols. (Leipzig, 1899-1903). See vol. 2, p. 2689.

[4] Geir T. Zoëga, *A Concise Dictionary of Old Icelandic* (Oxford, 1910).

[5] Jan De Vries, *Altnordisches Etymologisches Wörterbuch,* 3rd ed. (Leiden, 1977).s

reaching upwards of the waves of the sea. The reconstructed verb **purfan* representing a sense of obligation, indicates the weight of unavoidable duty on those who are thus restricted. It is understandable that the abstract sense of the weight of obligation should result in a metaphoric application to a flattened and dense object. Once this application was made to unleavened bread, the semantic implications connected with taste would follow.

Another semantic feature of **purfan* concerns being in need, expressed by Bosworth and Toller as 'to be in need, have need of something'.[1] Poverty and need also result in the sense of a weight bearing down on the needy person, and it is common to speak of 'a pressing need'. This sense may also have been present in *peorf* when used of the flat breads made by poorer families who did not have access to the preferred wheat flour.[2] Such bread, and its terminology, must have had a history reaching from the Saxon habitation of northern Germany to the uncomplimentary modem comments on *tharf-cakes* quoted above.[3] The twin concepts of the need to render dues to high-ranking persons, and being in need oneself, as contained in **purfan* resulted in the apparent contradiction of unleavened bread being of high status in Anglo-Saxon England and of low status in later times, although the latter sense may also have been present in the pre-Conquest period.

Finally, it is possible that one other example of OE *peorf* without final *-f* is extant. In the Old English translation of Leviticus 8: 2, God tells Moses to take Aaron and his sons, and all the people, to the doors of the tabernacle, with animals, ritual clothes, anointing oil, and *peorfe hlafas* 'unleavened loaves'.[4] At verse thirty-one of the same chapter, after the ritual clothing of Aaron and his sons, and the sacrifice of the animals, Moses tells them to cook the meat and ... *etaÍ pær pa* ... Crawford gives the equivalent Latin phrase from the Vulgate text as ... *ibi comedite eas* ... and, presumably, regards k as a transla-

1 Bosworth and Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dictionary,* under *purfan* meaning I.

2 Ann Hagen, *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food: Processing and Consumption* (Pinner, 1992), p. 9. Hagen discusses leavened and unleavened bread on p. 7-9. See also Ann Hagen, *Second Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production and Distribution* (Hockwold, 1995), p. 361.

3 F. W. Grube, 'Cereal Foods of the Anglo-Saxons', *Philological Quarterly,* 13 (1934), 140-158, at p. 151.

4 S. J. Crawford, ed., *The Old English Version of the Heptateuch* (London, 1922), p. 291.

tion of *ibi* 'there'.[1] However, a footnote reveals that *pær pa* is an amendment of the manuscript *pæra,*[2] and I suggest this indicates a form similar to *peru.*

The major dictionaries of Old English show how *peorf* can appear, not only as *perf,* as shown above, but also as *pærf,* so the variant vowel is no problem. My suggestion is that the edited phrase *etaÍ per pa,* 'eat there then'[3] need not have been amended from the manuscript reading *etaÍ pæra* which I would translate as 'eat unleavened loaves'. I take *pæra* be a neuter genitive plural, and to be understood as a partitive genitive.[4] I also take it to be a loose translation of a part of the Vulgate text which has been omitted by Crawford, presumably because he believed it to have been Ignored by the translator. After *ibi comedite eas,* the Vulgate has *panes quoque consecrationis edite ...* 'eat also the loaves of the consecration …' If my suggestion is correct, the Old English version was slightly more succinct than the Latin original. The Latin *'... coquite carnes ante fores tabernaculi et ibi comedite eas panes quoque consecrationis edite ...',* meaning '… cook the meats before the doors of the tabernacle and eat them there, eat also the loaves of the consecration …' was translated into Old English as *'... SeoÍaÍ eowwerne mete beforan Íæs temples dura [and] etaÍ pæra ...',* meaning '… cook your meat before the doors of the temple and eat the unleavened loaves …'

It is interesting to note that, if I am right, the standard Old English spelling of *peorf* at Leviticus 8: 2, appears in what I presume to be the spoken form *pær* just a few verses later at Leviticus 8: 31.

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1 Crawford, *The Old English Heptateuch,* p. 29.

2 The form is *pæra* in both the manuscripts containing Leviticus: London, British Library, Cotton Claudius B iv, and Oxford, Bodleian Library, Laud Misc. 509.

3 The Latin phrase *ibi comedite eas* can be translated 'eat them there' because the text has 'meats' in the plural, but the Old English has 'meat' in the singular.

4 Lass mentions the use, albeit inconsistent, of the Germanic partitive genitive with verbs of eating and drinking. See Roger Lass, *Old English: a Historical Linguistic Companion* (Cambridge, 1994), p. 237, note 27.