

The Etymology of English *ale*

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English *ale* goes back to Gmc. **alúþ* n. The inherited meaning of the root element **alu-* is 'bright, golden, reddish, etc.', which is also seen in the cognate forms OHG *elo* (< Gmc. **elwa-*) and OInd. *aruṣá-* (< older **alu-sá-*). Consequently, the original meaning of Gmc. **alúþ* 'beer' was 'the golden, pale beverage'. Its closest relative is Ossetic *aluton* 'beer', which like Gmc. **alúþ* reflects non-Anatolian IE **olú-t-*. The initial **o-* is retained in some very old Finno-Ugric loan words like Finn. *olut*. Ultimately, this name for beer belongs to a *w*-expanded IE root **H₁el-w-/*H₁ol-w-* 'bright, reddish, etc.', i.e. IE **H₁olú-t-* > non-Anatolian IE **olút-*; cf. IE **H₁elw-o-* > non-Anatolian IE **elwo-* > OHG *elo*.¹

1. Germanic forms

This undoubtedly very ancient English word is recorded in Old English as *alu*, *ealu* and is found also in several other old Germanic languages: ON *øl*, ODa. *øl*, OSw. *øl*, MDu. *āle* and OSax. *alo-* in the compound *alofat* n. 'beer barrel'. In addition to Eng. *ale* this word for 'beer' is also preserved in all modern Nordic languages: Icel. *öl*, Far. *øl*, Norw. *øl*, Da. *øl* and Sw. *öl*, and the gender is always neuter.

The genitive and dative singular of OE *alu*, *ealu* are *alop*, *ealop* (Campbell 1962: 259), and these case-forms enable us to reconstruct the Germanic proto-form as **alúþ* n., i.e., with the stress on the second syllable and an unvoiced **þ* according to Verner's law.

The Germanic nominative and accusative of this consonant stem had the form **alúþ*, and because of the early loss of **þ* in final position these case-forms became **alu*. This form is attested in OE *alu*, *ealu* and OSax. *alo-* and in all probability also in Primitive Norse runic inscriptions as *alu*, especially on bracteates. In some of the inscriptions the word appears together with Primitive Norse *laukaR* m. 'onion' (e.g.

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Skrydstrup B bracteate), cf. ON *laukr*, OE *lēac*, Eng. *leek*, etc., and with *lapu* f. ‘invitation’ (Fyn I bracteate). This circumstance makes it very likely that *alu* in these instances has the meaning ‘beer’, since it seems to indicate that (perhaps for magical purposes) the beer was consumed together with onion (at banquets), cf. ON *sem manni mærlauk eða ǫl bæri* – “a girl should serve a man onion or beer” (Høst Heyerdahl 1991: 188). The beer, and probably also the onion, played an important role in Germanic cult and ritual. Other inscriptions that contain the word *alu* are, for example, Lindholmen and Elgesem (Grønvik 1996: 74 and Høst Heyerdahl 1981: 43 with further details). The form *alu* has become ON *ǫl* through *u*-mutation of *a*- to *ǫ*-. There is no evidence then in support of the hypothesis that Primitive Norse *alu* should not be the Germanic word for ‘beer’ but a totally different word of uncertain meaning and origin as is sometimes assumed (Düwel 2001: 53).

This alcoholic beverage was known to the Babylonians and Egyptians and probably also already to the earliest grain-growing civilizations in this part of the world. The art of brewing spread quite early to Europe,² and the Roman historian Tacitus (ca. 100 A.D.) informs us that beer brewing had long-standing traditions with the Germanic peoples: *potui humor ex hordeo aut frumento in quandam similitudinem vini corruptus* – “as beverage – a liquid made from barley or wheat, fermented into something resembling wine”, Germania, Chapter 23 (Anderson 1938).

1.1. Formal analysis

The etymology of Gmc. **alúþ-* n. is unknown. It is of the utmost importance that every etymological study should start with a thorough investigation of the formal aspects of the actual word forms. For **alúþ-* two alternatives exist: **al-úþ-* and **alúþ-* and the latter, where the stressed **ú* is not part of the suffix, is clearly preferable for the following reason: The Gmc. **þ* (< IE **t*) is obviously a suffix, and one does not expect a suffix vowel **u* in connection with such a consonant, but rather **a* or **i* (< IE **o* or **e*), cf. Goth. *liuhap* n. ‘light’, *magaps* f. ‘girl’ and *miliþ* n. ‘honey’. The *u*-vowel, on the other

²“The analysis of dregs in prehistoric pottery in Northern Europe indicates that fermented beverages made of grains and honey were in current use since the middle of the second millennium B.C.” (Polomé 1996: 99).

hand, originally belonged to suffixes containing IE **n*, **m*, **r* or **l*, where syllabic IE **n*, etc. gave Gmc. **un*, etc. as in the Germanic word for ‘morning’: Gmc. **murguna-* m. in ON *morgunn*, OSw. *morghon*, etc. beside **murgana-* in OHG *morgan*, etc. and **murgina-* in Goth. *maurgins*, OE *myrġen*, etc. In some cases an analogical *u*-vowel may, however, appear before other suffix consonants such as **p*, e.g. Gmc. **halíp(a)-* m. in OSax. *helith* ‘hero’ and OE *hæleð*, *hæle* ‘man, hero, fighter’, whereas ON *holdr* ‘farmer, man’ reflects Primitive Norse **haluþaR*. In the case of **alúþ-*, however, the **u* is the only attested vowel and must consequently be considered original and inherited in this particular word.

Consequently, the most precise Gmc. proto-form of Eng. *ale*, etc. is **alúþ-*, which is a formation containing a *þ*-suffix and a radical element **alu-*. From a Germanic point of view this **alu-* can hardly be anything else than the adjectival root **alu-* ‘yellowy, reddish, etc.’, which is seen in e.g. Gmc. **aluzá-* m. ‘alder’ with reflexes in OE *alor*, ON *ǫlr*, Norw. *or* and *older*, Sw. *al*, etc. Newly cut alder wood has a reddish colour. The name of the tree corresponds exactly to OInd. *aruśá-* ‘reddish’ and Avest. *auruśa-* ‘bright, white’ (< Indo-Iran. **aruśa-* < older **aluśá-*). That the two radical elements Gmc. **alu-* and Indo-Iran. **aru-* reflect a non-Anatol. IE *o*-grade form **olu-* is shown most explicitly by the Gmc. *e*-grade form **elu-* found in the *wa*-stem **elwa-* underlying OHG *elo* ‘yellowy, pale yellow, reddish yellow, tawny’. The two stem forms **olu-* and **elu-* are clearly *w*-expansions of a non-Anatolian IE color root **el-/*ol-* ‘bright, yellowy, etc.’, which goes back ultimately to IE **H₁el-/*H₁ol-* with an initial non-coloring ‘laryngeal’ **H₁* (Pokorny 1959: 302-304; Lindeman 1997: 25-26), viz. **H₁el-w-/*H₁ol-w-* > non-Anatolian IE **elu-/*olu-* (Bjorvand and Lindeman 2000: 31-32 under *alm* ‘elm’).

A Germanic form that shows a similar extension with **þ* (< IE **t*) of a color adjective is the Germanic word for ‘gold’, Gmc. **gúlþa-* n. with reflexes in Goth. *gulþ*, OE. *gold*, Eng. *gold*, ON *gull*, *goll*, Norw. *gull*, etc. This word is an enlarged form of the adjective **gula-* ‘yellow’ > ON *gulr*, Norw. *gul*, Sw. *gul*, etc. The form **gúlþa-* shows a younger *a*-stem extension (Meid 1967: 139-141).

Gmc. **alúþ-* n. ‘beer, ale’ < non-Anatol. IE **olú-t-* in all probability originally described the color of the brew with the meaning ‘the golden, reddish, pale (beverage)’. The cited

OInd. adjective *aruṣá-* with the variant *aruṇá-* ‘reddish, ruddy, tawny, etc.’ is similarly used to describe the color of the juice of the Soma plant.

2. Cognate Indo-European forms

Gmc. **alú-p-* n. ‘beer’ is, as stated above, an inherited word, and a closely related form is the non-Anatolian IE neuter *u*-stem **olu-/*oleu-* ‘beer’ underlying Baltic and Slavic forms as OPrus. *alu* ‘mead’, Lith. *alus* and Latv. *alus* ‘beer’, the two last forms showing masculine gender like Russ.-OCS *olŭ* ‘beer’. Modern Russian has a derived form *olov-ina* f. ‘dregs from beer’.

While these forms represent a non-Anatolian IE form **olu-*, Gmc. **alú-p-*, as mentioned in 1.1., goes back to a non-Anatolian IE *t*-stem **olú-t-*. The latter form is also met with in the word for ‘beer’ in the Iranian language Ossetic, *æluton*, where *-on* is a later added suffix (Gamkrelidze and Ivanov 1984: 932, 946). Abaev (1958: 130) thinks that the Ossetic word could be a loan from Germanic, since there are no corresponding forms in the other Iranian languages, and because, in his opinion, one should expect **r* rather than *l* from IE **l* in *ælut-on* if it had been a direct continuation of the IE proto-form. His argumentation is, however, untenable. Clearly, IE **l* has not in all cases become **r* in the Iranian languages, and this fact is also demonstrated by some Ossetic forms such as, e.g., *læsæg* ‘salmon’, cf. Toch. B *laks* ‘fish’, ON *lax*, Norw. *laks* ‘salmon’, etc. Furthermore, the lack of corresponding words for ‘beer’ elsewhere in Iranian can simply be taken to indicate that the expected forms are all lost here. In the same way, we find that in Germanic quite a few inherited words are retained only in one of the languages, such as, for example, the Gothic preterite-present *ōg* ‘he fears’ and the strong verb *faian* ‘blame’ (Lehmann 1986: 270, 102). Consequently, nothing forces us to consider Ossetic *æluton* as a Germanic loan word.

Thus, the word for ‘beer’ goes back to two different forms of the same color adjective, **olu-* and **olut-*, meaning ‘bright, golden, reddish, etc.’. A formal parallel is observable in OInd. *hári-* ‘yellowy, light brown, reddish, etc.’, which is also attested with a *t*-enlarged form *harít-* beside the even younger thematic form *haríta-*.

3. Finno-Ugric forms

This Indo-European word for ‘beer’ has been adopted by the Finno-Ugric languages, e.g. Finn. *olut* and Est. *õlu*, etc. Because of the final *-t* in Finn. *olut* the word can hardly be a loan from Baltic or Slavic. Furthermore the initial *o-* makes it evident that it must have entered these languages before the *o*-vowel of the non-Anatolian IE proto-form **olu-t* had become **a* as it has later in Gmc. **alú-p-* and Iran. **alu-t*. There is nothing to support the assumption that a Gmc. **a-* should appear as *o-* in Finnish and other Finno-Ugric languages (Kylstra 1996: 310).

The preparation of this alcoholic beverage had most certainly been known to the Indo-European neighbors of the Finno-Ugric peoples for thousands of years BC. (see footnote 2). Therefore, it seems quite clear that the Finno-Ugric forms are so old that it is impossible to determine from which language ancestral to Germanic or Iranian they have been taken over, or on the whole where the borrowing has taken place. Consequently, all that can be established with certainty is that Finn. *olut*, Est. *õlu*, etc. are Indo-European loan words. Summing up, we may conclude that Finn. *olut*, etc. provides very strong support for the reconstruction of this old word for ‘beer’ with a non-Anatolian IE **o* rather than **a* (see also section 4 below).

4. Older etymologies

Several attempts have been made through the years to explain the etymology of this ancient word. They all suffer, however, from the same weaknesses: 1) through the failure to take Finn. *olut*, etc. into consideration the non-Anatolian IE proto-form is wrongly considered to have had an initial **a* instead of the correct **o*. 2) the Germanic proto-form **alú-p-* n. is not properly analysed.

Consequently, the old proposal (Pokorny 1959: 33 f.) which sees a connection between Gmc. **alú-p-* and Lat. *alūmen* n. ‘alum’ is unacceptable first of all for formal reasons, since the initial *a-* of Lat. *alūmen* goes back to a non-Anatolian IE **a*. The two words are further taken to be derivations from a root element **alu-* ‘bitter’, which is nowhere else to be found. Lat. *alūmen* is by Ernout and Meillet (1932: 68) considered to be a technical word of uncertain origin.

Polomé has twice (1954 and 1996) tried to explain the

etymology of Gmc. **alúþ-*. He thinks “that **alub-* (‘beer’) owed its name to its magico-religious function in Germanic society, [. . .]”. (1996: 101). Starting with this assumption he attempts to connect Gmc. **alúþ-* etymologically with Hitt. *alwanzatar* n. ‘witchcraft, magic, spell’. This Hittite noun and cognate forms like the verb *alwanzahh-* ‘bewitch’ are themselves, however, difficult to analyse (Puhvel 1984: 46 f. and Neu 1974: 77-78, fn. 139). They seem to be specifically Hittite words of quite uncertain origin. Hence, his suggested etymology is unsatisfactory on formal grounds.³ Furthermore, he gives no semantic parallels for such a name for ‘beer’, and I, for one, cannot think of any so that, semantically, his proposed etymology remains rather ill-founded.

Gmc. **alúþ-* has also been taken to be a derivation from the Germanic strong verb **alan-*, pret. **ōl-* by Elmevik (1999: 24 fn. 1), who thinks that the original meaning of **alúþ-* was ‘the growing or swelling beverage’. But an intransitive meaning ‘grow, swell’ is not demonstrable for Gmc. **alan-*, which only shows the transitive meanings ‘beget, breed, give birth to, feed, bring up, etc.’ as in ON *ala* (Bjorvand 2005: 45-47). In order to connect **alúþ-* etymologically with Gmc. **alan-* it must also be interpreted as **al-úþ-*, which is, however, an unacceptable formal analysis as shown in 1.1. above.

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³Theoretically, Hitt. *alw-* in *alwanzatar*, etc. could, like non-Anatolian IE **olu-* in **olú-t-*, also be the outcome of an IE element **H₁olw-* (of unknown basic meaning) with loss of the initial ‘laryngeal’ **H₁* and **o* becoming Hitt. *a-*, cf. 1.1., but even so Polomé’s proposal remains at best a very doubtful ‘root etymology’.

He attempts himself (1996: 101-103) to explain the etymology of the Hittite words by linking them with e.g. Gk. *aliō* ‘I am beside myself’ (from older **alusjō*), *alumos* m. ‘anguish’, etc. In this way he excludes, however, a connection between Hitt. *alwanzatar* and non-Anatolian IE **olút-* ‘beer’, since he among other things overlooks the Finno-Ugric forms, which show that the underlying non-Anatolian IE form of the beer name must be reconstructed with an initial **o-* as **olút-*, whereas the Greek forms point to a non-Anatolian IE **a-*.

The correspondence of Hitt. *a-* and Gk. *a-* is also problematic: Some of these correspondences have been explained by positing an initial voiced *a-* coloring ‘laryngeal’ **H₂*, which was also lost in Hittite (Lindeman 1997: 48 f.). There are, however, very few certain examples and it seems, therefore, somewhat better to link Gk. *aliō*, etc. with Hitt. *halluwai-* c. ‘quarrel’ (Tischler 1983: 20 f.).

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