

Proto-Germanic *krēþja- and Proto-Slavic *krěpbь ‘strong’

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In the present article, I argue that the received etymological connection of Proto-Germanic *kraftu- ‘power’ with ON *kræfr* ‘strong’ is misleading, because the adjective 1) does not mean ‘strong’ and 2) must be analyzed as a direct derivation from ON *krēþja* ‘to demand’. Alternatively, we may connect *kraftu- with *krēþja-, a formation that I reconstruct on the basis of the Visperterminen Swiss form *xreepfe* ‘strong’. This adjective was possibly borrowed into Slavic, so as to emerge as Old Church Slavonic *krěpbь* ‘strong’.

1. The reconstruction of the Proto-Germanic form of ON *krōftr* m., OE *cræft* m., OHG *chraft*, gen. *chrefti* f. ‘force, strength’ poses little problems. The attestations point to two slightly different Germanic proto-forms, i.e. *kraftu- and *krafti-, which are further mirrored by the appurtenant adjectives ON *krōftugr*, OE *cræftig*, OHG *chreftig* etc. Since there is an established tendency for *u*-stems to shift to the *i*-stems in West-Germanic, cf. OHG *skilt*, pl. *-i* ‘shield’ vs. ON *skjoldr* ‘id.’, OHG *heit*, pl. *-i* ‘nature, manner’ ~ Go. *haidus* ‘id.’, I assume that the *tu*-stem is original, and that it was remodeled into a *ti*-stem in West Germanic. This leaves us with a root *kraf-, *krap- or *krab- as the derivational base.

Two suggestions have been made concerning the etymology of *kraftu-. It is traditionally connected with ON *krēþja* ‘to demand’ (< *krabōjan) and OE *cræftian* ‘to crave’ < *krabjan.¹ It must be said, however, that this linkage is not necessarily convincing on the semantic side. The alternative connection with ON *kræfr* ‘strong, brave’ < *krēfi-, as given by

¹The Old Norse preterite *krāfða* points to a weak conjugation, but in some Norwegian dialects the verb is strong, i.e. *krēvja*, pret. *krōv*. Although the transition from strong to weak verbs is more common, this can be an innovation.

Fick/Falk/Torp (p. 52), is semantically more attractive, not in the least in view of the dialectal Norwegian form *kræv* ‘able, tough’ (Aasen 1850: 241). It turns out, however, that *kræfr* originally did not mean ‘strong’, so that the direct linkage of this adjective to **kraftu-* must be reconsidered.

2. It is, in fact, not an easy task to establish the exact meaning of Old Norse *kræfr*, the word being a hapax. Fritzner (1886-1896), Heggstad (1930) and Zoëga (1910) do not mention it at all. De Vries (1962: 329) does refer to *kræfr* under *krefja*, but an actual entry is lacking. The only dictionary that has included the word and specifies where it is attested is the 1860 edition of the *Lexicon Poeticum* (p. 477).² According to this dictionary, *kræfr* only occurs once in *Skáld-Helga rímur* 6, 7: *váþna þorr í vígi kræfr* ‘the weapon tree [= Helgi] in battle ...’.³ Evidently, the word can mean many things in this context, including ‘strong’. Cleasby and Vigfússon in their *Icelandic-English dictionary* gloss *kræfr* as ‘daring’ (p. 357), which in the textual context seems no better or worse than ‘strong’. But this meaning seems to be based on modern usage, as it is labeled “conversational”, i.e. colloquial by Cleasby and Vigfússon.

The modern Icelandic meaning is actually much broader, however. Árni Böðvarsson’s *Íslensk orðabók fyrir skóla og skrifstofur* provides two different translations for *kræfur*, that is 1) *seigur* ‘tough’, *sêður* ‘thrifty’, *sleipur* ‘sleek’ and 2) *sem unnt er að kreffast* ‘what is to be claimed (of debt)’. Clearly, the meaning ‘strong’, which is given by the etymological dictionaries, does not cover the full semantic load of the word. One may therefore wonder whether this gloss was not simply inspired by the proposed connection with **kraftu-*.

To my mind, the original meaning and derivation of *kræf(u)r* is betrayed by Böðvarsson’s latter definition, i.e. ‘what is to be claimed, claimable’. In view of these unambiguously gerundival semantics, *kræfur* must be compared to *vꝛddhi-* gerundives such as ON *auð-skæðr* ‘easily damaged’ < **skōþi-* to *skaða*, *dræpr* ‘allowed to be killed’ < **drēþi-* to *drepa*, *ætr* ‘edible’

²The entry is lacking in the later editions.

³Normalization mine. Note that, since *æ* and *ǣ* (ǿ) had already merged into *æ* in the 16th century (and later) manuscripts of the *Skáld-Helga rímur* (publ. Rafn 1838; Jónsson 1905-1912 I: 105-165), the original Old Norse vocalism can only be reconstructed on the basis of Nw. dial. *kræv*.

< **ēti-* to *eta*, *sær* ‘visible’ < **sēhwi-* to *sjá* etc. It seems therefore logical to assume that *kræfr* was at some stage derived from *krefja* < **krabjan-* (cf. Blöndal 1989: 512), or, given its *ē*-vocalism, from a related but non-attested strong verb **kref/ban-*.⁴

The other meanings given by Bōðvarsson, i.e. ‘thrifty’, ‘tough’ and ‘sleek’ can easily have developed out of the old gerundive as well, even though they rather seem to point to a gerund-like aspect, e.g. “claiming” or “urging” (as in Faroese *krevja* poet. ‘to urge’). Such a diathetical shift of roles is far from unique. The element *tækr*, for instance, means “takable” in e.g. *laus-tækr* ‘easily taken’, but “able to take” in compounds such as *fá-tækr* ‘poor’ and *djarf-tækr* ‘bold in taking’. The simplex *færr*, an old gerundive to *fara*, means both ‘able to go’ and ‘passable, safe’. Similarly, *auð-sær* means ‘easily seen’, i.e. “what is easily to be seen”, while *djúp-sær* translates as ‘smart’, i.e. “able to see deeply”. The semantic differentiation between *kræfur* ‘claimable’ and *kræfur* ‘thrifty, tough’ should therefore be explained as resulting from the difference between passive and active use of the gerundive to *krefja*. There is consequently no compelling reason to suppose two separate words, i.e. *kræfur* 1 and 2 (*pace* Blöndal loc. cit.)

3. Since *kræfr* must be a derivation from *krefja*, the direct connection with **kraftu-* is to be reconsidered. The link can only be maintained through **krabjan-*, assumed that this verb is indeed related to **kraftu-*. For the latter, there is an alternative etymology for **kraftu-*, however. Potentially relevant material can be drawn from the Swiss dialects, such as the archaic vernacular of Visperterminen in Wallis/Valais, which was amply documented by Elisa Wipf as early as in 1910. In a highly valuable lexicon of this dialect, which was compiled by Fides Zimmermann-Heinzmann over more than twenty years, and finally published in 2000, we encounter the adjective *xreepfe* (m.), *xreepfi* (f.), *xreepfs* (n.) ‘strong’.⁵ This adjective, which has correspondences in Graubünden and

⁴Cf. Schwenck (1834: 353): “Der Stamm muß [Gotisch] *kriban* geheißten haben.” Note that **kriban* with its ending *-an* could theoretically also have been a third class weak verb. It is clear, though, that Schwenck did not have this in mind.

⁵Zimmermann-Heinzmann elucidates the word with the phrase *æs išt as xreepfs Mæmmi* ‘it is a strong baby’ (orthographical rendering mine).

Sankt Gallen,⁶ seems to be of considerable antiquity. Visp. *ee* is the regular reflex of fronted OHG *ā* < PGm. **ē*.⁷ Thus, *xreepfe* looks like the regular reflex of an Old High German form **chrāpfī*. This **chrāpfī*, in turn, directly leads back to PWGm. **krāþþja-* through the High German sound shift, and further to PGm. **krēþja-* with West Germanic *j*-gemination⁸. So, in spite of the fact that the adjective is attested two millennia after the final stage of the Germanic parent language, it can be reconstructed with great accuracy. We may consequently consider to connect it with OHG *chraft* and related forms (cf. Pokorny 1959-1969: 385-390 on *chrāpf*).

4. Interestingly, the reconstruction of **krēþja-* is not only relevant for Proto-Germanic. It also has a bearing on the Slavic languages, which have a close parallel, i.e. PSlav. **krěþь* ‘strong’, cf. OCS *krěþь* ‘id.’. Usually, the etymological dictionaries connect this *krěþь* with ON *hræfa* ‘to tolerate’ (Pokorny 1959-1969: 620; Vasmer 1967: 2, 372; Derksen 2008: 246), which is quite remote semantically. It is conceivable, however, that the word was borrowed from Germanic **krēþja-* at the Proto-Slavic stage, the formal and semantic match being more complete. It would then have to be added to the large corpus of nouns, adjectives and verbs that were adopted by the Slavs from Germanic in the prehistoric period, cf. PSI. **bugь* ‘bracelet’ << PGm. **bauga-*, **nutь* ‘cattle’ << **nauta-*; **gotovь* ‘ready’ << **gatawa-*, **xōdogь* ‘dexterous’ << **handaga-*; **gonesti* ‘to heal’ << **ganesan-*, **goněti* ‘to suffice’ << **ganah-* ‘suffices’ (cf. Lith. *ganā* ‘enough’), etc. (cf. Bräuer 1961: §14).

Beside **krěþь*, the Slavic languages also bear evidence of a form extended with a *kr-*suffix, e.g. Ru. *krěpok*, SCr. *krěpak*, Sln. *krěpek* < **krěþьkb*. This formation is formally comparable to adjectives such as OCS *lgbьkb* ‘light’, *tnьkb* ‘thin’ and *ozьkb* ‘narrow’, which are all old Proto-Indo-European *u*-stems, cf. Skt. *laghū-* ‘light’, *tanū(ka)-* ‘thin’, *amhū-* ‘narrow’. Consequently, there is a distinct possibility that **krěþь* originally was a *u*-stem as well. It can therefore be surmised that OHG **chrāpfī*, the

⁶Schweizerisches Idiotikon, s.v. *chrāpfē*.

⁷Cf. Visp. *weexer* ~ *weeher* ‘better’ (= Cimbrian *begor* ‘id.’) < **wēhizan-*, comp. of OHG *wāhi* ‘fine, beautiful’.

⁸Like Standard High German, the Visperterminen dialect obviously preserves WGm. geminates after long vowels, e.g. *ant-slaafu* ‘to fall asleep’ < PGm. **slēpan-* vs. *ant-sleepfu* ‘to sedate’ < PGm. **slēþjan-*.

precursor of Visp. *xreepfe*, replaced older **krēpu-*. In fact, such a scenario dovetails with the general replacement of *u*-stems by *ja*-stems in continental West Germanic, cf. OHG *engi* ‘narrow’ < **angja-* vs. Go. *aggwus*, OHG *herti* ‘hard’ < **hardja-* vs. Go. *hardus* etc.

A possible objection against the hypothesis that Slavic **krěpъ* was borrowed from Germanic would be its accentuation. The word has been reconstructed with accent paradigm a (Derksen 2008: 246),⁹ which is characterized by columnar stress on the first syllable. It is relatively frequent in loanwords from Germanic, e.g. PSl. **bukъ* ‘beech’ < **bōk-*, **plugъ* ‘plow’ < **plōga-*, **xlěbъ* ‘bread’ < **hlaiba-*, which must be a reflection of the word-initial stress in Germanic (Meillet 1909: 69). The accentuation of SCr. *krījep* and perhaps also Ru. *krépiti*, on the other hand, rather points to the mobile accent paradigm c (Dybo 1968: 155-158), which is not common in Germanic loanwords. Since, however, instances such as PSl. **klějъ* ‘resin, glue’ < PGm. **klaija-*, **lstsъ* ‘deceit’ < **listi-* and **tjudjъ* ‘foreign’ < **peudja-* in spite of their Germanic origins have the same accentuation, this objection does not seem to be decisive. Moreover, in the case that **krěpъ* did have accent paradigm c, it may well be that this is due to analogy with other mobile *u*-stems such as **tъnъkъ* ‘thin’ (Derksen 2008: 505).

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⁹Derksen reconstructs the root as PIE **kreh₁p-*, because accent paradigm a is associated with laryngeal roots and roots ending in **d*, **ǵ* and **ǵʰ*. The laryngeal was already suspected earlier by Kortlandt (1975: 61).

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