<u>Iron-Clad Evidence in Early Mediaeval Dialectology: Old English *īsern,* *īsen,* and *īren*</u>

Nearly a quarter of a century ago, Helmut Gneuss argued that the standard variety of late West Saxon Old English originated at Winchester. In discussing his methodology, he predicted the direction of future research.

> In the future, I think, one may confidently expect significant findings … from the study of word usage and word geography; the project of a new, comprehensive Old English dictionary, to be based on computer-made concordances of all Old English texts … is a decisive step in this direction.[1]

Gneuss identifies two major developments in philological and linguistic research: the exploration of 'word usage and word geography' and the adoption of new research methodologies and techniques. Both of these issues are relevant to the subject of this paper, an examination of the usage and geographical distribution of the three forms of the Old English word for 'iron': *īsern,* *īsen,* and *īren.* The aim of the study is to provide a contribution to the canon of new dialect criteria which will become available as a result of the increasing use of electronic text searches and which may, once it has grown large enough, provide a new basis for our understanding of the Old English dialects.

Although a number of early studies have looked at word dialectology in Old English, the greatest body of evidence in the philological canon is phonological and morphological.[2] However, since Gneuss' prediction, a number of tools have become or are becoming available which are set to place a new emphasis in research on the lexical history of early English. Since 1980 the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English* project has made available *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English,* which makes it a relatively simple task to find and observe all instances of a given word.[3] The *Old English Thesaurus* gives access to the complete range of words used in Old English for a given semantic concept.[4] The *Helsinki Corpus of English Texts*

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[1] Helmut Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English and Æthelwold's School at Winchester', *Anglo-Saxon England* 1 (1972), 66.

[2] This is notable in all the major grammars, which, apart from small sections on loanwords, provide little information about word usage or dialectal distributions of words. For studies on word geography, see F. Wenisch, *Spezifisch anglisches Wortgut in den nordumbrischen Interlinearglossierungen des Lukasevangeliums* (Heidelberg, 1979), Richard Jordan, *Eigentümlichkeiten des anglischen Wortschatzes,* Anglistische Forschungen 17 (Heidelberg, 1906), Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English', and W. Hofstetter, 'Winchester and the Standardization of Old English Vocabulary', *Anglo-Saxon England* 17 (1988), 139-61.

[3] *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English,* ed. by A. diPaolo Healey and R.L. Venezky (Toronto, 1980).

[4] *A Thesaurus of Old English,* ed. by Jane Roberts, Christian Kay, and Lynne Grundy (London, 1995).

provides a large number of computer-searchable texts dating from early Old English to early Modern English with which to examine the diachronic development of Old English words.[5] Most importantly, especially from the point of view of this study, it is now possible to search the whole corpus of Old English texts by computer, and so identify words when they form the second elements of compounds, as is not possible in the *Microfiche Concordance*. Complex search strings in text-retrieval software also allow us to search for more spelling variants, as well.[6]

New methodologies are also changing the way we look at vocabulary. The significant methodological innovation which has been developed for the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* has been profitably employed by Peter Kitson to the study of Old English word-geography.[7] Diachronic comparative approaches also have a new impetus, since, apart from the *Helsinki Corpus*, we have an important tool in the *Middle English Dictionary*, nearing completion, which provides the largest corpus of Middle English word-forms available for comparison with their Old English antecedents.[8] In addition, the *Linguistic Atlas of Early Medieval English*, which is currently in development, will tackle many of the problems associated with Old English dialectology and promises to bridge the gap between the study of Old English and of late Middle English dialects.[9] Although the traditional lament of the dialectologist of mediaeval English is the failure of much useful information to survive, the sheer volume of easily accessible data which is now or soon to be available to scholars will provide innumerable new avenues for exploring Old English dialectology.

Nor does the discipline lack for variety of theoretical approaches. Traditional philology is by no means exhausted and forms the basis for any informed approach to the study of Old English. However, the traditional approach to Old English dialectology stems from the *Stammbaum* model of relating dialects, 'whereas modern dialectology … demonstrates that such a rigidly demarcated division is ultimately untenable'.[10] Labovian social dialectology, for example, may prove a useful approach to the study of Old English dialect mixing, as Richard

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[5] Merja Kytö, *Manual to the Diachronic Part of the Helsinki Corpus of English Texts* (Helsinki, 1991).

[6] There will still remain the few unanticipated spelling variants such as Harley Glossary C689 *risn* 'iron', which will be very difficult to identify by any search technique.

[7] Peter R. Kitson, 'On Old English Nouns of More than One Gender', *English Studies* 71 (1990), 185-221, and references therein. Also, see Peter R. Kitson, 'On the Chronological and Geographical Spread of Old English Combinative *u*-Mutation', *Studia Neophilogica* 64 (1992), 3-23 and 'The Nature of Old English Dialect Distributions, Mainly as Exhibited in Charter Boundaries', in *Medieval Dialectology*, ed. by Jacek Fisiak, Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs 79 (Berlin, 1995), pp. 43-135. Useful discussion is also to be found in the introduction to *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, ed. by A. McIntosh, M.L. Samuels, and M. Benskin, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1986), as well as Margaret Laing, 'A Linguistic Atlas of Early Middle English: the Value of Texts Surviving in More than One Version' in *History of Englishes: New Methods and Interpretations in Historical Linguistics*, ed. by M. Rissanen *et al.*, Topics in English Linguistics 10 (Berlin and New York, 1992), pp. 566-81.

[8] *Middle English Dictionary*, ed. by H. Kurath, S.M. Kuhn, and J. Reidy (Ann Arbor, MI, 1952-).

[9] Margaret Laing, *Catalogue of Sources for a Linguistic Atlas of Early Medieval English* (Cambridge, 1993).

[10] Richard M. Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English. Volume 1: Phonology* (Oxford, 1992), §1.8.

Hogg showed in 1988.[11] For lexical study, the primary theoretical question relates to the aim of word geography. Terry Hoad identifies two aims: practical, for the localisation of texts, and descriptive, for the outlining of the system of 'distinctive words used in various geographical areas to refer to the "same" concept', a distributional exploration of the Saussurian langue and parole relationship.[12] Another theoretical problem which can be couched in Saussurian language concerns the determining of what exactly constitutes a 'word'. In many cases it is not always easy to tell whether two different signifiers for the same signified should be taken as orthographic variants, phonological variants, morphological variants, or lexical variants. So, for instance, we can ask if the four Middle English forms *kirk*, *chirch*, *church*, and *cherch* occur randomly all over England or whether they represent dialectally distinct phonological or orthographic representations of the same concept. We will see this difficulty exemplified by the forms of the word for 'iron'.

Scholars of Old English dialectology have often expressed considerable scepticism (for which they are not always given credit) concerning the certainty of their dialect-designations. They recognise that the collection of features available for analysis do not give us a very accurate picture of the Old English dialects. The traditional divisions into West Saxon, Mercian, Northumbrian, and Kentish dialects are so broad as to be uninformative as geographical indicators. We can only really localise dialectal features to a few ecclesiastical centres where the manuscripts were written.[13] The terminology is deceptive in other ways. West Saxon is the language of both Alfred and Ælfric, but the later West Saxon of Ælfric does not appear to have developed directly from the earlier West Saxon of Alfred.[14] Rather, it seems that early West Saxon consisted of a number of sub-dialects, the features of which occur with varying frequencies in Alfredian texts.[15] This may also have been the case with late West Saxon, but in the later period a single sub-dialect (probably that of Winchester, according to Gneuss) became established as the written standard all over Wessex, and, indeed, throughout England.[16] When we refer to late West Saxon, we are generally referring to this written standard, which is by no means

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[11] Richard M. Hogg, 'On the Impossibility of Old English Dialectology', in *Luick Revisited: Papers Read at the Luick-Symposium at Schloß Liechtenstein, 15.-18.9.1985*, ed. by D. Kastovsky and G. Bauer, (Tübingen, 1988), pp. 183-203. For the claim that traditional philology has ignored theoretical developments, see P.W. Conner, 'Source Studies. The Old English *Guthlac A* and the English Benedictine Reformation', *Revue Bénédictine* 103 (1993), 380-413.

[11] Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.6.

[12] Terry Hoad, 'Word Geography: Previous Approaches and Achievements', in *Speaking in Our Tongues: Medieval Dialectology and Related Disciplines*, ed. by Margaret Laing and Keith Williamson (Cambridge, 1994), p. 199.

[13] Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.6.

[14] Alistair Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), §16, §301, and Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.10 and footnotes.

[15] Janet Bately, ed., *The Old English Orosius*, EETS SS 6 (Oxford, 1980), p. xxxix.

[16] Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.10, Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English', 63.

limited to its geographical place of origin. Anglian is a general term for the Mercian and Northumbrian dialects, which likewise consisted of a number of sub-dialects. Mercian sub-dialects are represented by the *Vespasian Psalter*, in part by the *Épinal* and *Erfurt Glossaries*, and by the Mercian portion of the *Rushworth Gospels* (*Ru¹*) respectively.[17] It has also been claimed that the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the portion of the *Rushworth Gospels* (*Ru²*) written by Owun represent more northerly and more southerly dialects of Northumbrian.[18]

The boundaries between these dialects were often fluid. Old English texts often contain characteristics of more than one dialect, and are in fact notable for their 'lack of dialectal uniformity'.[19] On the basis of the features found in the texts, it is very difficult for us to speak of the dialects described above as distinct. Dialect mixing could take place for a number of reasons. One is the degree of consistency with which the late West Saxon standard was employed by scribes for whom it was not a native dialect or the degree of consistency with which they translated other dialects into their own. Another is the existence of the poetic lingua franca, or koine, which Kenneth Sisam argued convincingly to have consisted of a set of linguistic forms common to, or drawn from, all the different dialects.[20] Finally, the political influence of the various kingdoms or ecclesiastical centres also appears to have encouraged standardising tendencies based on different dialects at different times. Just as West Saxon conventions influenced writing in all regions in the later period, the earlier political prominence of Mercia is probably responsible for some of the apparently Anglian forms which are found in southern texts of that period.[21] Hence dialect evidence in Old English is notoriously difficult. There is very often not enough evidence to make any firm conclusions about geography, and, even when there is enough evidence, it is often so complex that no single explanation appears likely. One is forced into a certain pessimism, encapsulated in the much quoted assessment of Alistair Campbell in his *Old English Grammar* that 'it is not possible to draw a dialect map of England in the Old English period'.[22]

The difficulty in drawing a dialectal map of England during the Anglo-Saxon period has not prevented scholars from making what we might call 'significant generalisations' about the

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[17] Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §11, Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.8, and J.D. Pheifer, ed., *Old English Glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary* (Oxford, 1974), §89.

[18] Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.7 and Paul Bibire and A.S.C. Ross, 'The Differences between Lindisfarne and Rushworth Two', *Notes and Queries* 226 (1981), 99-116.

[19] Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §18.

[20] Kenneth Sisam, *Studies in the History of Old English Literature* (Oxford, 1953), p. 138.

[21] Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §9, §17, Hogg, *A Grammar of Old English*, §1.9-§1.10; for an in depth study, see T.E. Toon, *The Politics of Early Old English Sound Change*, Quantitative Analyses of Linguistic Structure (New York, 1983), although Toon's methodology and findings have recently been subjected to harsh criticism by K.A. Lowe, 'A Loose Canon?: Materials for the Study of Old English Dialectology', paper delivered at the International Medieval Congress, University of Leeds, 9 July 1996.

[22] Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §19.

dialect origins of texts and the features of those dialects. In fact, even the view that maps cannot be drawn has been overcome for a few dialectally significant features, especially vocabulary. As mentioned above, Kitson has used the 'fit' technique of the *Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English* to produce some detailed dialect maps based on an analysis of the language of Old English charter boundaries, which can sometimes be localised and hence serve as 'anchor texts'.[23] However, charter boundaries contain a limited range of vocabulary, and many words which vary dialectally are rarely to be found in them, if at all.[24] The Old English word for 'iron' is one such case.

Without localisable 'anchor texts' we must rely on the statistic weight of large amounts of data, and this is where a search of the entire Corpus is useful. In this type of situation traditional philological divisions must serve as our 'anchors' if we are to provide any analysis of the distributions we uncover, at least until we establish by this method a new canon of lexical dialect criteria. The practical value of such traditional dialect divisions has been well demonstrated over the course of a century.[25] That dialectology has failed up to now to solve some important issues in the history of Old English literature should not be taken as a rebuttal of its achievements; nor is it an indicator that such study is theoretically flawed. On the other hand, the discussion above will have demonstrated that the discipline should not be seen to be devoid of theoretical debate or unreceptive to theoretical advancement. The study of word geography in a number of languages has shown that the neogrammarian view that phonological change was absolute (though modified by analogical change) paints a very different type of dialectal picture from a lexical approach working from the view that each word has its own history.[26] We would not be surprised to observe this distinction as a large canon of lexical criteria becomes available to Anglo-Saxonists. In addition, we can also focus on the relationship between geographical distributions and the existence of standardised dialects in Old English and, in fact, explore the whole nature of standardisation in the Anglo-Saxon period. In doing so, we can not only refine our view of the effects, but also trace something of the origins, of standardisation in Old English.

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[23] For an account of the 'fit'-technique and 'anchor' texts, see *A Linguistic Atlas of Late Mediaeval English*, I, 9-11 and Margaret Laing, 'Anchor texts and Literary Manuscripts in Early Middle English', in *Regionalism in Late Medieval Manuscripts*, ed. by Felicity Riddy, (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 27-52. The extent to which charter boundaries are localisable is the subject of controversy; see Kitson, 'On Old English Nouns of More than One Gender', pp. 285-86.

[24] The study of field names may expand the vocabulary, but this direction has not been sufficiently explored (cf. M. Laing and Keith Williamson, *Speaking in our Tongues*, pp. 230-31), and, since most field names will have been recorded from the Middle English period or later, there is the inevitable difficulty of ascertaining that individual field names were current before the Norman Conquest.

[25] See, for instance, Klaeber's assessment of metrical testing in F. Klaeber, *Beowulf*, 3rd edn (Boston, 1950), pp. cviii-cix.

[26] For the neogrammarian view of language change, see A.S. McMahon, *Understanding Language Change*, (Cambridge, 1994), pp. 17-24.

A great deal of research must still be done before we can give a satisfactory account of these matters. The scope of this study is therefore modest: to outline a single dialect distribution and to attempt to say something about its relevance to the larger picture of Old English literary history based on the extent of our present knowledge. Hence, when speaking of the 'dialect' of a text, I will for convenience refer to traditional chronological and dialectal categorisations as assigned to it by the *Dictionary of Old English*, which is relatively up-to-date in its assessment and sufficiently vague to allow the grouping of a number of very different texts. Most texts in the Corpus are described as early or late and Southern or Anglian.[27] A few are classed as of 'indeterminate' date or 'unknown' dialect, and these are omitted from the following study, except for two: the Old English translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* and *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*.

I will begin with a brief discussion of the etymology of the Old English word for 'iron'. The origin of the word is not clear. The Germanic form of the word was never developed in the romance languages; or it was replaced by the word represented by Latin *ferrum*, which is also of obscure origin, possibly ultimately a loanword (via Etruscan) from the same root as Old English *bræs* 'brass'.[28] In Germanic the form may be a loanword from Celtic, from the root **eis-*, denoting 'holiness', via an original meaning connected with 'passion'. The Germanic (or earlier Celtic) form **īsarna-* may have once meant 'holy metal'.[29] In the extant Germanic languages this form develops to Gothic *eisarn*, Old Saxon and Old High German *ī*sarn (Dutch *ijzen*, *ijzer*, German *eisen*), Old Norse *ísarn* (beside later *járn*). In the North and West Germanic languages the *a* was generally replaced by *e*, but only in Old English does this occur before the later Middle Ages. An *e* also appears in the Celtic cognate forms contemporary with the Anglo-Saxon period in Continental and in British Celtic writings, raising the possibility of further Celtic influence. David Dumville has examined the Celtic forms but finds the evidence inconclusive.[30]

Another etymological difficulty is to be found in the Old English variants *īsen* and *īren*, the origin of which is not well understood. Forms ending in *-n*, as opposed to *-rn*, developed on the Continent, but long after they had become widespread in England. It therefore seems likely that the *īsen* form in Old English was not inherited from any variety of Continental Germanic, and

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[27] The *Dictionary of Old English* uses the term 'Saxon', but, since texts under this heading include Kentish elements, I have adopted the term 'Southern'. However, the word for 'iron' does not occur in any documents believed to be in a purely Kentish dialect.

[28] *The American Heritage Dictionary of Indo-European Roots*, ed. by Calvert Watkins (Boston, 1985), s.v. *ferrum*.

[29] A remnant of this belief amongst the pre-Christian Anglo-Saxons may be present in the description of the conversion of the high priest Coifi, and the injunction against priests bearing arms, as described by Bede, *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, ed. by Bertram Colgrave and R.A.B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969), ii.13 (p. 184): *Statimque, abiecta superstitione uanitatis, rogauit sibi regem arma dare et equum emissarum, quem ascendens ad idola destruenda ueniret. Non enim liuerat pontificem sacrorum uel arma ferre uel praeter in equa equitare.*

[30] David N. Dumville, *et al.*, *Saint Patrick, AD 493-1993* (Bury St Edmunds, 1993), pp. 94-96.

that, if the form was subject to any later cross-linguistic influence, it is likely to have been that of Old English on Continental Germanic, rather than vice versa.

Concerning the *īren* form, the *Oxford English Dictionary* notes that there is uncertainty about the development of *s* to *r*, assuming the *īren* form to be a tertiary development: *īsern* > *īsen* > *īren*. The *OED* is probably correct in rejecting the view that an *ir-* form was a Primitive Germanic variant produced by Verner's Law alternation between *s* and *z*; this is partially because the consonant is not in the environment where Verner's Law normally took place and partially because there are no Continental parallels.[31] On the other hand, the *OED*'s alternative, a spontaneous rhotacism of the *s* during the Old English period is not entirely convincing, although the possibility that the resulting form **irern* became *īren* by a haplology similar to the developments *bærærn* > *bærn* 'barn', *cweartern* > *cwearten* 'quarter' is enticing. Another possibility is that *īsern* underwent metathesis to **īsren*, which was then assimilated (possibly through **īzren*) to *īren*.[32]

It must be noted that the presence of *s* or *r* in any given form of the word is open to question from a palaeographical point of view, and this in turn will affect how we see the distribution of forms found in the Old English Corpus. Any occurrence of the form *īsen* may be the result of a miswriting of *īsern*, with the *r* accidentally omitted. Such an occurrence would be undetectable, even in the poetry, where we might hope to employ metrical testing, since the long initial vowel means that forms with and without the *r* do not affect the metre. Another problem is the resemblance of the letters *r* and *s* in some varieties of insular miniscule script.[33] These letters might easily be miswritten by Anglo-Saxon scribes, or misread by Anglo-Saxon copyists and modern editors alike. The result could be confusion between *īren* and *īsen*. Some texts are more prone to this kind of error than others. It seems to me that interlinear glosses are most likely to be relevant here, since they will have the smallest writing. Not all the texts are available in facsimile, and I have only checked a few readings; but I have not come across an example which looked ambiguous. So at least some faith in both copyist and editor may be justified.

The distribution of the word for 'iron' in Old English is no less problematic. I am aware of only one early statement about the dialectology of the word, which is given in the *OED* entry for 'iron': 'The English type *īren* has no continental parallel; in Old English, as a simple substantive, it was apparently chiefly poetic, but it became the standard form in Middle English.' This seems still to have been accepted recently (although perhaps hesitantly) by Stephen Barney:

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[31] Old Norse *járn* and its cognates are likely to be loanwords from Old Irish *iarn*, cf. *Isländisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Alexander Jóhannesson (Bern, 1956) and *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, ed. by Jan de Vries, (Leiden, 1961), s.v. *járn*.

[32] I am grateful to Dr Martin Syrett for this suggestion.

[33] For the similarity, see Bernhard Bischoff, *Latin Palaeography: Antiquity and the Middle Ages*, trans. by Dáibhí Ó Cróinín and David Ganz (Cambridge, 1990), p. 85. These letters are commonly confused in Anglo-Latin texts.

> Oddly, the more poetic OE form with *r* drove out the more prosaic OE form
> with *s* in the ME period, whereas prose forms usually drive out poetic ones.[34]

As Barney notes, this scenario is decidedly odd, and it is surely worthy of an attempt to verify it. This is a relatively easy matter with a searchable Corpus of Old English texts. The results of such a search reveal a substantial argument against the statement found in the *OED*. All 43 instances in Anglo-Saxon poetry of forms containing the word for 'iron' are gathered below. Where the form differs from the head-word, it is given in parentheses.

Īren
Andreas	1181
Battle of Maldon	253
Beowulf	322 (*hringiren*), 330 (*irenþreat*), 673 (*irena*), 774 (*irenbendum*), 802 (*irenna*), 892, 989, 998 (*irenbendum*), 1112 (*irenheard*), 1459, 1697 (*irena*), 1809, 1848, 2050, 2259 (*irena*), 2338 (*eallirenne*), 2586, 2683 (*irenna*), 2778, 2828 (*irenna*)
Genesis B	371 (*irenbenda*), 383 (*irenes*)
Solomon and Saturn	28 (*irenum*), 301, 471 (*irenum*)

Īsen
Charm for a Sudden Stitch	18 (*isenes*)[35]
Paris Psalter	149.8 (*isene*)

Īsern
Beowulf	671 (*isernbyrnan*), 3116 (*isernscure*)
Daniel	247 (*iserne*), 519 (*isernum*)
Exodus	348 (*isernhergum*)
Genesis	1088 (*isernes*)
Maxims II	26
Charm for a Sudden Stitch	14 (*iserna*)
Paris Psalter	106.9 (*iserne*), 106.15 (*iserne*)
Riddle 5	1 (*iserne*)
Riddle 58	9 (*isernes*)
Riddle 72	15
Riddle 93	17

The texts containing the word for 'iron' are not easily grouped according to the form of the word used. Those which contain more than a single instance of the word often have more than one form, making it impossible to group them together with the texts which have only one instance of the word. At first glance, *īren* does seem to be the predominant form of the word, occurring 27

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[34] Stephen A. Barney, *Word-Hoard: An Introduction to Old English Vocabulary*, 2nd edn (New Haven and London, 1977, 1985), 61.

[35] Dobbie emends the MS *isenes* to *isernes* without explanation (see *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. by Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 6 (New York, 1942), p. 122). Possibly he bases his judgement on the form *iserna* in line 14, although no such emendations are made in other poems which contain more than one form of the word for 'iron'. There do not seem to be any metrical implications related to which form is chosen.

times out of the 43 total. In *Beowulf,* forms of *īren* occur 20 times, beside only two instances of *īsern*. This tells us that the *īren* form was certainly preferred at some stage in the transmission of this particular text.

However, on closer inspection, we have little positive evidence that the usage of *Beowulf* was the norm in Old English poetry. Õren forms occur a total of 7 times in only four other poems: *Solomon and Saturn, Genesis, Andreas,* and *The Battle of Maldon.* On the basis of this small number of forms, it is difficult to say whether *īren* was preferred. On the other hand, statistical probability actually argues against the theory given in the *OED* that *īren* was the predominant poetic form. Leaving *Beowulf* aside for the moment, we find in the rest of the poetic corpus that there are 12 occurrences of *īsern,* 7 of *īren,* and 2 of *īsen*. The non-*īren* forms occur twice as often as the *īren* forms. On this basis, one is forced to conclude that *īren* is unlikely to have been the preferred form, if there was one, in the poetic koine. The much greater frequency of *īren* forms in *Beowulf* may be owing to circumstances in its composition or transmission which are peculiar to that text.

I will examine below how the use of traditional dialect criteria can suggest that certain poetic texts are likely to have formed part of an *īsern*-group, an *īren*-group, or an *īsen*-group. But before I present this evidence, I want to give a fuller picture of the distribution of 'iron' words in the entire Corpus of Old English texts. If we had access to more texts which had enough forms to demonstrate a pattern such as that found in *Beowulf,* we could almost certainly be justified in categorising them together using the form of the word for 'iron' as a dialect criterion. Since poetry cannot supply such information, we should look to prose texts. For prose we have more data and greater certainty concerning date and dialect origins owing to less ambiguous linguistic evidence and more external evidence. If we can identify dialect groupings in the prose, we can at the least establish a probability that poems which share the same forms as these groupings belong with or are related to those dialects.

A few scholars have suggested that the different forms of the word for 'iron' were divided along dialectal lines. Dickins and Wilson noted in 1951 that 'in OE *iren* appears to have been distinctively Anglian, *isern* WS, but in ME, *ysen, yse, ise,* appear to have been distinctively SE, whereas *ire* is SW'.[36] No support for this statement is given, but the observation that the *isen* type was a southeastern form in Middle English was repeated five years later by A.H. Smith:

> The form *isen* survives in regular use through the ME period, especially in the SE
> dialects, and is found in that area in place-names. In other parts *iren* is in more normal
> use and ultimately ousts *isen*.[37]

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[36] Bruce Dickins and R.M. Wilson, *Early Middle English Texts* (Cambridge, 1951), p. 186.
[37] A.H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements,* English Place-Name Society 25 and 26 (1956), s.v. *īsern.*

If these statements are correct, then there was a three-way dialectal distinction in Old English: *īren* in Anglian, *īsern* in West Saxon, and *īsen* in Kentish (and plausibly also in the surrounding dialects of Surrey and Sussex).

The only documentary support offered for such a distinction is Smith's reference to the evidence of place-names. This evidence is important, but as yet inconclusive. However, it must be noted that a clearer picture of the distribution of forms in place-names may become apparent when the English Place-Name Survey is complete. From the evidence currently available to scholars Carole Hough has gathered all the place-names containing an 'iron' element which could plausibly go back to an Old English form of the word.[38] She reports the following place-names: Isenhurst (Sussex), Easneye (Hertfordshire), Isenwell (Gloucestershire), Isingdale (West Riding of Yorkshire), Iron Acton and Ironwells (both in Gloucestershire), and Isnage (Hampshire), the last of which may be related to the *isen hyrste gate*, mentioned in a charter of the Old English period (Birch 1307, Sawyer 820).[39] This distribution in no way confirms the distinctions implied by Dickins and Wilson and by Smith. Both *īsen* and *īren* are found in West Saxon territory, and *īsen* is found as far north in Anglian territory as Yorkshire. Alternative etymologies might be suggested but, except in the case of Easneye, and perhaps Isenwell and Ironwells, there is good evidence for iron-works at or near most of these locations.[40] Notably,

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[38] Carole Hough, '*Īsern* in Place-Names', *Studia Neophilologica* 67 (1995), 145-47.

[39] The identification of Isnage with the *isen hyrste gate* (which also appears in the charter as *isenhyrstengeat*) in this charter of King Edgar to Old Minster, Winchester is not entirely certain. If the second element of Isnage is Old English *hæcc* 'hatch-gate', then the meaning 'iron-gate' is similar to that of *isen hyrste gate* 'iron wooded-hill-gate', especially as the term *hæcc* seems often to have been applied to a gate 'giving access to a park or forest' (cf. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 213). The earliest mention of these two names together in the English Place-Name Survey is in A. Mawer and F.M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex*, 2 vols., English Place-Name Society 6-7 (Cambridge, 1929-39), II, 382, in which they are merely given as cross-references to the Isenhurst in Sussex. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 304 appears to have taken the names as connected, since he gives as examples for names containing the *īsen* element 'Isenhurst Sx, Isnage Ha (hyrst)'. Hough has followed Smith in this but agrees with me that Mawer and Stenton's original usage is ambiguous (personal communication). The problem is complicated by the fact that I have been unable to locate any other references to Isnage, nor have I been able to find it on a map. Since the elements *hyrste gate* and *hæcc* differ, we may have two different places, both with names of similar meaning, although it must be admitted that it is not impossible for different lexical elements to replace earlier elements in place-names, e.g., Isingdale with the second element from Old Norse *dalr* beside earlier *-dene*, Old English *denu, dene* (cf. A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society 30-37 (Cambridge, 1961-63), VI, 99).

[40] Hough, '*Īsern* in Place-Names', p. 145. Hough's view that the *īsen* element meant 'kingfisher' in some place-names is plausible for Easneye and Isenwell, but less so for Isenhurst, since the *hyrst* 'wooded hill' is not the natural habitat of kingfishers; cf. *The New Atlas of Breeding Birds in Britain and Ireland: 1988-1991*, ed. by David Wingfield Gibbons, James B. Reid, and Robert A. Chapman (London, 1993), p. 260. Such an etymology for Ironwells is also questionable since there is no evidence in the Old English Corpus for *iren* being used to mean 'kingfisher'. In fact the forms *isaern, isern,* and *iren* are in the *Épinal Glossary*, the *Erfurt Glossary*, the *Corpus Glossary*, and the *Cleopatra Glossary* respectively. Although the *Épinal* and *Erfurt Glossaries* are primarily in a variety of Mercian, all these texts may have been ultimately of southern origin and had a single exemplar at some stage in their transmission (see Pheifer, *Old English Glosses*, §§13-17 and §§89-90). Therefore there is not any firm evidence that the semantic association between the metal and the bird was widespread.

īsern does not occur in any place-name currently available to us, so there is no evidence of this type to suggest a geographical distribution.

The Gloucestershire place-names Iron Acton and Ironwells probably do not go back to an Old English form of the 'iron' word. Iron Acton is recorded as early as 1086, but as *Actvne*, and an *Iren(e)* affix is not recorded until 1248.[41] Ironwells, as Hough points out, is not recorded until 1839, and there is no other evidence to indicate when the name was first coined.[42] The other place-names containing the 'iron' element are likewise first recorded after the Norman Conquest.[43] These can be taken more plausibly as original Old English names, but they may also be names of post-Conquest origin containing Middle English dialectal forms. In either case, *īsen* still appears to span a geographical area corresponding to three different Old English dialect-regions: Anglian, West Saxon, and Kentish.

A conceivable explanation for this distribution is that the *īsen* form spread from one region to others, just as *īren* eventually did. But it is unclear whether we should interpret this areal diffusion as a phenomenon of the spoken or of the written language. If *īsen* were a form characteristic of the Winchester standard of Old English, it would be unsurprising to find it in a text originating from an area where *īsen* was not a feature of the spoken language. On the other hand, we would expect Middle English texts and place-names to confirm a locally spoken form of the word. This makes the Yorkshire form Isingdale problematic, since *īsen* was presumably not a feature of the spoken language of this region.

The textual evidence in Middle English gives better support to the statements by Dickins and Wilson and Smith that the *īsen* form was characteristic of the Southeast. In lines 1028-29 of *The Owl and the Nightingale* the rhymes *wyse* / *ise* have been disrupted by the replacement of *ise* with *ire* in the course of transmission. Even if we cannot use this criterion alone to locate the original dialect of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, as Stanley implies, other phonological and morphological evidence (particularly rhyme) suggests strongly that the poem was originally from the Southeast, making it highly probable that *ise* was the form of the word current in that region.[44] Further support is available from the appearance of an *īsen* form as late as 1340 in the Kentish *Ayenbite of Inwyt*.[45]

The location of *īsen* in the Southeast raises further interesting questions. If *īsen* was a southeastern word in Old English, how did it come to enter the standard dialect of Old English

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[41] A.H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, 4 vols, English Place-Name Society 38-41 (Cambridge, 1964-65), III, 1.

[42] Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, II, 236.

[43] For the first recorded forms, see Mawer and Stenton, *The Place-Names of Sussex*, II, 382, Mawer and Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire*, p. 200, and Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VI, 99. Apart from the charter evidence discussed in note 41, there is no indication when Isnage was first recorded.

[44] E.G. Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale* (London and Edinburgh, 1960), pp. 17-18.

[45] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *isen*.

which developed in Winchester? Either the form spread in speech further west or it was brought to Winchester in writing by scribes from the Southeast, probably Canterbury, beginning somewhat earlier than the Benedictine Reform, since a single *īsen* form occurs already in Alfredian texts. Alternatively, the *īsen* form had its origin in Wessex and spread to the speech of the Southeast even as the *īren* form was encroaching on the Southwest.

The evidence of Old English prose texts only partially clarifies the picture. To save space I have not listed all the prose forms and citations as with the poetry above. The Old English word for 'iron' occurs 313 times, 258 instances of which have been considered here. Of these, 147 are forms of *īsen*, 75 of *īsern*, and 36 of *īren*.[46] A number of texts which have predominantly or only one of these forms can be considered to have a high probability of belonging to a dialect for which that form is an identifying criterion. For instance, since only the form *īsen* is found in the writings of Ælfric, it is likely that this was the normal form in the variety of Old English in which he wrote, whether his own spoken dialect or a standardised dialect. Moreover, in looking at the prose we have a greater certainty based on external evidence concerning the dating and dialect-identification of many texts than we have for poetry. This provides a convenient, if not necessarily accurate, framework with which to examine specific issues which arise from the data.

Let us look first at some texts which the *Dictionary of Old English* classifies as Anglian. For ninth-century texts there is conflicting evidence. The *Vespasian Psalter* contains 2 *īren* forms, but the *Épinal* and *Erfurt Glossaries* between them have 6 instances of *īsern*. This can be taken as further support for the view mentioned above (pp. 3-4) that these texts represent different sub-dialects of Mercian. Furthermore, we know from the evidence of the *Vespasian Psalter* that *īren* had appeared in at least one area of the West Midlands, possibly Herefordshire, by the ninth century; we thus have a *terminus ad quem* before which this form must have developed. It does not necessarily follow that *īren* first arose in an Anglian region, but such a conclusion would receive some support if we group with the *Vespasian Psalter* the early text known as *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle*, which has one such form. This text is believed by its editor, Rypins, to have a heavy Anglian element, despite some West Saxonising by a later copyist.[47]

The only late Anglian texts with the word for 'iron' in them are Northumbrian: these are the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and the parts of the *Rushworth Gospels* written by Owun. As mentioned above, these appear to belong to two sub-dialects of Northumbrian, but they each have only the *īsern* form, three times in the *Lindisfarne Gospels* and once in the Northumbrian portion of the

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[46] The remaining 55 forms are found in the texts considered to be of unknown or inderminate date or origin by the *Dictionary of Old English*, as mentioned above.

[47] Stanley Rypins, *Three Old English Prose Texts in MS Cotton Vitellius A. xv*, EETS 161 (London, 1924), pp. xxxviii-xxxix; also Robert D. Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter* (Philadelphia, 1992), p. 308. *Alexander's Letter to Aristotle* also has one *īsern* form.

Rushworth Gospels. This suggests that *īren* had not penetrated north of the Humber by the late tenth century, from which these texts probably date. If this is so, it must have done so not long after, since *īren* is firmly established in Middle English and Middle Scots. The only evidence I can find for a later retention of the *īsern* form in this region is from an early fifteenth-century will for Mathilda Holbek of York (dating from 1404), which refers to a *cultellum de ayser* 'iron knife'.[48] This is also possibly the latest instance of the form recorded, and I am unsure how it should be interpreted in the light of the Old English evidence. Basing his argument on the scarcity of Scandinavian loan-words in the *Lindisfarne* and *Rushworth Gospels*, E.G. Stanley has suggested that the scribes of these texts employed a standardised written language, which did not represent actual spoken Northumbrian.[49] If he is right, then the *īsern* forms may be relics of earlier usage in this standardised language. However, I believe it is more likely that the *īsern* forms represent the contemporary language in Old English, and that the Middle English form *ayser*, if it is a characteristic form of the region, has its origin after the tenth century elsewhere in England (probably the South) or is perhaps due to later continental influence (compare Dutch *ijzer*). In conclusion, I think it unlikely that the *īren* form originated in the North and that *īsern* was the normal form in this region until at least the late tenth century.

    In early southern texts *īren* does not occur at all, and this lends some support to the view that *īren* first appeared in Anglian territory. Possibly the first appearance of *īren* in the South occurs in of the version of the Old English translation of Gregory's *Dialogues* found in MS Corpus Christi College, Cambridge 322, which has 10 instances of *īren*, 3 of *īsern*, and 1 of *īsen*. By contrast, the version in MS Bodleian Library, Hatton 76 contains 4 instances of *īsen* only. Gneuss attributes the Corpus and Hatton manuscripts to roughly the same period, the first half of the eleventh century, but he believes that the Corpus manuscript 'offers the original text of Wærferth's translation' and is thus not fully in accord with late West Saxon.[50] If I am right about the Anglian origin of *īren*, the frequency of *īren* forms in the Corpus manuscript is consistent with an Anglian character to the text, which we might attribute to the influence of Wærferth, who was bishop of Worcester in the West Midlands. Our other alternative is to consider *īren* to be a southern form. However, an examination of all of the early West Saxon texts does not give this impression. The *īren* form occurs only 10 times in early West Saxon texts beside 23 instances of *īsern*, and 1 of *īsen*. It therefore seems more likely that *īsern* was the earliest form in the South. We may also note that the *īsen* form, although rare, had already appeared in this region not long before the production of the first Alfredian texts.

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[48] *Middle English Dictionary*, s.v. *isen*. The presence of both *īsern* and *īren* in Yorkshire makes the place-name Isingdale mentioned above all the more curious.

[49] E.G. Stanley, 'Karl Luick's "Man schrieb wie man sprach" and English Historical Phonology', in *Luick Revisited*, ed. by Dieter Kastovsky and Gero Bauer (Tübingen, 1988), pp. 321-24.

[50] Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English', pp. 80-81.

In identifiably late southern texts there are 193 instances of the 'iron' word, just under 70% of which have the form *īsen*. Many of these are in Ælfrician texts, but the variety of other texts attesting this form is extremely wide: laws, glossed psalms, translations of Aldhelm, charters, anonymous homilies, hymns, and *lacnunga*. As mentioned above, Ælfric is consistent in employing the *īsen* form. We can thus attach a high degree of probability to the notion that *īsen* was the spoken form in Winchester where the written standard was developed, although it is possible that the form was adopted from another dialect or sub-dialect, which was probably Southern, since the *īsen* form does not appear in early Anglian texts. Late texts associated with the Anglian region cannot be used as evidence, since the late West Saxon of Winchester was not a regional dialect but a standard language which was influential all around the country. Although not all of the late texts can be shown to have come out of the same Winchester school of writing as Ælfric's texts, this school had such a strong influence over texts of all dialects in late Old English that scribes may have adopted the *īsen* form in writing even if it was not part of their spoken dialect.

So what of the 30 *īren* forms which occur in late southern texts? It is possible that *īren* had spread to some areas of the South or that Anglian scribes working in the South were responsible for letting a few non-standard forms slip into their writing. The *īren* forms occur in fourteen separate texts of which I will discuss only a few worthy of note.[51] Four instances of *īren* (beside one of *īsern*) occur in the *Old English Martyrology* of MS Cotton Julius A.x in the British Library, which its editor believes to be ninth-century Mercian in origin, possibly from Lincolnshire.[52] It is unclear which of the two forms was original in the text, since we have no way of knowing which form was current in Lincolnshire at that time. What is clear is that there was no attempt to translate the text into the standard dialect, at least with respect to the form of the word for 'iron'. This raises a more general problem, that individual copyists may or may not have considered this feature worthy of translation into the standard written dialect. This possibility is noted by Gneuss.

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[51] Forms of *īren* are found in the following texts, identified here by their Cameron numbers (see R. Frank and A. Cameron, eds., *A Plan for the Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1973)): an *Anonymous Homily on the Invention of the Cross* (B3.3.5); an *Anonymous Homily on St Guthlac* (B3.3.10.1); the *Prose Dialogue Solomon and Saturn II* (B5.3); the *Heptateuch (Genesis)* in British Library, Cotton Claudius B. iv (B8.1.4.1); a homily in the *Gospel of Nicodemus*, in British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xiv (B8.5.3.1); the translation of Alcuin's *De virtutibus et vitiis* in British Library, Cotton Vespasian D. xiv (B9.7.4); the *Canons of Edgar* in MS Cambridge University Library, Ii.1.33 (B13.1.2); the *Gerefa* (B14.45) 4x; the *Laws of William I* (B14.57) 3x; the D version of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in British Library, Cotton Tiberius D. xiv (B17.8); the *Old English Martyrology* (B19.5) 4x; the *Psalms* in MS British Library, Arundel 60 (C7.5); the *Psalms* in MS Bodleian Library, Junius 27 (C7.12); and the *Psalms* in MS Salisbury Cathedral 150 (C7.13).

[52] George Herzfeld, *An Old English Martyrology* (London, 1900), pp. xix, xxvii, and xxxii.

Even those contemporaries of Ælfric who otherwise kept to Standard Old English felt themselves at liberty, in their choice of words, to follow their own inclinations or other models. This is the case with Wulfstan, archbishop of York and bishop of Worcester, who corresponded with Ælfric and yet used a vocabulary which was not that of Æthelwold's school.[53]

In fact, Wulfstan's usage of the 'iron' word varies. Two instances of *īsen* occur in his homilies, but there are 4 instances of *īren* in other texts connected with him: 3 in the *Gerefa* (which is thought to owe its final form to him) and 1 in *The Canons of Edgar*.[54] The appearance of *īsen* in his homilies may have been influenced by his correspondents, particularly Ælfric, as well as by the written standard of the day.

We should not forget that the *īsern* form appears consistently in texts of all dialects from early on (except in Northumbria, where no early texts contain the 'iron' word) and throughout the later Old English period. These texts may provide useful information about whether the *īsern* form was still strong in the spoken language, and where. The *īsern* form may still exerted some influence as a feature of the written language, since Anglo-Saxon scribes would have had access to many older manuscripts which employed *īsern*. However, it is notable that *īsern* occurs only in a small number of late texts: 40 instances in only 13 texts. Seven of these texts also contain *īsen*, and 3 of them also contain *īren*. There is not space in this article to examine the histories of these texts and their transmission, but most of them appear to be copies of earlier texts influenced by the standard. The presence of *īren* forms may be due to original Mercian composition or to later copying by a speaker for whom this form was normal, but the evidence is ambiguous on this point.

The evidence of the Old English Corpus search thus points strongly to an original *īsern* which was supplanted in an area of the West Midlands by *īren* and in an area of the South by *īsen*. That *īsern* was the earliest and most geographically widespread form is consistent with its etymology (< *īsarna-*). The southern form *īsen* gradually spread, at least in writing, under the influence of standard late West Saxon, and in the late period it found its way to areas where it would not actually have been spoken, perhaps even as far as York. The *īren* form also spread in all directions, ousting the others. Although Northumbrian texts suggest that *īsern* may have been

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[53] Gneuss, 'The Origin of Standard Old English', p. 79. Other examples are given on pp. 79-80.

[54] None of the instances of the 'iron' word in Wulfstan texts occurs in a manuscript which is thought to contain examples of Wulfstan's own hand; see N.R. Ker, *A Catalogue of Manuscripts Containing Anglo-Saxon* (Oxford, 1957), p. lvi. For the identification of the *Gerefa* with Wulfstan, see Angus McIntosh, 'Wulfstan's Prose', *Proceedings of the British Academy* 35 (1948), 126 and Dorothy Bethurum, 'Six Anonymous Old English Codes', *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 49 (1950), 456 note.

current even in late Old English in that region, the Middle English evidence argues against it, except perhaps for the area around York.

Let us now return to the distribution of words for 'iron' in poetry. Even if we cannot find in Old English verse suitable 'anchor texts' for establishing the 'iron' word as a dialect criterion, we have seen above that it is possible to associate specific forms of the word with groups of texts which are associated either with a specific geographical area or with the late written standard. Conceivably, we could use these groups of texts as 'anchors'. If we can attach some of the poetic texts to these 'anchors' based on the word for 'iron', we can consider this word to be a useful criterion for the discussion of the dialect of Old English poems. This gives interesting insights into the literary history of *Beowulf* in particular, for which two options present themselves. One possibility is that the great frequency of *īren* forms indicates that the poem originates from an Anglian region, with Northumbria probably ruled out, and that, with respect to this criterion, it does not display the features of the poetic koine. The *īsern* forms would have crept in either as a result of the influence of the koine or through later transmission of text by a speaker from elsewhere in the country, or both. The other possibility is precisely the opposite of this one. The poem was originally written in a region where the original *īsern* form was employed, or in the poetic koine, and nearly all the forms were subsequently translated to *īren*, presumably by a Mercian. Although neither of these possibilities can be ruled out on the basis of this criterion alone, the evidence given here will be of interest to those studying the literary history of the text, since it indicates strong Anglian associations if the poem was composed before the late tenth century. Furthermore, if I am right in locating the origin of the *īren* form to the West Midlands by the ninth century on the basis of the *Vespasian Psalter*, we can use the *Vespasian Psalter* as an 'anchor text' for *Beowulf*, and those who attribute *Beowulf* to the court of King Offa at the end of the eighth century can use this dialect criterion as further evidence.[55] Note that I am not implying that these two texts were originally composed in the same sub-dialect of Mercian. Rather, since they share a common criterion which was probably geographically restricted during the early period, this may constitute evidence that they were composed or transmitted in dialects associated with that geographical area.

None of the other poems can be associated with an *īren*-, *īsern*-, or *īsen*-dialect as unambiguously as *Beowulf*. But indirect evidence tends to support the limited evidence we have for grouping texts according to the 'iron'-word criterion. Other features which constitute evidence for the date and dialect origins of the poems tend to be obscured by the poetic koine, and thus there are very few poems for which we can have the same certainty about the date and place of origin of poems as we have for prose texts. However, scholars have come to some

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[55] For the attribution of *Beowulf* to King Offa's court, see especially Dorothy Whitelock, *The Audience of Beowulf* (Oxford, 1951), pp. 30-33 et passim.

general agreement about the origins of the Old English poems based on a number of dialect criteria which seem to be more apparent in some poems than in others. The latest assessment of opinion on these criteria is in Robert Fulk's *A History of Old English Meter*, and I have relied largely on his discussion in the analysis here.

Twelve of the poems are consistent in using *īsern* or *īren* and there are ten instances of *īsern* and four of *īren* (cf. the table on p. 8). These numbers are not large, and we have to allow for the possibility that the appearance of the word 'iron' in a poem, and the number of times it occurs, is coincidental. But the proportions do at least suggest that *īsern*, rather than *īren*, was the poetic form of the word. This conclusion is supported by Fulk's suggestion that the *Riddles*, which have exclusively *īsern*, appear to come from diverse sources, but are remarkably consistent in their dialectal features.[56]

Amongst the texts likely to have originated in the ninth century, Fulk assigns *Andreas* and *Solomon and Saturn* to the Anglian region and *Daniel* and *Exodus* to the South of England. If this is true, it is striking that *Andreas* and *Solomon and Saturn* contain only *īren* forms, whilst *Daniel* and *Exodus* contain only *īsern* forms. This lends some support to the argument that *īren* was the Anglian form and *īsern* the southern form at this point.[57] *The Battle of Maldon*, like *Andreas*, has only one occurrence of the word, also an *īren* form. This poem is believed to have originated in Essex, where a Saxon dialect distinct from the West Saxon of most of our texts was spoken. It is not impossible that the region where *īren* was used extended into Essex, if not as early as the ninth century, then by the tenth century. There are, however, two other explanations for the form. Gordon believes *The Battle of Maldon* to have been an eleventh-century western copy of an eastern original.[58] If this is true, it is possible that the *īren* form has been inserted by an Anglian scribe. Another possibility is that the *īren* form was chosen to achieve a poetic assonance. The word occurs in line 253—*ord on īren. / He ful yrre wod*—where *r* follows each of the alliterating vowels. A poet familiar with a non-native *īren* form of the word may have adopted

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[56] Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter*, pp. 404-10.

[57] Another interesting point concerns the relation of *Andreas* to *Beowulf*. *Andreas* has been considered to be stylistically related to *Beowulf* by a large number of scholars, starting with A. Fritzche, 'Das angelsächsische Gedicht Andreas und Cynewulf', *Anglia* 2 (1879), 441-96. For others, see Leonard J. Peters, 'The Relationship of the Old English *Andreas* to *Beowulf*', *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 66 (1951), 844-63, Anita R. Riedinger, 'The Formulaic Relationship between *Beowulf* and *Andreas*', in *Heroic Poetry in the Anglo-Saxon Period: Studies in Honor of Jess B. Bessinger, Jr.*, ed. by Helen Damico and John Leyerle, (Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute, 1993), pp. 283-312, and T.A. Shippey, *Old English Verse* (London, 1972), pp 92-96 and 115-18. Given the strength of this relationship, it might not be surprising if both poems were composed in the same dialect at around the same time. The criterion discussed here can only be a small piece of evidence in the argument, but one worthy of mention.

[58] E.V. Gordon, *The Battle of Maldon* (London, 1968), p. 39.

it consciously in order to achieve this effect.[59] In the light of these different hypotheses, it is apparent that we can come to no firm conclusion about the dialect of Essex.

Apart from *Beowulf, Genesis*, the *Charm for a Sudden Stitch*, and the *Paris Psalter* are the only other poems which use more than one form of the word. Doane speculates that *Genesis A* may have gone through an Anglian stage in its transmission, but that *Genesis B* did not, and this may account for the fact that the *īren* forms occur in *Genesis B*, whilst *īsern* occurs in *Genesis A*.[60] A similar explanation might be advanced for the *Charm for a Sudden Stitch*; some scholars have suggested that parts of the poem are of two different origins, and at least one divides the two parts at line 17, right before the occurrence of the *īsen* form.[61] However, we cannot account for the three *Paris Psalter* forms (*īsern* twice and *īsen* once) in this way. Perhaps the scribe was attempting to employ a standardised dialect—either late West Saxon or the poetic koine—and slipped up once or twice, writing the form from his own dialect. This, at least, agrees with Robert Fulk's belief that the *Paris Psalter* is a heavily late West Saxonised copy of an Anglian original.[62] Hence we may have an example of dialect mixing in this poem.

I have been suggesting that Old English poetry provides some evidence that *īsern* was the preferred form of the 'iron' word in poetry, and that *īren* was probably the spoken form in some regions of Mercia in the ninth century, and possibly Essex by the tenth century. The major counter-evidence is the appearance of *īren* forms in *Genesis B*, a text which probably originated in Canterbury.[63] Perhaps the scribe was influenced by his familiarity with Mercian spelling conventions which had earlier been influential in Canterbury, but this is not a very satisfactory explanation. The dating of the manuscript to the first quarter of the eleventh century is probably important, since by this time we do have some *īren* forms appearing in southern prose texts.[64] How they appeared there, whether due to spreading of the form in the spoken language or due to the influence of Anglian scribes working in the South, is difficult to say. The forms in *Genesis B* remain problematic.[65]

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[59] For evidence that the poet of *The Battle of Maldon* was capable of such devices, see M.S. Griffith, 'Alliterative Licence and the Rhetorical Use of Proper Names in *The Battle of Maldon*, in *Prosody and Poetics in the Early Middle Ages: Essays in Honour of C.B. Hieatt*, ed. by Jane Toswell (Toronto, 1995), pp. 60-79, especially pp. 70-71.

[60] A.N. Doane, *Genesis A: a New Edition*, (Madison, WI, 1978), pp. 35-36 and *The Saxon Genesis* (Madison, WI, 1991), p. 48.

[61] Dobbie, *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, p. cxxxv.

[62] Fulk, *A History of Old English Meter*, pp. 410-14.

[63] Doane, *The Saxon Genesis* (Madison, WI, 1991), pp. 29-30.

[64] For the date of the manuscript containing *Genesis*, see *The Junius Manuscript*, ed. by George Philip Krapp, The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 1 (New York, 1931), p. x and Doane, *The Saxon Genesis*, p. 29.

[65] It may be relevant that the *Genesis B* instances of *īren* both occur in extremely similar formulations: *ac licgað me ymbe irenbenda* in l. 371 and *licgað me ymbe heardes irenes* in ll. 383-84. *Genesis A*, l. 1088 has *æres cuðon and isernes*.

The above analysis is open to criticism because many of the texts contain only a small number of relevant forms. The status of these forms is uncertain, not only because they are statistically suspect, but because there is a question as to whether it is theoretically or methodologically valid to separate the *īsern*, *īren*, and *īsen* forms at all. Earlier I discussed the difficulties in establishing the etymological relationships between the three forms. Given these difficulties, it is not clear to what extent the three forms were phonological or semantic variants of the same word. Would an Anglo-Saxon have considered them as separate words, or as a single word spoken with different 'accents'? This question is by no means clear-cut, since, at different times and in different contexts, all three forms appear to have formed part of a standardised dialect, although this may not have been the case for the *īren* form until the Middle English period. It remains to be explored what relevance this may have for the interpretation of the distribution of forms.

The three forms of the 'iron' word provide us with a great deal of evidence to juggle when we search the entire Corpus of Old English texts. Since the evidence we draw from a Corpus search is, on its own, statistical in nature, I have tried to establish a statistical probability that the different forms of the Old English 'iron' word had a dialectal distribution. I have also tried to use the 'iron' word to explore some of the theoretical issues which underlie the study of Old English lexical geography and strengths and weaknesses of this type of evidence. In particular, I have demonstrated that a sophisticated approach using this methodology can illumine our understanding of the literary history of Old English texts. The investigation here has also cast doubt on the view expressed in the *OED* that *īren* was chiefly a poetic word, by showing that this view was probably based only on the poem *Beowulf*. Instead, I suggested that *īsern* might be a better candidate for a feature of the poetic koine. There is also strong, if not entirely unambiguous, evidence for dating and dialect distinctions between the other two forms: *īren* and *īsen*. The relative success of this endeavour gives me some confidence that other such dialectal criteria will be found if we sift through the Corpus of Old English texts looking for similar lexical distinctions which appear at first glance to be occur haphazardly in the early literature of England.

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