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The Figure of the Maternal Uncle in the Old Germanic Tradition

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Runic texts, like all epigraphic traditions, are marked by archaism and conventionality, of language and of form. This however throws a particular light on the inscription on a stone in Högby, Östergötland, commissioned by a niece in memory of her maternal uncle. The epitaph in honour of Assurr, most probably one of the first Varangians to die in the service of the Byzantine emperor¹, reads as follows, in the Roman transliteration by Erik Brate²:

þukir • resþi • stin • þansi • eftiR • asur • sin • muþur • bruþur • sin
• iaR • eataþis • austr • i • krikum

“Þorgærðr raised this stone in memory of Assurr, her maternal uncle, who met his death in the east, among the Greeks.”

Among a host of commemorative dedications to parents, spouses, offspring and siblings this one stands out, attesting to the existence, since Runic times,³ of what was clearly a special relationship between nephew and maternal uncle.⁴ In that treasure of wonders which is the lexicon of a given language, especially in this case of

¹ Omeljan Pritsak, *The Origin of Rus'*, vol. I: *Old Scandinavian Sources other than the Sagas*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1981, p. 375. Having acknowledged that the same rune stone, besides the commemoration of Assurr, adds a memorial, in verse, to all the dedicatee's maternal uncles, Pritsak states that the inscription reflects “The fate of this interesting, possibly typical, family of this *Sturm und Drang* period of Varangian history”.

² Erik Brate, *Östergötlands runinskrifter*, Kungl. Vitterhets Historie och Antikvitets Akademien, Stockholm 1911-1918, pp. 80-83 (Ög 81).

³ Omeljan Pritsak, *op. cit.*, p. 310, more precisely, recalling that ‘there were skalds among these masters’, dates the inscription, by Þorkell, at between 1010 and 1025. In the opinion of Lucien Musset, *Introduction à la Runologie*, Aubier-Montaigne, Paris 1965, p. 411, “ce texte représente sans doute le sommet de la poésie épigraphique de l'âge des Vikings”.

⁴ This is not the only inscription to attest to the bond. For the quotation of Ög 207 and Sö 296 cf. Lena Peterson, *Svensket runordsregister*, Institutionen för nordiska språk, Uppsala Universitet, Tredje, reviderade upplagan, Uppsala 2006, s.v. *mōðurbrōðir*.



Old Norse, where virtually every word, in a specific context, can assume a range of multiple meanings and even be charged with highly recherché semantic ambiguity, recourse is made to the compound *mupurburpur*, for that matter fully transparent, to designate, exactly, the brother of one's mother.

There are immediately obvious correlations between linguistics and anthropology in the field of kinship relations: given its particular denominative typology, and its various symmetries and asymmetries, kinship terminology should provide unassailable proof of the nature and structuring of family relations. In actual fact, however, even leaving aside the basic differences both in object and method of investigation that characterize, on the one hand, linguistic enquiry and, on the other, anthropological research, it is particularly difficult to identify a common ground, even in the restricted domain of kinship naming systems, since, whatever terminology is selected, the criteria used to configure it can vary in origin. In the present study, of course, the question of the various kinship classification systems is only relevant to its final hypothesis, which points to the exclusion of kinship from the objects of study proper to comparative anthropology, given the importance of the role played by the single cultures with all their idiosyncrasies and localisms.⁵

This should be born in mind when evaluating the various Germanic evidence on the maternal uncle, endorsed by Tacitus in chap. 20 of the *Germania*,⁶ when he underlines with customary authority:⁷

⁵ Francesco Remotti, *Luoghi e corpi. Antropologia dello spazio del tempo e del potere*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino 1993, pp. 86-87: "All kinship networks are inexorably based [...] on some 'selection' criterion of organization [...]. Kinship regulates relations between the living and the dead, past and present: a mechanism not simply of remembrance but also of forgetting. [...]. Societies [...] decide what can or must disappear, and what can or must remain" [all trans. from the Italian are by the translator of the article, A.J. Weston].

⁶ P. *Cornelii Taciti Libri qui supersunt*, II, 2, *De origine et situ Germanorum liber*, recensuit Alf Önnorfors, in aedibus B.G. Teubneri, Stvtgardiae 1983, p. 15.

⁷ Alexander C. Murray, *Germanic Kinship Structure: Studies in Law and Society in Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages*, Pontifical Institute of Mediaeval Studies, Toronto 1983, p. 60, finds "a certain amount of rhetoric in the passage", in the sense that "Tacitus,



sorum filiis idem apud avunculum qui apud patrem honor. quidam sanctiorem artio remque hunc nexum sanguinis arbitrantur et in accipiendis obsidibus magis exigunt, tamquam et animum firmiter et domum latius teneant.

The fact of a patrilinear and patrilocal model of Germanic society is in no way being questioned here of course: nothing, even in this context, authorizes the slightest doubt as to the centrality of the juridical and institutional role of the *paterfamilias*⁸ and to the coherence of the whole system of kinship, firmly anchored to the interrelations among individuals designated by ancient Indo-European names.⁹ It is more a question of verifying how to position avunculism within this reality, since it would seem to reflect a specific cultural arrangement, the peculiarities of which are dictated by expressive needs, whether normative, affective, or symbolic. The unimaginable perspectives that open up within the large Indo-European family, not least when factoring in the considerable documentation on matriarchal organization of Slavic primitive society,¹⁰ are however drastically reappraised once the residual documents of the other

or his source, [...] finding the *avunculus* playing a pivotal role among the Germans, have found the relationship worthy of special note”.

⁸ Moreover, a few lines later, in the same chapter, Tacitus himself, in describing Germanic customs regarding rights of succession, underlines that, where the deceased was without offspring, his goods went, in order, to his brothers, his paternal uncles, and, significantly last, his maternal uncles: *Si liberi non sunt, proximus gradus in possessione fratres, patruī, avunculi*.

⁹ The theoretical problem of the legitimacy of considering “terminologies as ‘consistent systems’ in which the different parts could express a cohesive ‘logic’ capable of structuring an ordered and homogeneous whole” (Luisa Moruzzi, *Terminologie di parentela e logica classificatoria*, in «La Ricerca Folklorica», XXV [1992], pp. 51-60, here p. 51) is not of course my intention here. My observation is linguistic, based on the verification of the fortune, in Indo-European languages, of a specific terminological structure for a number of kinship names.

¹⁰ Naturally, after Evel Gasparini’s study, *Il matriarcato slavo. Antropologia culturale dei Protoslavi*, Sansoni, Firenze 1973, p. 297, which makes the following strong statement: “If a firm foundation exists for the glottologists’ laborious patriarchal reconstruction of Indo-European society [...], we are led to conclude that there was not an action of matriarchal substratum on the Slavs, but that the Slavs themselves, being matriarchal,



Indo-European linguistic traditions are studied¹¹ and definite, systematic evidence sought, even if only at the more representative manifestations of the matriarchy: from the system of filiation transmitted by the woman, whereby offspring become part of the mother's lineage, to the taking up residence in the house of the maternal grandparents – not to speak, of course, of the complete consigning of power to female hands. Basically, even those wishing to believe in the possibility of a matriarchal organization of society far back in time¹² would be obliged to admit that it had successively di-

are that substratum”. On this point I am in agreement with Mario Alinei, *Origini delle lingue d'Europa*, I. *La teoria della continuità*, il Mulino, Bologna 1996, p. 634, while not sharing his theory on the continuity of European populations and their languages: “The truth is that the vocabulary of all languages now dominated by patrilinear systems maintains traces of a previous matrilinear system, and that the shift from one system to the other is an internal process, not an external influence”.

¹¹ Foremost in this context is of course Johann Jakob Bachofen's *Das Mutterrecht* (*Das Mutterrecht. Eine Untersuchung über die Gynäkokratie der alten Welt nach ihrer religiösen und rechtlichen Natur*, B. Schwabe, Basel 1861), although the validity of even his Greek examples has been questioned by various scholars, as Jan Bremmer notes in his *Avunculate and Fosterage*, in «Journal of Indoeuropean Studies», IV (1976), pp. 65-78, here pp. 74-75. Traces of Celtic society's possible matriarchal past are also adduced by Henri Hubert, *Les Celtes depuis l'époque de La Tène et la civilisation celtique*, La Renaissance du Livre, Paris 1932, p. 245: “Cette famille, qui présente les caractères généraux de la famille agnatique indivise et de la famille patriarcale indo-européenne, présente toutefois sur certains points des survivances saisissantes de la famille utérine”. A restricted but precise account also extending to un-Indo-European situations is *Stichwort* by Johann Knobloch, *Das Avunculat und seine kulturgeschichtliche Bedeutung*, in «Arzt und Christ», XXXVI (1990), p. 200.

¹² Mention must be made here of Marija Gimbutas's important accounts of the matriarchal structure of ancient European society in *The Living Goddesses: Religion in Pre-Patriarchal Europe*, ed. Miriam Robbins Dexter, University of California Press, Berkeley-Los Angeles 1999, and the intriguing parallels established through the interaction between the most ancient pre-Indo-European tradition and European mythologies. For an example regarding Germanic culture, see the passage on p. 118: “The female and male deities discovered in a grave of Hamangia culture from the early fifth millennium B.C., on the coast of the Black Sea, very likely represent a sister and brother pair rather than a married couple, since in European mythologies the female and male deities are known to be sister and brother pairs (for example, the Lithuanian earth mother, Žemyna, has a brother, Žemininkas, and the Scandinavian great-goddess, Freyja, has a brother, Freyr)”.



sappeared, with only the survival of a few scattered habits and related terms.¹³

On the other hand, to return to my original subject, the matriarchal organization of society is not a necessary condition for postulating the existence of particular solidarity between maternal uncle and nephew. Whether, with Claude Lévi-Strauss, we believe that avuncular solidarity is rooted in the exchange logic behind the need to form alliances,¹⁴ or we consider it the best possible proof of the importance of the *nexus sanguinis*,¹⁵ it is perfectly reasonable that the privileged relationship between brother and sister, the former protecting the latter,¹⁶ should produce a special closeness and confidence between uncle and nephew.

¹³ On Slavic society's similar evolution see the explicit statement by Bruno Meriggi, *Su alcuni termini di parentela slavi*, in *Studi in onore di Ettore Lo Gatto e Giovanni Maver*, Sansoni, Firenze 1962 (Collana di «Ricerche slavistiche», vol. I), pp. 477-490, here p. 488. In justification of the semantic generalization of several terms which originated “in a free matriarchal system” Meriggi admits that the system “was gradually infiltrated by patriarchal elements, to the point of their becoming predominant”.

¹⁴ The postulate of alliance-based relations with the inevitable consequence of restricted or generalized exchanges is the dominant theme of Claude Lévi-Strauss's speculations aimed at identifying the elementary principles underpinning kinship relations. Significant to this issue, besides the celebrated *Les Structures élémentaires de la parenté*, Presses Universitaires de France, Paris 1949/Mouton, Paris-La Haye 1967, pp. 301-302, 346-350, 503-504, is *Réflexions sur l'atome de parenté*, 1973 (in «L'Homme», XIII, (1973), n. 3, pp. 5-30, here p. 6), where he adduces the reasons justifying the importance of the avunculate: “Ce que je proposais d'appeler atome de parenté, c'est-à-dire le système quadrangulaire de relations entre frère et sœur, mari et femme, père et fils, oncle maternel et neveu, était donc, dans ma pensée, la structure la plus simple qu'il soit donné de concevoir et parfois même d'observer”.

¹⁵ The Tacitus passage should be interpreted in this sense, according to Vittore Pisanì, *Zii e cugini nel mondo indoeuropeo antico*, in *Studi di Linguistica e Filologia*, eds. Giancarlo Bolognesi and Ciro Santoro, vol. I, *Spicilegium postremum*, Congedo editore, Galatina 1982, pp. 293-294 (= 'AGI', LX [1975], pp. 47-48).

¹⁶ When her husband predeceases her, for example. On this point it is worth bearing in mind the dying Sigurðr's words to Guðrún, despite firmly believing in the brother-in-laws' guilt: *þér bræðr lifa* “your brothers live” in *Sigurðarqviða in scamma* 25, 8, in *Edda. Die Lieder des Codex Regius nebst verwandten Denkmälern*, ed. Gustav Neckel, I Text, fourth re-elaborated edition by Hans Kuhn, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, Heidelberg 1962 (from which are taken the following quotations from the poetic *Edda*). As to the citation in the *Nibelungenlied* 996, 3-4: *Lât in bevolben sîn / ûf inwêr genâde die bolden*



Indeed, it is tempting to extend to Germanic avunculism the considerations raised by the study of Indo-European *fosterage*. Obviously the need to create ‘a network of ethical and affective bonds’¹⁷ with the child, the reason behind his fostering out to some friendly family, could readily have been met through some relationship assigning authority and familiarity to the relative of the mother who was socially and emotionally most important. The comparison with fosterage however stops short of concluding that even traces of avunculism “are preserved not in words but in texts”.¹⁸ With all due acknowledgment of the findings of the relevant literary documentation, the fortunate occurrence which in the Germanic tradition causes the maternal uncle to have his own name should be emphasized. Resorting to a specific term is itself a sign of the need for a single denomination and of the utility of its inclusion in a terminological field, like that of kinship, even if evidently incomplete¹⁹ and incapable even of distinguishing between allocutive and descriptive terms.

triuhtinne min “Allow me to entrust unto you and unto your courtesy my beloved wife”, it is impossible not to endorse the note at 996, 2 of *Das Nibelungenlied*, in the Karl Bartsch edition, ed. Helmut de Boor, twenty-first edition, revised and amplified by Roswitha Wisniewski, F.A. Brockhaus, Wiesbaden 1979, p. 165: “Der Gedanke, Kriemhild der Fürsorge der Mörder zu empfehlen, ist ebensowohl germanisch (Schutz der schutzlos Gewordenen durch die Sippe) wie höfisch (Schonung der Schwachen)”.

¹⁷ Enrico Campanile, *Ancora sul fosterage nella cultura indoeuropea*, in *Saggi di linguistica comparativa e ricostruzione culturale*, eds. Maria Patrizia Bologna, Filippo Motta and Chatia Orlandi, Istituti editoriali e poligrafici internazionali, Pisa-Roma 1999, pp. 352-354, here p. 352.

¹⁸ Enrico Campanile, *Sul fosterage in età indoeuropea*, in *Saggi di linguistica comparativa e ricostruzione culturale*, eds. Maria Patrizia Bologna, Filippo Motta and Chatia Orlandi, cit., pp. 264-266, here p. 266 (= *Studi linguistici e filologici offerti a Girolamo Caracausi*, ed. Giovanni Ruffino, Centro di studi filologici e linguistici siciliani, Palermo 1992, pp. 69-73). The whole quotation is relevant here: “An Indo-European institution, precisely in being a cultural phenomenon, is to be reconstructed through the traces concretely left in the single Indo-European cultures, and these traces are in turn preserved not in words but in texts”.

¹⁹ This is true even if limited to blood relations. Cf., e.g., the lack of a distinction between a grandchild *ex filio* (hence from the grandfather) and a nephew *ex fratre* (from the uncle) and the more general ambiguity of **nepot-*, which, besides “nephew”, can also mean “cousin”, or “next-of-kin”. On this point see the interesting linguistic reconstruction proposed by Bruno Meriggi, *op. cit.*, p. 485.



It would be sufficient to consider the Old Norse lemma *móðurbróðir*, which with its own *Wortbildung* responds to the need to denominate a kinship figure extraneous to the nuclear family,²⁰ although no less important in affective and, probably, social implications. Actually, I have in mind an entire lexical set of clear Indo-European origin, surviving in the west-Germanic area: a set of co-radical terms with a circumscribed, fragmentary, and from certain aspects controversial history, all of which are used to express the original meaning of “maternal uncle”, namely, the lemmas: Old English *ēam*,²¹ Old Frisian *ēm*, Old High German *ōheim*, Middle Low German *ōm*, which all share the lexeme of the Indo-European word for **awos* “forefather, ancestor”,²² which through a derivation process characterized by a variety of suffixes has, even outside the Germanic context, produced the Latin *avunculus*,²³ Lithuanian *avýnas*, Old Prussian *awis*, Cymric *enythbr*, Old Cornish *euitor*, Breton *eontr*.²⁴

²⁰ Heinrich Hettrich, *Indoeuropean Kinship Terminology in Linguistics and Anthropology*, in «Anthropological Linguistics», XXVII (1985), pp. 453-80, here p. 462, says of Indo-European kinship terminology of a descriptive nature that: “In its pure form this type contains elementary terms only for the members of the nuclear family; in order to designate the remaining relatives, syntagms and/or compounds or derivations of the types just mentioned are used”.

²¹ Wilhelm Schoof, *Die deutschen Verwandtschaftsnamen*, in «Zeitschrift für hochdeutsche Mundarten», I (1900), pp. 193-298, here p. 232: “Ags. *ēam* (aus *ēabām* synkoptiert)”.

²² According to Heinrich Hettrich, *op. cit.*, p. 463, the maternal uncle-nephew relationship becomes of terminological relevance only when the Indo-European tribes gave up nomadism. At the coining of this “special term [...] the homogeneity of the relationship of Ego to grandfather and to mother’s brother has [...] the following result: in some dialects, the new term for *mother’s brother* is derived by independent but parallel processes from the inherited term for the grandfather”.

²³ Maurizio Bettini, *Antropologia e cultura romana. Parentela, tempo, immagini dell’anima*, Carocci editore, Firenze 1986, p. 66, notes of *avunculus* that: “It is clearly a diminutive form [...] transforming ‘grandfather’ into ‘little grandfather’. The generally ‘affective’ [...] nature of such formations is well-known of course: ‘affectivity’ which can emerge in contexts which are confidential [...], light-hearted, playful [...] in character. Therefore, the very fact that the term for the maternal uncle is made by a diminutive (the only example in all kinship terms) thus bespeaks the confidential, affective aura surrounding the figure”.

²⁴ In Alois Walde, *Vergleichendes Wörterbuch der indogermanischen Sprachen*, ed. Julius Pokorny, W. de Gruyter, Berlin-Leipzig 1930, vol. I, pp. 20-21, on the basis of the evidence of *nika* “aunt”, also Old Slavic **njb*.



In fact, their history is one of lights and shadows: the somewhat difficult etymological reconstruction and paucity of the evidence present in the oldest texts is certainly problematic but does not diminish the significance of what these words represent, their quality of almost exclusive evidence of a cultural phenomenon, which, if not constituting a juridical institution, is of indisputable antiquity.²⁵ These terms have had similar success in surviving into modern languages (English *eme*,²⁶ Dutch *oom*, German *Obeim*, *Obm*), albeit with some semantic weakening from “maternal uncle” to “uncle” (maternal and paternal), inevitable over the course of time.²⁷ This success, however, it is perhaps worth adding, is hardly on a par with that of the Latin *avunculus*, which, via the loan from the French *oncle*, has also supplied many of the modern Germanic languages with the word, or one of the words, for “uncle”: English *uncle*, German *Onkel*, Danish, Swedish, and Norwegian *onkel*.²⁸

The search for a satisfactory etymology for the Germanic lemmas has met with some difficulty, I observed above, though this needs qualifying. Leaving aside the specificity of the single reconstructions, doubt has never been cast on either the relationship with the lexeme

²⁵ The maternal uncle-nephew bond was unable to be codified within the legal system on account of its very nature. Cf. the point made by Sigurd Graf von Pfeil, *s.v. Avunkulat*, in *Reallexikon der Germanischen Altertumskunde*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1973, vol. I, pp. 525-527, here p. 526: “Die auf jeden Fall evidente Sonderstellung des Mutterbruders scheint jedoch rein familiasozialer Art gewesen zu sein”. Alexander C. Murray, *op. cit.*, p. 63, similarly notes that “the avunculate remained a feature of European literature and folklore”.

²⁶ For dialect variants and their occurrences see *The Oxford English Dictionary*, eds. John A. Simpson and Edmund S.C. Weiner, Oxford Clarendon Press, Oxford 1989², vol. V, *s.v. eme*.

²⁷ Of a different nature, of course, is the case illustrated by Émile Benveniste, *Le vocabulaire des institutions indo-européennes*, vol. I, *Économie, parenté, société*, Les Éditions de Minuit, Paris 1969, p. 221, referring to the origin of the neologism *hermano* in Spanish, a language which required finding new terms to indicate natural kinship, given that “*frater*, et aussi *soror*, avaient pris un sens uniquement religieux, ‘frère et sœur en religion’”.

²⁸ In the Scandinavian languages cited, the term *onkel*, mainly referring to an acquired uncle (the husband of the mother’s or father’s sister) is used with *morbror* and *farbror*, respectively the maternal and paternal uncle. Icelandic, applying a similar descriptive conservatism, continues to distinguish between *móðurbróðir* and *föðurbróðir*.



**awos*, or the original structure of the word as a compound. Interest has been concentrated, for readily imaginable reasons, on the Old High German term *ōheim*, supplying sufficient material for a reconstruction, with other Germanic lemmas, of a masculine form in *-a* **awa-haima*.²⁹ If at the Indo-European level **awos* designated “grandfather”, the oldest representative on the maternal side,³⁰ in Fritz Mezger’s definition the Germanic compound stands for “der die Heimstätte des Großvaters mütterlicherseits hat”,³¹ and indicates a figure which can only be identified as the mother’s brother. With the functionality typical of the *babuvrīhi* the most concrete and effective way was found to give a name to a subject who, with access to the ancestral goods, has also taken on the familial and social duties of the head of the family, first and foremost those towards the sister and her offspring.

It is at this point completely legitimate to verify the extent to which the above reconstruction is born out in extant texts. The Old

²⁹ It is here worth bearing in mind Hermann Osthoff’s proposal, *Etymologica I*, in «Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur», XIII (1888), pp. 395-463, here p. 452, considering the second member of the compound as the development of an ancient **-χαιμο-ζ*, comparable with Greek *-τιμος*, for example of *θεότιμος*, characterised by a different apophonic grade and the expected result of the initial labiovelar. The Germanic compound therefore means “Großvaters Schätzung habend, in dem Range des Großvaters stehend”.

³⁰ Berthold Delbrück, *Die Indogermanischen Verwandtschaftsnamen. Ein Beitrag zur vergleichenden Alterthumskunde*, S. Hirzel Verlag, Leipzig 1889, p. 104. Robert S.P. Beekes, *Uncle and Nephew*, in «Journal of Indoeuropean Studies», IV (1976), pp. 43-63, here p. 60, refutes the traditionally-held thesis that **awos* designates the mother’s father, sustaining that “It would be rather strange [...] that there would have been a special term for MoFa (**awos*) and not for MoBr”, thereby somewhat surprisingly failing to take into account the evidence which could solve the problem.

³¹ Fritz Mezger, *Oheim und Neffe*, in «Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung auf dem Gebiete der indogermanischen Sprachen», N.F. LXXVI (1960), pp. 296-302, here p. 296. Formally different, on the other hand, while moving in the same semantic domain, are the solutions proposed by Karl Müllenhoff, *Deutsche Altertumskunde*, Weidmannsche Buchhandlung, Berlin 1900, vol. 4, p. 320, “der das Großvaterhaus hat”, and Rudolf Blümel, *Oheim*, in «Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur», LIII (1929), pp. 55-58, here p. 58, “der *heim-abne*, der in der wohnung der großen familie, in der großen familie die stellung des (verstorbenen oder fernen) großvaters inne hat”.



High German tradition unfortunately stops at the gloss of the Latin *avunculus*, in itself a considerable contribution however given³² the high number of occurrences and the univocal nature of the meaning given. It is also true that the gloss has a peremptory tone – paradoxically, in and on account of its minimal textual weight: when a context of reference is inexistent or unrecognizable, a word is generally given its standard meaning to the extent that it is precisely the perfect semantic match guaranteed by the Latin lemma which occasionally manages to triumph over the phonetic or simply graphic differences separating, in the case of *ōheim*, significantly discordant German variants.³³ German literature however, it has to be said, is rather more generous, and by extending research to the middle period it is immediately possible to verify that the productivity of *ōheim* is consecrated by the emergence in literary texts of the so-termed *uncle-nephew motif*,³⁴ considered “of all blood relationships [...] the most prominent in the medieval German epic and the most glorified”.³⁵ It is within these poems that the conditions for the reciprocal uncle-nephew use of *ōheim* evolve: the centrality of the motif to the plots of many narratives determines the frequent instances of reciprocal interaction between the two characters who, especially “in vertraulich ehrender anrede”,³⁶ address each other with the same term.³⁷ In ge-

³² *Althochdeutscher und Altsächsischer Glossenwortschatz*, ed. Rudolf Schützeichel, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Tübingen 2004, vol. I, s.v. *ōheim*.

³³ See too, *ibidem*, with *ōheim*, the following forms among others: *boeme*, *hobeī*, *hobeim*, *oem*, *obaim*, *obei*, *obein*, *ohem*, *oibaī*, *ome*, characterized, according to the specific cases, by the prosthesis *b* and by reductions originating from Low German.

³⁴ For evidence beyond the Germanic domain see William O. Farnsworth, *Uncle and Nephew in the Old French Chansons de Geste. A Study in the Survival of Matriarchy*, Columbia University Press, New York 1913.

³⁵ Clair Hayden Bell, *The Sister's Son in the Medieval German Epic. A Study in the Survival of Matriliney*, in «University of California Publications in Modern Philology», X (1922), n. 2, pp. 67-182, here p. 105.

³⁶ *Mittelhochdeutsches Handwörterbuch* von Matthias Lexer, 3 vol., S. Hirzel Verlag, Leipzig 1872-1878, s.v. *o-beim*. Hardly an irrelevant detail, bearing in mind that Berthold Delbrück, *op. cit.*, p. 523, had already indicated the versatility of γαμβρός “brother-in-law (*i.e.* the sister's husband)” in also signifying πενθερός “father-in-law” in a dialogue exchange.

³⁷ Clair Hayden Bell, *op. cit.*, p. 78, very appositely remarks: “It often occurs in the epics that the mother's brother, addressed as ‘*ōheim*’ by his nephew, uses the



neral, it is no surprise that the same term can apply to individuals with different kinship roles, and similar examples exist in the kinship terminology of several other linguistic traditions.³⁸ The case in point, however, adduces a number of problems of semantic ambiguity not subsumable within the icastic *obem vel nefē* of Diefenbach's *Glossarium*.³⁹ What favors an exchange of names between uncle and nephew is the dramatic urgency of the plot, with its own ludic reciprocity of affectionate compliments, the uncle-nephew exchange also occurring when *ōbeim* is replaced by *veter*, the term for "paternal uncle", comparable with the Latin *patruus* in its etymological correspondence.⁴⁰ Certainly, before evaluating the specific weight of *ōbeim*, it would be prudent to consider the many ways in which its linguistic destiny has been shaped by this tangle of cohabitation, competition, and confusion:⁴¹ *ōbeim*, for all the later arrival of *Onkel*, was to remain in the modern tongue in its slightly etiolated original meaning, while *veter* was to lose its more marked semantic

honoring title in return address; or the nephew, addressed as 'nephew' by his uncle, uses the same address in return; so that *obem* and *neve* may mean either 'uncle' or 'nephew'".

³⁸ The various studies of interest include Lorraine Lancaster's *Kinship in Anglo-Saxon Society*, parts I a. II, in «The British Journal of Sociology», IX (1958), pp. 230-250 and 359-377, here p. 238. Lancaster states of Old English kinship terminology that: "The Anglo-Saxon naming system was remarkably flexible in that it contained many synonymous terms for one relationship, while the same term sometimes did duty for different relationships".

³⁹ Lorenz Diefenbach, *Glossarium Latino-Germanicum Mediae et Infimae Aetatis*, Sumpibus Josephi Baer Bibliopolae, Francofurti ad Moenum 1857, s.v. *auunculus*.

⁴⁰ Clair Hayden Bell, *op. cit.*, pp. 122-123, on *Rosengarten*: "There is also increasing irregularity in the use of relationship terms; for whereas the terms *neve* and *obem* are used in *Ros. A* and *D*, in the later versions *D'* and *F* both uncle and sister's sons are called *veter*". For a systematic analysis of the semantic evolution of *obem* from the beginnings of the literary tradition to 1500, see William J. Jones, *German Kinship Terms (750-1500): Documentation and Analysis*, W. de Gruyter, Berlin-New York 1990, pp. 147-162.

⁴¹ Relevant here is the non-literary evidence listed in the *Wörterbuch der mittelhochdeutschen Urkundensprache auf der Grundlage des Corpus der altdutschen Originalurkunden bis zum Jahr 1300*, eds. Bettina Kirschstein and Ursula Schulze, E. Schmidt Verlag, Berlin 1999, Lieferung 15, s.v. *obem*.



denotation and in the form *Vetter* “cousin”, or “relative” come to designate a far less significant kinship degree.⁴²

The same considerations relate to the Anglo-Saxon tradition, evidence of which appears in a variety of works, from poetry and literary prose to historical documents and even an inscription on a considerably damaged rune stone. Here it is impossible not to question why scholars continue to investigate the ‘true’ meaning of *ēam*, even in the presence of a documentation which, although not ample, is at any rate very heterogeneous.⁴³ Ingeborg M. Bajema’s very useful article⁴⁴ dates from 1994, and it is certainly in the name of scientific rigor that as late as 2008 the *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *ēam*, inserted paragraph 3 separating the cases in which the lemma indicates a “male relative, where nature of relationship cannot now be determined”. It is pointless to observe that the caution used to preserve historical truth only endorses the already proven tendency of a word to acquire a new, often more generic meaning where it had originally been used in an exclusive, specific sense. What is questioned here is the procedure whereby, for every occurrence of *ēam*, the genealogical indication demonstrating its meaning as “maternal uncle”⁴⁵ is sought in the plot of some narrative or between the lines of a historical account. In the absence of any such indication, which may be determined by the nature of the document itself, the selec-

⁴² Any further comment on the gradual loss of semantic precision in *veter* would be superfluous. It should however be pointed out that the role of cousins was clearly far from negligible in terms of the stability of family structure if in *Vǫluspá*, strophe 45, it is the strife among cousins (*systrungar*, actually the offspring of the mother’s sister), like that among brothers, which presaged the imminent end of the world.

⁴³ Antonette di Paolo Healey *et al.*, *Dictionary of Old English: A to G on CD-ROM*, Dictionary of Old English Project, Toronto 2008, s.v. *ēam*, lists some 45 occurrences.

⁴⁴ Ingeborg M. Bajema, *The Mother’s Brother: an Investigation into the Meaning of Old English eam*, in «Neophilologus», LXXVIII (1994), pp. 633-43.

⁴⁵ This is the method diligently followed by Ingeborg M. Bajema, *op. cit.*, p. 633, who explains: “In most of the cases the evidence for *eam* designating the MoBr could be derived from the context. In other instances, however, secondary sources had to be consulted to verify that no other relationship than that of MoBr was meant. Dorothy Whitelock’s genealogical trees have been especially helpful here (Whitelock *et al.* 1965)”. An assumption of similar considerations underlies the organization of the entry for *ēam* in the *Dictionary of Old English*.



tion falls on a loosely-defined “male relative”. It could then be argued that the word or possibly the lexeme it is based on urge verification of the kind, given the documented semantic flexibility of the German tradition, but it is then necessary to respond that the reservations as to the meaning of *ēam* derive fundamentally from a number of its uses in the Anglo-Saxon translation of *Orosius*, some of them so embarrassing that Janet Bately adduces a number of hypotheses to justify anomalies considered deviant however with respect to the word’s true meaning.⁴⁶ It seems to me impossible to exclude the evaluation of the evidence given by *Riddle 46*, even though not easily interpretable:⁴⁷

Wer sæt æt wine mid his wifum twam
ond his twegen suno ond his twa dohtor,
swase gesweostor, ond hyra suno twegen,
freolico frumbearn; fæder wæs þær inne
þara æþelinga æghwæðres mid,
eam ond nefa. Ealra wæron fife
eorla ond idesa insittendra.

A man sat, drunk with wine, with his two wives and his two sons and his two daughters, true sisters, and their two sons, their noble first-born. Therein was the father of each of these young men, uncle and nephew. In all five were the men and the women seated therein’.

The intellectual game so beloved by the Anglo-Saxons, exercising all their logic and culture, is here trained with restrained but still disconcerting flippancy on the sad tale of Lot and his two daughters and the two sons born of their incestuous coupling (Genesis 19, 31-36). The stringent logic of the intricate reasoning compels us to iden-

⁴⁶ *The Old English Orosius*, ed. Janet Bately, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1980 (“Early English Text Society”, S.S. 6), p. 226. Ingeborg M. Bajema has a number of relevant objections here, *op. cit.*, p. 640, but is forced to conclude that “in *Orosius* family bonds are not accurately reported” (p. 642).

⁴⁷ *The Exeter Book*, eds. George P. Krapp and Elliott Van Kirk Dobbie, Columbia University Press, New York 1936 (“The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records”, vol. III), p. 205.



tify *ēam* with the son of Lot's daughter who is inevitably the "maternal uncle" of the other daughter's son; this daughter, having the same father, is also indeed his sister.⁴⁸ In such a context, it is plausible to surmise that the term was deliberately chosen since its full definitory capacity could better facilitate the solution to the riddle, which exploited the disorientating complexity of the kinship relations of the characters involved.⁴⁹

To settle the question of the semantic salience of the lemmas under consideration, however, it may be useful to find further legitimation on different levels. In short, it is now time to move from names to contents or, in Campanile's perspective, from words to texts, analyzing the widest possible selection from the Germanic tradition of course⁵⁰ and verifying the role and functions of the maternal uncle even where the figure is not designated by a co-radical term of *ēam* and *ōbeim*.

Given its unique nature, attesting to a nephew's homage to an uncle and the plea to pray for his soul, the inscription on the Falstone Stone should, I believe, be considered emblematic.⁵¹ In a manner common to eastern Northumbria, the text is written both in Roman script and in runes,⁵² in the two adjacent panels. The follo-

⁴⁸ *The Old English Riddles of the Exeter Book*, ed. Craig Williamson, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill 1977, p. 284: 'Each son is, in fact, *eam* and *nefa* to the other'.

⁴⁹ Nigel F. Barley, *Structural Aspects of the Anglo-Saxon Riddle*, in «Semiotica», X (1974), pp.143-175, here p. 164, states more simply that "The riddle rests on the fact that the numbers just do not add up".

⁵⁰ I agree with Maurizio Bettini, «*Patern*» «*avunculus*» «*avus*» nella cultura romana più arcaica, in «Athenaeum», LXII (1984), pp. 468-491, here p. 481: "It is pointless to hope to solve a problem in kinship relations terminology without attempting to correlate the linguistic information with the evidence in history or legend available for that society".

⁵¹ Despite its being collocated among the dubious cases in the *Dictionary of Old English* quoted.

⁵² Raymond I. Page, *Roman and Runic on St Cuthbert's Coffin*, in Id., *Runes and Runic Inscriptions. Collected Essays on Anglo-Saxon and Viking Runes*, ed. David Parsons, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 1995, pp. 315-325, here p. 322, stresses that "There is also, in the east of Northumbria, an extended tradition of the use of the two scripts side by side but distinct". Anna Maria Luiselli Fadda's considerations, *Aspetti e significati della compresenza delle scritture romana e runica nelle iscrizioni anglosassoni*, in *Incontri di popoli e culture*



wing reading is proposed by Raymond I. Page, despite the fragmentary nature of both panels:⁵³

+EO [.] | TA [.] *AEFTAER* | HROETHBERHTÆ | BECU-
NAEFTAER | EOMAE GEBIDAEDDERSAULE

and

‘+ [.] æftæroe [.] | tæ [*bec*] unæftære [.] | gēb [.] ædþe[.] saule’ (= +
.... *æftærHroethberhtæ becun æftær eomæ gebiddæd þer saule*)

“[NN raised] this monument in memory of Hroethberht, in memory of his maternal uncle. Pray for his soul”.

The identification of the maternal uncle is neither forced nor gratuitous. Given the dating of the inscription, ninth century at the latest,⁵⁴ reference to a paternal uncle can be excluded if only because the term *fædera* was still current, while the celebrative context is at odds with a dedication not wishing to give all possible information as to degree of kinship. To this should be added the fact that the Viking world, for its part, produced a similar inscription in which the identity of the maternal uncle, given the transparency of the neologism *mǫðurbrúður*, is beyond discussion.

tra V e IX secolo, ed. Marcello Rotili, Arte tipografica, Napoli 1998, pp. 89-101, here pp. 89-90, are placed in a wider context: “The co-presence in a text of both an exclusively epigraphic system of writing and an alphabet of considerable cultural prestige, consecrated over centuries in notable works of literature, has to be considered of maximum importance to understand both the links and the dialectical relations between the two writing systems [...], and the dynamics behind the gradual consolidation and cultural legitimation of Anglo-Saxon national identity”.

⁵³ Raymond I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes*, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 1999², p. 142. Even if over-zealous in its attempt at completion, I would also suggest a reading of the texts as they appear in *The Oldest English Texts*, ed. Henry Sweet, Oxford University Press, London-New York-Toronto 1885 (“Early English Text Society” O.S. 83), p. 127, taken, of course, from George Stephens, *Handbook of the Old-Northern Runic Monuments of Scandinavia and England*, Williams & Norgate / H.H.J. Lyngé, London-Copenhagen 1884, p. 136.

⁵⁴ Elisabeth Okasha, *Hand-List of Anglo-Saxon Non-Runic Inscriptions*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1971, note 39, dates the inscription from the “eighth to ninth century” (p. 72), while Raymond I. Page, *An Introduction to English Runes* cit., p. 142, is inclined towards the latter.



An Anglo-Saxon versus Old Norse culture comparison is particularly instructive even in this restricted sector, highlighting shared conceptions and customs which integrate and complement each other, thus providing considerably greater reliability. The aspect both traditions underscore with some emphasis is the elective affinity between maternal uncle and nephew, based, would be, on common habits, values, and even character traits. In both traditions are found indications revealing the objective importance assigned to that particular family bond so much so that precise shared cultural habits lead uncle and nephew to reinforce and consolidate the depth and solidity of their relationship across all instances of their life experiences. And it is in the name of this perspective that this shared world takes shape through the creation of a proverb, which in the Old Norse texts is designated as such. In the *Harðar saga*, chap. 10, a negative outcome is expected of the event described on the basis of the perceived wisdom of the proverb: *þótt almælit sannaðist, þat at móðurbræðum yrði menn líkastir* “if the saying were confirmed according to which men greatly resemble their maternal uncles”.⁵⁵

Within this type of identification process, it is possible that the name of the maternal uncle is given to the nephew.⁵⁶ This is the case of Robert, son of King William, whose rebellion against his father and flight to the home of his mother’s brother, of the same name, in Flanders, are recorded in the Chronicle for the entry 1079: *Her Rodbert, þæs cynges sunu Willelm, bleop fram his fæder to his eame Rotbryhte on Flandron* “In this year did Robert, son of King William, flee from his father, into Flanders, to his maternal uncle

⁵⁵ *Harðar saga*, eds. Þórhallur Vilmundarson and Bjarni Vilhjálmsson, *Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, Reykjavík 1991 (“Íslensk fornrit” XIII), p. 28. The differences in formulation of the proverb in the *Páls saga*, chap. 7 in *Biskupa sögur II*, ed. Ásdís Egilsdóttir, *Hið íslenska fornritafélag*, Reykjavík 2002 (“Íslensk fornrit” XVI), -p. 309 are of no significance: *It fornkvæðna myndi sannask, at móðurbræðrum myndi menn líkastir*.

⁵⁶ On the far from arbitrary practices of name-giving see Marc Bloch, *La société féodale*, Albin Michel, Paris 1939, 1940, édition numérique 2005, above all where he says: “L’importance sentimentale que l’épopée attribue aux relations d’oncle maternel à neveu n’est qu’une des expressions d’un régime où les liens d’alliance par les femmes comptaient à peu près autant que ceux de la consanguinité paternelle. Ainsi que l’atteste, entre autres, le sûr témoignage de l’onomastique”.



Robert”.⁵⁷ The custom of naming the nephew after the uncle was an ancient one, as was well-known:⁵⁸ it is strange that this antiquity in England is attested by the Anglo-Saxon *Orosius*, in one of the uses of *ēam* which, corroborated by a definite historical fact, is unquestionably correct. It is used in reference to Alexander, King of Epirus and brother of Olympias, Alexander the Great’s mother, presented as follows: *Alexander, Epirotarum cyning, þæs maran Alexandres eam*.⁵⁹ The various considerations and attestations of the practice of name-giving argue for a re-examination of the meaning of *ēam*, hitherto considered uncertain,⁶⁰ in the sentence from the *Chronicle* for the year 1066, in which the death of the abbot of Peterborough Leofric is recorded, recalling that he had first been given by the king the Abbey of Coventry *þet se eorl Leofric þe wæs his eam ær beafide macod* “that eorl Leofric, who was his maternal uncle, had previously founded”.⁶¹ The translation bespeaks my conviction that the use of the same name is concealing, in *ēam*, the identity of the maternal uncle, whose mention, for all the concision of the account in the annals, is evidently

⁵⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 6, Ms D, ed. Geoffrey P. Cubbin, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 1996, p. 88.

⁵⁸ The examples adduced by Jan Bremmer sufficiently represent the ancient world: Jan Bremmer, *The Importance of the Maternal Uncle and Grandfather in Archaic and Classical Greece and Early Byzantium*, in «Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik», L (1983), pp. 173-186, p. 180. As proof of the robustness of the habit in more recent texts, including from outside the Germanic domain, the case of Robert the Magnificent and his *avunculus* Robert, archbishop of Rouen, cited in the *Gesta Normannorum ducum* by Guillaume de Jumièges (VI, 10, t. 2, 78) may suffice to demonstrate that “lorsque deux personnages sont mis en rapport avec un troisième qui est l’oncle paternel de l’un et l’oncle maternel de l’autre, c’est *avunculus* qui l’emporte” (the observation was made by Pierre Bauduin, *Désigner les parents: le champ de la parenté dans l’œuvre des premiers chroniqueurs normands*, in *Anglo-Norman Studies XXIV: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2001*, ed. John Gillingham, The Boydell Press, Woodbridge 2002, pp. 71-84, here p. 82.

⁵⁹ *The Old English Orosius*, ed. Janet Bately, cit., p. 60. Also at p. 70 according to ms C: *Alexander, Epira cyning, þæs miclan Alexanderes eam*.

⁶⁰ In the *Dictionary of Old English*: “‘uncle’ is likely; specifically ‘maternal uncle’ cannot be determined”.

⁶¹ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*, vol. 7, Ms E, ed. Susan Irvine, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2004, p. 87.



considered significant on account of the family's renown⁶² and the recognized importance of that specific kinship bond.

It is the Old Norse sources which clearly substantiate the closeness of the bond. The *Ynglinga* saga, for example, contains a classic case of a maternal uncle's fosterage:⁶³ *Hálfðan var upp fæddr í Sóleyjum með S□ lva, móðurbræðr sínum*: "was brought up in Solør in the dwelling of Sölvi, his maternal uncle",⁶⁴ while the *Þorleifs þátrr jarlsskálds* makes it clear that the aim of the stable relationship was to guarantee the nephew a solid specialized education *í fræðum fornligum*.⁶⁵ *Hann var á fóstri með Miðfjarðar-Skeggja móðurbróður sínum, [...] þar til er hann var átján vetra gamall. Skeggi unni mikit Þorleifi og lagði við hann ástfóstr. Þat t□ luðu menn at Skeggi mundi fleira kenna Þorleifi í fræðum fornligum en aðrir mundi vita* "[Þorleifr] grew up in the dwelling of Miðfjarðar-Skeggi, his maternal uncle, [...] until eighteen years of age. Skeggi greatly loved Þorleifr and raised him with loving care. People said that Skeggi had taught Þorleifr more ancient knowledge than others knew".⁶⁶ The passage movingly supports the hypothesis that at the base of this privileged rapport between maternal uncle and nephew lies all the

⁶² The point is made by Charles Insley, *Where Did All the Charters Go? Anglo-Saxon Charters and the New Politics of the Eleventh Century*, in *Anglo-Norman Studies XXIV: Proceedings of the Battle Conference 2001*, ed. John Gillingham, cit., pp. 109-127, here p. 122: "Compared to the spate of foundations in the later tenth century and first two decades of the eleventh, the period from Cnut's accession to the Norman Conquest saw far fewer new foundations: Orc's foundation of Abbotsbury, Earl Harold's foundation/refoundation of Waltham and Earl Leofric's foundation of Coventry. Moreover Coventry, founded by a member of one of the few surviving families from the tenth-century 'establishment'".

⁶³ Equally well-known is the example of fosterage found in the *Gísla saga Súrssonar*, in *Vestfirðinga sögur*, eds. Björn K. Þórolfsson and Guðni Jónsson, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík 1943 ("Íslensk fornrit" VI), p. 7, where it states that Ari was raised by his maternal uncle Styrrkar: *Ari var fóstur fengit með Styrrkári, móðurbróður sínum*.

⁶⁴ *Ynglinga saga* in *Snorri Sturluson, Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík 2002⁴, vol. I ("Íslensk fornrit" XXVI), pp. 73-74.

⁶⁵ In Gianna Chiesa Isnardi's interpretation, in *Storia e cultura della Scandinavia con introduzione letteraria e linguistica*, Università degli Studi di Genova, Genova 2008, vol. I, p. 288, note 44, the education mentioned in the passage would specifically concern the study and practice of the art of Skaldic poetry.

⁶⁶ *Þorleifs þátrr jarlsskálds* in *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Hið íslenska fornritafélag, Reykjavík 1956 ("Íslensk fornrit" IX), p. 216.



affection and confidentiality necessarily curbed by the austerity of the father's patria potestas.⁶⁷ For all the obvious historical and cultural differences, the underlying similarity inevitably emerges with the account of the upbringing of Romulus and Remus given by Dionysius of Halicarnassus (1,84,5): “When the boy-children were weaned, they were brought to Gabii [...] by those who had raised them to learn Greek culture most thoroughly, and there were they raised by Faustulus’ personal friends, receiving until their youth complete instruction in letters, in song, with musical accompaniment, and in the use of Greek arms”.⁶⁸

The Germanic texts contain no such explicit reference to arms training, though it is certainly implied in the many descriptions of battles where the maternal uncle and his nephew fight side by side. In traditions like the Germanic ones, strong characterized by heroic ideals, dramatic episodes of armed fight for survival or conquest are frequent, and cannot contemplate real difference in roles, particularly among close relatives often with shared interests. Language recognises the legitimacy of such expressive needs, and coins effective compounds, the so-termed *Vervandtschaftsdvandva*,⁶⁹ such as *sunufat-*

⁶⁷ This is central to the hypotheses of Alfred R. Radcliffe-Brown, *Structure and Function in Primitive Society*, Cohen & West, London 1952, reprised by Lévy-Strauss and other ethnologists, cf. Jan Bremmer, in *Avunculate and Fosterage*, cit., pp. 71-72, who explicitly states that “in the paternal family the MoBr is the outsider who is not hindered by the patria potestas and therefore can develop an affectionate relationship”. On proof of this particular emotional bond in archaic Roman culture see Maurizio Bettini, «*Patem avunculus*» «*avus*» nella cultura romana più arcaica, cit., pp. 473-487. Regarding the particular importance assigned to the avunculate in the Celtic area, Giovanni Guastella, *I Parentalia come testo antropologico: l'avuncolato nel mondo celtico e nella famiglia di Ausonio*, in «*Materiali e discussioni per l'analisi dei testi classici*», IV (1980), pp. 97-124, here p. 119, underlines how the fact that the sister's son could be raised by his uncle is to be considered ‘in a certain way complementary (at least in structural terms) to the avoidance characterising father-son relations in childhood in old Gaul’.

⁶⁸ The passage has been regarded as proof of fosterage by Enrico Campanile, *Ancora sul fosterage nella cultura indoeuropea*, cit., p. 353, who cites the translation given by Emilio Peruzzi.

⁶⁹ Eino Mikkola, *Das Kompositum. Eine vergleichende Studie über die Wortzusammensetzung im Finnischen und in den indogermanischen Sprachen*, Suomalainen Kirjallisuuden Seura / E.J. Brill, Helsinki-Leiden 1971², p. 28.



*arungo*⁷⁰ in *Hildebrandslied* (v. 4a), *gesunfader* in *Heliand* (v. 1176a) “father and son”, *āpumsweoras* “father-in-law and son-in-law” in *Beowulf* (v. 84b) and, most significantly for the present topic, *subtergefæderan* again in *Beowulf* (v. 1164a)⁷¹ and *subtorfædran* in *Widsith* (v. 46b) “uncle and nephew”, where the reference to the father’s brother is evinced by the etymology. At the same time whole sentences are written to communicate the particular camaraderie between maternal uncle and nephew, clearly on account of the intensity of feeling and shared habits. Of relevance here, selecting from those cases where we find *ēam*,⁷² are ll. 881-882 in *Beowulf*,⁷³ in which the bond between Sigemund and Fitela is described:

ēam his nefan, swā hīe ā wæron
æt nīða gehwām nýdgesteallan; [...]
“uncle to nephew, since they had always been, in every struggle,
companions in time of need; [...]”

⁷⁰ Of significance here are Marco Scovazzi’s considerations in *Antico alto tedesco* ‘sunufatarungo’, in “Atti del Sodalizio Glottologico Milanese”, XVII-XVIII (1964-65), pp. 33-39 (now in Marco Scovazzi, *Scritti di filologia germanica*, ed. Fausto Cercignani, Edizioni dell’Orso, Alessandria 1992, pp. 45-47); examples are given of considerably ancient compounds from the Old Norse language created to foreground particular kinship bonds.

⁷¹ The two compounds to appear in *Beowulf* are considered by Ellen Spolsky, *Old English Kinship Terms and “Beowulf”*, in «Neuphilologische Mitteilungen», LXXVIII (1977), pp. 233-238, here p. 236, “an archaism which the poet felt to be appropriate to the dignity of an epic”, just as, in somewhat hastily evaluating the maternal uncle-nephew relationship, she concludes that in *Beowulf* “This reference to an old custom is part of the epic machinery by which the poet augmented the stature of his hero”.

⁷² For an analysis of the *Beowulf* passages illustrating the relationship between maternal uncle and nephew even with recourse to strategies other than the mention of *ēam*, see Rolf H. Bremmer jr., *The Importance of Kinship: Uncle and Nephew in “Beowulf”*, in «Amsterdamer Beiträge zur älteren Germanistik», XV (1980), pp. 21-38.

⁷³ *Beowulf* quotations are taken from *Klaeber’s Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, eds. Robert D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork and John D. Niles, with an introduction by Helen Damico, fourth edn., based on the third edition with first and second supplements of *Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg*, ed. Friedrich Klaeber, Toronto-Buffalo-London 2008.



Again in *Beowulf*, in ll. 1114-1117a, it is the awareness of the existence of the strong bond between one's brother and one's son which drives Hildeburh to demand a joint burial:⁷⁴

Hēt ðā Hildeburh æt Hnæfes āde
hire selfre sunu sweoloðe befæstan,
bānfatu bærnan, ond on bæl dôn
ēame on eaxle.

“Hildeburh decreed to entrust to the flames, on Hnæf's pile, her own son, to bury the body and place it on the pyre, shoulder to shoulder, with his uncle.”

Shoulder to shoulder, then, even after death, as a mark of honour and favour towards a worthy nephew,⁷⁵ following a custom also pas-

⁷⁴ The last two passages were determining in convincing Andreas Fischer, *Of fæderan and eamas: avuncularity in Old English*, in *The Power of Words: Essays in Lexicography, Lexicology and Semantics. In Honour of Christian J. Kay*, eds. Graham D. Caie, Carole Hough and Irene Wotherspoon, Editions Rodopi B.V., Amsterdam 2006, pp. 67-77, here pp. 76-77, that “in the cultural memory of the Anglo-Saxons represented by Old English poetry avuncularity lingered on as a negative rather than a positive concept”. In actual fact, however, it is insufficient to underline, as he does, in the light of the few examined examples, that “The evidence, admittedly, is scanty”, particularly if gathered from texts outside the Anglo-Saxon tradition, whether Biblical or Old Norse; particularly disorienting is the fact that his judgment regarding the avunculate is viziased by his evaluation of the tragic events involving a figure who is someone else's *ēam*. However, among the examples of unfortunate combat involving sisters' sons and their maternal uncles, a famous one is narrated in ll. 113-115 of the poem *The Battle of Maldon* in *The Anglo-Saxon Minor Poems*, ed. Elliott van Kirk Dobbie, New York 1942 (“The Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records”, vol. VI), in which Wulfmær, before even *swuster sunu*, is defined *Byrhnodes mæg*. On the use of the word *mæg* and its reflections on the maternal uncle-nephew bond, see Christine Fell in the volume co-authored with Cecily Clark and Elizabeth Williams, *Women in Anglo-Saxon England and the Impact of 1066*, B. Blackwell, London 1984, pp. 84-88.

⁷⁵ Inevitably there are critics who, bearing in mind the *earme* lesson from the manuscript, interpret the passage differently: see for example *Klaeber's Beowulf*, p. 186, cited above. Particularly interesting is Kevin Kiernan's conclusion, in *Grendel's Heroic Mother*, in *In Geardagum VI* (1984), pp.13-33, rev. 2010, in <<http://www.uky.edu/~kiernan/iconic/Grendel'sHeroicMother.htm>> (14.7.2014), that the reference to the arm sanctions the supposition that “Hildeburh's son died in the same terrible way as Grendel, losing his arm in battle”.



sed down in the *Chronicle* which, for the year 1049,⁷⁶ after describing Beorn's murder and unseemly burial, notes that, when the body had been exhumed and taken to Winchester, *þær bebyride við Cnut cing his eam* "there did they bury him beside King Canute, his maternal uncle".⁷⁷

The Old Norse sources clearly share identical conceptions and scenarios with their Anglo-Saxon equivalents, albeit reinterpreted with originality and practicality. One theme prevalent in almost all the sources is the dynamic protagonism of the nephew who in the *Sturlunga saga*, for example, at a crucial moment in his life is careful to consult his uncle: *Reið Loptr þa vt aa Kolbeinsstaði at finna Þorlák modur-bróðr sinn* "Then rode Loptr to Kolbeinsstaðr to seek out Þorlák, his maternal uncle".⁷⁸ Of a cognate nature is the request Sigurðr puts to his maternal uncle Grípir in *Grípisspá*, 6, 5-8: *Segðu mér, ef þú veizt, móðurbróðir: hvé mun Sigurði snuna ávi?* "Tell me, my uncle, if you know it, how life will pass for Sigurðr?",⁷⁹ when in the name of their long-standing custom (10, 4: *er við hugat mælom* "since we two speak openly the one with the other") he seeks to draw on the wisdom and prophetic qualities of his uncle to know his future. But the degree of the nephew's solicitude towards his uncle emerges possibly even more significantly, though indirectly, in the words which Sigurðr addresses to Guðrún as he lies dying at the hand or instigation of his brothers-in-law in *Sigurðarqvíða in scamma*, 27,1-4: *Ríðra þeim síðan, þótt siau alir, / systor sonr slícr at þingi* "Even if you brought seven of them into the world, such a sister's son will not ride behind them to the assembly", meaning that a son of his would never follow uncles responsible for the assassination of his father, in a procession which was supposed to be a sign of respect and a

⁷⁶ Various dates in the different versions, the C manuscript gives the year 1049.

⁷⁷ *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle. A Collaborative Edition*. Vol. 5, Ms C, ed. Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe, D.S. Brewer, Cambridge 2001, p. 111.

⁷⁸ *Sturlunga saga eftir membranen Króksfjarðarbók udfylt eftir Reykjjarfjarðarbók*, ed. Det Kongelige Nordiske Oldskrift-Selskab, Gyldendalske Boghandel / Nordisk Forlag, København-Kristiana 1906-11, vol. I, p. 346, rr. 25-26.

⁷⁹ This request is the poem's *Leitmotiv*. Repeated verbatim at lines 7-8 of strophes 12 and 14 *hvat mun enn vera ávi minnar?* "how will life pass for me?", it is clearly delineated in 24, 5-8 *leið vísa þú - lagt er alt fyrir - / mærr, mér, ef þú vilt, móðurbróðir* "if you will, show me the way - all is preordained - illustrious uncle".



pledge of protection.⁸⁰ Usually it is the nephew who seeks and expects help, and if that nephew goes by the name of Óláfr Tryggvason, and is bound on one of his habitual expeditions, it is clear how the solidarity of the maternal uncles, cited immediately after the king's brother, can even entail the construction of a well-equipped ship. Hence the following passage in *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*: *Þorkell nefia broðir konungs styrði Orminum skamma. Þorkell dyðrill ok Josteinn, móður bræðr konungs höfðu Travvna, ok var huartuegia þat skipit allvel skipat* “Þorkell Nefia, the king's brother, had charge of the ‘Short Serpent’, while Þorkell Dydrill and Josteinn, the king's maternal uncles, piloted the ‘Skull’, and both of these ships were well equipped”.⁸¹ Lastly, the nephew could hope to inherit from his uncle. If formerly the Högby inscription, quoted at the beginning, may have been suggested by the need for a niece to be recognized as heir, in a decidedly explicit way are the rights to inheritance claimed by two brothers in respect to a maternal uncle in the *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*: *Þeir bræðr þottuæ réttkominir til Bjarmalands eptir Hárek, móðurbroður sinn* “The brothers believed they could place claims on Bjarmaland through Hárek, their maternal uncle”.⁸²

From the emotions to inheritance: the pragmatic epilogue of a rapport which, also in the light of evidence from the Frisian tradition, authorized the nephew to claim compensation for the death of uncle: *Alsa thi em eslein is, sa clagat thi suster sune and welle sin riucht hebba* “If the maternal uncle be killed, then may the nephew stake his claim and seek to obtain his rights”.⁸³ And these rights were to be guarded

⁸⁰ I share Carolyne Larrington's position that this is “a politically rather than militarily motivated ideal of kin-group expansion” (Carolyne Larrington, *Sibling Drama: Laterality in the Heroic Poems of the “Edda”*, in *Myths, Legends, and Heroes: Essays on Old Norse and Old English Literature in Honour of John McKinnell*, ed. Daniel Anlezark, University of Toronto Press, Toronto 2011, pp. 169-187, here p. 178).

⁸¹ *Óláfs saga Tryggvasonar en mesta*, ed. Ólafur Halldórsson, Editiones Arnarnagæana, Series A 2, edn. Den Arnarnagæanske Kommission, Museum Tusculanums Forlag, København 1961, p. 207.

⁸² *Hálfðanar saga Eysteinsonar*, ed. Franz Rolf Schröder, Max Niemeyer Verlag, Halle a.S. 1917 (“Altnordische Saga-Bibliothek”, 15), p. 136.

⁸³ *De eerste en de tweede Hunsinger Codex*, ed. Jelle Hoekstra, Martinus Nijhoff, 's-Gravenhage 1950 (“Oudfriese Taal- en Rechtsbronnen”, VI), p. 66. *Das Hunsinger Recht*,



with the same guarantees requested for other considerably more important forms of hereditary succession: *Allera frimonna ek to baldande bach [...] sines emes lawa [...] mith twilif bondon anda withon* “Every free man should acquire the inheritance of his maternal uncle through an oath over relics on the part of twelve witnesses”.⁸⁴

Translation from the Italian: Anita Weston

eds. Wybren Jan Buma and Wilhelm Ebel, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, Göttingen 1969 (“Altfriesische Rechtsquellen”, vol. 4), p. 68.

⁸⁴ *De eerste Riustringer Codex*, ed. Wybren Jan Buma, Martinus Nijhoff, 's-Gravenhage 1961 (“Oudfriesche Taal- en Rechtsbronnen”, XI). *Das Riustringer Recht*, eds. Wybren Jan Buma and Wilhelm Ebel, Musterschmidt Verlag, Göttingen-Berlin-Frankfurt 1963 (“Altfriesische Rechtsquellen”, vol. 1), p. 34.