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The Terrible Bite of Fire: Metre, Sound Change, and Emendation in *Beowulf* 1122

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ABSTRACT

Line 1122 of *Beowulf* represents a problem where the findings of metrics, historical phonology, and the reading of the manuscript are in conflict with one another. I revive and adapt Tolkien's proposal to emend *lāðbīte liċes liġ ealle forswēalg* to *lāðbīte liġes liċ eall forswēalg* "the cruel bite of fire swallowed up the entire bodies". This emended reading allows the line to be scanned in accordance with Kaluza's law without any complications to the standard historical phonology of Old English, and furthermore improves both the syntax and semantics of the overall passage.

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The process of turning marks on parchment into meaningful poetry can often be an elaborate project, with palaeographic, linguistic, and metrical considerations all playing their part in establishing the text. Sometimes medieval ink-scratches may prove to be fairly easily read and interpreted; in other cases, tensions arise: a linguistically grounded interpretation creates a metrical difficulty, or the physical ink shapes are at odds with what other factors suggest.

Line 1122 of *Beowulf* – which describes the burning of bodies on a funeral pyre in the *Finnesburg* episode – is one of these difficult cases. Among other issues, a tension between metrical and linguistic considerations has previously led to the proposal of a new sound change in the history of Old English. I will begin by trying to lay out the nature of this problem as clearly as possible, reviewing the scansion of 1122a and the operation of Kaluza's law, as well as some of the basic sound changes that affected word-final vowels in prehistoric Old English. My argument is that it is neither the metrics nor the historical phonology which should give or be adjusted; rather, all the issues involved in 1122 stem from a rather minor slip by a copyist at some point during the transmission of the text of *Beowulf*. To address this issue, I revive and adjust an emendation proposed by Tolkien which avoids the various metrical, historical-phonological, syntactic, and semantic problems created by non-emending readings.

1. 1122a: Text and Scansion

Line 1122 occurs in the *Finnesburg* episode of *Beowulf* (roughly lines 1071–1159, though the exact starting point is slightly fuzzy). In the aftermath of a battle, a pyre is made for an

uncle and nephew who died in the fighting. The process is described in some detail, and the burning of the bodies themselves is recounted as follows in lines 1120–1124. I give the text as conventionally understood and punctuated, following *Klaeber Four*, with a translation of the standard interpretation by Fulk:¹

1120 Hafelan multon,
 bengeato burston ðonne blōd ætspranc,

1122 lāðbīte līces; līg ealle forswealg,
 gæsta ġīfrost, þāra ðe þær gūð fornam

1124 bēga folces.

“Heads melted, wound-openings broke asunder when blood burst out, hostile bites in the body. The flame, most ravenous of spirits, swallowed all of those of both nations whom war had carried off there.”

There are no particular difficulties in reading the letter-forms of the manuscript (see [Figure 1](#) and, for the now-damaged letters, [Figure 2](#)), though the details of capitalisation and punctuation are, as usual, supplied by the editors in line with their understanding of the passage’s syntax and meaning.

The starting point for reconsidering this passage is a potential metrical issue in verse 1122a, *lāðbīte līces*. Under the mainstream Sieversian framework for understanding Old English metrics,² this is clearly a variety of type A2a, $\underline{\text{ / }} \underline{\text{ / }} \underline{\text{ / }} \text{ X}$.³ Two main lifts are filled by alliterating *lāð*- and *lī*-, and *-ces* forms a final unstressed dip or drop. The metrical issue concerns the second metrical position, which is filled by two syllables in *resolution*. That is to say, *-bite* (which carries secondary stress, being the second element of a compound) counts as the metrical equivalent of a monosyllable. This may be compared with an equivalent verse without resolution, with the four metrical positions separated by spaces and numbered:

1	2	3	4
swīð-	mōð	swym-	man
“the very-brave-one swimming” (<i>Beo</i> 1626a)			

1	2	3	4
lāð-	bi-te	lī-	ces
“the terrible bite of the body”			

These have precisely the same metrical structure, except that *-mōð* is monosyllabic while *-bite* is a resolved equivalent.

¹Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*; Fulk, *The Beowulf Manuscript*, 159–61. Every recent edition and translation of the poem I have been able to check has been in accord with this in all relevant essentials.

²Terasawa, *Introduction*. The foundational works for this framework are Sievers, “Rhythmik I”; Sievers, “Rhythmik II”; Sievers, “Rhythmik III”; Sievers, *Altgermanische Metrik*, which has more recently been built on by many others: Cable, *Meter and Melody*; Cable, *The English Alliterative Tradition*; Suzuki, *Metrical Organization*; Yakovlev, “Development of Alliterative Metre.” The core of Sievers’ findings also form the foundation for alternative frameworks, especially the word-foot theory of Russom, *Old English Meter*; Russom, *Evolution of Verse Structure*. The divergences between these metrical theories make no material difference to the problem at hand. I assume the Sieversian notation will be more familiar to most, and so adopt this framework in the main text, but I also supply word-foot notations in footnotes.

³In Russom’s word-foot notation, this would be Ss/Sx, or indicating resolution Ss*/Sx. Stockwell, “Recent Theories.”

Figure 1. MS Cotton Vitellius A xv, 154v (BL 157v), reproduced with permission of the British Library. © British Library Board (Cotton Vitellius A xv, 157v).

Figure 2. Thorkelin's Transcript A, from Electronic Beowulf 4.0 (Kiernan, Electronic Beowulf), used with permission of Kevin Kiernan.

Resolution is itself not problematic, and is a standard part of mainstream metrical theories for Old English.⁴ The issue with 1122a instead involves a specific set of restrictions on resolution known collectively as *Kaluza's law*.

1.1. Kaluza's Law

Kaluza's law is a substantial topic, too much so to go over in full here.⁵ What is relevant here is that the two syllables *-bi-te* fall in what may be called a *Kaluza position*, that is, the position immediately after a *heavy* syllable. Within a Kaluza position, two syllables resolve together into a single metrical position if and only if they are both *light* syllables.

A heavy syllable is any that contains a long vowel (or long diphthong) or which ends in a consonant. A light syllable is one that ends in a short vowel. In 1122a, *lāð-* is clearly a heavy syllable (it both has a long vowel and ends in a consonant), and so conditions a "Kaluza position" immediately after it. I will write this conditioning syllable in italics below. The two syllables after this, in the "Kaluza position", are in bold:

lāð-bi-te lices

"the terrible bite of the body" (*Beo* 1122a)

By Kaluza's law, we would expect both bolded syllables, being in "Kaluza position", to be light (since our scansion demands that they resolve). The syllable *bi-* certainly ends in a short vowel, and so is unambiguously light. The weight of the syllable *-te* is, then, the key question: is this light or heavy?

⁴Sievers, "Rhythmik I," 217–8; Suzuki, "Defense of Resolution"; Russom, "Bard's-Eye View."

⁵For further details and data see: Bliss, *The Metre of Beowulf*, 27–35; Fulk, *History*, 153–68; Suzuki, "Kaluza's Law Reconsidered"; Goering, "Linguistic Elements," 73–155.

The answer is not self-evident, since Kaluza's law depends not on the lengths of vowels of the Late Old English of the scribes, but of the Early Old English of some three centuries prior. Final *-e* in the *Beowulf* manuscript can potentially reflect any of three vowels in Early Old English: either short **-i* or long **-ī* or **-ǣ*.⁶ Short **-ti* would be a light syllable, but either **-tī* or **-tǣ* would be heavy syllables. To find out whether 1122a adheres to Kaluza's law or not, with the needed two light syllables in *-bite*, we need to take a closer look at this word's grammatical form in Early Old English.

2. The Problem

The traditional understanding of 1122a, as outlined above, takes *-bite* as a nominative plural: the "bites" are in apposition to *bengeato*, the "wound-openings" as the subject of the plural verb *burston*. Etymologically, *bite* belongs to the nominal class known as *i*-stems, which historically had a distinction of length between the nominative singular and plural: a short vowel ending in the singular, **biti*, and a long ending in the plural, **bitī* (see below for further discussion).

The basic problem with 1122a, then, is a mismatch between the traditional grammatical understanding of *bite* as an *i*-stem nominative plural – Early Old English **bitī*, with a final long vowel – and the expectation from Kaluza's law that these two resolved syllables should both be light. That is, grammar (under the traditional view) suggests **bitī*, while metrics suggests **biti* (with a short final vowel).

There are several possible solutions to this mismatch. One would be to accept 1122a as metrically deficient. This is not a very comfortable solution, since Kaluza's law is remarkably regular in A2a verses, with an accuracy of over 97%.⁷ While not impossible, the odds are decidedly against this being the correct choice.

A second possibility is to reconsider the historical phonology, proposing a new sound change so that plural **bitī* becomes **biti* through an extra process of vowel shortening. This is argued explicitly by Fulk,⁸ and seems implicit in Bliss.⁹ This would allow the plural reading to be kept and reconciled with the metre, but I will argue shortly against this approach.

A third option is to reconsider the reading of the passage so as to interpret *bite* not as a nominative plural, but as some other form that would be expected to have the short ending **biti*. This is the solution I will argue for below.

3. Sound Changes

Early Germanic had a wide variety of word-final vowels, which were reduced fairly dramatically during the prehistory of what would become Old English.¹⁰ By the Early Old

⁶Or potentially short **-æ*, if this existed (which I doubt); for discussion, see Goering, "Linguistic Elements," 98–105. The (non)existence of short **-æ* is fortunately not relevant to the question at hand, which likely concerns an *i*-quality vowel, whether long or short.

⁷Fulk, *History*, 159–65; Goering, "Linguistic Elements," 126–7, 129.

⁸Fulk, *History*, Appendix C.3, 421.

⁹Bliss, *The Metre of Beowulf*, 119.

¹⁰For overviews, from different perspectives, see in particular Hollifield, "Final Syllables"; Stiles, "Final Syllables"; Boutkan, *The Germanic 'Auslautgesetze'*.

English period, there were five final vowels: the three long vowels **-ī*, *-ǣ*, and *-ā*, and the two short vowels *-i* and *-u*.¹¹

There are three major sound changes that helped create the Early Old English system which are relevant to the issue at hand: (1) an early shortening of certain final vowels; (2) the loss of final **-z*, which made new vowels final; and (3) the process conventionally known as high-vowel deletion.

The first of these was the change of final **-ī* and **-ū* to become **-i* and **-u*.¹² This shortening only took place when the vowel was absolutely final: a word like **bandī* “bond” became **bandi*, but words like **alβīz* “elves” or **bitīz* “bites” were unaffected, with the **-z* “protecting” the vowels from shortening.

Sometime after this change, however, this **-z* was itself lost. This meant that there were now once again word-final **-ī*s in the language, as **alβīz* and **bitīz* became **alβī* and **bitī*. Among *i*-stem nouns such as “elf” and “bite”, this created contrasts where the nominative singular and nominative plural were distinguished by final vowel length alone: singulars **alβi*, **biti*, plurals **alβī*, **bitī*.

The final change, in very late prehistory (after changes such as umlaut), is the loss of short high vowels – that is, **i* and **u* – in some contexts. Putting it a little over-simply, final **-i* was retained immediately after a light syllable, but lost immediately after a heavy syllable.¹³ Thus a word like **meri* “sea” (from Proto-Germanic **mari*) or nominative singular **biti* “bite” both retained their final short **-i*s. On the other hand, words like **bændi* “bond” (from **bandī* by early shortening of final **-ī*) or nominative singular **elβi* (from **alβīz* by *z*-loss) both lost their short final **-i*s, since they immediately followed the heavy syllables **bæn-* and **al-* (both heavy because they ended in consonants).

Importantly, final **-ī* was not affected by this loss at all. The nominative plural **elβī* retained its final vowel, even though the preceding syllable was heavy. The contrast of singular **elβi* becoming *elf*, but plural **elβī* not losing its vowel, is an important linguistic indicator that short **-i* versus long **-ī* was still a contrast made in Old English in the late prehistoric period. High vowel deletion likely took place in the early seventh century,¹⁴ ensuring that final long vowels (specifically **-ī*) were present in the language at the cusp of the historical period. If the dating to approximately 600 is even remotely correct (and it should be noted that absolute datings of prehistoric sound changes are notoriously difficult), then it would seem that Cædmon’s parents or grandparents must still have had them, and it is not implausible that he and his contemporaries still did.

These three phonological developments can be summarised as a table, with the Late West Saxon (LWS) forms familiar from most manuscripts given at the end.¹⁵ These show the typical later Old English merger of *-i*, *-ī*, and *-ǣ* all as *-e*.

¹¹On the question of a possible sixth vowel, see note 6 above.

¹²Ringe and Taylor, *Development of Old English*, 15–6.

¹³For a more precise discussion, see Goering, “Foot Structure.”

¹⁴Luick, *Historische Grammatik*, 287; Ringe and Taylor, *Development of Old English*, 292.

¹⁵Note that the sound changes generally give Anglian forms, while the final row is not just later, but also in West Saxon. I do not mean to imply that *ylfe* is a direct descendant of Anglian **elβī*.

	<i>*mari</i> "sea"	<i>*bandi</i> "bond"	<i>*alβiz</i> "elf"	<i>*alβiz</i> "elves"	<i>*framidæ</i> "performed"
Short.	<i>*mari</i>	*bandi	<i>alβiz</i>	<i>*alβiz</i>	<i>*framidæ</i>
z-loss	<i>*mari</i>	<i>*bandi</i>	*alfβi	*alfβi	<i>*framidæ</i>
i-loss	<i>*meri</i>	*bænd	*elf	<i>*elβi</i>	<i>*fræmidæ</i>
LWS	<i>mere</i>	<i>bend</i>	<i>ylf</i>	<i>ylfe</i>	<i>fremede</i>

It is clear that by these standard sound changes, the dilemma facing the traditional reading of 1122a is real: the final vowels of **biti* and **alβi* must have remained long through the period of high vowel deletion, which was only perhaps a century before the likely date of composition of *Beowulf* (perhaps very roughly around 700).¹⁶ To judge by Kaluza's law, according to which historical **-ā* and **-æ* routinely count as long vowels in *Beowulf*, there was no general shortening of final vowels during this period. All other things being equal, we would expect final **-ī* to still be a long vowel in *Beowulf*.

There are, however, relatively few examples of final **-ī* in what have traditionally been regarded as the core contexts for Kaluza's law. To allow the vowel to scan short in this lone verse, Fulk¹⁷ proposes a special round of *ī*-shortening between the operation of high vowel deletion and the composition of *Beowulf*. By this, we would have the development of **bitiz* to **biti* by z-loss, and then further to **biti* by *i*-shortening (even as **-æ* and **-ā* remained long).

A parallel shortening of this sort clearly took place in Old High German, where a plural like *gasti* escapes the German form of high vowel deletion, but the vowel is never marked as long – and in Old High German, unlike Old English, we possess manuscripts where such marking might be expected.¹⁸ This is an interesting parallel, but is an argument of plausibility only, not direct evidence. Many details of vowel reductions are different in Old High German and Old English, both in the details of what happens, and the chronology in which it takes place.

What grounds are there for assuming that a similar change happened in Old English? Aside from *Beowulf* 1122a itself, where a nominative plural **biti* would be metrically convenient, there is to my knowledge no further evidence of any sort for this extra round of *i*-shortening. This sound change is posited, in effect, to account for this single verse in *Beowulf*.¹⁹ This is a very slender basis on which to posit a sound change, however plausible, and all the more so because 1122a reveals, on closer inspection, other problems which cast doubt on the reliability of the traditional reading of this half-line.

¹⁶Beowulf cannot be dated precisely, and disagreement remains about the exact chronological bounds for the poem's composition. For reviews of the chief literature and arguments in favour of a date between perhaps 650 and 750, see Fulk, "Beowulf and Language History"; Neidorf, "Introduction."

¹⁷Fulk, *History*, Appendix C.3, 421.

¹⁸For further details, see Braune, *Althochdeutsche Grammatik*, 201 (§215, n. 4).

¹⁹It may be worth noting in passing that there is more metrical evidence available as well. Six type-C verses ending in compounds or names, such as 116a *hū hit Hringdene* "how the Ring-Danes (lived in) it", show etymological **-ī*, in every case failing to resolve. This failure of resolution suggests the ending was heavy, with a long vowel. Such verses are of less value, since even short endings may fail to resolve in verse-final compounds, but the type still adheres to Kaluza's law around 90% of the time. For six verses (116b, 1279b, 1996a, 2363a, 2479a, 2916a) with the same ending to all fail to resolve adds some weight to the idea that this ending did in fact contain a long vowel, which further weakens the argument for a short-vowel version of this plural ending in 1122a. For details, see Goering, "Linguistic Elements," 120–3.

4. 1122a Reconsidered

While editors and translators have been able to wring sense from 1122a as it stands, the traditional construals involve difficulties both concerning the syntax of the larger passage, and the semantics of *bite*. Combined with the linguistic-metrical difficulties already discussed, it may be more promising to suggest that this constellation of problems has arisen because of an error in the transmission of the text.

As noted above, the traditional reading understands *lāðbite* to be in apposition to *bengeato* “wound-openings”, and so to be the subject of *burston* in line 1121a. This is a possible reading, but syntactically awkward: the subordinate clause *ðonne blōd ætspranc* (1121b), with its own subject and (singular) finite verb, intervenes between *bengeato* and *lāðbite*.

Semantically, the traditional gloss of *lāðbite* is “hostile bite, wound”. This takes *bite* as a concrete noun, the physical result of “biting” or wounding, a lasting injury to the body. More typically, however, *i*-stem nouns are abstract or action nouns.²⁰ We would accordingly expect this to mean the action of “biting”: as in the “bite of the wind” (action noun) rather than “a snake bite” (concrete noun).

This is reinforced by the two other occurrences of *bite* in *Beowulf*, which are both action nouns:²¹

æfter billes bite

“after the biting of the sword” (*Beo* 2060a)

bite irena

“(the armour experienced) the biting of iron (swords)” (*Beo* 2259b)

Most of the instances of *bite* in Old English are, to judge by the *Dictionary of Old English* and its *Corpus*, action nouns of this type. The main exceptions are when *bite* occurs as a translation of Latin *morsus*, where loan-translation effects may be a factor, and a couple of instances referring to insectoid bites or stings.²²

wið scorpiones bite and næðran slite

“against scorpion’s bite and snake’s rent” (*Medicina de Quadrupedibus* 4.15)

This picture also generally holds into Early Middle English, where the following uses of *bite* are typical:²³

i þan compe þer uēollen ten þūsend cnihten

þurh stēles biten

“in that battle there fell ten thousand knights through the biting of steel”

(*Brut* 14953-14954)

hēr ich abīde þe bite of sweordes egge

²⁰Krahe and Meid, *Wortbildungslehre*, 65–7; Tolkien, *Finn and Hengest*, 113.

²¹Williams, *Finn Episode*, 77.

²²Cited, with adjustment, from Cockayne, *Leechdoms*, 346.

²³Cited, with adjustment, respectively from Madden, *Brut*, III, 202, and from d’Ardenne and Dobson, *Seinte Katerine*, 126. The lineation for *Brut* is after Brook and Leslie, *Lazamon: Brut*, 782.

This solves all of the issues identified above. Under this reading, *lāðbīte līges* would mean “the hostile biting of fire”, with *bīte* as a singular action noun. The half-line begins a new sentence, the immediate subject *offorswealg*, so the difficulties of apposition disappear. And as a nominative singular *i*-stem noun, *bīte* would reflect Early Old English **biti* with no sound changes except those already identified on linguistic grounds: Proto-Germanic **bitiz* would become **biti* simply by *z*-loss. The two short syllables in **bi-ti*, both ending in short vowels, consequently resolve as called for by Kaluza’s law.²⁷

One potential drawback to this emendation is that it requires the further change of manuscript *ealle* to *eall*, making 1122b comparable to 2080b:

līc eall forswearg

“(Grendel) swallowed all the body” (*Beo* 2080b)

If *eall* is an adjective in 1122b, it would, under the emended reading, modify *līc*, an accusative plural noun, and so should be in the endingless strong neuter accusative plural. If, instead, *eall* was originally intended as an adverb, which is entirely plausible for the emended passage, the form should still be endingless.²⁸ Either way, this supposes a two-stage process of transmission: first there was the initial error of transposition (palaeographically highly plausible), and later a correction of what by then appeared to be an inadvertent omission of a masculine accusative plural grammatical ending.²⁹

6. Choosing an Explanation

Fundamentally, each person who engages with the textual criticism of *Beowulf* will have to choose for themselves which approach they find most convincing depending on their editorial philosophy. No absolute certainty is possible, and there are costs to any approach. If we accept the manuscript reading, we must accept that this passage involves unlikely features of syntax and semantics. We must further either posit an extra, otherwise unsupported (though not implausible) sound change in the history of Old English, or else tolerate 1122a as a violation of Kaluza’s law.

As should be clear, I prefer to see emendation as the least costly alternative. Kaluza’s law is not exceptionless, but is demonstrably very robust. I am also very reluctant to posit a sound change on the basis of a single half-line, without some further supporting evidence. The congruence of a metrical anomaly with issues of both syntax and semantics is a classic sign of a transmission error in the text of *Beowulf*.³⁰ The emendation of 1122 to *lāðbīte līges līc eall forswearg* does carry the cost of “meddling” with the manuscript. This cost is, however, mitigated by the palaeographic ease of explaining the error and the uncontested presence of many other scribal errors in the manuscript. The resulting emended line avoids all the issues of metrics, historical phonology, syntactic construal,

²⁷The formulaic association of *lāð* and *līg* at 83a and 2305 may also reinforce the proposed reading of 1122a; my thanks to Francis Leneghan for pointing out these parallels.

²⁸Cameron, Amos and Healey, *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *eall* adv.

²⁹Examples of other proposed two-stage errors include Tolkien’s compelling account of line 306 (Tolkien, *Beowulf*, 201–4), the sequence implied by emending 1382 a from *wundini* to *wundnan* (Fulk, Bjork and Niles, *Klaeber’s Beowulf*, 202; Neidorf, “The Archetype of *Beowulf*,” 234), and the addition of the majuscule *H*- to the name *Hunferð* (Gerritsen, “The *Beowulf* Manuscript,” 20). For further discussion and references, see Lapidge, “The Archetype of *Beowulf*,” 36.

³⁰See especially Fulk, “Textual Criticism,” 39. Also compare Fulk, “Textual Criticism of *Klaeber’s Beowulf*,” 151 (cf. 143–4); Neidorf, *The Transmission of Beowulf*, 19.

and the unusual semantics of *bite* which trouble an unemended reading. All this, I suggest, supports the idea that the *Beowulf* poet composed not about “terrible bites of the body”, but rather the “terrible bite of fire” which consumed the corpses on the funeral pyre.

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