

## Part 2

### The Old English Textual Evidence for *Ælfe*

## Chapter 3

# The Earliest Anglo-Saxon Evidence: Etymology, Onomastics and Morphology

My investigation of the Norse evidence for *álf* has facilitated the reconstruction of *álf*'s earliest meanings and of at least some of the main semantic fields which it bordered or overlapped. We may turn now to *álf*'s Old English cognate. Reconstructing its pre-conversion meanings is difficult, and attempts hitherto have been either too tentative or too speculative to be useful. But I show that there is evidence for *ælf*'s early meanings in its roles in the Old English system of dithematic personal names and in the Old English morphological reorganisation of etymological long-stemmed masculine *i*-stems around the seventh century. These sources correlate almost exactly with the early Scandinavian evidence for the meanings of *álf* discussed above, the correlation in turn providing a basis for inferring the place of *ælf* in early Anglo-Saxon cosmologies. Thus, this chapter not only provides a basic picture of the early meanings of *ælf* against which to seek evidence for subsequent continuity and change, but considers a key aspect of the place of *ælf* in Anglo-Saxon world-views.

### 1. Etymology

Both cognate and internal Old English evidence demand a masculine Common Germanic nominative singular \*/a1βi-z/ denoting some kind of supernatural being (cf. Appendix 1). Norse *álf* and some medieval German plurals do not show the expected *i*-mutation, demanding either an early *a*-stem variant \*/a1βa-z/ or later analogical transference to the *a*-stem declension.<sup>57</sup> Grimm observed that its obvious Indo-European cognates, deriving from a root \*/albh-/, are connected semantically by whiteness (1882–88 [1875–88], II 444), and it must originally have meant ‘white one’.<sup>58</sup> Examples are Latin *albus*

<sup>57</sup> \*/a1βaz/ is not an etymon of the Old English word, however, and its citation in the *MED* (s.v. *elf*) is misleading: perhaps in consequence, Edwards cited this etymon (2002, 79) and Colman identified *ielf* as an *a*-stem (1988, 119).

<sup>58</sup> An alternative etymology derives *ælf* from a variant of Indo-European \**lbhu*, presumably with an *a*-colouring laryngeal, an etymon supposedly evidenced by Sanskrit *rbhu* (‘clever, skilful, inventive, prudent’, but also the name of a deity and by extension a class of deities, Kazanas 2001, 274), since Sanskrit *r* can derive not only from Indo-European \*/r/, but also Indo-European \*/l/. Bizarrely, this is the only etymology for *ælf* in the *OED* (s.v. *elf*), which perhaps helps to explain the occasional support still voiced for the idea (e.g. Dronke 1997, 261–62; Kazanas 2001, 276). But *rbhu* affords slender evidence for a possible etymon of *ælf* (cf. Peters 1963, 252–53); it is admittedly short of likely cognates (Mayrhofer 1956–80, s.v. *rbhú* *h*), but *ælf* will not solve this

(‘white’); Old Irish *ailbhín* (‘flock’); the ancient Greek ἄλφιτον (‘barley-flour’); Albanian *elb* (‘barley’); and Germanic words for ‘swan’ such as Old English *ylfetu* (Mann 1984–87, s.vv. *albhedis*, *albhīs*, cf. *albhos*; Pokorny 1959–69, I s.vv. *albhi-*, cf. *albho-*). However, the etymology is not in itself very revealing: innumerable explanations could be hypothesised for the association of supernatural beings with whiteness. Grimm took the whiteness to imply positive moral connotations and noted the congruence with Old Norse *ljósálfr* (1888–82 [1875–88], II 444), and we might still invoke *álfrǫðull*, denoting the sun, as evidence for an ancient association of *álfar* with light. However, although *ælf*’s Indo-European cognates are connected by whiteness, they do not generally suggest lucidity. As I discuss below, however, both the *vanr* Heimdallr and the *álfr* Vǫlundr are described as *hvítr* (‘white’) in contexts where it seems to connote their lack of masculinity (§7:3)—a characteristic which seems reasonably well-attested in our textual Old English evidence for *ælf*. One wonders, then, if this is how *alβiz* got their name. Either way, however, the Indo-European etymology of *ælf* must be explained by our medieval data, and not *vice versa*.

## 2. Personal names

The early Germanic languages had a rich tradition of dithematic personal names, formed according to a shared naming-system comprising name-elements drawn from the common lexicon.<sup>59</sup> Since its reflexes occur in names throughout the Germanic languages, we may number *\*alβiz* among these,<sup>60</sup> and such names may afford evidence for the semantics of *ælf*. Name-formation was controlled in three main ways: dynastic relations might be expressed through repetition or alliteration of name-elements between generations (Woolf 1939, 246–59; Keil 1936, esp. 6–26, 109–26); some elements usually only occurred finally (as generics), while others, including *\*alβi-*, usually only occurred initially (as modifiers); and, according to conventional wisdom, there was a strong preference for second elements whose grammatical gender corresponded with the sex of the name-bearer.<sup>61</sup> This naming-system was maintained in Old English, albeit with a

problem (cf. Lloyd–Springer 1988–, s.v. *alb*).

Menn has suggested that the root *\*albh/* is itself a loan from Sindarin *alph* (‘swan’; 1978, 143). This raises some intriguing possibilities. However, her argument that Old English *ylfetu* preserves the original meaning is hard to sustain in view of the full range of Indo-European evidence and *ylfetu*’s obviously secondary character (for its suffix see Voyles 1992, §§7.2.8, 7.2.32).

<sup>59</sup> For surveys of Anglo-Saxon naming practises, see Clark 1992; Kitson 2002; cf. Colman 1992, 12–69.

<sup>60</sup> See Searle 1897, 6–30; summarised by Jente 1921, 170–71; Förstemann 1900–16, I s.v. *alfi*, supplemented by Kaufmann 1968, sv.; Lind 1905–15, cols 11–14, 16; 1931, cols 1, 18.

<sup>61</sup> For Old English see Searle 1897, xiii; Clark 1992, 457. Colman 1996, 13–17 argues for a tendency for elements’ genders to be changed to fit the gender of the bearer, however; cf. Kitson

growing preference for certain fixed combinations which meant that by the eleventh century, dithematic names were generally of fixed form and often opaque as lexically meaningful compounds (Colman 1992, 55–67; cf. Clark 1992, 461; Kitson 2002, 105–6).

The Old English dithematic personal names afford extensive and early attestations of *ælf*-compounds, but scholars have generally shied from using this material to reconstruct *ælf*'s lexical meanings because of the complex relationship between name-elements and their lexical counterparts. Names primarily denoted their bearers rather than being lexically meaningful compounds (Colman 1992, 12–16; cf. Barley 1974, 1–13), and Germanic names probably always included elements which were not transparently meaningful, either because they had been borrowed from other languages or because linguistic changes had rendered once-transparent elements obscure. Thus although it is clear from puns and literal translations that Old English dithematic personal names were potentially meaningful (see Robinson 1968, 35–57; 1993 [1970]; Harris 1982), it is considered unlikely that patterns in the pairings of elements in Old English names reflect the elements' lexical meanings.<sup>62</sup> Likewise, it is possibly of interest that elements such as *ælf* and *os*, like for example *æðel* ('noble') occur only as modifiers, and never as generics: taking names as lexically meaningful compounds, this implies that a name-bearer might be like an *ælf*, but never be an *ælf* himself. That it is hard to demonstrate the significance of these observations does not necessarily mean that the principle that names reflect lexical semantics is at fault—merely that it is hard to test it systematically (cf. the observations of Müller and Hald discussed above, §2:2). Even without undertaking syntagmatic analyses, however, it is possible plausibly to derive some semantic information from Anglo-Saxon personal names.

The range of elements available for Anglo-Saxon dithematic name-formation was limited, and it is generally assumed that these name-elements lexically denoted things or attributes with positive cultural associations (Clark 1992, 457–58; cf. Kitson 2002, 97). To some extent, therefore, we are dealing with a semantically-defined system, and its inclusion of *ælf* can be analysed from this perspective. The fact that *ælf* is a common initial element in Old English dithematic personal names such as *Ælfred* and *Ælfric* has long been understood to suggest a benign aspect for *ælf*.<sup>63</sup> This hypothesis can be tested

2002, 97, 99, 100.

<sup>62</sup> Woolf 1939, 263–4; Ström 1939, 44; Barley 1974, esp. 13; Kitson 2002, 99–100. *Contra*, e.g., Schramm, who compared *Ælflæd*, etymologically 'ælf-beautiful', with the poetic compound *ælfscyne*, literally 'ælf-beautiful', as if the correlation were significant evidence for the semantics of *ælf* (1957, 135; cf. Jente 1921, 172; Stuart 1976, 316). It has also been suggested that *engel* ('angel') was introduced to Old High German names as a replacement for *alp*, perhaps suggesting some semantic correspondence (and distinctions) between the two (Keightley 1850, 66 first note; Mitterauer 1993, 224–30); but the necessary systematic analysis is beyond my present scope.

<sup>63</sup> e.g. Dickins 1933, 156–57; Storms 1948, 51; Thun 1969, 392; Stuart 1976, 314; Lecouteux 1997, 153.

with a systematic survey. The basis for Old English name-studies is still Searle's *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum* (1897), which is greatly flawed (Insley 2002). But, supplemented with later works and used with due circumspection, it still gives a good idea of the range of name-elements available in Anglo-Saxon dithematic naming-practises.<sup>64</sup> I survey only initial elements, since *ælf* does not occur finally,<sup>65</sup> establishing an inclusive list of Old English words which could denote animate beings and which occur as protothemes in Anglo-Saxon personal names. I divide it for convenience into five semantic groups, marking words which occur as protothemes in Anglo-Saxon names less than ten times in Searle's *Onomasticon* with an asterisk (\*) as a crude indicator of rarity (most are either substantially more or less common than this). Words which may not belong in the category in which they are placed, or in the survey at all, are marked with a question mark (?) and where necessary discussed in the footnotes:

Person:	?ar* ('messenger'), <sup>66</sup> beorn ('man'), bregu ('lord'), cwen ('woman'), ?cyn(e), <sup>67</sup> ?frea* ('lord'), <sup>68</sup> ?freo ('lady'), <sup>69</sup> gisl ('hostage'), ?gyst* ('guest'), gum ('man' < <i>guma</i> ), hæl* ('man' < <i>hæle</i> ), ?helm ('protector'), <sup>70</sup> hyse* ('young man'), leod ('man'), mæg ('kinsman'), mann ('person'), ?rinc* ('man'), <sup>71</sup> scealc* ('man'), þegn* ('thegn'), weard* ('guard'), wine ('friend').
People(s):	Angel, <sup>72</sup> ?Cent* (< <i>Cantici</i> ), <sup>73</sup> cynn ('family'), Dene, dryht

<sup>64</sup> I also use Birch 1899, Ström's analysis of Old English personal names in Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica* (1939, itself supplemented particularly by Anderson 1941, 67–74; Els 1972, 115–77), Colman's study and catalogue of moneyers' names in the reign of Edward the Confessor (1992), Keats-Rohan and Thornton's index of personal names in the Domesday surveys (1997), and comparison with naming in cognate languages (by reference to Förstemann 1900–16, I; Kaufmann 1968; Lind 1905–15; 1931).

<sup>65</sup> *Contra* Searle (1897, s.vv. *Beorelf*, *Heorælf*). Searle's forms occur in place-names in S1536, now Barlaston (Staffs) or Barlestone (Leics) and Harlaston (Staffs), too unusual to be useful. Cognates of *ælf* seem not to occur as second elements in medieval German personal-names: 'das in Vollnamen als Zweitglied erscheinende "-alp, -alf" kann unmöglich zu Alþi- gehören. Denn die Regel, daß vokalisches anlautende Zweitglieder gemieden werden, duldet nachweislich keine Ausnahme' ('the element "-alp, -alf" which appears in dithematic names as a second element cannot possibly be related to *Alþi-*. For the rule that second elements beginning in vowels are avoided demonstrably permits no exceptions'; Kaufmann 1968, 29).

<sup>66</sup> If a genuine element, this seems more likely, however, to be the word meaning 'honour' (Ström 1939, 6–7).

<sup>67</sup> *Cyne-* in Old English usually means 'royal', but possibly in early personal names shared the meaning of its Old Icelandic cognate *konr* ('man (of noble birth)'; Ström 1939, 11–12).

<sup>68</sup> Unless denoting the Old English counterpart of Freyr.

<sup>69</sup> More likely, however, is the meaning 'noble, free', which seems to be required by cognates (Ström 1939, 16); some occurrences could be variants of *frea*.

<sup>70</sup> This can denote armour as well as people (see Ström 1939, 21).

<sup>71</sup> Attestations may be forms of *hring*.

<sup>72</sup> Possibly an eponymous ancestor. Sometimes perhaps 'angel', in which case it belongs under 'Supernatural being' if it is not excluded as a loan-word.

<sup>73</sup> More probably to be understood as the name of the kingdom, names in *Cent-* being understood as nicknames (Clark 1992, 460).

	(‘warband, people’), <i>folc</i> (‘army, people’), <i>?folþ*</i> (‘retinue’ < <i>folgob</i> ), <sup>74</sup> <i>Geat*</i> , <sup>75</sup> <i>?had*</i> (‘rank; tribe’), <sup>76</sup> <i>here</i> (‘army’), <i>hloþ*</i> (‘company’), <sup>77</sup> <i>noþ*</i> (‘warband’), <sup>78</sup> <i>Peoht</i> , <i>Seax</i> , <sup>79</sup> <i>Swæf</i> , <i>þeod</i> (‘people’), <i>?Wealh</i> , <sup>80</sup> <i>Wendel*</i> . <sup>81</sup>
Animal:	<i>?deor</i> (‘wild animal’), <sup>82</sup> <i>earn</i> (‘eagle’), <i>eofor*</i> (‘boar’), <sup>83</sup> <i>eoh</i> (‘horse’), <sup>84</sup> <i>fisc*</i> (‘fish’), <i>gos*</i> (‘goose’), <i>?hun</i> (‘cub’), <sup>85</sup> <i>hund*</i> (‘dog’), <i>seolh*</i> (‘seal’), <sup>86</sup> <i>?stut*</i> (‘gnat’), <i>wulf</i> (‘wolf’).
Supernatural being:	<i>ælf</i> , <i>god</i> (‘god’), <sup>87</sup> <i>os</i> , <i>?regen</i> (‘gods’), <sup>88</sup> <i>?run*</i> (‘otherworldly female’). <sup>89</sup>
Unclassified:	<i>wiht</i> (‘being’), <sup>90</sup> <i>wyrm</i> (‘worm, snake, maggot, dragon’). <sup>91</sup>

Many details of this selection are problematic. Nevertheless, some useful points emerge, and are not blurred by my inclusion of dubious elements. Of the words denoting

<sup>74</sup> This relies both on the etymology being correct, and the exclusion of the equally obvious sense ‘service’.

<sup>75</sup> Possibly an eponymous ancestor (cf. Colman 1992, 76).

<sup>76</sup> Or possibly ‘personality’, in which case it belongs here, if at all, under ‘Person’.

<sup>77</sup> This etymology is open to question (Ström 1939, 23–24), but not seriously to doubt (Anderson 1941, 68).

<sup>78</sup> This is a rare meaning and ‘daring; plunder’ more likely, in which case the word should be excluded.

<sup>79</sup> Unless an eponymous ancestor or ‘dagger’ (see Ström 1939, 33).

<sup>80</sup> Unless ‘foreigner; slave’, in which case it belongs under ‘Person’ (see Ström 1939, 38).

<sup>81</sup> Unless an eponymous ancestor.

<sup>82</sup> Unless ‘beloved; precious’ or ‘brave, fierce’, in which case it should be excluded.

<sup>83</sup> As Kitson noted (2002, 116), although Searle gave numerous references to *Eofor*-names, most come from Continental sources, in accordance with his exasperating inclusion of Continental names in (sometimes incorrectly) Anglicised form (cf. Insley 2002, 158–59). Colman (1992) and Birch (1899) record no example of *Eofor*- or its variants.

<sup>84</sup> This is probable but not certain (see Ström 1939, 14–15).

<sup>85</sup> Unless this is the cognate of the ethnonym *Hun* (see Ström 1939, 24–25; Colman 1992, 103).

<sup>86</sup> See Colman 1992, 112.

<sup>87</sup> This may at times represent the etymon of *good*; comparative evidence, however, puts it beyond doubt that at least some examples represent the etymon of *god* (Förstemann 1900–16, 1 s.vv. *goda*, *guda*; Kaufmann 1968, s.vv. *goda*, *gūda*; Mitterauer 1993, 222–23; cf. Colman 1992, 98).

<sup>88</sup> Unless in the meaning ‘advice’ or as an intensifier (Ström 1939, 32).

<sup>89</sup> Unless ‘rune; counsel’. *Run* is common finally and is usually taken in this position to reflect a usage of *run* and its cognates as the second element in words denoting otherworldly females, attested in all the branches of Germanic (cf. Schramm 1957, 135–36, 166). However, it is rare initially and might have been taken in this position to denote runes, advice, or mysterious knowledge (see Fell 1991; Page 1995a).

<sup>90</sup> While transparent enough in synchronic terms, this name-element is rare on the Continent and absent from Scandinavia (where, however, the cognates are etymologically problematic, Vries 1964, s.vv. *vætr* and the words there cited), and other etymologies have been suggested (Ström 1939, 39). It seems hard to believe, however, that it was not understood as the word *wiht* in synchronic use (cf. Kitson 2002, 118).

<sup>91</sup> The place of *wyrm* is problematic because it may have been taken to denote an animal (‘maggot, worm, snake’), a supernatural being (‘dragon’), or possibly even a one-time man (assuming, through comparison with Norse evidence, that the *wyrm* in *Beowulf* was once the ‘last survivor’ who speaks in lines 2208–93. The argument was made by Tripp 1983 but has since regained a degree of favour: see Rauer 2000, 39–40 and references there). On *wyrm* and its cognates in personal names more generally, see Müller 1970, 64–67, 147–48.

beings used as protothemes in Old English dithematic names, most lexically denote people or peoples and so are self-evidently semantically appropriate to anthroponyms, while the commoner animal-names seem to reflect their cultural prestige in early Germanic-speaking cultures (see Müller 1970, esp. 195–212). Besides these words, we find *ælf*, *os*, *god*, and, if understood in Old English to denote gods, *regen*. This distribution is identical, cognate for cognate, to that of words for supernatural beings in kennings for men in skaldic verse and related evidence: *ás*, *álfr*, *goð* and *regin* (see above, §§2:2–3). Likewise, the numerous other Old English words for monsters such as *þyrs*, *eoten*, *puca*, *dweorg* or *mære* are absent from the Anglo-Saxon name-stock, as are their cognates from the kennings. So precise a correlation is impressive, presumably reflecting both similarities in belief and the systematic overlap between dithematic kennings denoting men and lexically meaningful dithematic names denoting people (on which see Barley 1974, 18–24; cf. Schramm 1957, 106–19 *et passim*). The parallel extends, naturally enough, to Old Norse dithematic personal names, in which *ás*, *guð* and *regin* are common initial elements (e.g. *Ásmundr*, *Guðrún*, *Rognvaldr*), and *álfr* respectably well-attested (e.g. *Álfhildr*), and from which monster-words are generally excluded (see Lind 1905–15, *passim*; 1931, *passim*).

These considerations suggest the existence of a Germanic naming-system whose protothemes included the etyma of *ælf*, *os*, *regen* and *god*, their mythologically significant collocation in Old Norse poetry thereby being attested for the culture of Common Germanic-speakers. The exclusion of words for monsters from Old English and Norse personal names might not be so old: the German and East Germanic material attests to a scattering of names whose first elements are thought to be cognates of Old Norse *þyrs* and maybe *rīsi* ('giant') and *gýgr* ('ogress, witch'; Förstemann 1900–16, I s.vv. *gug*, *rīsi*, *thursja*; Kaufmann 1968, s.vv. *gug*, *rīsi*, *thursja*). The sparse attestation of these elements hints that this was a dying tradition or the product of sporadic innovation, but they also imply that the exclusion of monster-word from the Old English and Old Norse dithematic name-systems was not inevitable. This encourages the supposition that the other name-elements reflect the synchronic meanings of their lexical counterparts. Even so, the value of the onomastic evidence for Anglo-Saxon culture is open to question. The fact that *ælf* and *os* remained in the naming-system after the conversion of the Anglo-Saxons may simply reflect conservatism, as with the retention of *Wealh-* after *wealh* ('foreigner', later 'Welshman, slave') had become pejorative (see Clark 1992, 463–64; Faull 1975, esp. 31–32): the social significance of repeating name-elements within a family apparently outweighed the importance of reacting to gradual changes in

their lexical meanings.<sup>92</sup> Although new elements were added to the system, such as *Peoht-* ('Pict') and *Trum-* ('strong', a Brittonic loan: Breeze 1993), while some seem to have been dropped, such as *-ides* ('lady'), several elements which had been lost from the common lexicon survived throughout the Old English period (e.g. *-flæd*, *Tond-*, Ström 1939, 15, 37), presenting a real possibility that the presence of *ælf* in the personal name system merely reflects the semantics of a long-distant time. A further correlative is required.

### 3. Old English morphology

*Ælf* was an *i*-stem, while the fact that its root vowel \*/a-/ was followed by two consonants, \*/-lβ/, defined its stem as long. In prehistoric Old English, most long-stemmed masculine *i*-stems, including the monster-words *þyrs*, *wyrm* and *ent*, were transferred to the *a*-stem declension (Hogg 1992b, 131–32; Campbell 1959, §600), so taking the nominative/accusative plural inflexion *-as*, producing the attested Old English plurals *þyrzas*, *wyrmas* and *entas*.<sup>93</sup> The only long-stemmed masculine *i*-stems to retain the old nominative/accusative plural *-e* were plural names of peoples (e.g. *Myrce*, 'Mercians', *Seaxe*, 'Saxons'); the plural denoting 'people', *ylde*; the suffixes denoting 'dwellers', *-sæte*, *-ware*; and *ælf* (plural *ælfe*; Campbell 1959, §610.7; Wright–Wright 1925, §385). They were joined by loans such as *Beornice* ('Bernicians') and *Egypte* ('Egyptians'). In short, the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension became a productive declension for words denoting people or peoples.

The presence of *ælf* in this declension of ethnonyms militates for a semantic association of *ælfe* with humankind. This detail not only parallels the use of *ælf* in anthroponymy, but also my argument that *álfar* and ethnic others were potentially members of the same early medieval Scandinavian conceptual category, which I labelled 'otherworldly beings'. This is not the only possible inference: *ælf* may be a member of this declension by metaphorical linking (possibly on the basis of mythology) rather than because it is a prototypical example of a human group (cf. Lakoff 1987, esp. 91–114).

<sup>92</sup> North has suggested that *ælf* occurs in names to ward off the threat of demonic *ælfe* (1997, 54). The distinction between seeking a deity's support and seeking to avert his or her displeasure is admittedly blurry, but North's idea does not account for the absence from names of words for monsters which certainly denoted threats, and conflicts with the inclusion of *Þórr*, *álf*, *ás*, etc. in pagan Scandinavian personal names, where these denote primarily beneficent forces. For the lack of change in Norse personal names, and the argument that Christianisers were not interested in this aspect of culture, see Kousgård Sørensen (1990, 394–97). In any case, this thesis shows that *ælf* and its reflexes retained positive connotations in many speech-communities throughout medieval English, so its retention in names need have involved no serious semantic conflict

<sup>93</sup> On the etymologies of these words, see Jente 1921, 187–89, 134–35, 181–84; cf. Holthausen 1934, s.vv. *ent*, *þyrs*, *wyrm*.



Even so, the possibility even of metaphorical association with words for people and peoples, contrasting with the exclusion of words for monsters from the declension, is strong evidence for *ælf*'s semantics. This evidence would relate to the period when the morphology of the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stems was re-organised—after Old English separated from the Continental West Germanic dialect continuum (since these dialects preserved the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension, Braune 1987, §§214–16; Gallée 1910, §§319–20) and after the onset of *i*-mutation (since *i*-stems moved to the *a*-stem declension, such as *byrs*, show *i*-mutation). The situation before the morphological change is barely represented in our texts if at all (Campbell 1959, §601), so it must have ended by the time Old English was first being written, in the second half of the seventh century (Pheifer's dating of the original of the Épinal-Erfurt glosses, 1987). The development seems to have taken place in all dialects of Old English, and presumably stands as evidence, therefore, for all parts of English-speaking Britain before or around that time.

It is also of interest that *ælf* seems to have had a familiar partner in the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension: *os*. *Os* is attested only in the nominative singular (as a name-element and once as a rune-name which, however, is interpreted as though it were the Latin word meaning *mouth*) and in the genitive plural form *esa* in *Wið færstice*. Old Icelandic *ás* is etymologically a *u*-stem; if *os* was too, then it should not have exhibited the *i*-mutation apparent in the genitive plural form *esa* in *Wið færstice*.<sup>94</sup> This form would most obviously be explained by assuming that, in the plural, *os* had been moved to the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension. Possibly an *i*-stem variant of *os* existed in North-West Germanic (as argued by Holmberg 1992a from certain Norse personal names); otherwise it is plausible enough that Old English-speakers transferred *os* in the plural to the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension because of its association with *ælf*e and ethnonyms. If this inference is correct then Old English morphology as well as Anglo-Saxon names shows an association of *ælf* with *os*. There is a textual correlative for this argument, first noted by Grimm, in the fact that *os* occurs in *Wið færstice* in alliterative collocation with *ælf* (1882–88 [1875–78], I 25; cf. II 460). However, although Harley 585 shows no obvious Scandinavian influence,<sup>95</sup> the case for the influence of Norse vernacular poetry on Old English has enough support that we must take seriously the idea that the formulaic collocation of *os* and *ælf* in *Wið færstice* might be borrowed (e.g. Watson 2002, see 498 n. 2 for further references). But the collocation of *ese* and

<sup>94</sup> *Contra* Campbell (1959, §620), who took it as an athematic stem.

<sup>95</sup> The word *fled* at the end of the charm, if we do not emend, would seem least unlikely to be from Norse, but this is hardly a reliable point (Doane 1994a, 144).

*ælf*e in *Wið færstice* at least shows the longevity of an association attested in naming-practices inherited from Common Germanic.

The Old English reformation of the long-stemmed masculine *i*-stem declension affords secure evidence that the lexical associations and semantics attested for *ælf* in early Norse poetry and Old English personal names were current in early Old English, and we may be reasonably confident that *ælf* had at this time no less positive connotations than *álfr* did when the relevant skaldic and Eddaic poetry was being composed.

#### 4. Contexts and interpretations

Combining the evidence of Old English morphology and personal names, and the earliest Old Norse evidence, we find a fundamentally consistent set of associations for *ælf* and *álfr*: a lexical collocation with *os/ás* (and to a lesser extent *god/goð* and *regen/regin*), suggesting that the words denoted significantly similar beings; a more general association with the denotation of people and peoples, which suggests that *ælf*e/*álfar* and *ese/æsir* were like humans in some crucial respect(s); and a semantic contradistinction to the words denoting monsters which aligns *ælf*e/*álfar*, *ese/æsir* and humans in a systematic opposition to monsters. This system seems likely to have existed in the common ancestors of Old English and Norse, so we must infer that Anglo-Saxons brought it with them when they migrated to Britain. At any rate, it was certainly current in Scandinavia in a formative period of poetic language around the ninth and tenth centuries, and in Anglo-Saxon England in a morphologically formative period around the seventh. The Old English material adduced so far is neatly susceptible to the same componential analysis as I have applied to the Norse material, though the validity of the precise features used is so far justified largely by comparison with the Norse material:

	æalde	ese	ælf	þyrsas, entas
SUPERNATURAL	–	+	+	+
MONSTROUS	–	–	–	+

Figure 4: *componential analysis of Old English words for beings*

Likewise, a similar semantic field diagram can be posited:

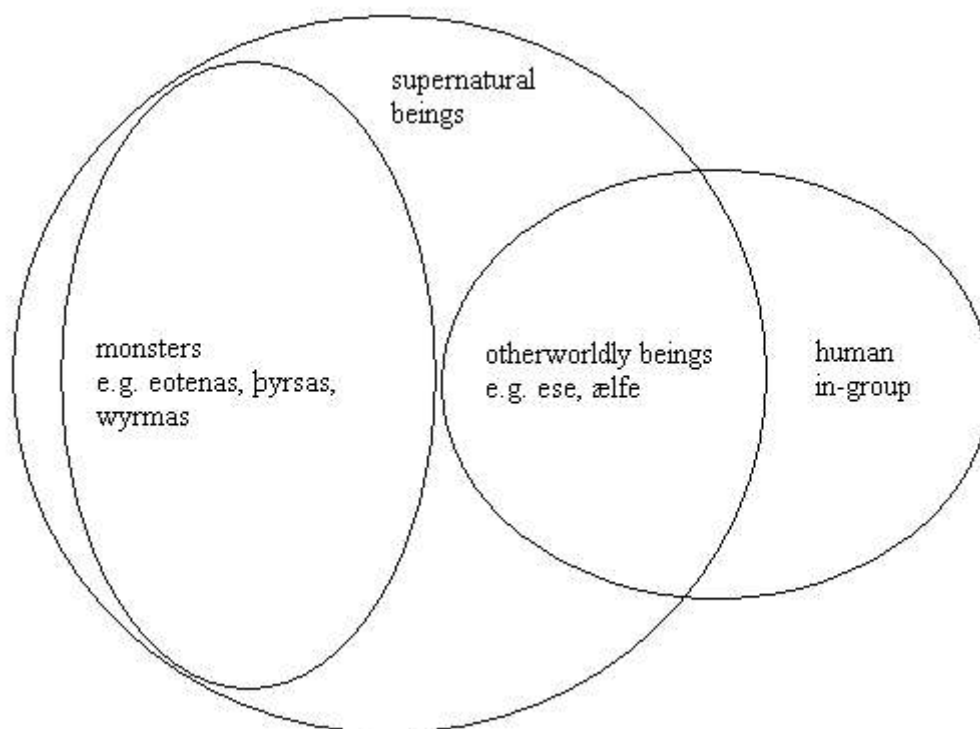


Figure 5: semantic field diagram of Old English words for beings

One corollary of this, consolidated by textual evidence considered below, is that it is unlikely that *ælfes* in early Old English were considered particularly small (an idea current already with Grimm 1882–88 [1875–78], II 449–51, and maintained since, e.g. Jolly 1998, 19–26; Henderson–Cowan 2001, 47), invisible (e.g. Jolly 1996, 134; 1998, 20) or incorporeal (e.g. Stuart 1972, 22). Although it is not conclusive, the early Old English evidence suggests corporeal anthropomorphic beings mirroring the human in-groups which believed in them. As I discuss at length below, this prospect is eminently well-paralleled: by the evidence for *álfar*; by the medieval Irish *aes síde*; the inhabitants of the medieval Welsh *Annwfn*; medieval Latin *fatae* and Old French *fées*, and their Middle English counterparts, *elves*; and the Older Scots *elvis*.<sup>96</sup>

Another corollary is that *ælfes* should probably be seen as components in early Anglo-Saxon discourses of group identity. That beliefs concerning supernatural beings helped to shape group identity in early Anglo-Saxon culture is established in our earliest Anglo-Saxon saints' lives. Felix's *Vita sancti Guthlaci*, composed around 730×49 (Colgrave 1956, 18–19), describes how Guthlac, living as a hermit on a fenland island, was tormented by demons. One night, Guthlac finds himself beset by what he initially takes to be *Britannica agmina* ('British bands') but what proves later to be 'daemoniorum

<sup>96</sup> On Scandinavia see in addition to chs 2 and 7 Jón Hnefill Aðalsteinsson 1990, 120–22; 1993; Einar Ólafur Sveinsson 2003, 170–83; cf. Feilberg 1910; on French Harf-Lancner 1984; Gallais 1992; Ferlampin-Acher 2002, 121–69; otherwise §§7.1.2, 8.3.

turmae' ('hosts of demons'). Guthlac's misapprehension is because the demons speak with the 'strimulentas loquelas' ('strident utterances') or, in variants, the 'barbaras loquelas' ('barbaric utterances') of the *Brittones* (ed. Colgrave 1956, 108–10). This episode could be demythologised to reflect a dream or hallucination inspired by Guthlac's time fighting Brittonic-speakers (cf. Cameron 1992; Meaney 2001, 39–41)—but if so, the 'mythologised' version which we now have strikes me as more important. Demons and *Brittones* are implicitly aligned here in much the same way as *jōtnar* and *Finnar*—and not for the last time (see §2.4; *Fouke le Fitz Waryn*; ed. Hathaway and others 1975, 4–7; Jones 1994). Though profoundly Christian, the *Vita Guthlaci* also arguably fits into traditional Anglo-Saxon discourses of group identity associating certain ethnic others with monsters. By this argument, Felix's account has its logical counterpart in chapter 9 of the anonymous *Liber beatae Gregorii papae* and book II.i of Bede's *Historia ecclesiastica gentis Anglorum*, which relate Gregory the Great's punning association of *Anguli* ('Angles') with *angeli* ('angels'; ed. Colgrave 1968, 90, cf. 94; Colgrave–Mynors 1991, 132–34).<sup>97</sup> One may infer that in some early Christian Anglo-Saxon discourses, *Anguli* were to *Brittones* as *angeli* were to *daemones*—a reading well-paralleled in Anglo-Saxon constructions of themselves as holy and the Britons as heretical (on which see Higham 2002, 35–41). The equivalence implied here emphasises the plausibility of understanding the Anglo-Saxon morphological evidence to the same effect: that in traditional discourses, *Anguli* were in some sense mythologically paralleled by *ælfes* and *ese*. Possibly, indeed, *ælfes* were to *Anguli* what monsters were to *Brittones*.

<sup>97</sup> Felix himself may or may not have known the story: he knew Bede's prose *Vita Cuthberti* intimately, and the *terminus post quem* for the *Vita Guthlaci* is itself based on Bede's failure to mention Guthlac in the *Historia ecclesiastica*, but there is no evidence that Felix knew this work; it is unlikely that he knew the Whitby *Vita Gregorii* (Colgrave 1956, 16, 19; cf. 1968, 56–60).