

*GEREFA* §§15 AND 17: A GRAMMATICAL ANALYSIS OF THE LISTS OF NOUNS

An assessment of the grammatical features of the two long lists of Old English nouns that are terms for items of equipment required on a properly supplied and run Late Anglo-Saxon estate reveals significant differences between them. This corroborates the view that they are of separate origin, although at the same time it poses further questions about how and why they were drawn up. Although *Gerefa* received considerable expert attention in the 1970s and 80s, the Old English specialists involved discussed only parts of these lists in detail, leaving the issue of their integrity untouched.<sup>78</sup>

Old English nouns have grammatical gender (masculine, neuter or feminine) and can vary in form in respect of four inflexional cases (nominative, accusative, genitive and dative) and two numbers (singular and plural). There are also several different declensions for nouns of all three genders. Grammatical gender was almost entirely lost from the language as part of the change from Old to Middle English in the 11th to 12th centuries. There are now three principal ways by which we may be able to determine the gender of an Old English noun: (1) by diagnostic inflexional endings in contexts where the number and case of the example is known; (2) by diagnostic adjectival endings associated with examples of the noun; (3) by diagnostic forms of definite and demonstrative articles (our words *the*, *that*, *this*) associated with examples of the noun. Some Old English nouns, however, are so rarely attested that we do not know what gender they were. In such circumstances the occurrence of cognate nouns in other Germanic languages may suggest which gender to expect, but this is not an infallible guide. Even within Old English, it is possible for a noun to have different genders in different dialects, and to shift from one gender to another over time. These grammatical issues are important in relation to the lists in *Gerefa* because many of the words are not ones often recorded in the type of written records we have from the Old English period. Several specimens here are indeed *hapax legomena*: the only known occurrences of the word in question.

Despite problems of this kind, we can confidently identify all fifty nouns in List A (§15) as being in the accusative case, as is appropriate for the direct objects of the phrase that introduces the list: *He sceal . . . habban . . .*, 'He must have'. Not all types of Old English noun have contrasting nominative and accusative forms in the singular, and all distinction between the two cases was lost in the plural of noun declensions. This distinction is, however, found in the singular of feminine *o*-stem, or 'strong', nouns, which are either endingless or have a final *-u* in the nominative singular and take the ending *-e* in the accusative, as *æsce*, *byrse*, *sage*, *spade*, *scofle*, *race*, *hlædre*, *fyrtinge*, *spinle*, *presse*, *wefle* and *nædle* in this list. *wifte* and *sceadele* are *hapax legomena* that can be suggested to be feminine nouns on this basis. *geafle* is unusual because the noun *geafel*, 'fork', is otherwise known as a masculine strong noun; it is, however, quite possible for it uniquely to be feminine in the dialect underlying this text. Masculine and feminine *n*-stem, or 'weak', nouns also distinguish between the nominative and accusative cases in the singular, so that *adsan*, *scafan*, *bærwān*, *besman*, *flexlinan*, *gearnwindan*, *stodlan*, *timplean* and *seamsticcan* cannot be nominative singulars. There are only two certain grammatical plurals in this list. One is the term *scear[r]a* (twice), 'shears', which was conventionally pluralised in Old English as it is in Modern English. The real anomaly in this respect is *lorgas*. The ending *-as* is that

<sup>78</sup> R. I. Page, "'The proper toil of artless industry': Toronto's plan for an Old English Dictionary", *Notes & Queries*, 220 (1975), 146–55, esp. 148–9; idem, 'Two problematic Old English words', *Leeds Studs. English*, NS 16 (1985), 198–207, esp. 202–5; Christine E. Fell, 'Some domestic problems', *Leeds Studs. English*, NS 16 (1985), 59–82; R. G. Poole, 'The textile inventory in the Old English *Gerefa*', *Rev. English Studs.*, NS 40 (1989), 469–78.

of the nominative and accusative plural of masculine *a*-stem, 'strong', nouns. The few other attestations of the noun *lorh* identify it as a feminine strong noun.<sup>79</sup>

The second collection, of sixty-four nouns in §17 (List B; cf. Tab. 1, above), is manifestly less consistent. Structurally it appears composite, starting with:

*Man sceal habban wængewædu, sulhgesidu, egeðgetigu 7 fela þinga ðe ic nu genæmian ne can . . .*

One must have wagon-cloths, plough-fittings, items for harrowing, and many things that I cannot list here . . . ,

but then does add in a few more items:

*ge eac mete, ável 7 to odene fligel . . .*

and also a measure, a fork, and a flail for the threshing floor. . . ,

before introducing the list of tools discussed by Gardiner, above, with:

*7 andlemena fela*

and many tools.

Many of the nouns in this section of the text are unambiguously in the plural. This applies to the thirteen nouns ending in *-as*, as explained above, and the three compounds in *-u* with which §17 starts. The nine weak nouns ending in *-an* could also then as well be nominative or accusative plurals as accusative singulars, a possibility that is discounted in respect of List A in the absence of more than one definite, optional plural. At the same time, List B includes a smaller number of unambiguously singular forms: the masculine strong nouns *awel*, *hwer*, *cytel*, *hlædel*, *sædleap*, *piperhorn* and *camb*, while the four neuter compounds that end in *-fæt*, 'vat, container', must also be singular.<sup>80</sup>

The feminine strong nouns in List B would also appear to vary between singular and plural. As noted above, these nouns characteristically have *-e* as the inflexion in the accusative singular. Their nominative and accusative plural ending is *-a* or *-e*. In very early Old English this noun declension appears to have retained a distinction between the nominative plural, in *-a*, and the accusative plural in *-e*. This, however, was levelled out by the time of most written records, with *-a* found for both cases in most dialects but *-e* in a few.<sup>81</sup> We have both *-a* and *-e* endings in this list, even, in the cases of *syfa* and *hersyfe*, and of *humigbinna* and *yrsebinne*, on the same lexical root. The *-a* forms should be unambiguously plural. It would be possible for the *-e* forms to have been intended to represent plurals too, although in that case we should have to concede that *-a* and *-e* spellings had become completely interchangeable at least in inflecting feminine strong nouns, so that the *-a* forms too could as well be read as singulars. However, although we have some cases of phonological decay from the standards of strict or 'classical' literary Old English in the spellings of this text,<sup>82</sup> those quite clearly do not bear witness to a general levelling and confusion of *a* and *e* as the vowel [ə] (*schwa*) in unstressed syllables. Given the differentiation of spellings within this list, and the absolute regularity of *-e* in List A, it is most reasonable to interpret the *-a* forms as plurals and the *-e* forms as singulars. This means that of the feminine strong nouns in the list at least seven are

<sup>79</sup> It should be noted that Poole, op. cit. in note 78, without reference to the remainder of List A, assumes the five weak nouns denoting parts of the loom and weaving equipment ending in *-an* to be in the plural. This is undeniably possible, although it would then imply that List A is composite, as List B is (below). Poole himself notes that it is surprising that *timplean*, 'temple', should appear in the plural, suggesting this might represent the purely grammatical pluralisation of a bipartite object, like 'shears'. But it would also then seem strange for an item such as the needle, *nædle*, to appear only in the singular.

<sup>80</sup> Further nouns in this list that are probably singular, but which are too uncertainly attested in Old English and in cognate languages to be sure of this, are *mete*, *fligel*, *hriddel*, *sticfodder*, *fodderhec*, and *meluhudern*.

<sup>81</sup> A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), 234–5.

<sup>82</sup> See R. I. Page, 'Gerefa: some problems of meaning', 211–28 in A. Bammesberger (ed.), *Problems of Old English Lexicography: Studies in Memory of Angus Cameron* (Regensburg, 1985), esp. 216.

plural (*cyfa, syfa, fanna, hyfa, hunigbinna, bleða* and *æscena*<sup>83</sup>) and at least eight singular (*cyrme, hersyfe, beorbydene, cyste, bearmteage, yrsebinne, ofnrace* and *mexscofle*). It turns out that the *-a* forms predominate in the first half of the list and the *-e* forms in the second.

Since no Old English nouns distinguish between the nominative and accusative cases in the plural it is impossible to point to conclusive evidence that the nouns in this list have been put into that case as one would expect for the direct objects of the introductory phrase *Man sceal habban . . .* at the very beginning of §17. If the feminine strong nouns in *-e* are correctly identified as singular then this would be so, but, as explained, that is not proven. The form *crocca* ought to be the nominative singular of a familiar and frequently used masculine weak noun. It is not impossible that the *-a* in this case should uniquely represent a dialect in which this noun has moved over to the feminine strong declension, but so familiar is this noun otherwise that that seems highly implausible.<sup>84</sup> It seems more likely that the diacritic bar over the vowel *a* that would represent a final nasal consonant *n* in Old English orthography was either omitted by scribal error, or so lightly done has to have been erased or effaced.

Even if we accept that the nouns in List B were intended uniformly to be in the accusative case as those in List A are, this list of tools still differs from the preceding list in containing a considerable number of pluralised nouns — close to half of the list — and thus more definite variety of form. Many scholars have noted the lexical and morphological clustering within the list discussed by Gardiner (above): the three compounds pluralised in *-u* in the first short section; the contrastive distribution of *-a* and *-e* forms of feminine strong nouns; even a few alliterative blocks of three or more nouns: *cyfa, cyfles, cyrme, cystæt, ceodan; systras, syfa, sædleap; beorbydene, bæðfæt, beodas, butas, bleða*. There are a further six alliterative pairs with the same initial consonant and one pair with vowel alliteration. A significant factor behind this may have been the alliterative habit in Old English discourse, and the mnemonic effect that could have. Nonetheless what we have here fully justifies the belief that glossary-type alphabetical lists of a kind well attested in Early-medieval textual culture lurk somewhere behind what we come to read in *Gerefa*.

What may be concluded on grammatical grounds, then, is that List A and List B were not composed by the same person on the same occasion. They came from different sources, and have been conjoined in a composite text that is the quasi-legal tract *Gerefa*. There is good reason to suggest that not only the entire survey of equipment in §17, but even the list of tools itself that Gardiner discusses as List B is itself of composite textual origins.

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<sup>83</sup> *æscen[-]* is a noun derived from the adjective *æscen*, meaning ‘of ash-wood, ashens’. I infer it to be a feminine noun here on the strength of both the ending *-a* and by analogy with Modern Icelandic *askja* and Norwegian dialect *aska*, both feminine nouns used to denote a small box. These terms form contrastive pairs with the masculine nouns in those languages. Old Icelandic *askr* and Norwegian *ask* denote ‘box’ more generally; Modern Icelandic *askur* is a lidded wooden bowl.

<sup>84</sup> Fell, *op. cit.* in note 78, 65, discusses this problem and notes some slight further evidence that might support the existence of a feminine strong noun *crocc*.