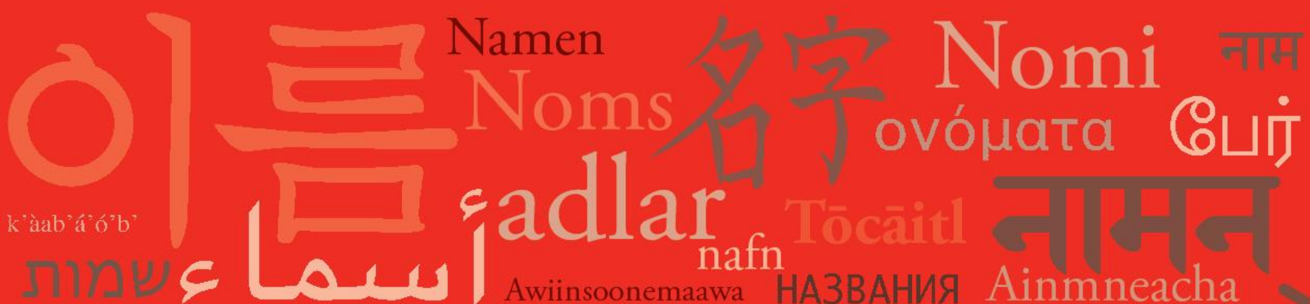
Names | A Journal of Onomastics



Book Review

The Wordhord: Daily Life in Old English. By Hana Videen. Princeton: Princeton University Press. 2022. Pp. 296. (Paperback) $23.95. ISBN 13: 9780691232744.

Inspired by Hana Videen's obsession with words and *hord-wynn* 'hoard-joy', *The Word Hord: Daily Life in Old English* is a collection of Old English words and names central to Old English life. "This book's approach to the past is thus guided by words, not historical events or individual people" (14), Videen writes.

This compendium of word treasures is connected to Videen's social media account on X, @Oldenglishwordhord, where the author, who holds a PhD in Old English from King's College, London, has been posting an Old English word of the day since her first tweet in 2013: "*wordhord*" (@OldEnglishwordhord, 2024). One of this book's aims is to give readers an in-depth glimpse into the cares and concerns of lay people, people of religious vocation, and poets during the Old English period (between 550 CE until around 1150 AD) through words they used to make sense of their lives. She compares the book to "[. . .] an old photo album. Old English words are familiar but also strange, like seeing pictures of your parents as children. There's something recognizable in their smiles" (8).

Readers may wonder what a *wordhord* was in Old English. "Obviously a word like *wordhord* tells us something about the experience of storytelling more than a millenium ago, but it's also surprisingly relevant," Videen assures them (2022). In the first chapter, she writes: "A wordhord wasn't a physical object like a dictionary, or even a library, but a metaphor for the collection of words and phrases a poet memorised and drew upon for their craft. This book is a *wordhord* of sorts, a hoard of words collected, treasured and shared" (17). The word *hord*, a borrowing from Latin *horda* 'hoard', was last recorded around the mid-1600s (see the *OED*'s online entry for "hord", 2024). According to Videen, it appears seven times in extant Old English literature and often collocates with the verb *on-lūcan* 'to unlock'. She cites three of these instances, poems in which characters—Guardian of the way, Beowulf, and Wisdom—"unlock" their own respective wordhords. In

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fact, the name *Beowulf* appears in the majority of the book's thirteen chapters, both as the name of the character whose wordhord she draws upon for her own or the name of the poem (16).

The book contains an extensive reference list, helpfully organizined into chapter and then domain or onomastic example. Videen's Old English scholarship and expertise as a blogger for onomasticians and word-lovers are apparent through her selection of sources: Old English manuscripts, *Beowulf: A New Verse Translation* and *Klaeber's Beowulf, 4th edition*, dictionaries, letters of J.R.R. Tolkien, laws and other texts from the Old English period, and blogs. Yet she reminds the reader of the limitations inherent in her Old English research. Not all extant Old English texts have beginnings or endings; some poems are damaged, some words illegible, and some manuscripts destroyed in fires. However, these sources still offer partial glimpses of the same texts known to modern scholars, and our understanding of these may still be enriched (263).

In addition, she provides several tables and graphic elements to aid the reader: (1) Wordhord lists after each chapter with entries that include a transcription, transliteration in bold and lowercase letters for both common and proper nouns, IPA transcription, and Modern English translation, gloss, or definition; (2) A transcription-style table for onomastic examples; (3) A table for runic-alphabet transliteration, pronunciation, Old English name, and meaning; (4) A table for Roman and Northern European deities, and Old English and Modern English days of the week; (5) Fifteen images of cultural artifacts from Old English manuscripts, depicting the referent of a name or the the source of an etymological dispute, for instance.

The book comprises thirteen chapters. The first seven examine everyday pursuits, with words—proper names and common nouns—people used to name many aspects of their lives, and the last five venture into the environmental, mythological, and spiritual realms. In the text, the onomastic examples include first and last names; place names; species names; names in Roman, Saxon, Norse, and pagan mythology (gods and godesses, places, and abstract concepts); names from Christianity (God, Christ, saints, and place names); names of rulers; names of books; names of mythological creatures; names of literary characters; and names from pop culture. They are transcribed and transliterated, often with an accompanying gloss. The breadth of these examples demonstrates the influence of other languages, especially Latin after Christian missionaries arrived from Rome in the late 6th century and Old Norse after the arrival of Scandinavian raiders, Vikings, and settlers in the 9th century.

While many proper names are mentioned in passing, others are central to *The Word Hord* and discussed in as much detail as common nouns. Discussions center on onomastics, etymology, morphology, and semantics; there are ample humorous anecdotes sprinkled throughout and discussions of disputed origins, alternative interpretations, recent interpretations, and etymological mysteries. Nonetheless, *The Word Hord* contains far fewer proper names compared to common nouns. A reader may wonder whether this is because of the limitations she mentions or because names were less relevant to the aspects of daily life she highlights. Did the seven poetic figures who unlocked their wordhords rely on proper names—of kings ruling their land, laws, places they had visited, saints, gods they worshipped, names from literature? As Mark C. Amodio and Katherine O'Brien O'Keefe write, Beowulf relies on his wordhord to "navigate the culturally and politically complex situations in which he finds himself thrust" (3).

Below is a summary of the proper names Videen treasures in her hord.

Chapter 1, "The Language You Thought you Knew", offers a brief history of Old English and recounts the history of a pseudo-archaic term, *ye olde*, in the modern-day British restaurant name *Ye Olde Cheshire Cheese*. As scribes replaced the rune thorn *þ* with the similar letter *y*, eventually its original pronunciation was forgotten (1–2).

Chapter 2, "Eating and Drinking", centers on the gustatory lives of lay people and people of religious vocation. Common time words included *tid* (from which *Yuletide* and *Shrovetide* are derived) and *stund*. Usually translated as 'time' or 'hour', the Old English words actually referred to a time for a specific activity—for dinner, for bed—rather than a time of day (28).

Chapter 3, "Passing the Time", includes names of days of the week and months. December is the compound *midwinter-mōnaþ* 'mid-winter month', *gēol-mōnaþ* 'Yule month', and *ærra gēola* 'first Yule'; January is *æfterra gēola* 'second Yule'; April's is *ēastermōnaþ* 'Easter month', whereas August is *wēodmōnaþ* 'weed-month', reflecting the significance of agricultural work (51–58). Interestingly, the word from which the name *August* is derived appears infrequently in texts. Videen clarifies the reason for this gap in the next chapter: according to Debbie Banham and Rosamund Faith, whom she cites, the word was associated with the work of women, who are not centered in the historical sources (72).

Chapter 4, "Learning and Working", is about occupations of Old English men and women. She offers essential historical background on how scribes created manuscripts on parchment (*bōc-fell* 'book skin') by hand (62). Two familiar last names come from feminine forms of a common noun: *Webster* from *webbestre* 'weaver' and *Baxter* from *bæcestre* 'baker'. *Smith* has not changed from *smiþ* 'smith', and *Wainwright* is from *wægn-wyrhta* 'wagon-maker' (72–74).

Chapter 5, "Playing (and More Drinking)", describes Old English enjoyments and leisure. It features Beowulf, who is described as a *wil-cumer* 'well-comer', or person who comes well, in the land of the Danes and

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the land of the Geats. In passing, Videen mentions John the Baptist who uses that word to describe Christ in the Old English poem *Descent Into Hell* (88).

Chapter 6, "Making Friends and Enemies", features Beowulf again, this time in a discussion of solitude. Several names from poetry appear including Grendel, the hero's opponent, described in the poem as a lone "solitary walker" (114). Regarding personal names from the 13th century, Videen discusses the disputed origins of *Gilbert Unwine* and *William Unwin,* the last names said to come from *un-wine* 'unfriend,' that is, 'enemy' or 'adversary'. As they are the earlier alternate spellings of *Hunwine* or *Hunwyn*, they might have instead come from *hūn* 'young bear'. *Hūnbald* and *Ælfhūm* are likely related to Old Norse *húnn* 'young bear' as well. According to that theory, she concludes, *Unwin* has a more positive connotation—a 'young bear friend' rather than an 'unfriend' (103).

Chapter 7, "Caring for Body and Mind", deals with early medieval health, illness, and remedies. Among books that offered distinctly Old English medical remedies and recipes, Videen introduces *The Herbarium* (122). The book is a sub-category of the medical texts known as leechbooks, *leech* having a disputed etymology, 'doctor' or 'leech'. An image of a page in *Bald's Leechbook* (123), in the runic alphabet, is provided for context.

Chapter 8, "The World Outside", moves *The Word Hord* beyond daily life and activities. In the discussion of weather is the Medieval Warm Period and those individuals who wrote almanacs, *Welkin Wisards*. *Welkin* is from *wolcen* 'clouds', which might be translated as 'weathermen/women' or 'meteorologists' in Modern English, though the chapter does not go into their meterological methods (147–148).

*Tūn***,** a component of many modern-day British place names (e.g., *Luton*, *Tonbridge*, *Southampton*), originally referred to old towns of Roman Britain. Its meaning broadened from 'one house' to a collection of houses (a town), or it can refer to the a type of 'enclosure', a house, land or building surrounded by walks, fences, or hedges (154).

In the religious sphere, this chapter analyzes the place name *neorxnawang* 'paradise' over three pages, with a discussion of its disputed origins and spellings. The *-wang* element means 'plain' or 'field', while the component *neorxna* has puzzled scholars attempting to make sense of it linguistically and contextually. Theories about the meaning of *neorxna* include the place name *Garden of the Norns* (named for the Norse goddesses of fate) and *ne wyrcan* 'no work'. Those about *neorxnawang* include the mythological place name *Asgard*, home of the gods in Norse mythology, and 'garden of perpetual change' (155). *Tree of Knowledge* is introduced to highlight different translations and connotations in modern English and Old English. *Dēap-bēam* 'death tree' appears in the poem *Genesis B,* where its negative connotations ("That was the Tree of Death [*deaðes beam*], which bore much that was bitter") contrast with the positive image that Eve attaches to the *Tree of Life* in the Latin Vulgate Bible (158).

Chapter 9, "Wildlife", is the book's bestiary, which includes real and mythological beasts, as well as 20th-century literary names derived from Old English species names. One literary name discussed is *Draco Malfoy* of the Harry Potter books, whose name comes from the dragon constellation *Draco*; Latin *dracō* means "'devil' as well as 'dragon', but either way is a threatening and dangerous creature" (171). Another is *Gandalf Greyhame*, the wizard in *The Lord of the Rings* by J.R.R. Tolkien, so named as Tolkien borrowed the compound *grǣg-hama* 'grey cloaked' or 'grey cloaked one'. As a hapax, appearing only once in sources from the period, the precise nature of this animal is a mystery (179), yet it remains a good example of a word that persisted across time through literature.

Chapter 10, "Travel", covers names of places: real places, false islands, and literary places. Another 20th-century literary name is discussed: *Mordor*, meaning 'black land' in Sindarin, a conlang in Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. It is derived from *morþor* 'murder', appearing in the compound *morþor-hūs* 'torment house' or in Modern English 'hell' (191). The general British place name *stow* appears alone, *Stowe* or *Stow,* or combined, as in *Walthamstow, Stow-in–the-Wold, Padstow,* or *Chepstow*. *Cēap-stōw* means 'market-place', and its first component, meaning 'purchase', 'sale', 'price', or 'payment', is the origin of Modern English "cheap" (195).

Of all the names Videen selects for her wordhord, it is a mythological name, *Fastitocalon,* that receives the most in-depth treament. The legendary creature, also known by the Greek name *Aspidochelone* 'Asp-Turtle' is "'a kind of fish, a great whale'" appearing first in the 10th-century poem *The Whale,* which speaks of seafarers' act of naming such a beast: "Seafarers often meet him by accident. Everyone gives him the name *Fastitocalon*, he who floats in the ancient streams. His appearance is like a rough stone, the greatest sea-bank that crumbles near the water's edge" (198). The false-island creature plunges beneath the waters and leaves the ships to sink. Going further into the name's history, Videen highlightes that *The Whale* is probably derived from the Latin bestiary *Physiologus,* translated from Greek. *Fastiticalon*-like creatures appear in lore from other regions, too, bearing the names *Jasconius* (Irish), *Lyngbakr* and *Hafgufa* (Icelandic), *Zaratan* (Middle Eastern), *Cuervo* (Chilean), and *Imap Umassoursa* (Inuit). Such a creature appears to have had lasting mythological significance, as it features in early- to late-20st century names as well: a poem of the same name by Tolkien; the film *The NeverEnding Story*; the game *Magic: the Gathering;* and the video game *Final Fantasy VIII.* Names of other creatures are the Scottish *Nuckelavee* and London's *Deptford Creek Necker* (196–202).

Chapter 11, "Beyond Human", features non-human entities, as well as personal names, place names, and literary names derived from them. *Pūcel* 'goblin' appears in several place names–*Putshole, Pock Field, Puxton, and Pucklechurch*; last names, such as *Richardus Puchel, Nocholas Pokel, John le Pochel, Thome Pouk,* and

Galfridus Puke; and a literary name, *Puck*, from *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Humorously, Videen notes an instance where the Latin *priapos* (Priapus), a Greek and Roman fertility god, was translated as *pūcel* and wonders how this translation may have affected connotations the above name-bearers attached to their names (217). Another literary name—*Warg,* in J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings,* and George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* and *A Game of Thrones*—appears in the general discussion of the *wearg*, a villain or a malignant creature (225).

Finally, in a discussion second in length to *Fastiticalon*, is *Homodubii*, a Latin name for a *tweō-mann* 'double person' or 'uncertainty person' described in *Wonders of the East*, which is in the same 10th-century manuscript as *Beowulf* in the British Library, and in an 11th-century manuscript. However, early and later parts of the poem descibe this individual with different features, an inconsistency that, Videen posits, may indicate two species of *Homodubii* (228–230).

Chapter 12, "Searching for Meaning", discusses spiritual matters. Godly personal names mentioned are the male *Godric* 'God-power' and *Godwine* 'God-friend' and the female *Godgifu* 'God-gift'. Two proper names are discussed in relation to *wyrd* 'what happens' and its potential origins: *Urðr* of the *Norns* and the *Three Weird Sisters* in Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (248).

Chapter 13, "Hoarding Words", the final chapter, begins with the Old Testmament phrase in Old English "On frymde wæs word" 'In the beginning was the Word' and a lengthy discussion of compounds including *word*, all of which are common nouns (257).

Among the proper names Videen includes in her wordhord, *Beowulf* appears most frequently, in nearly every chapter. Curiously, however, she does not delve into the origins of this name, though readers may be familiar with recent scholarship in this area (Shaw 2020). It appears in the same sentence or paragraph as other proper names: *Heaven, Wyrm* 'worm'*, Christ, Grendel, King Hrothgar, King Hrethel, King Scyld, Land of the Danes,* and *Land of the Geats*. With the exception of *Wyrm,* these names are not analyzed but form part of the context around a dicussion of common names.

Ultimately, Videen achieves what she sets out to do in *The Word Hord* by giving readers an Old English store of words, a *wordhord* or a *word-loca* 'word locker', to understand daily life in Old England. This same wordhord also helps readers understand various aspects of modern life; the ways names have been immoratlized in 20th-century literary names and pop cultural references; and last, but certainly not least, ~~a~~ the relevance of the epic poem to Old English life.

In future works, it is hoped that Videen will provide a *wordhord* dedicated to proper names. Until then, readers might enjoy those collected in *The Word Hord*. Her second book, *The Deorhord* (2024) might appeal to readers enthralled by the the names of *dēor* (animals) in Chapters 9 to 11. Finally, they can of course unlock their own wordhords which she has helped to curate.

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