

Early Germanic Names and Vowel Shifts*

HERBERT PENZL

GERMANIC NAMES as quoted by Latin and Greek authors since the beginning of the Christian era have been an important source for the phonology of the Germanic languages, in that they provide material that is even earlier than the Runic inscriptions in the North. It has been established that names reflect phonemic changes like any other linguistic material although their orthography is often somewhat more conservative. Names like Caesar's *Tencteri*, like *Segimerus*, have figured in the discussion concerning the pre-history of Germanic *e* and *i*; names like *Marcomanni*, Caesar's *Bacenis* in the discussion concerning Germanic *a* (or *o*) and *ō*. The definite linkage of some names to biographical or historical data, periods of settlement, definable local areas and to datable or dated documentation has tempted some scholars to overly optimistic association of spellings to time and place of sound-changes and their phases. At the same time the problems inherent in the rendering of the foreign sound-values of names, or of any other borrowed material, for that matter, have not always been recognized. Even if a native oral, not merely a written or a third language source, can be assumed, the foreign sounds can be replaced according to phonetic or morphophonemic or morphemic or associative ("analogical") patterns of the borrowing language. In this paper I shall specifically deal with the shift from Germanic *ē* to *ā* as reflected by names, which have often been cited as conclusive evidence.

We find Germanic names containing Indo-European *ē* invariably with *e* spellings in the first century A.D., e.g., Tacitus' *Segimerus*, *Catumerus*, *Inguiomerus*, Strabo's *Segimēros*. Later there are Gothic names with *e*, even *i*: *Thiudimer*, *Thiudimir*. But Langobardic and Burgundian names have *a* and so do Marcomannian and Alemannic names since the fourth century, e.g., *Marcomarus*, *Vadomarius*, *Chnodomarius*, *Suomarius*, *Fraomarius*. But Franconian names show

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only *e* until the end of the 5th century, then *e* and *a* alternate until *a* becomes general in the 8th century: *Merogaisus* (4th c.), *Teutomeres* (4th c., Ammianus Marcellinus), *Audefleda* (5th c., Jordanes), *Gislemerus* and *Gislemarus* (c. 500), *Meroveus* and *Maroveus* (6th c.), *Sigemarus* (7th c.), *Radobertus* (7th c.) *e* in *Suevi* (*Suebi*) prevails from the 1st to the 7th century; *Suabi* is not found before the 5th century.¹

The evidence of the Latin and Greek orthography points to a replacement of the long (lowered?) mid front vowel [e:] by the long central low vowel [a:] in West (and North) Germanic. This was interpreted to mean a phonemic shift which resulted in filling the empty slot in the vowel-system vacated by the rounding and raising of Indo-European (Pre-Germanic) **ā* to *ō* and only partly filled by the development of *-*anh* to -*āh* (as in the Old High German name *Hāholt*). It was also assumed that an incoming new long, somewhat closer *e*-sound, called “*ē*₂” with a mysterious origin, variously assumed to be from IE *ēi* (Jelinek), or from *ei* (van Coetsem, Antonsen) or from *e + e* (Lüdtke),² also pushed the old *ē* (“*ē*₁”) in the direction of *ā*; this *ē*₂ never developed in Gothic where *ē*₁ was not lowered. When a new “*ē*₃” developed from *ai* before *r h w* in 8th century Old High German, the old *ē*₂ did not coalesce with it but became a diphthong.

Such was the diachronic phonemic interpretation of the evidence. Time and place of the *ē* and *ā* spellings were viewed as depicting the spread of the phonemic change: from an early “Ingvaemonic” center northward and south-eastward, then much later from the South up the Rhine as far as the Low Franconian area.³ It is not surprising that Otto Höfler⁴ pleaded for spontaneous development from a shared disposition (“polygenesis”), since he found this com-

¹ Otto Bremér, *Beiträge zur Geschichte der deutschen Sprache und Literatur*, XI (1886), 1 ff.; M. Schönfeld, *Wörterbuch der altgermanischen Personen- und Völkernamen* (Heidelberg, 1911), pp. XVI–XXI, also under *Audefleda*, *Merobaudes*; H. d’Arbois de Jubainville, *Études sur la langue des Francs à l’époque mérovingienne* (Paris, 1900), 77 f., 176–179; Th. Jacobi, *Beiträge zur deutschen Grammatik* (Berlin, 1843), 111 f.

² H. Lüdtke, *Phonetica*, I (1957), 157 ff.; W. G. Moulton, *Beiträge* (Tübingen), LXXXIII (1961), 5 f., 35, fn.; E. H. Antonsen, *Language*, XLI (1965), 28 f., fn. 49 (p. 32 f.).

³ L. Wolff, *ZfdA*, LXXI (1934), 142 f.

⁴ *Beiträge* (Tübingen), LXXVII (1955), 470 f.

plicated spread over a huge area quite unlikely. The Franconian fluctuation between \bar{e} and \bar{a} cannot be due to a Latin or Romance parallel or Gothic intermediaries. The long preservation of \bar{e} in *Suebi* and in the spelling of the morphemes *mer fled red* was mostly explained by the strength of the orthographic tradition in names.

But a very important fact has been overlooked, although O. Bremer already suggested it in 1886, because it did not seem to fit the accepted diachronic phonemic history of \bar{e} . The morphemes *m̄er fl̄ed r̄ed* occur mostly in the second part of compounded names, where a variant pronunciation is known to have been one without any, even secondary stress. The change from \bar{e} to \bar{a} in West Germanic is confined to accented syllables; unaccented \bar{e} as found in the Old High German third weak conjugation, the optative endings, the dative plural adjective endings, never changed to \bar{a} . The appearance of *e* in *Waimerus* (seventh c.) and the like, thus represents the preservation of \bar{e} in unaccented position. We must recognize that \bar{e} was never completely lost as a phoneme; its merger with [\bar{a}] (from nasalized \bar{a}) was only partial. If the phoneme [\bar{e}] was in the language, the addition of the “ \bar{e}_2 ”-cases loses much of its alleged mystery. We never had more than one [\bar{e}] phoneme in the pattern anyhow. When in Old High German a new \bar{e} developed out of *ai* (*m̄er*₁), it joined the allophones of [\bar{e}] in unaccented syllables (*all̄en*), while [\bar{e}] in accented syllables became a diphthong (*hear*, *hier*). If our sound-change is not a shift nor a complete merger with \bar{a} (from *an*) but a split and only a partial merger, the presence of both *e* and *a* in Franconian names is not surprising. The fluctuation only reflects a distribution according to stress, e.g., of *-m̄ar* with secondary or primary stress, and *-m̄er* with no stress. Analogical transfers would bring *m̄er* into stressed position, e.g., *Merulfus*, *Meroaldus* (seventh c.), and *m̄ar* into unstressed position. The eventual victory of the *-m̄ar -r̄at -fl̄at* forms must be due to the influence of the lexical forms *m̄ari* ‘famous,’ *r̄at* ‘advice,’ **fl̄at* ‘beauty.’

It is obvious that the occurrence of *a* beside *e* forms cannot be used to trace the spread of the sound-change in detail, since our compounded names may simply reflect two stress types and \bar{e} was never merged with \bar{a} in unstressed position. The first appearance of *a* in names, e.g., in *Gislemarus* as well as in *Maroveus* can indeed be used to date the phonemic split of [\bar{e}] in Franconian but the split may be a good deal earlier. A form like *Merogaisus* (with analogical

o!) may be the Latin rendering of the umlaut allophone of [ā] before *i* (OHG *māri*). In the borrowing of Germanic material by substitutions phonetic, not just phonemic information becomes available just as Caesar's *a* for Germanic *ō* in *Bacenis*, if not based on Celtic intermediaries, could certainly point to an open, lowered, rather than a close *ō* in the Germanic dialects of that period.

Let me emphasize in conclusion that diachronic study of the spelling of name-forms can provide us with phonemic data. The name-forms show, if correctly interpreted, that the change of \bar{e} to \bar{a} is not a complete merger with an existing phoneme but only a partial merger resulting from a split according to stress. In this sound change $\bar{e} > \bar{a}$, the limited available material does not permit us to observe any details of the probable influence of following consonants and low vowels in inflectional endings upon the [ē] in accented stem syllables.

University of California, Berkeley