

Ships and *Brunanburh*

Paul Cavill

Lecturer in Early English (Old English)

School of English

University of Nottingham

Nottingham NG7 2RD

Email: paul.cavill@nottingham.ac.uk

Tel. +44 (0)115 8467549

Abstract

Work on ships in the Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* has principally focused on the word *cneor* as a lexical item or as having some particular form or appearance. This article draws on this work with a view to elucidating what the poem tells us was happening in the aftermath of the battle of 937. It discusses the significance of the term *cneor* in relation to the manuscripts, its intelligibility and meaning, before analysing in detail the contexts in which it appears. A reconsideration of syntax and the semantics of *on flot*, gives rise to a modified interpretation of lines 32b–36. It is suggested, finally, that *cneor* and the passages in which it occurs might carry overtones of mockery at the expense of the escaping Norsemen.

Keywords: ships, launching ships, *The Battle of Brunanburh*, Old English poetry, Old English *cneor*, Scandinavian *knorr*, poetic compounds, Henry of Huntingdon

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Introduction

Lexical, literary and archaeological work on Anglo-Saxon and Scandinavian ships has brought to light interesting evidence about the form and use of ships in the period known as the Viking Age. The Old English poem *The Battle of Brunanburh* features prominently in lexical discussion of ships because it uses the unusual word *cneor*, and in literary and historical discussion because it relates to an encounter involving Anglo-Saxons and Scandinavians in which the latter arrive by, and depart in, ships. The poem, in four texts of the Anglo-Saxon Chronicle, is a panegyric celebrating the victory of King Athelstan and his brother Edmund over the combined forces of King Constantine of the Scots and Anlaf king of the Scandinavians from Dublin, in 937.¹ So far, though, the broad questions of what the Scandinavians were doing with the ships, the immediate context of the occurrences of the word *cneor*, and the metre, syntax and meaning of the passages in the poem, have been little studied.

In this article I intend to examine what the Old English poem in particular, and the sources relating to *Brunanburh* in general,² tell us about the ships used by the Hiberno-Norse contingent of the invading, and subsequently escaping, force in 937; and in the process, how they might have manipulated such ships in escaping. The discussion falls into several related parts: the first examines the words used in the poem for ships, particularly *cneor*; the next considers the question of whether this word was borrowed, and asks what kind of vessel might be indicated by the term. Then the passage which has a fleeing Anlaf escaping in a *cneor* is considered closely in order to ascertain its precise sense; and finally some conclusions are reached as to what Anlaf actually might have done, according to the poet, with the ship.

Ships in the Old English poem

Ship words in the poem are *lid* and *cneor*, though the compound *scipflotan* “sailors” is used

¹ The poem is edited, with variants from the different Chronicle manuscripts (A, B, C, D), by Campbell.

² The literary and historical sources relating to the battle are edited and discussed in Livingston.

for the Norsemen (11b, and see also *flotan* “sailors” 32a).³ *Lid* “ship” is common enough in Old English poetry, where it occurs as both simplex and compound.⁴ It is used of almost any vessel, from Noah’s Ark to a warship,⁵ and notably in the formulas *to lides stefne* “to the prow of the ship” and *on lides bosme* “in the hold of the ship”, discussed below. The words used of the ship in which Anlaf escaped are *cnear* (35a), as well as *lid* in the previous line (34a). Here, the generalised formulaic phrase *to lides stefne* is used for the position Anlaf takes in the vessel, and the following specific term *cnear* is used for the vessel itself. The ships in which the Norsemen later escaped are *nægledcnearrum* (“nailed ships” 53b), where the second element of the compound is the dative plural of *cnear*. The *Brunanburh* poet thus uses a very general term for a sailing vessel, *lid*, and apparently a very specific one in simplex and compound forms, *cnear* and *nægledcnear*.

The use of *cnear* is a marked feature, since the word only occurs once elsewhere in Old English, in a manuscript of Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica*, in a gloss to *navis actuaria*, interpreted as “light, swift vessel” by the *Dictionary of Old English*.⁶ This interpretation receives further discussion below, but for the moment it is enough to note that the word only occurs outside of *Brunanburh* in this gloss. The Old English language had a wide variety of terms for ships,⁷ and another word with *nægled-* in a compound for “ship” was readily available: *nægledbord* “(ship with) nailed planks”.⁸ *Nægledbordum* would have suited the context and alliteration in line 53b (alliterating with *norðmenn* “northmen” in 53a). Likewise the simplex *cnear* is marked. Since, as Campbell analyses it, *cread cnear on flot* “pushed the ship afloat”⁹ in line 35a is either a D4 or E-type verse in terms of its metre,¹⁰ a similar long monosyllable like *ceol* “ship, boat” (the commonest uncompounded word for a ship in Old English poetry) would fit there: *cread* “pushed” carries the alliterating stress for the first half-line, alliterating with *cyning* “king” in the second half-line. The requirement for double alliteration in a D-type verse in the first half-line would also have been met by *ceol* as it is by *cnear*. The resources were readily available to the poet to refer to Anlaf’s departure in a vessel without recourse to the extremely rare simplex *cnear*, or the departure of the remnant of the Hiberno-Norse army in similar vessels without recourse to the equally rare compound *nægledcnear*, both of which appear uniquely here in verse.

The issue about whether the term is borrowed or native is discussed below, but a prior question is whether the primary identifiable audience of the poem, the scribes, were familiar with this word and could make sense of it as a compound as well as a simplex. One possible indication that both the simplex and the compound were unfamiliar is that two different scribes garbled them. The Parker Chronicle scribe wrote *cread cnearen flot* at line 35a of the

3 All references to Old English poems are to Krapp and Dobbie, except where specified. All translations are my own unless otherwise stated.

4 The *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* lists, apart from the *Brunanburh* examples, the simplex *lid* at *Genesis A* 1332a, 1410b, 1479a; *Andreas* 398a, 403b, 1707b; and compounds *lidweard* “ship-guardian” at *Andreas* 244b, *lidwerig* “weary of sailing” at *Andreas* 482a, and *lidmann* “sailor” at *Beowulf* 1623b, *Maldon* 99a, 164b.

5 The *Genesis A* examples refer to the Ark, the *Andreas* ones apparently to merchant ships, and the sailors referred to by the term *lidmann* “sailors” in *Maldon* are Viking warriors, so possibly from warships.

6 See the *Dictionary of Old English*, under *cnear*; the manuscript is London, British Library, Cotton Tiberius C.ii, fo. 7v; see also Thier, 43.

7 Roberts, Kay and Grundy, 05.12.01.09.03.01, list 47 terms, 15 of which are simplices, the remainder compounds.

8 Examples are at *Genesis A* 1418a, 1433b, *Riddle* 58 5a; also Thier, 76.

9 See below for a discussion of the phrase.

10 Campbell, 29.

edited text.¹¹ Orton, as noted by Sara Pons-Sanz, suggested that this is “the sort of mangling of words which might result when a scribe tries to write a partly unfamiliar version of his own language to dictation”;¹² Pons-Sanz remarks, however, that the scribe also makes mistakes with words of clearly native origin.¹³ In the poem, those mistakes might include the phrase *dæn\ n/ede / secgas hwate* in lines 12b–13a (elsewhere *dennade* or *dennode secga swate* “resounded? darkened? with the blood of warriors”). The meaning of this verb is still uncertain, and the scribe was attempting to make sense of the phrase, but it is far from clear what it might have meant.¹⁴ Another phrase is *hira land* “their land” in line 56a, elsewhere *ira* or *yra land* “Ireland”, a common Norse designation for a place which, Niles notes, would have been more familiar as *Scotta land* “land of the Scots”, i.e. “Ireland”.¹⁵ The scribe’s version of this phrase makes good sense even though it departs from what was apparently the original; again it is plausibly a dictation error where a familiar phrase was substituted for an unfamiliar term. This scribe might well have been unfamiliar with some of the locutions of the poem, and the simplex *cnear* appears to be one of the words he had difficulty with.

The version in the D manuscript of the Chronicle “has the astonishing corruption *dæg gled on garum*” as Campbell calls it, for *nægledcnearrum* at 53b.¹⁶ The A scribe might have been writing from dictation, but the D scribe seems to have been copying from an exemplar, since eye-skip (from *on flot* to *on flod*) is the simplest explanation of the omission of the words *flot, cynig ut gewat / on fealene* “... afloat, the king went out on the fallow...” in the middle of the scribe’s *creat cnear on flod* “pushed the ship [words omitted] on the sea” at lines 35–6 of the edited text. Orton notes particularly the scribe’s garbling of poetic words and compounds, which nevertheless make some sort of sense in his version.¹⁷ *Dæg gled on garum* retains, accurately, the sequence of characters <gled>, though it is difficult to know what it might have meant to the scribe;¹⁸ the words together at least attempt alliteration for a verse text. This suggests that the scribe failed to parse the compound as a compound, and was consequently unable to process its meaning.¹⁹ The garbled phrases in A and D might make some sort of sense, and overall, it seems likely that the scribes struggled with unfamiliar words: A with the first use of *cnear* among others, D with poetic words and compounds more generally.

The unfamiliarity of the word *cnear* and the related compound is consciously or unconsciously acknowledged by the poet. In the half-line *cread cnear on flot* 35a, the term *cnear* is presented in a context where nautical activity is clearly signalled, and where an audience might expect *ceol* (or similar) for the ship-word. The cognitive jolt caused by the use of this unfamiliar word prepares the audience for the use of the compound in line 53b,

11 The manuscript is Cambridge, Corpus Christi College 173, fo. 26v.

12 Orton, 23.

13 Pons-Sanz, 79: the “not” in her comment, “However the scribe also makes mistakes with words the native origin of which is not beyond doubt” is a mistake (personal communication).

14 Niles, 74–5 [361–62], suggests that “the poet is invoking the commonplace motif of the noise of weapons that cause blood to flow”, and that “the verb *dynian* echoes scaldic battle-kennings”. Orton, 58, is less optimistic: “the absence of any consensus about the verb in 12b means that we cannot even guess what the scribe who produced *secgas hwate* made of the sentence in which it appeared”.

15 Niles, 72–3 [360].

16 Campbell, 114. The manuscript is London, British Library Cotton Tiberius B. iv, fo. 49v.

17 Orton, 59, 87 f.

18 Orton, 59–60, reads *gled* as a possible adjective “the day bright (?) on the spears”.

19 Davis-Secord distinguishes between processing as “the activation of entries in the mental lexicon and the construction of a relationship between the constituents of a compound”, and parsing as “the assemblage of individual words’ meaning into grammatical relationships with each other within a larger, sentential meaning”, 174.

where reference to the nautical activity is artfully delayed (to at least 54b, *on Dingesmere* “on Dingesmere”, but that name itself was very likely an unfamiliar term to most of the audience, so possibly to line 55, *ofer deop wæter Dyfelin secan* “over deep water to seek Dublin”). In his discussion of compounds in Old English, Jonathan Davis-Secord applies research on the processing of present-day compounds, and writes:

according to recent experiments gauging eye-fixation times, lexical decision tasks, naming tasks, and other criteria, the brain processes even seemingly lexicalized compounds by decomposing them into constituents. Subsequent experiments have shown that compounds in fact never fully lexicalize ... Rather, processing any compound involves both retrieving the lexical entries of the individual constituents (and constructing the relationship between them) as well as retrieving the entry for the whole compound.²⁰

The point here, then, is that the meaning of the lexical element *cnear* in the compound *nægledcnearrum* is “pre-loaded” by the poet’s use of the simplex earlier in the poem; the poet presents *cnear* in this way so that the audience can retrieve the lexical entry and construct the meaning of the compound.²¹ In short, it is likely that the poet needed to give a clue to the meaning of the word. We can almost see this procedure working with the A scribe, who understood the compound after having mistaken the simplex; and failing to work with the D scribe, who understood the simplex, but had a blind spot for compounds and misconstrued the compound in his exemplar.

That this procedure could function as intended is shown by the B and C versions of the poem, and the translation by Henry of Huntingdon. Henry did not understand all the poem’s locutions,²² and made some substitutions based on his best guesses. His versions of the phrases containing *cnear* and *nægledcnearrum* are not exactly accurate, but they capture the “ship” sense of the words. For the first passage Henry has *Cum paucis uero in maris fluctus rex nauis prouectus intrinsecus gemebat*, “the king groaned inwardly as he sailed back in his ship in the waves of the sea”; and for the second he has *cum Normanni nauibus clauatis et Anlaf tabefactus ultra profundum flumen terras suas mesto animo repetissent*, “the Norsemen in nailed ships and the broken Anlaf returned with heavy hearts across the deep waters to their own lands”.²³

These Latin passages can be read as at least partially reconstructing the Old English: for example, *cum paucis* clearly renders *litle weorode*; and “[i]t is possible that in desperation he reconstructs *Anlaf* from the OE *dreorig daraða laf* [...] supplying what he might have supposed was a missing macron over the genitive plural -a” [i.e. *a[n]laf*].²⁴ *Nauibus clauatis*

20 Davis-Secord, 42–3. Davis-Secord goes on to note that the same process is necessary for oral comprehension as well as written, 44–5. The Chronicle manuscripts are all formatted for reading with half-line dots, more or less consistently, but the poem may have circulated orally: the debate on this matter continues. For a recent contribution, see Jorgensen.

21 Davis-Secord, 76–9, outlines the process of “priming”, whereby “the interpretation of transparent compounds occurs more quickly when the brain is ‘primed’ by compounds with a similar semantic relation connecting their constituents, than by compounds with a different relation”, 76. The process I suggest is going on, with *cnear* followed by *nægledcnear*, is slightly different, since the simplex and determinatum of the compound is rare, and the target term in the compound needs to be understood before the compound can be processed.

22 See further Cavill, ‘*Eoredcistum* in *The Battle of Brunanburh*’ (unfortunately this article was listed in the journal contents as ‘*Eoredcistum* in *The Battle of Maldon*’ and has appeared in bibliographies under that erroneous title); Rigg and Tiller.

23 Text and translation from Greenway, 312–13. See further below for comment on the unnecessary addition of the possessive pronoun “his” in the translation.

24 As suggested in the notes to the text, Cavill and Smith, in Livingston, 199.

accurately renders *nægledcnearrum*; and while initially we suggested that Henry “earlier omits *cread cnear on flot* from his translation”, on reflection it appears that *naui prouectus* “sailed in the ship” is Henry’s version of that phrase. The Latin verb *proveho* has some of the sense of “press forward” of the Old English verb *crudan*, as well as a more general sense “travel (by sea)”;²⁵ Henry maintains the grammatical subject of the verb in the paragraph as *Anlaf, rex*, but uses a perfect passive construction *prouectus naui* “sailed in the ship”. Henry has understood *cnear* clearly.

The use of the word *cnear* is unusual but apparently deliberate since it was used twice in the poem, and the Old English poet took steps to make it intelligible in both its simplex and compound forms. His strategy was only partly successful as the garbling of the words by the different scribes indicates, suggesting that the term was unfamiliar to at least some of his audience.

The cnear

Most scholars believe that *cnear* is an early loan-word in Old English from Scandinavian, a borrowing of Scandinavian *knørr*. Sara Pons-Sanz is more cautious and posits the possible existence of an Old English word, cognate with the Scandinavian term.²⁶ She accepts the etymology offered by Sayers, relating it to *knott* “ball, knob”, most likely applying to the construction of the ship with nails or rivets with prominent heads.²⁷ The evidence is sparse, but if the Bede gloss (*cnearrum* for *navibus actuariis*) is indeed Kentish, as Pons-Sanz observes, then the word might be supposed to be English, though Scandinavian activity in that area might have given rise to a loan to denote a particular type of ship.²⁸ Pons-Sanz concedes that “the presence of a Norse-derived nautical term in a text which can be dated to 937 x c. 955, when it was entered in the A-manuscript of the *Chronicle* ... may not seem out of place given its technical character”, a character shared by several other nautical words borrowed into English around this time.²⁹ Given also the existence of common variant terms that would fit the alliteration and compounding in the *Brunanburh* poet’s usage, it is very likely that the poet intended the terms *cnear* and *nægledcnear* to convey technical information about the ships used by the Norsemen to escape from the battle.

According to Sayers, what was distinctive about the Scandinavian *knørr* of the eleventh century was its construction using iron rivets, such that he believes, “in *knorr* we have reference to the nail-studded outer hull of Viking-era craft, the visual impression created by the heads of rows of rivets that at regular intervals ... joined the strakes”. This, he argues, would chime well with the Old English poet’s use of the compound *nægledcnear*. Davis-Secord notes that elements in poetic compounds are sometimes semantically redundant, and if *cnear* denoted or connoted a nail-studded vessel, then *nægled-* would be essentially redundant.³⁰ If the pre-modifying adjective is restrictive, in the sense that it distinguishes a nailed *cnear* from any other type of *cnear*, we still have ships with a nailed appearance. On balance, given the rarity of the word, and the possible general unfamiliarity of the class of

25 *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, s.v. *proveho*, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin*, s.v. *provehere*.

26 Pons-Sanz, 283.

27 Pons-Sanz, 283; Sayers, 283. Jesch does not find this “particularly convincing”, 132, not least because etymology does not determine the semantic application of a term. Pons-Sanz discusses the etymology in some detail and relates the word to a group “referring to knotty things”, 77; see also Thier, 43, 132.

28 Pons-Sanz, 80.

29 *Ibid.*, 79.

30 Davis-Secord, 82, observes “‘pleonastic’ compounds are generally restricted to poetry, and their first constituents seemingly contribute nothing of semantic significance”, as in the compound *guðbill*, literally “war-sword”. See also 96 and Sayers, 280.

vessels denoted by the word *cnear*, it seems likely that the compound is pleonastic.

A second feature that distinguished the (later) ship type, Sayers argues, was that “the *knerrir* had oarports at only the stem and stern, where there was also permanent decking”.³¹ In the *knorr* type of vessel described by Sayers, the decking at the prow and stern would give a point of vantage for the lookout and the steersman. There is as yet no archaeological evidence from the early tenth century for ships lacking oarports along their length, and constructed with them only at stem and stern, but some kind of decking would be a standard feature of ships of any size.³² Jesch concludes: “[i]n the early period (in the ninth and most of the tenth century), then, there would not have been much difference between warships and cargo-ships in terms of their shape”.³³

In normal prose usage in Old Norse, the word *knorr* comes to mean predominantly “cargo ship” as Sayers points out, but Judith Jesch shows that at this date (937 or soon after), the term could be used “of a troop-carrier, if not an actual warship”.³⁴ In other words, a *knorr* could be used for a variety of purposes at this time, warlike or peaceful, and the distinction between merchant ships and warships is a later innovation. The word *knorr* is common in later Old Norse, and Scandinavian trading and raiding was practised widely around the British, Irish and Continental European coasts, as is evidenced by the fact that *knorr* was borrowed into Middle Irish, Old French, Old High German and possibly Gaelic as well as (probably) Old English.³⁵

The gloss to Bede has not been much considered in relation to what kind of ships might be indicated, and it merits further attention. Bede’s text in the manuscript reads *et nauibus circiter onerariis atque actuariis LXXX praeparatis in Britanniam transuehitur*, “[Julius Caesar] prepared about eighty ... ships and sailed across to Britain”.³⁶ Translators, and the gloss in the *DOE*, tend to interpret the adjectives as contrastive, so that *actuarium* “agile, swift” refers to one kind of vessel,³⁷ and *onerarius* “relating to load, freight” refers to another kind of vessel. Thier writes, “Im Textzusammenhang ist *navis actuaria* hier explizit von *navis oneraria* ‘Lastschiff’ unterscheiden”.³⁸ While it is true that *navis oneraria* idiomatically refers to “a transport ship, a freighter”, a more natural interpretation of *atque* “and” would be to see the adjectives *actuaria* and *oneraria* as referring to the same kind of vessel: as Lewis and Short put it, the word *atque* “indicat[es] a close internal connection between single words ...; while *et* designates an external connection of diff[erent] objects with each other.”³⁹ Bede’s later reference to Caesar’s shipbuilding after the wrecking of this fleet of 80 ships, *[r]egressus in Galliam, legiones in hiberna dimisit, ac DCtas naues utriusque commodi fieri imperavit* is typically translated “[h]e returned to Gaul, sent the legions into winter quarters, and then gave orders for the construction of 600 ships of both types”. But immediately before this, Bede mentions *non paruum numerum militum, equitum uero pene omnem disperdidit* “he lost no small number of his soldiers, including almost all his cavalry”, and it seems possible that *naues ... utriusque commodi* might actually mean “ships suitable for both [foot soldiers and cavalry]”.

31 Sayers, 279.

32 Judith Jesch, personal communication.

33 Jesch, 132.

34 Jesch, 131. See also the conclusion to the present article.

35 Sayers, 284, 287–9; Jesch, 131; Pons-Sanz, 202 and note 70.

36 Colgrave and Mynors, *HE* I.2, pp. 20–21.

37 It is noticeable that Latin dictionaries avoid “light” as a gloss for the word, and it may be that this is an assumption of the glossators in the *DOE*.

38 Thier, 43.

39 Lewis and Short, s.v. *atque*.

The Bede passage is taken more or less wholesale from Orosius, VI.9, conveniently translated by A. T. Fear. In his footnote, Fear remarks, “[t]his comment [about the two types of warship] stems from a misreading of Caesar, *Gallic War*, 5.1, where Caesar describes in detail a single type of new warship with two distinct capabilities. Orosius has taken this as a description of two separate sorts of ship, hence the confusion in his text here.”⁴⁰ Caesar’s ships were to be constructed to be both *actuaris* “speedy” and *ad onera, ad multitudinem iumentorum transportandam* “for transporting loads and many horses”. It is at least arguable that Bede, and possibly the glossator, did not share Orosius’ confusion. The gloss *cnearrum* in the Old English manuscript may then refer to *nauibis onerariis atque actuariis*, not just *navis actuaris*; and the sense of the Latin may be “swift, agile transport ships”.

What, then, may we glean from archaeology, etymology and usage about what a *cnear* might have been, and what might the poet might have intended to convey by using it in *Brunanburh*? It seems clear that the *cnear* was a distinctive type of vessel used particularly by Scandinavians around the north European coasts. In all three uses it appears to have had the function of transporting troops. Whether the word was native Old English or a borrowing from Norse, the etymology and compound usage suggest that the ship had a knobbly appearance due to its construction with rivets. It probably had decking at stem and stern. What the Old English poem refers to in specific contexts is Anlaf at one point, and the remaining Norsemen at another point, fleeing in the kind of ships that Scandinavian sailors used to ply the northern seas.

Anlaf and the cnear

The passage in the poem in which this term occurs demands closer attention. Some parts are clear enough, but others are not. The syntax in particular is susceptible to different interpretations.

Pær geflemed wearð
 Norðmanna bregu, nede gebeded,
 to lides stefne litle weorode;
 cread cnear on flot, cyning ut gewat
 on fealene flod, feorh generede. (32b–6)

The Old English poet tells us that Anlaf, “the chief of the Northmen was put to flight there, forced by necessity to the stem (or prow) of the boat” (32b–4a), and that “the king went out on the fallow sea and saved his life” (35b–6): so much is largely undisputed. The other phrases are ambiguous in their meaning and their syntax. *Litle weorode* (34b) probably means “with a small company”, though in at least one poem the parallel phrase *mate weorode* means “alone”.⁴¹ The focus only on Anlaf, and the singular verbs throughout, certainly make it possible that this passage refers to Anlaf rowing for his life on his own; but it is to be doubted that whatever in particular a *cnear* was, it was a boat manageable by a single person.

The phrase *on lides stefne* “to the prow of a ship” perhaps supports the idea of a small group: the phrase is used in contrast with *on lides bosme* “in the bosom/hold of a ship” in 27a, where the mass of men were who sailed with Anlaf to England. *On lides bosme* is twice used in *Genesis* to refer to the family of Noah and the animals in the Ark (*Genesis* 1332a, 1410b); the Ark was covered over and had no steering mechanism that is mentioned, so the idiom clearly refers to men (or people and animals) essentially as cargo.⁴² The first of these idioms is used elsewhere in Old English poetry: in *Andreas* 403b, *æt lides stefnan*, and 1707b

⁴⁰ Fear, 280 note 123.

⁴¹ *The Dream of the Rood*, 69b, 124a.

⁴² As also noted by Fry, 65.

to *lides stefnan*, where the place of the leader, St Andrew, is in the fore or aft of the ship. On the journey to Mermedonia he addresses his men from the prominent place afforded by the raised position of prow or stern; and on his departure, he is led to the place of honour at the ship's prow or stern by the grateful Mermedonians. The contrast here with Anlaf *nede gebeded* "forced by necessity" fleeing to the accustomed prominent position in the boat is marked. That raises questions about the sense of the phrase *cread cneor on flot*.

Campbell notes that in Middle English the verb *crude*, from Old English *crudan*, is both transitive and intransitive, and "[a]ccordingly we can translate here 'the ship pressed ahead' or 'he (the king) pressed his ship ahead'".⁴³ These translations take it as read that the phrase *on flot* means something like "on the sea", and indeed the *Dictionary of Old English* gives the gloss "deep water" for *flot* and "on the sea" for this phrase, together with "afloat".⁴⁴ This set of glosses is odd and it is doubtful that the first two suggestions can be accurate. In *Andreas* 1698, the saint "got himself ready and prepared to sail" back to Achaia, *ongan hine fysan ond to flote gyrwan*; in *Elene* 225–6a, "a host of warriors quickly prepared to sail", *Ongan þa oftslice eorla mengu / to flote fysan*; and in *Maldon* 40–1a, the messenger of the Vikings probably promises no more than that they will sail away if paid off, *we willað ... us to scype gangan, / on flot feran* "we want ... to go to the ships and sail off on the water". The examples of *flot* here apparently refer to a stage of activity before the ships encounter "deep water, the sea": the phrase refers to preparing to sail, not as yet sailing.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* under *afloat* B. adv. I. 1. a. relates the OE word *flot* to the verb *float*, with connotations of shallow water: "On or on to the sea or any stretch of water (or other liquid) of sufficient depth to support a body; so as to be floating, as opposed to sinking or being aground; so as to be at sea, as opposed to in dock or in a dockyard."⁴⁵ This more obviously matches the OE prose example. In the *Chronicle*, raiders at Ely are in their ships in expectation of attack from a land force, *þa wæron þa utlagas ealle on flote, wistan þet he sceolde þider cumen* "the outlaws were all afloat then, knowing that [Turolð] would come there" (1070 E).⁴⁶ Here the water is fen, and the outlaws are afloat in their ships so as to be safe from Abbot Turolð's army: they are not "on the sea": they sail there later and are dispersed: *þa hi comen on middewearde þe sæ, þa com an mycel storm [ond] todræfed ealle þa scipe þær þe gesumes wæron inne ...* "When they came into the middle of the sea, then a great storm came and scattered all the ships in which the treasures were".⁴⁷ The same might be true of the *Maldon* Vikings: their ships were on Northey island in the Blackwater, and they merely promise to take the tribute and move on. These ships, too, are not "on the sea", and indeed part of the underlying threat of the message conveyed might be that the promise is merely to sail off somewhere else in the vicinity, not necessarily to leave English shores. The other examples of the word *flot* are in damaged parts of their manuscripts.⁴⁸

The fundamental senses of the phrase *to flote*, with a verb of preparing, appears to be, then, "launch, float (a ship), in preparation for sailing", and *on flot(e)* to be "afloat", both as distinct from being on land and perhaps even as distinct from being at sea. This clearly makes problematical a translation of "pressed ahead" for the verb *cread*; either the boat pressed

⁴³ Campbell, 108.

⁴⁴ DOE, under *flot*.

⁴⁵ OED, <www.oed.com>, accessed 4 August 2016.

⁴⁶ Irvine, 89.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ The possible use and meaning of the phrase in Ælfric is not reconstructable, even with a Latin source text, see Pope 1 245; the phrase in *Riddle* 78, 6 may, as noted by DOE, refer to the lamprey "which kills its wave-covered victims in the sea" (a reference to the fragmentary text *flote cwealde ... yþum bewrigene*); it may be pressing the fragmentary evidence too far, but lampreys are predominantly shallow- or fresh-water predators.

afloat to sail, or it was pressed afloat to sail. Campbell preferred the intransitive sense of the verb, partly because the other example of *crudan* in Old English is intransitive: *þonne heah geþring / on cleofu crydeð* “when the high tumult [of the waves] presses against the cliffs”, *Riddle 3* 25b–6a.⁴⁹ But the sense of *on flot* just examined makes a transitive sense very plausible in *Brunanburh*: “[Anlaf] pressed the ship afloat; the king departed on the fallow sea and saved his life”.

We might note two incidental features that support this interpretation. First, the poet neatly contrasts *on flot* “afloat” and *on ... flod* “on the sea”: these are entirely different but sequential aspects of sailing, echoing but not overlapping with each other. Secondly, the syntax: the lines 32b–6 have as their subject Anlaf, the king, the chief of the Northmen, and the transitive sense preserves that focus, and refers to his agency; the intransitive sense of the verb here would make the phrase parenthetical.⁵⁰ The syntax permits the sense “Anlaf, with a small company, pressed the ship afloat”, since the singular verb is in concord with the grammatical subject *Norðmanna bregu* “chief of the Northmen” and later *cyning* “king”.

The clause under consideration here has a fronted verb preceding the subject or object. Poetic syntax is freer than prosaic, but nevertheless it is customary for this word-order to occur in clauses introduced by adverbs such as *þa* and *þær*, and with negative statements.⁵¹ In five passages of the poem relating to the invading forces listed by Carroll,⁵² three are clearly introduced by an adverb, *þær læg secg mænig* 17b, *þær geflemed wearð / Norðmanna bregu* (32b–3a) and *Gewitan him þa Norþmen* (53a); and one is a negative statement, *Gelpan ne þorfte / beorn blandenfeax* (44b–5a). The other is *cread cneor on flot*, which, following the adverb *þær* in 32b introducing the chief of the Norsemen as the subject of the sentence, may be thought to continue with a recapitulation, [**þær*] *cread cneor on flot / cyning ut gewat* “[there] the king launched the ship, went out on the sea”, thus motivating the word-order.

The widespread interpretation of *flot* as “(deep) sea” has obscured what Anlaf does at this point in the poem. The *Elene* passage just mentioned, *Ongan þa oftslice eorla mengu / to flote fýsan* “a host of warriors quickly prepared to sail”, continues,

Fearoðhengestas

ymb geofenes stæð gearwe stodon,
sælde sæmearas, sunde getenge. (226b–8)

(Wave-stallions stood ready along the sea’s shore, tethered sea-horses near the sea.) The ships are ready to sail, tied up along the beach, and the men are preparing to launch them. As D.K. Fry points out, ships in *Beowulf* are also *sælde to sande* (1917a), most likely partially beached and fastened by cables to the shore, and the preparations for departure involve launching the ships afloat. Fry explains the process:

To launch a grounded ship, sailors must free it from the sand, especially as the incoming tides tend to wash even more sand up around the bow. To do so, they press their weight on the outboard end, often by jumping up and down in the stem away from the land. This motion causes the ship to pivot at the point where the keel touches

49 Campbell, 108.

50 Single half-line parentheses are not uncommon, but are often emphatic, see Krapp.

51 Mitchell, II, §3922, 971–2, “[t]he frequency of VS is greatest in simple sentences and principal clauses introduced by the ambiguous adverb/conjunctions *þær*, *þanon*, *þider*, *þa*, and *þonne*”; Mitchell and Robinson, §145, 64–5, “[i]n OE the order V.S. is found in ... Negative statements. ... In principal clauses introduced by certain adverbs.”

52 See Carroll, 45 and note 19.

the sand, and the bow springs up and breaks free.⁵³

He goes on to suggest that the *Brunanburh* passage accurately describes the way in which Anlaf was “pushed *in extremis* to the narrow end of his ship with just a few retainers”, and “he and a little band . . . mount the ship’s prow . . . to bounce the vessel loose”.⁵⁴

My argument here is that the text of the poem precisely outlines the humiliation of Anlaf. He is forced to the stem of the ship, as part of a small company that set the vessel afloat so that the king could get away alive. His shame and discomfiture are parallel to those of Constantine who was forced to flee, leaving his young son dead on the battlefield. Ultimately it is as undignified a thing for a king to bounce a ship afloat in his haste to get away and save his life, as it is for a king to leave his son unavenged on the battlefield.

Conclusion

The *Brunanburh* poet used the term *cnear* twice in the poem even though it was an unfamiliar word, garbled by two different scribes, and other words were available to fit the metrical patterns that the poet used in the two instances. *Cnear* may or may not be a borrowing from Scandinavian, but it was a type of ship used around the north European coasts by Scandinavians, and it probably had a visibly nailed appearance, and may have had decking fore and aft. Anlaf probably had to join in bouncing a beached *cnear* into the water and rowing the vessel away in order to escape from the battle. The Norsemen departed in similar vessels heading back to Dublin.

Niles sensed the possibility of some comedy about the use of the word *cnear* “based on the incongruity of the king being forced to flee in a merchant vessel”,⁵⁵ but as has been already noted, the distinction between a warship and merchant vessel in the Scandinavian *knǫrr* seems to have developed later. Nevertheless, this suggestion introduces a serious interpretative issue: discussion of *cnear* has tended to assume that Anlaf fled in the same vessel as he arrived in, and that the Norsemen did likewise. Niles himself posited that the *cnear* in the poem was “the royal vessel of Anlaf”; Pons-Sanz observes that “[t]he Old English occurrences certainly seem to indicate that this was a type of ship appropriate for an invading army”;⁵⁶ and Jesch writes, “[a]lthough the battle took place on land, the function of these ships was to transport the Norse warriors to the battle, so that at the very least, *knǫrr* could be used of a troop-carrier, if not an actual warship”.⁵⁷ What these scholars (and many more, including Greenway translating Henry of Huntingdon’s *rex nauī prouectus* as “the king sailed back in his ship”,⁵⁸ quoted above) fail to reckon with, is that the *cnear*, in both instances in the poem, was the type of ship in which the Norsemen *escaped*, not necessarily the type of ship in which they arrived; the *cnear* ship or ships were not necessarily “his ship” or “their ships”, and indeed no possessive pronoun is used in the sources for these ships. Consequently, *cnear* in the poem may not refer to the royal vessel, or specifically to the vessels of an invading army, troop-carriers or warships at all, but only to the vessels by which the Norsemen escaped. It is unsafe to presume that the word refers to these specific kinds of vessels being used by the invaders because we cannot be sure those were the vessels the Norsemen escaped in. And as a corollary, the use of *cnear* might perfectly well have been motivated by some incongruity associated with the vessels in which the king and the remnant

53 Fry, 64.

54 Ibid, 65–66.

55 Niles, 73 [360].

56 Pons-Sanz, 203.

57 Jesch, 131.

58 Greenway, 312–13.

of his army departed.

As I demonstrate in another place,⁵⁹ there is no suggestion in the poem that the vessels Anlaf and the Norsemen left in were those they came in; there is no indication in the sources that the ship in which Anlaf fled was in the same place as those the larger body of Norsemen fled from, and indeed the clear emphasis in the Old English poem on two distinct departures might suggest that they were from different places as well as at different times. The ships might have been those the army came in, and I have already suggested that they were likely to be Scandinavian-style ships used around the coasts; but the survivors of the army might equally well have left in whatever vessels they could find seaworthy in the vicinity of *Dingesmere*, perhaps merchant vessels or freighters used in coastal trade. If the battle took place on or around the Wirral as I have argued before, then there would have been a supply of Irish Sea Scandinavian-style trading craft at Meols, a major port at this time. Pons-Sanz concludes that “connotations of foreignness may have contributed to the selection of the OE *cnearr* word-field”.⁶⁰ I suggest, with Niles, that the poet might well have been using this word to sneer at the plight of the Norsemen and their king in reference to the boats they got away in; certainly some of his audience missed this and perhaps more recent interpreters have, too.

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⁵⁹ Cavill, “Escaping from *Brunanburh* and John of Worcester”, forthcoming.

⁶⁰ Pons-Sanz, 243.

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