The Authorial Version of the E-Verse iren(n)a cyst in Beowulf

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Abstract The half-line *īrena/īrenna cyst,* an E-verse in *Beowulf,* causes problems because *īrena* is prosodically too weak in the second syllable, but metrically correct *īrenna* is morphologically difficult to account for. Since there is good reason for assuming that the word for 'iron' was *īsern* at an early stage of Old English it may be suggested that, in the course of the textual history of *Beowulf, īsern* tended to be replaced by *īren.* In all its occurrences in *Beowulf, īren* can be replaced by *īsern* without harm to the metre. It is therefore thinkable that the authorial version of the formulaic E-verse was *īserna cyst.*

A formulaic E-verse meaning 'the best of swords'[1] occurs thrice in *Beowulf:*[2] *īrenna* cyst (with geminate *-nn-*) at line 802b and *īrena cyst* (with single -n-) at lines 673a and 1697a respectively. Evidently guided by metrical considerations, *Klaeber*4 (2011: 157) notes, '*īrena* (…) stands for older *īrenna* (…)'; the formulation is taken over from Klaeber3 (1950: 153). With regard to the E-verse *īrenna cyst,* the prosodic length of the second syllable in the first foot is indicated by instances like *weorðmyndum þah* (Beowulf, 8b); see further Terasawa (2011: 42-43). From the metrical viewpoint, *īrenna (cyst)* is therefore regular. That the form *īrenna* is 'older' than *īrena* is held by a number of scholars. Thus Wrenn comments on *īrenna* (802b), 'Here metre suggests that the spelling represents the older form with its double *n*'.[3] Holthausen (1908: 22 and 54) and Trautmann 1904: 38 and 94), even emend *īrena to īren[n]a* at lines 673a and 1697a. With reference to *īrena* at 673a and 1697a, Klaeber3 (1950: 153) remarks, "Even if the *n* was really meant to be single, this would not necessarily involve a gross violation of meter". The occurrence of both *īrena* and *īrenna* in the genitive plural definitely requires an explanation.

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1   Meaning 'the best of', the noun *cyst* with a preceding genitive is also found at 1232b (*þær wæs symbla cyst*), etc.
2   *Beowulf* quotations follow Fulk et al. (2008) (= *Klaeber⁴*). The third edition of Klaeber's *Beowulf* is referred to as *Klaeber³*.
3   C. L. Wrenn (1958: 268) slightly changed in the 1973 edition (p. 253). Hoops (1932: 88) also considers the genitive plural *īrenna* as the original form and attributes the single nasal in *īrena* to 'Verkürzung des *nn* zu *n*'.

In order to account for the geminate *-nn-* in forms of the word for 'iron', Campbell (1959: §647, fn. 2) posits a formation in *-ja*: '*īren* 'iron' seems to be a *ja*-stem in OE as a noun, and a *ja*-, *jō*-stem as an adj.; hence in *Beow*. g.p. *īrenna* (noun), a.s.n. *-īrenne* (adj.) have *-nn-* (sometimes graphically simplified), and so lWS a.p.m. *yrenne* (adj.).' There is no doubt that **īranja-* > **īrannja-* > *īrenn-* would represent a phonologically acceptable development. This interpretation raises serious problems, however. On the basis of a reconstructed form **īranja-*, we may expect OE *īrenn-*: *īren* could show simplification of *-nn* > *-n* in final position (e.g. *cynn* > *cyn* 'kin'), but the geminate *-nn-* would be preserved in intervocalic position (e.g. *cynnes*). Following an unstressed syllable, geminate *-nn-* is usually preserved intact, as can be seen from inflected infinitives like *gefremmanne* (174b and 2644a). Consequently, a genitive plural *īrena*, with single *-n-*, cannot be accounted for on the basis of a starting-point **īranja-* > OE *īrenn-*. Furthermore, it must be stressed that a formation **īranja-* would be hard to justify in the morphological system of Pre-Old-English because no convincing reason can be provided for the derivation in *-ja-*. The E-verse *īren(n)a cyst* is suspect within the metrical system of *Beowulf*: *īrena cyst* is weak in the first foot, on the other hand, *īrenna cyst* is correct from the prosodic point of view, but *-nn-* cannot be explained as due to gemination by *-j-*, because the gemination ought also to appear in *īrena*, and the formation in *-ja-* can hardly be justified in the first place.[4]

At this stage it is imperative to give an account of the substantive meaning 'iron, sword'[5] as found in *Beowulf*. The nominative *īren* is attested four times (892, 989, 1848, 2586), twice *īren* functions as accusative (1809 and 2050). Apart from the three E-verses at 673, 802 *(īrenna)*, and 1697, the genitive plural *īrena* occurs in the half-line bite *īrena* (2259), a D-verse. The compound *hringīren* (322) refers to the iron rings of the mail shirt. As first element, *īren* is

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4   According to Hogg and Fulk (2011: §2.21, note 3) an underlying ja-stem **īranja-* is unlikely, but the suggestion that gen. pl. *īrenna* should represent 'an a-stem with assimilation of **-zn-* to **-nn-*' is not acceptable because the cluster **-zn-* would not develop in the paradigm of the word for 'iron'.
5   The meaning 'sword' in poetic attestations may be understood metonymically as 'made of iron'.

found in the following compounds: *īrenþreat* (330), (dative plural) *īrenbendum* (774 and 998), *īrenheard* (1112), *īrenbyrne* (2986). The first element of the compound *īrenbyrne* is replaced by *īsern-* in *īsernbyrne* (671), and *īsern-* is also found in *īsernscur* (3116).

In Old English documents, the substantive for 'iron' appears in three different forms: *īren – īsern – īsen.* Gothic *eisarn* 'iron', Old Norse *ísarn*, Old Saxon *īsarn*, and Old High German *īsarn* allow the reconstruction of a stem Gmc. **īsarna-*.[6] OE *īsern* probably represents the phonologically regular continuation of this starting-point.[7] It may be further assumed that *īren* is due to an innovation in contrast to the inherited form *īsern.* The main outline of the rather complex sound change was defined by Kluge:[8] *īsern* led by metathesis to **īsren*, and the intervocalic cluster *-sr-* was assimilated to *-rr-*, but, following a long vowel, *-rr-* in **īrren* was simplified leading to *īren*.[9] The distribution of *īsern* and *īren* is analysed in detail by Kleinman, who notes that in Old English poetry we find altogether 43 instances of forms containing the

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6   Orel (2003: 204) gives the main references. Kroonen (2013: 271) sets up *īsarna- ~ īzarna-*, but there is no justification for positing an alternant **īzarna-* supposedly showing the working of Verner's Law. The prehistory of this Germanic noun is disputed. Cowgill (2012: 68, fn. 10) thinks that Gmc. **īsarna-* is due to borrowing from Celtic **īsarno-*: IE **ēsr̥no-*, the ancestral form, is interpreted as being derived from the word for ' blood', and Cowgill points out that 'rusty iron' is reddish like blood. A recent discussion is offered by Harđarson (2014: 103-112).

7   The form *īsern* is found in early glossaries. In OE *īsen*, the prenasal *-r-* in *īsern* dropped out, a comparable development also occurred in OHG *īsan*, ultimately leading to German *Eisen*. OE *īsen* is found in the half-line *isen eall ðurhgleded* (*Daniel*, 244a).

8   Kluge (1918: 516-517); see also Hirt (1931: 122, fn. 2). Very succinctly the development is accounted for by Campbell (1959: §459, fn. 3) as follows: "In *īrenn* iron, beside *īsern*, metathesis of *r* was followed by assimilation and simplification of the double consonant so produced: **īsarn- > *īsrannj- > *īrannj > īrenn.*" It should be noted that the form *īrenn* with geminate *-nn* in final position is not attested; the assumption of a derivation in *-j-* is unwarranted.

9   A parallel for the sound change *-sr- > -rr- > -r-* in medial position is perhaps available in the paradigm of the pronoun for first person plural: *ūser* 'of us', the genitive belonging to *we* 'we', was partly replaced by *ūr/ūre*. The possessive adjective *ūser* 'our' has regular adjectival inflection, the genitive can be expected as **ūsres* (< pre-OE **ūsaras < *unsaras*) and could lead to **ūrres > ūres*; this may secondarily have brought about the replacement of *ūser* by *ūr/ūre*. With regard to *īren* and *ūre*, Ringe (2014: 339) notes: "In two words the sequence *V:ser* has become *V:re*, apparently without any intermediate stage". The assumed sound development is not credible.

word for 'iron'.[10] The prevailing form in the poetic corpus is *īsern. Beowulf,* with only two attestations of *īsern-* and twenty instances of *īren(-),*[11] deviates from this general pattern. The question is therefore permitted whether *īsern* may have been more prevalent at an early stage of the *Beowulf* text. It is worth noting that *īserna cyst* would be a perfectly regular E-verse. The form *īsern* can be substituted for *īren* in all single instances in *Beowulf* without disturbing the metre. It can therefore be suggested that, in the course of the textual transmission, an authorial form *īsern* tended to be replaced by *īren,* only *isernbryne* and *isernscur* resisted the modernising tendency of copyists.

Apart from substantival *īren* discussed so far, *Beowulf* also offers forms of *īren* that must be understood as adjectival. The geminate *-nn-* occurs in non-final position. In the following verse lines, the form *īrenna* functions as nominative plural of an adjective in the feminine: *þæt him īrenna ecga mihton (2683), ac him īrenna ecga fornamon* (2828). An adjective is probably also found at 2338a: *eall īrenne* is likely to represent the accusative singular neuter in the weak adjective declension agreeing with *wigbord* (2339a).[12] The half-line *ecg wæs īren* (1459 and 2778) probably shows simplification of the geminate *-nn* in word-final position. For the adjective we may posit the underlying form as *īrenn-.* Since the substantival forms offer no evidence of a formation in *-ja-,* we must still inquire how the geminate *-nn-* in the adjective can be accounted for.

On the basis of Gothic *eisarn-eins* 'made of iron', we may reconstruct an adjectival stem Gmc. **īsarn-īna-,* a regular formation in **-īna-* on the pattern of OE *gylden* 'made of gold' (< Gmc. **guld-īna-*), derived from the substantive for 'gold', OE *gold,* or OE *ǣren* 'made of brass' (< Gmc. **aiz-īna-*), derived from OE *ār* 'brass, copper' (< Gmc. **aiz-*).[13] Phonologically, **īsarn-īna-* leads to

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10   Kleinman (1997: 371-390).

11   Kleinman's (1997) count does not distinguish between the functions as substantives or adjectives. In addition to the 15 substantival forms of *īren-* already mentioned, the *Beowulf* text offers 5 instances of *īren-* in adjectival function to be considered presently.

12   Mitchell and Robinson (2006: 254) posit a compound adjective *eallīren* 'all of iron'.

13   The formation pattern is dealt with by Meid (1967: 112).

OE *īsern-en-* > *īsern-n-* > *īsern-*.[14] When *īsern* was replaced by *īren*, the adjectival formation *īsern-en-* would follow suit and be reshaped to

īren-en-, resulting in *īrenn-*. A parallel development can be observed in the adjectival formation in *-īna-* drawn from the substantive OE *stān* 'stone' (< Gmc. *staina-): *stǣnen* 'made of stone' (< Gmc. *stain-īna-*) exhibits *-nn-* in *þam þe deorc gewit hæfdon on hreþre heortan stǣnne*.[15] The adjectival stem *īrenn-* can therefore be explained without having recourse to a morphologically doubtful formation *īranja-: -nn-* in *īrenn-* represents the final nasal of the word for 'iron' in contact with the nasal of the suffix *-en*.[16]

Neither nominal nor adjectival forms of the word for 'iron' require the assumption of *a ja*-formation *īranja-* for a Pre-Old-English stage. The inherited form of the substantive is likely to have been OE *īsern*, gradually supplanted by *īren*. Geminated *-nn-* originated in the adjectival stem *īsarn-īna-* > OE *īsern-en-*, replaced by *īren-en-* and resulting in *īrenn-*. Therefore the E-verse *īrena/īrenna cyst* is unlikely to belong to the original layer of the *Beowulf* text: *īserna cyst*, metrically regular, may be assumed to have been the authorial version of the half-line. N

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14   This adjective is attested twice in *Daniel*: *wall on stealle iserne* (247b) and *ærenum clammum and isernum* (519); the interpretation of line 247b is dealt with by Farrell (1974: 138).
15   *Christ,* 640b-641, translated by Gollancz (1893: 40-41) as 'from those who in their breasts had understanding dark, a stony heart'.
16   Apart from the Beowulf passages mentioned above, the geminate *-nn-* in the adjective meaning 'made of iron' is found in scyttelas yrenne glossing vectes ferreos; see Kimmens (1969: 353) (Psalm 106,16).

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