Waldere's Challenge and The Day of Battle: A Translation of the Waldere Fragments

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Waldere's Challenge (Waldere B)

"...a better blade
except for that alone, I also have,
in a stone-case, silently concealed.
I know that Theodric thought of it for Widia,
to send it himself and also much treasure,
spoils with the sword, many another with it
garnished with gold. As recompense, he received it,
because from captivity Nithhad's kinsman,
Weland's child, Widia, released him.
Through the monsters' realm he hurried forth,"
Waldere declared, the strength-stout warrior.

He had it in hand, the battle-support,
the war sword, in his grasp, voiced these words:
"So! You indeed deemed, friend of the Burgundians,
that Hagena's hand in attack advanced on me,
and divided the foot-combat. Fetch, if you should dare,
thus from the war-weary a hoary corslet.

Here stands on my shoulders Aelfhere's legacy,
good and curve-faced, gloriously gilded,
entirely unblemished, a prince's garment
to possess, whenever his hand safeguards
his spirit-hoard from its foes. Nor is it adverse to me
when Nifela's kinsmen again attempt,
confront me with blades, as you did to me.

However, he may grant victory, he who always is
prompt and firm in purpose, in each right.
Whoever himself in that holy one trusts for help,
consolation from God, he there readily finds it,
if these rewards he first contemplates.

Then might the proud ones dispense prosperity,
command possessions, that is..."

The Day of Battle (Waldere A)

One fortified him, earnestly:
"Surely, Weland's work does not betray
of men any of those who can
hard Mimming hold; often by fighting fell,
wetly stained and sword-wounded, one warrior after another.
Aetla's point-fighter, let not your valor now
fail today, nor your dignity fall.

... Now is that day, come,
such that you shall have entirely one of the two:
to lose your life, or long-lasting acclaim
to obtain amongst men, Aelfhere's son.

Never could I, you, my friend, with words chide
that I may have seen you at sword-play

disgracefully from any man's
battle escape or to the wall flee
to preserve your body, even as many hostiles
hewed at your corslet with blades.

But you always further fighting sought,
a bit beyond the boundary. I for you dreaded the Creator,
that you too savagely combat sought
at the position of another man's battle-plan.

Dignify yourself with good deeds, while God cares for you.
Mourn not yourself by the blade! To you was the best of treasures
given as an aid, with which you shall
bring down Guthere's boast, because he this slaughter began,
unrighteously, earlier to seek.

Forsook he that sword and the precious vessels,
a multitude of rings; now must he, bereft of both,
turn from this battle, the lord to seek
the old homeland, or here, earlier, to sleep in death
if he that…"

Translator's Note

Waldere is composed of two fragments, which likely formed part of a larger Old English poem about the story of Walter of Aquitaine. E.C. Werlauff discovered them in the Royal Library of Copenhagen, on the back of two partially damaged pages of unknown origin. Jonathan Himes describes how the poem contains "quite an array of textual oddities and unexplained idiosyncrasies," perhaps due to "the dilapidated state of the manuscript which has holes, scuffs, and ambiguously corrected letters."[1] The manuscript contains some unconventional spellings for some Old English words, leaving multiple possibilities for their meaning. For example George Stephens, who found the manuscript, read a word describing Mimming as "hearne" and thus translated it as "pale-shiny" or

[1] Jonathan Himes, *The Old English Epic of Waldere* (Newcastle Upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009), 11.

alternately "hoary"[2] while Peter Baker suggests it is instead "heardne" meaning "hard."[3] When there was no consensus, I generally followed Peter Baker's version of the text and took inspiration from Benjamin Slade's translation.[4]

The characters and plot of *Waldere* reoccur across a large set of stories from the Germanic-heroic tradition, surrounding Walter of Aquitaine, making it easier to piece together the likely narrative in these fragments. Indeed, the little of *Waldere* that survives hints at the extent of Old English heroic poetry which has since been lost. George Stephens suggests that Waldere may have been part of a lay "on an extensive scale, some 6 or 8,000 lines" and "points back to the existence of Old-English Edda Songs" of which Beowulf was only "one of many."[5] Similar characters appear in other Old English texts, showing they were part of an oral tradition that would have been known to the listeners and readers of these stories. John Newell Sanborn describes how *Beowulf* also contains a character called Aelfhere, who is similarly "connected with family and with swords" and Wiglaf's bringing of a sword to Beowulf may have "triggered the response to the Weland-made Mimming" for its audience.[6] Though only these fragments of the original Old English poem survive, they likely would have been part of a well-known, much longer epic poem.

While characters such as Walter, Hagen, Hildegund, Weland and Attila are featured in other sources, including *Þiðreks saga*, the *Niebelungenlied, Chronicon Novaliciense*, and *Walterus Robustus*, it is the Latin epic poem *Waltharius* that contains the most detailed and complete narrative about the events referenced in *Waldere*.[7] In *Waltharius*, Walter of Aquitaine and Hagen of the Franks are given as hostages to Attila, and fight on his behalf.[8] Walter and Hildegund, the Burgundian princess whom Attila took captive, conspire to flee together. Gunther, a Frankish prince, finds out about their escape and leads his army to unsuccessfully battle Walter; in these fights, Hagen's nephew is killed. Walter and Hagen then fight, both suffering injuries, until they decide to make peace. The fragment *Waldere A* then may be a speech from Hildegund to Walter, encouraging him in his battle against Gunther's army, while *Waldere B* is likely a dialogue between Gunther and Walter before they fight, but after his battle with Hagen.

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[2] George Stephens, *Two Leaves of King Waldere's Lay: From the Originals in the Great National Library Cheapinghaven*, Denmark (Cheapinghaven and London, 1860), 44.

[3] Peter Baker, "Waldere," line 4, Old English Aerobics, https://www.oldenglishaerobics.net/waldere.php

[4] See Benjamin Slade, "Waldere [two fragments]," Beowulf on Steorarume, revised August 25, 2002, https://heorot.dk/waldere.html.

[5] Stephens, King Waldere's Lay, x–xi.

[6] John Newell Sanborn, "A Possible Anglo-Saxon Poetic Framework: An Alternative to an Emendation," Modern Philology 70, no. 1 (1972): 48. http://www.jstor.org/stable/436503.

[7] Marion Dexter Learned, "Versions of the Walther Saga," *PMLA* 7, no. 1 (1892): 1. https://doi.org/10.2307/456224.

[8] Himes, *The Old English Epic of Waldere*, 7–8.

However, *Waldere* also differs from *Waltharius* in many key respects, revealing the dangers of using *Waltharius* and other sources to speculate about the story of *Waldere*. J.D. Pheifer argues that there has been an over-reliance on using the story of *Waltharius* to understand *Waldere,* making scholars "unwilling to accept the meaning of the text as it stands."[9] A key point of emphasis in *Waldere* absent in *Waltharius* is Waldere's possession of the sword Mimming, made by the famed smith Weland, who appears in *Deor*, King Alfred's *Boethius*, Frank's Casket, and the Old Norse *Völundarkviða*.[10] Similarly, Waldere seems to fight Guthere and Hagena separately rather than together. George Stephens suggests that "Walter bears the character of a man no longer young" and that the fight between Guthere and Waldere may take place later on in the narrative, after his marriage to Hildegund.[11] To avoid proscribing these interpretations, I avoided assumptions about the names and genders of speakers in the poem, using the pronoun "one" for the speaker at the beginning of *Waldere A*, often taken to be Hildegund.[12]

Thus, while *Waltharius* and other sources suggest likely plot elements of *Waldere*, the poem's fragmentary form invites interpretive flexibility, which I tried to preserve in my translation. In translating Waldere, I tried generally to take a proximate, quite literal approach to the text. I kept the word order roughly similar to the original text, refraining from changing the structure of the lines as much as possible. Similarly, in naming the characters, rather than modernizing them or using the names from *Waltharius*, I chose to keep them as transliterated versions of the Old English names. If etymological descendents of the Old English words were available, such as "unrighteous" for "unryhte,"[13] "good" for "god,"[14] or "fighting" for "feohtan,"[15] I gladly used them, but otherwise resorted to finding those with as similar a meaning as possible. For example, the word "hyrde"[16] can imply physical hardening as well as encouragement, so I chose the word "fortified" to preserve this double meaning.

While I originally tried to structure the lines according to the manuscript, this format ended up feeling somewhat fragmented and confusing. I thus decided to structure the poem instead according to the verse line structure, adding extra spacing between some sections to break up the text. To denote sections that were fragmentary or unknown, I added ellipses.

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[9] J.D. Pheifer, "Waldere I. 29-31", *The Review of English Studies* 11, no. 42 (1960): 183. http://www.jstor.org/stable/511505.

[10] H. R. Ellis Davidson, "Weland the Smith," *Folklore* 69, no. 3 (1958): 145–59. http://www.jstor.org/stable/1258855.

[11] Stephens, King Waldere's Lay, 20-21.

[12] "Waldere," line 1, Old English Aerobics.

[13] "Waldere", line 27, Old English Aerobics.

[14] "Waldere", lines 24 and 51, Old English Aerobics.

[15] "Waldere", lines 18 and 20, Old English Aerobics.

[16] "Waldere", line 1, Old English Aerobics. See Bosworth Toller Dictionary, "hyrdan."

Creating new compound words allowed me to maintain ambiguity in how I translated words that had multiple likely meanings. While "swatfag" likely implies being stained with blood, "swat" can also mean "sweat" or "other moisture that comes from the body."[17] By translating "swatfag" as "wetly stained," I tried to keep the implication of being stained with blood while still leaving a sense of ambiguity in this phrasing as to the type of moisture. "Ordwyga" is another compound word that presented some difficulty.[18] While "wiga" means "warrior" or "soldier", "ord" is a relatively open word that could mean "point" or "spear," or "chief" or "front."[19] "Ordwyga" might thus mean a warrior who fights with points or spears, or one who fights at the front or in an important role, so I chose to use the compound word "point-fighter" to suggest someone who might fight with pointed blades or in an important role. Similarly, Murray Dahm suggests that "máel ofer mearce" might mean beyond "a reasonable or sensible distance from his own shield-wall" rather than a distance beyond the boundary of a region or border.[20] By translating "mearce" as "boundary," I tried to preserve this possibility in addition to the more common meaning of a territorial limit. Constructing these compound words, I thus tried to keep open multiple interpretive possibilities.

As the first translator of the manuscript, George Stephens, described, "not only is it difficult to give a title to a short ancient fragment, it is often no less hazardous to translate it."[21] The question of what to title this translation was somewhat difficult, but I ended up trying to give both fragments straightforward titles that described the broad arc of their narrative. *Waldere B* contains boasts and challenges from Waldere to an unknown speaker, so I titled it *Waldere's Challenge* while *Waldere A* was a passionate speech, presumably by Hildegund, urging him to fight bravely that day, so I titled it *The Day of Battle.* These titles were not very creative, but I hope they serve to anchor the reader in the narrative of each fragment, while not presuming the identity of unknown characters or the order of plot elements. While most versions place the *Waldere A* fragment ahead of *Waldere B*, the order of these fragments is not necessarily clear. While I think the A–B order is understandable and likely correct, I placed *Waldere B* first since I felt it created an interesting dialogue between the two fragments, with the first fragment (B) showing Waldere's challenge to an unknown speaker, and the second (A) describing a speech urging him on in battle and referencing Guthere's boast that had driven him to battle. To translate a text as fragmentary and fascinating as *Waldere*, I thus tried as much as possible to hew closely to the literal meaning of words while also leaving space for the reader to creatively interpret and respond to the poem.

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[17] Bosworth Toller Dictionary, "swat."

[18] "Waldere," line 6, Old English Aerobics.

[19] Bosworth Toller Dictionary, "wiga" and "ord."

[20] "The Shield-Wall of Waldere: New Evidence for Anglo-Saxon Tactics," *Medieval Warfare* 5, no. 1 (2015): 52. https://www.jstor.org/stable/48578418.

[21] Stephens, King Waldere's Lay, 21.

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