

Old English *wār* as Seaweed

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Anglo-Saxon vocabulary contains words denoting seaweed, which mostly occur as renderings of Latin *alga* “seaweed.” The purpose of this paper is to show how the Old English terms for seaweed appear in the Old English context, and what we can elucidate from the evidence. As a result, we find that *wār* is a common term for seaweed in Old English, and the word form survives in Modern English, especially in British dialects. It is reasonable to say that the Anglo-Saxons knew how to utilize the seaweed, and the culture has been transmitted until today.

Key words : Old English, Anglo-Saxon, Seaweed, *wār*

1. Introduction

According to the *Thesaurus of Old English* [TOE], the nouns signifying “seaweed” in Old English are *flēotwyr̄t*, *sēwār*, *wār* and *wāroþ*.¹ These words have flags as follows: *flēotwyr̄t* (o), *flotwyr̄t* (og), *sēwār* (g), *wār* (g), *wāroþ* (op). The flag o shows that the word form is very infrequent. The flag g points to word forms that appear generally in glossed texts or glossaries. The flag p points to a form that seems to occur only in poetry.² From the flag indication, we find *sēwār* and *wār* are the common terms which denote “seaweed” in Old English.

According to *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* [BT], *wār* is defined as “sea-weed, waur.”³ The *Oxford English Dictionary* [OED] shows that *sēwār* (>sea-ware) is a compound of *sē* “sea” and *wār* “ware” (=seaware, *Sc.* and *dial.* seaweed).⁴ As for *flēotwyr̄t*, the entry and the definition in *BT* is *flēot-wyr̄t* “floatwort, seaweed(?)” which is also a compound of *flēot* “a place where vessels float” and *wyr̄t* “a wort, plant, herb.” Therefore, it is relevant to focus on *wār* as “seaweed” here.

The purpose of this paper is to show how the lemma *wār* appears in the Old English context with reference to *sēwār* and *flēotwyr̄t*, and to discuss what we can elucidate from this evidence.

2. Etymology of *wār*

With regard to the etymology of the Old English *wār*, *OED* states that it “corresp. to NFris. *wier* neut. sea-weed, pond-weed, whence prob. Du. *wier* neut. (first found in Kilian, referred to the ‘Holland’ dialect), repr. OTeut. **wairo-m*, f. **wai-*: *wī-* to bind.”⁵ Holthausen says that *wār* “Tang, Seegrass” is cognate with “wfr. *wier*, lit. *ī-vairū-s* “gewunden”.⁶ Skeat speculates that the root of OE *wār* perhaps comes from a PIE root indicating “to twine.”⁷

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In other words, *wār* is Germanic in origin, and *sēwār* and *fleotwyrt* are the Anglo-Saxon coinage.

3. The Catalogue of *wār*

The catalogue of *wār* is arranged in Table 1. As is shown in Table 1, the Latin *alga* is basically rendered into *wār*.

Lendinara (1992) considers Anglo-Saxon glosses and glossaries in detail, and Latin *alga* with its Old English translations is discussed,⁸ but we should notice that Latin *alga* does not always mean “seaweed”. The etymology of *alga* goes back to the PIE base **el-*, **ol-*, “to putrefy, rot.”⁹ According to *A Latin Dictionary* [Lewis and Short], *alga* is “from ligo [“to tie, bind” (translation mine)], quasi alliga, as binding, entwining, Van.,”¹⁰ which suggests the entangled state of seaweed on the shore. The definition of *alga* in Lewis and Short is “sea-weed, comprising several kinds, of which one (*Fucus vesiculosus*, Linn.) was used for coloring red, – Hence also for a *thing of little worth*.”¹¹

Table 1 The Catalogue of *wār*

Category	Short Titles	Spelling	Latin
Glossary: Corpus	<i>CorpGI</i> 2.120 (Sweet) ¹²	waar	alga
Glossary: Corpus	<i>CorpGI</i> 2.125 (Sweet)	Scaldhyflas vel sondhyllas	alg(e)
Glossary: Épinal	<i>EpGI</i> 48 (Pheifer) ¹³	uuar	alga
Glossary: Erfurt	<i>ErfGI</i> 1.47 (Pheifer)	uar	alga
Glossary: Erfurt	<i>ErfGI</i> 3.6 (DOE) ¹⁴	uar	alga herba marina
Glossary: Cleopatra	<i>CIGI</i> 1.220 (Rusche) ¹⁵	þæm warihtum	Algosis
Glossary: Cleopatra	<i>CIGI</i> 1.345 (Rusche)	wár	Alga
Glossary: Cleopatra	<i>CIGI</i> 2.369 (Rusche)	wár	Alga
Glossary: Cleopatra	<i>CIGI</i> 3.36 (Rusche)	ðæm warihtum	Algosis
Glossary: Leiden	<i>LdGI</i> 47.23 (Hessel) ¹⁶	uuac ¹⁷	alga
Glossary: Bodley 730 ¹⁸	<i>CollGI</i> 25 (Merrilees/DOE)	war	alga
Glossary: Bodley 730	<i>CollGI</i> 26.173 (DOE)	sewar	alga
Glossary: Bodley 730	<i>CollGI</i> 40.2.177 (DOE)	uuac	alga
Glossary: Laud Misc. 567 ¹⁹	<i>Lauds Herbal Glossary</i> 173 ²⁰	Sewar	Alga
Glossary: Antwerp	<i>AntGI</i> 4.10 (Kindschi) ²¹	saewaur	Alga
Glosses: Ars Tatuini	<i>TatGI</i> 1.27.814 (Law) ²²	var	alga
Glosses: Ars Tatuini	<i>TatGI</i> 2.27.814 (Law)	aluarga ²³	alga
Glosses: Ars Tatuini	<i>TatGI</i> 4.27.814 (Law)	uar	alga
Glosses: Aldhelm	<i>AldV</i> 128 (Goossens) ²⁴	warihtum	algosis
Glosses: Aldhelm	<i>AldV</i> 4.24 (Nap/DOE)	warihtum	algosis
Glosses: Aldhelm	<i>AldV</i> 13.1.35 (Nap/DOE)	warihtum	algosis
Glosses: Aldhelm	<i>AldÆ</i> 1.13 (Nap/DOE)	warum	algis
Glosses: Sedulius	<i>SedGI</i> 3.108 (Meritt) ²⁵	waras	algas, herbas
Verse: Maxims I	<i>Max</i> I 98 ²⁶	warig	
Verse: Riddle	<i>Rid</i> 40 49 ²⁷	waroð	
Prose: Homilies	<i>OEHom</i> III. 29.4 ²⁸	worie ²⁹	
Prose: Leechdoms	<i>Lch</i> II (2).52.8 ³⁰	fleotwyrt	

The *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* [DMLBS] defines *alga* as follows³¹: “[CL] sea-weed. **b.** (as type of worthlessness). **c.** “moss” (ed.), but (?) ice (< *al-gere*). **d.** (by conf.) sandhill.”

The citations in *DMLBS* are as follows: “~a, *waar GIC A 434*; *velut scopulis refluis ~arum illisionibus et undarum .. vorticibus fatigatus ALDH. PR 142 p. 203*; ~a, *sæwaur ÆLF. Gl.*; [bernace] *tanquam ab ~a lingo coerente..per rostra dependent GIR. TH 1 15*; *inde/algidus et algor, pariter maris †ala vocatur GARL. Syn. 191*; *ut capiant ~am maris ad impinguendam .. terram Cart. Newm. 55*; **14.** *alga, ðetwort WW.*” No Old English renderings are given for **b.** and **c.** As for “sandhill,” the *DMLBS* gives a citation from the *Corpus Glossary*. The citation is “~a, *scaldhyflas vel sondhyllas*”³² *GIC A 440.*”

In the *Épinal-Erfurt*, *alga* (*Erf*: *alge*) is also translated into *scaldthyflas* (*Erf*: *scaldthyblas*), about which Pfeifer (1974: 63) comments that *scaldthyflas* is literally “plants growing in shallow water.” He does not say whether “shallow water” is fresh or salt. Therefore, *alga* may mean “seaweed,” “sandhill,” and “plants growing in shallows.”

Algas, herbas occurs once in *SedGl 3*, which is glossed *waras*. The *DMLBS* defines *herba* [CL] as follows: **1. a.** small plant, herb; **b.** (used as food or flavouring); **c.** (used in medicine or magic); **d.** (dist. From fruit). **e.** weed. **2. a.** grass (collect.) or grassland; **b.** (*anguis in ~a*, prov., cf. Virgil *Ecl.*3.93). **c.** hay. **d.** (*ad ~am*) at grass; cf. *herbagium 2c*. **3.** in var. plant-names. **4. a.** early growth of corn; **b.** (fig.). From this definition, we can say that *algas, herbas* mean seaweeds, which are included in herbs and used in cooking or as a medicine.

Alga marina also occurs once in *ErfGl 3*, which is rendered into *uar*. The *DMLBS* refers to *herba marina* in “*marinus* [CL] 1. marine, of the sea;” as “*herba marina in profundum maris crescens*,” which means that *herba marina* are the plants growing in the seabed. In other words, they could be attached, not floating, seaweeds.

In *AldV*, the lemmas *spumosis* “foaming” *algosis* are glossed by *famigum* “foamy” (*femgendes, fæmigum*) *warihtum*, which suggests the frothy state of floating seaweed. Perhaps this kind of seaweed (*war*) might have vesicles, and the vesicles might look like foams from afar. One of the genera could be *Ascophyllum*. Another one is in *AldÆ*, where the lemmas *ramnis* “buckthorn, thorn-bush” *algis* are glossed by *fyrsum* “furze, gorse” *warum*.

4. Seaweed in the Old English Verse and Prose

The citation from *Maxims I* suggests the characteristics of seaweed and how seaweed was recognized in the Anglo-Saxon period.

*Max I 93-99*³³

Scip sceal genægled, scyld gebunden,
leoht, linden bord, leof wilcuma
Frysan wife, þonne flota stondeð;
biþ his ceol cumen ond hyre ceorl to ham,
agen ætgeofa, ond heo hine in laðaþ,
wæseð his warig hrægl ond him syleþ wæde niwe,
liþ him on londe þæs his lufu bædeð.

(The ship must be riveted; the shield, the light linden board, bound together; and cherished by his wife the yearned-for returning Frisian, when his ship docks. His vessel has returned and her husband is home, her own provider, and she leads him in, washes his wrack-stained clothes and gives

him fresh garments and sails with him to a landfall as his love demands.³⁴⁾

We could say that the plant, which stains the clothes of seafarers, would be floating on the sea, and in addition, membranous and sticky. *BT* states that *warig* is a variant of *wariht* “full of seaweed,” but it is easily understood that *warig* connotes negatively in *Max I*, and the definitions in *BT* and Hall “stained with sea-weed, weedy, dirty” may reflect that implication.

In the following citation in the *Riddles*, *wudu* would work to indicate the appearance of the plant.

Rid 40 (lines 46 to 49)

Ic eom fægerre frætwwum goldes,
 þeah hit mon awerge wirum utan;
 ic eom wyrsligre þonne þes wudu fula
 oððe þis waroð þe her aworpen liged.

(I am more beautiful with gold ornaments, though people would protect its outer metal. I am worse than this rotten wood, or this seaweed, which lies here cast up.)

Wudu fula is paraphrased by *waroð* here, and then it is conceivable that this plant (*waroð*) would not be membranous, but have a somewhat hard stalk or stipe. The genera, therefore, could be *Laminaria*, *Saccorhiza*, *Alaria*, *Fucus*, and *Ascophyllum*.

The only mention of seaweed in a medical text is found in the *Leechbook [Lch] II*, and the word for seaweed is *flēotwyr̄t*, not *wār*. In this context, seaweed is used as one ingredient of an emetic drink.

Lch II (2) 52.8

To spiwdrence, Eft, glædene, hofe, fleotwyr̄t, cnuwa on ealaþ & geswet, drince onne.

(For an emetic; Again, gladden, hove, float wort, pound these in ale, and sweeten it, then let *the man* drink.³⁵⁾

As emetic drinks, there are many other ingredients listed in *Lch II*, and generally they are dried, pounded, mixed in ale, and sweetened. According to *BT*, *cnuwian* ‘to pound’ is often used in *Leechdoms*, in which we find the following combinations: *leaf – cnuca* (*Herbarium* 41.4), *wyr̄t – cnuca* (*Herbarium* 57.1), *wyr̄te – cnuca* (*Herbarium* 63.7, 64, 65), *cnucige – wyr̄ta* (*Fly Leaf Leechdoms*), *gecnuca – læchwyr̄t* (*Leechbook I* 68), *witmæres wyr̄t – cnuca* (*Leechbook I* 2.14), *cnuca – beolenan 7 hemlic* (*Leechbook III* 50), *mucgwyr̄t – gecnuca* (*Leechbook III* 51). From these examples, we can say that *wyr̄t – cnuwian* is collocative, and *fleotwyr̄t – cnuwa* is one of these word-combinations. It is reasonable to suppose that the word *flēotwyr̄t* is chosen in the *Leechbook* because *flēotwyr̄t* would be the plant for medical use, and neither *wār* nor *sēwār* would be used for that purpose.

5. Uses of Seaweed in Anglo-Saxon England

There is no direct evidence that the Anglo-Saxons used seaweed as a food, but the record in Ireland from a similar date is suggestive. Newton (1951:102) says that “[s]ome 1,400 years ago, St. Columba’s monks were diligent harvesters of dulse.”³⁶ A later Irish poem about St. Columba’s island hermitage, written by an unknown author in the twelfth century, supports Newton’s statement, and,

no doubt, indicates a traditional activity³⁷.

Whether or not seaweed was a regular source of food, it has often been utilized on European coasts in times of famine. Newton (1951:31) states that “[t]hough it may appear from some statements in Latin literature that the Romans considered the seaweeds useless, nevertheless these plants are recorded as being used in Europe as food for cattle in times of hardship.” She cites the record of the unknown author of *Bellum Africanum*, written about 46-43 B.C., which describes that in times of scarcity the Greeks gathered seaweed to give it to their cattle and prolong their lives. It is natural to assume that, in times of hardship at least, the Anglo-Saxons would also make use of this resource, perhaps for people as well as animals.

We can say with reasonable certainty that seaweed was utilized in the British Isles in the early medieval period as manure, since archaeology provides some evidence for this. Bell (1981: 121) refers to the excavation at Gwithian, Cornwall, dating between the ninth century and c1100 A.D., and points out the possibility of the use of seaweed as manure.³⁸ He mentions that “a number of very tiny shells of mussel and periwinkle which were far too small for foodstuff, and also various little beach pebbles” were found, and all of them seem “to point to the use of seaweed as manure.”

Hagen (1992:40 and 1995:42) also suggests that the Anglo-Saxons used seaweed, not only as a food, but also to produce salt.³⁹ As to the use of salt, she mentions that salt is used for an emetic drink, quoting from *Lch I*, LVIII.⁴⁰ It seems that emetics were believed to be essential for the maintenance of health in the Anglo-Saxon period. Bonser (1963:302) refers to the fact that “[e]metics and purgatives are constantly prescribed in Anglo-Saxon recipes”, and Cameron (1993:53) quotes from the *Canterbury Classbook* (430v): “one who vomits frequently should always be healthy, because vomiting removes bile and phlegm which harm the head and it also prevents the illnesses which come from overeating and poor digestion”. In the *Lch I*, there are descriptions of *thyaspis* “shepherd’s purse” and *stauisagria* “stavesacre = lousewort” as ingredients of emetics,⁴¹ but seaweed is not referred to. The pharmaceutical value of seaweed now has scientific support,⁴² and taking into account that seaweed is saline and salt is used as an emetic, it seems reasonable to suppose that the Anglo-Saxons might have known the seaweed’s emetic effect from experience.

We may note, in passing, that the quotation in *Lch II* is associated with the description of seaweed in *Egil’s Sagam*.⁴³ When Bodvar Egilsson was drowned, Thorgerd, Egil’s daughter, lamented and chewed seaweed. Egil asked her what she was chewing, and she replied, “I’m chewing seaweed [i.e. *sól*]. I expect it will make me feel worse than ever.”⁴⁴

Thus far, from the extant records, seaweed was sometimes acknowledged negatively in the Anglo-Saxon period, but the Anglo-Saxons might have realized that seaweed had value in medicine, and as a manure, and for other purposes as well. Today in Scotland, some sheep and cattle are fed on seaweed, and that is said to be why they suffer from very few diseases and why the wool has a superior quality.⁴⁵ I venture to suggest that it is likely the same thing as in the present-day world happened in the Anglo-Saxon England.

¹ See *TOE*, 02.07.11.01.

² *TOE*, p. xxi.

³ *BT, wár*, p.1168.

- ⁴ *OED*, SEA-WARE.
- ⁵ *OED*, *ware*, n¹.
- ⁶ Holthausen, **wār, -ōð**.
- ⁷ Skeat, **Ware** (3), seaweed.
- ⁸ Lendinara, pp. 29-32 and p. 64.
- ⁹ Klein, *alga*, p. 23.
- ¹⁰ Lewis & Short, *alga*, p. 83.
- ¹¹ *op.cit.*, p. 83. In the *Oxford Latin Dictionary*, *alga* is defined as 1. Sea-weed. b. (as a type of what is worthless or uncountable). 2. (poet.) Plants growing in fresh water, water-plants.
- ¹² Henry Sweet (1885; repr. 1966) *The Oldest English Texts. EETS OS* 83.
- ¹³ J. D. Pheifer (1974) *Old English Glosses in the Épinal-Erfurt Glossary*.
- ¹⁴ Dictionary of Old English Project (1984-1998) *Old English Corpus TEI P3-1998 Release*.
- ¹⁵ Philip Guthrie Rusche (1996) *The Cleopatra Glossaries: An Edition with Commentary on the Glosses and their Sources*. Yale University Dissertation.
- ¹⁶ John Henry Hessels (1906) *A Late Eighth-Century Latin-Anglo-Saxon Gloissary preserved in the Library of the Leiden University*.
- ¹⁷ Hessels describes that *uuac* is “(wrongly for) *uuar* = *wár* (sea-weed, waur, wore)” (Hessels 1906:57).
- ¹⁸ Bodleian, Bodley 730. Glossaries added on the last three leaves (ff. 144-6) of the last quire of a copy of Cassian’s *Collations* written in England in the twelfth century. The lemmata are in Latin and the glosses partly in Latin, partly in Anglo-Norman, and partly in English. [From Ker, p. 379.]
- ¹⁹ Bodleian, Laud Misc. 567. About 250 OE glosses from part of a glossary of herb-names which occupies the last quire (ff. 68-73) of a manuscript of s. xii containing the *Viaticus* of Constantinus Africanus and other medical texts. [From Ker, p. 424.]
- ²⁰ J. Richard Stracke (1974) *The Laud Herbal Glossary*.
- ²¹ L. Kindschi (1955) *The Latin-Old English Glossaries in Plantin-Moretus MS 32 and British Museum MS Additional 32,246*. Stanford University Dissertation, p. 111.
- ²² Vivien Law (1977) “The Latin and Old English glosses in the *ars Tatuini*.” *ASE* 6, pp. 77-89.
- ²³ In *TatGl2*, *uar* appears as *aluarga*, where *uar* is incorporated into the middle of *alga*. Law (1977:79) explains that this is because “[t]he Old English gloss, written above the appropriate word, was thought to be an omitted syllable.”
- ²⁴ Louis Goossens (1974) *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library, 1650 (Aldhelm’s DEL LAUDIBUS VIRGINIT ATIS) Edited with an Introduction, Notes and Indexes*.
- ²⁵ Herbert Dean Meritt (1968) *Some of the Hardest Glosses in Old English*.
- ²⁶ Krapp and Dobbie (1936) *The Exeter Book, ASPR III, Maxims I*. The number means the line.
- ²⁷ Krapp and Dobbie (1936) *The Exeter Book, ASPR III, Riddles 40*. The number means the line.
- ²⁸ Richard Morris (1868; repr. 1988) *Old English Homilies and Homiletic Treatises of the Twelfth and Thirteenth Centuries*. The numbers are the chapter and line.
- ²⁹ *worie* = stained with sea-weed, dirty.
- ³⁰ O. Cockayne (1864-66; repr. 2001) *Leechdoms, Wortcunning, and Starcraft of Early England*, 3 vols. The numbers are the book, chapter and line.
- ³¹ In his *Medieval Latin Word-List*, however, Latham (2004) gives *alga* as one of variants of *alveus* “trough,” c1160, 1345.

- ³² *BT* quotes from *Lchdm. III*, 343, col. 2 that “[s]caldhýflas *alga*, scaldhúlas *paupilius* are errors.”
- ³³ Caesuras in *Max I* and *Rd* follow Krapp & Dobbie.
- ³⁴ For the translation, I refer to Bradley (1982) *Anglo-Saxon Poetry*, pp. 348-49.
- ³⁵ Translation is cited from Cockayne’s edition, p. 269.
- ³⁶ Lily Newton (1931) *A Handbook of the British Seaweeds*, p. 102.
- ³⁷ Kenneth Hurlstone Jackson (1951; revised in 1971) *A Celtic Miscellany Translations from the Celtic Literature*, p. 279. “That I might pore on one of my books, food for my soul; a while kneeling for beloved leaven, a while at psalms. A while gathering dulse from the rock, a while fishing, a while giving food to the poor, a while in my cell.”
- ³⁸ Martin Bell (1981) “Seaweed as a Prehistoric Resources” in Don Brothwell and Geuffrey Dimbleby eds., *Environmental Aspects of Coasts and Islands. British Archaeological Reports*, No. 94, pp. 117-26.
- ³⁹ Ann Hagen (1992) *A Handbook of Anglo-Saxon Food Processing and Consumption*, p. 40, but she does not say how and what kind of seaweed is used.
- ⁴⁰ “Against palsy; take a cup full of boiling water, another of oil, and of white salt so much as one may pick up with four fingers ... drink all this by drops, rest awhile, poke thy finger into the gullet, spew up again all” (quoted after the Modern English translation in *Lch I*, lix, p.131.)
- ⁴¹ See De Vriend (1984:192), CL. [*thyaspis*], “The juice of this plant is wrung well and a cupful is drunk, then the bitterness which comes from the bile expels out everything through the common necessary evacuation of bowels and vomiting,” and (1984:226), CLXXXI. [*stauisagría*], “Against the bad humour of the body, take the fifteen grains of this plant’s seed pounded in the light beer, give it to drink, then it purifies the body through vomiting.” Modern English plant names are cited from de Vriend’s Appendix I.
- ⁴² It is well known that the iodine contained in seaweed is effective against goitre. According to Chapman & Chapman (1980), there is a record that dulse was used as purgative in Skye in the middle of the 18th century (p. 237). As to further information of algae in modern medicine and other applications in pharmacy, see Chapman & Chapman (pp. 233-38), and Indergaard & Østgaard.
- ⁴³ Gwyn Jones (1960) *Egil’s Saga*, Chapter 78, pp.203-204.
- ⁴⁴ Hermann Pálsson & Paul Edwards (1976; repr. 1986) *Egil’s Saga*, pp. 203-204.
- ⁴⁵ V.J.Chapman & D.J.Chapman (1980) *Seaweeds and their Uses, Third Edition*, pp. 30-31.

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