

### The etymology of Old English *\*docga*

**ABSTRACT.** This article explores the origin of English *dog* (OE. *\*docga*), generally regarded as a word of unknown origin. It is argued, on the basis of its morphology, that the word is a hypocoristic derivative of *dox*, an Old English colour adjective. The article suggests that the relation between OE. *frox* and *froga* 'frog' is not an isolated irregularity but an example of a derivational process represented also by *dox*: *\*docga* and possibly by other such pairs in Old English (e.g. *fox*: *\*fogga*).

#### Introduction

Authors of etymological dictionaries of English, from Skeat (1879–1892) onwards, deal with the origin of *dog* brusquely in such terms as "root unknown" (Skeat) or "of obscure origin". In fact, historians of English seem to have lost interest in the word, at best commenting on its form, which, as will be shown, suggests some kind of diminutive formation (Hogg 1982: 196, 1992: 43). Since no etymological source suggests itself, *dog* has apparently been shelved together with other words of dubious derivation. In the following sections I shall challenge this agnostic attitude.

There is certainly a good deal of truth in Yakov Malkiel's rather pessimistic assessment of the status of etymology in modern linguistics (Malkiel 1993: 168):

"The very term 'etymology' has virtually disappeared from announcements of journal notes and articles, or from series of academy memoirs. For a young scholar, it is at present inadvisable, at least for career purposes in the teaching field, that he or she be known as aiming to qualify mainly as an etymologist, the way his next-door neighbours may safely declare their eagerness to pass off as phoneticians, phonologists, semanticists, pragmaticists, syntacticians, and the like.

Now it is, indisputably, desirable that one should not cultivate etymology in strict isolation. Its study can be very fruitfully combined with inquiries into models of regular sound change, phonosymbolism,



morphology (with particular emphasis on derivation and compounding), and so on; even a certain partnership with the fashionable probing of newly coined words might be highly commendable. But society is in error if it, directly or indirectly, encourages, or even provokes, the publication of reference books which, practically by definition, should contain no entirely new facts or ideas on the side of word origins, but instead, provide only novel approaches to relationships established elsewhere, while sorely neglecting the diffusion of purely exploratory writing."

As no relationships have been established for *docga* anywhere, the present article is of necessity "purely exploratory". To be sure, any attempt to attack an etymological enigma of long standing in a thoroughly studied language such as English may, and perhaps should, be viewed with suspicion. It seems reasonable to expect that if a convincing etymology could be proposed at all for a familiar word, somebody would have thought of it before. The reason why I put forward a new proposal concerning the origin of *dog* is my conviction that the word has been given up prematurely, and that some possible approaches to its etymology have not been satisfactorily explored.

### 1. The \*docga enigma

We would normally expect a generic term for the domesticated dog to be diachronically stable. After all, the domestication of dogs took place in pre-Neolithic times and with the exception of a few isolated areas the dog has accompanied humans everywhere. We find 'dog' as the only term referring to a domesticated animal on the 100-word Swadesh list of "basic vocabulary", together with other lexical items believed to be universally resistant to replacement by borrowing or word coinage.<sup>1</sup> Indeed, a Proto-Indo-European term for 'dog', \**k(u)wōn* (gen. \**kunós*) is securely reconstructible. But it should also be noted that in several lineages of the Indo-European family the inherited word has been replaced by innovations. Well-known examples include Slavic \**pъsъ*, East Slavic *sobaka*, Modern Irish *madra*, East-

<sup>1</sup> But cf. Lass (1997: 184–190) on the general weakness of constraints on borrowability.

ern Iranian \**kuta-* ~ \**kutī-* and Spanish *perro*, not all of them with known etymologies. Even the origin of Lat. *canis* is far from clear, and while it seems certain that PGmc. \**xundaz* goes back to pre-Gmc. \**kwn̥tós*, the \*-t- "extension" has not been adequately explained.<sup>2</sup> English is unique among the Germanic languages in that it has developed a synonym that has supplanted the inherited Germanic word as the normal generic term for 'dog' (Mod.E. *hound* refers primarily to various breeds of hunting dogs). The first and only attestation of this innovation in written Old English occurs in one of the OE. glosses to Prudentius' "Psychomachia" (dated at ca. 1050), where gen.pl. *docgena* translates Lat. *canum*.<sup>3</sup> This, together with a couple of early place-names (*on doggene ford*, *on doggeneberwe*, cf. Smith 1956: 134) is the basis for reconstructing (late) OE. nom.sg. \**docga*, i.e., a masculine weak stem. The word has no obvious cognates outside English. If it is a loan, it has not been traced back to an identifiable source, Germanic, Celtic or Latinate. Its late attestation and its original restriction to English rule out borrowing from a lost pre-Germanic substrate.<sup>4</sup> It seems, therefore, that the word originated within Old English, but, strangely enough, it does not appear to be a transparently derived word, as if it had been coined *ex nihilo*.

### 2. \*Docga vs. hund

Beyond the fact that \**docga* must have been roughly synonymous with *hund*, its precise semantic value in Old English can hardly be determined on the basis of a *hapax legomenon*. The word re-appears as *dogge* in Middle English texts ca. 1200 ("Ancrene Riwe"), and becomes common after 1300. Throughout the Middle English period *dogge* (occasionally spelt *dog* and no longer inflected like a weak noun) remained slightly less frequent and more specialised than *h(o)und*. The Middle English Dictionary (MED) notes that "[i]n early ME **dogge** is usually deprecatory or abusive". In fact, the examples of use cited in the MED show that it retained its deprecatory value in

<sup>2</sup> Unless Olsen (2004: 222) is right about \**k̥wont-* being the original shape of the stem.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. the relevant entry in Toller (1921).

<sup>4</sup> That is, what Lass (1997: 209) calls *etymologia ex silentio*.



late Middle English as well: we find it accompanied by such adjectives as *wed* 'mad, demented', *luper* 'trecherous, wicked', *felle* 'fierce, terrible', *unchast*, or *lousy*, or compounded with *curre* 'cur' (thought to be related to ON. *kurra* 'snarl'). Both *dogge* and *hound* could be employed as terms of abuse ('a despicable person'), but *dogge* was definitely rarer as a stylistically neutral word. In John of Trevisa's 1398 translation of Bartholomew de Glanville's "De proprietatibus rerum" (quoted in the MED), an explicit distinction is drawn between them, and a common *dogge* is stereotypically characterised as heavier and shaggier than a well-bred *hound*: "A gentil hounde [Lat. *canis nobilis*] ... haþ lasse gleissh þan a dogge [Lat. *canes rurales*] and schorter here and more þynne."

*Dogge*, like *hound*, was used in surnames and place-names already in early Middle English, but it was only in the 15<sup>th</sup> century that *dog(ge)* began to replace *hound* in compounds such as *dogge-fish* 'dogfish, small shark' for earlier *hund(es)-fish* or *dog(ges)-tonge* beside *houndes-tonge* (OE. *hundes-tunge*) 'hound's-tongue, dog's-tongue, *Cynoglossum officinale*'. This can be taken as clear indication that the lexeme *dogge* was taking over the original functions of *hound*. Judging from the relevant entries in the Oxford English Dictionary (OED), compounds with *dog-* rather than *hound-* (*dog-rose*, *dog-star*, etc.) became the norm already in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. By that time *dog* had practically supplanted *hound* as the neutral term for the domesticated dog.

Another characteristic sense in which ME. *dogge* was used is defined in the MED as 'a dog used in hunting or bearbaiting; ... a watch-dog; ... a herdsman's dog'. This squares well with other evidence suggesting that "dogges" tended to be perceived as large and heavy as well as fierce and malicious (hence the adjective *dogged* and the adverb *doggedly*, used since the 13<sup>th</sup> century). The word *dog(ge)* has been borrowed from English into numerous other languages as a specialised term for large breeds of dogs: Ger. *Dogge* 'mastiff', *deutsche Dogge* 'great Dane', Fr. *dogue* and Sp. *dogo* for various heavyweight breeds, Pol. *dog* 'great Dane', etc. As the OED points out, such words are attested from the 16<sup>th</sup> c. onwards and their earliest occurrences are usually accompanied by the attribute "English" (*le genereux dogue anglaise*, *englische dock(e)*, etc.). If any inferences concerning OE. *\*docga* may be drawn from the later senses of the word, the prototypical *\*docga* may have referred to any of the sturdy, thickset breeds kept

in Anglo-Saxon England, similar in appearance to modern mastiffs and bulldogs.

### 3. The form of OE. *\*docga*

Let us now examine those formal properties of the OE. *\*docga* that might throw some light on its etymology. The first conspicuous feature is the unusual medial geminate, *-cg-* (= *gg-*, i.e. /γγ/ or /gg/, pronounced as [gg] no matter which phonemic analysis one prefers).<sup>5</sup> A convenient checklist of Old English lexemes with this geminate (including actually attested words and forms reconstructed from indirect evidence) can be found in Hogg (1982). One of the three sets into which Hogg divides his data consists of names of animals, all of them masculine weak nouns. Apart from *\*docga*, the set contains *frogga* 'frog', *\*picga* 'pig', *\*stacga* 'stag, male deer', *sucga* 'hedge-sparrow, *Prunella modularis*' (or some similar bird), *\*tacga* ~ *\*tecga* 'young sheep' and (ēar-) *wicga* 'earwig'.<sup>6</sup> Nearly all of them present various etymological problems, the only relatively clear case being *frogga*, which is certainly related to OE. *frox* ~ *forse* (a Germanic word, further related to ON. *froskr* and OHG. *forsk*). The trouble with the medial *-cg-* is that it cannot have been created by any of the regular sound changes that generated early Germanic geminates (cf. Cser 1994). Nasal assimilation, which produced geminated stops from stop plus nasal combinations after a short vowel (as in PIE. *\*liĝh-nā-* > PGmc. *\*likkan-* 'lick') always yielded voiceless geminates. The West Germanic gemination before *\*-j-* (as in PIE. *\*legʰ-je/o-* > PGmc. *\*liγ-jan-* > OE. *licġan* 'lie, recline') could not produce velar [gg]. Finally, the West Germanic and specifically Old English geminations before liquids (as in *bet(e)ra* > *bettra* 'better') did not affect the ancestor of OE. *g*, and the conditioning factor (the liquid) was never lost.

Some of the *-cg-* words may be loanwords, especially from Old Norse.<sup>7</sup> However, *frogga* is known not to be one of them; nor is there a

<sup>5</sup> See Hogg (1992: 42–43).

<sup>6</sup> OE. *\*bagga* 'badger', reconstructed on the basis of toponymic evidence (cf. Hough 2001: 1), may be added to this list.

<sup>7</sup> See Danchev (1995) for a comprehensive diachronic treatment of "final /g/" in English, which covers the *-cg-* ~ *-gg-* words.



known Scandinavian prototype of *docga*. To explain the form of such words, one has to look for a possible source of gemination within Old English. The only possibility that remains is expressive gemination of the kind that we often find in hypocoristic words (frequently, but not exclusively, proper names). As noted by Kurylowicz (1968), gemination is often found in truncated pet-forms of full names – not only in Germanic but also, for example, in Latin, Greek and Celtic, cf. Gaulish *Epoedorix* → *Eppo*. Truncation does not respect morphological boundaries or the etymological structure of a compound, so that we get not only OE. *Totta* ← *Torht-helm* but also *Beoffa* ← *Beornfriþ* (Clark 1992: 460). It also results in loss of information: OE. *Eadda* or OHG. *Otto* may represent the abbreviation of any dithematic Germanic names with *\*auða-* as the first element.<sup>8</sup> Gemination may also occur without truncation, as in Lat. *Iuppiter* < PIE. voc. *\*dieu pə<sub>2</sub>ter* (Kurylowicz 1968: 177) or in Old English monothematic nicknames like *Blæcca* (from the common adjective *blæc* ‘black(-haired man)’ (Clark 1992: 460).

Another characteristic feature of Germanic hypocorisms (with parallels in other branches of Indo-European) is the use of nasal-stem (“weak”) endings. Truncation or gemination, or both, often occur together with weak inflections, as in *Totta* or *Eadda*. These features are not restricted to nicknames or pet versions of personal names; they can be found e.g. in nursery words adopted as regular kinship terms (such as Goth. *atta* ‘father’) or in common nouns that may have been diminutives originally, e.g. *frogga* ← *frox* /froks/.<sup>9</sup> The last example shows that geminated /γγ/ [gg] may correspond to /ks/ in the base form. As the latter goes back to earlier /xs/ (with a velar fricative), and as the contrast between PGmc. *\*x* and *\*γ* was neutralised in pre-consonantal and final positions in Old English, it is easy to see how /γγ/ may have been derived from *\*xs* (treated like /γ/ + /s/). It is worth noting that OE. /o/, the lowered reflex of PGmc. *\*u*, is favoured before historical *\*xs*. We find it, for example, in OE. *fox* (as opposed to *\*fuks-in-* > OE. *\*fyxen* > *vixen*), *lox* ‘lynx’ and *oxa*. In *frogga*, the

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Mod.E. *Ed*, *Eddie*.

<sup>9</sup> If, as seems likely, such words belonged to the “demotic” register, their rarity in Old English texts may be misleading. Indeed, they seem to have been quite common as onomastic elements.

stressed vowel of the hypocoristic derivative echoes the quality of the vowel of the base, in contrast to *sucga*, which possibly derives from a word with *u* or *ū*.<sup>10</sup>

#### 4. The derivation

To sum up, the form of *\*docga* suggests a typical Old English hypocorism derived from something like /doγ-/ or /dox(C)-/, or perhaps even /doRxC-/ (cf. the case of *Totta*), where R is a liquid and C is an obstruent. One can furthermore assume that the base is not a feminine noun (thereby eliminating *dohtor*, for example). Practically the only word that fits the bill is the sparsely attested colour adjective *dox* (~ *dohx*), whose pre-metathetic counterpart *\*dusc* is reflected as *dusk* ‘dim, darkcoloured, dull’ in Middle English.<sup>11</sup> As is often the case with Old English colour terms, the focal meaning and the connotations of *dox* may have been rather different from the later meanings and connotations of *dusk*. The hints provided by the two Old English glosses that contain the adjective (both quoted in Toller 1921) are somewhat confusing. OE. *dohx* translates Lat. *furva* ‘dark, dusky, gloomy; swarthy, black’ in an Aldhelm gloss (Logeman 1891).<sup>12</sup> But the other equivalence (Wright-Wülker 1884, II: 149.21) is between Lat. *flava specie* and OE. *of glæteriendum vel scylfrum hīwe vel doxum*, where *dox* is given as a near-synonym of two other Old English terms meaning, approximately, ‘shining’ and ‘yellow, golden’; together they translate Lat. *flāvus* ‘golden-yellow, reddish-yellow, flaxen-coloured’. A less specific sense such as ‘yellowish-brown’, perhaps referring to saturation, brightness and textural features rather than just a particular hue,<sup>13</sup> might reconcile the apparent contradiction between the im-

<sup>10</sup> Although *tux* ‘tusk’ (from *tusc*, with metathesis) looks like a counterexample, it derives from *\*tūsk* < *\*tun(p)-ska-*, and the pre-cluster shortening of Ingvaenic *\*ū* in this word may well be later than the lowering of *\*u*.

<sup>11</sup> From PGmc. *\*duska-*, cognate to Lat. *fuscus* and ultimately related to Lat. *furvus* and probably OE. *dun* if *\*dunna-* < PGmc. *\*dūzna-*.

<sup>12</sup> Lat. *furvum* is glossed as *bruun* (*brūn*) in the Épinal/Erfurt Gloss. 433 (Pheifer 1974).

<sup>13</sup> See Barley (1974).



plications of the two glosses.<sup>14</sup> Finally, the related verb *doxap* (3sg. of \**doxian*) occurs in the Vercelli Homilies (4.291) with the probable meaning of 'turn purplish yellow (the colour of a bruise)'.<sup>15</sup>

If one imagines a fawn or brindle dog with a dark mask (the typical colours of a mastiff, for example) *dox* seems to be appropriate enough as a descriptive adjective. *Docga* would then be a hypocoristic epithet (exactly like *Blæcca*), formally an abbreviation of \**dox hund*. One may compare it to \**pocca* '(male) fallow deer', reconstructed by Hough (2001) on the basis of English toponyms and claimed by Hough to be related to OE. *pocc* 'spot'. Other terms for species or breeds of animals can be formed in a similar way, also in Modern English and other languages. Suffice it to mention *grizzly* ← *grizzly bear* and *tabby* ← *tabby cat*.<sup>16</sup> In the latter case *tabby* has completely lost its original descriptive value<sup>17</sup> when it refers to 'any female domesticated cat'.<sup>18</sup> Note also the neatly parallel example of Polish *burek*, a "demotic" term for 'mongrel, cur' (e.g. a farmyard watchdog), derived from the colour adjective *bury* 'brownish-grey, dun'.<sup>19</sup>

### 5. Further remarks and conclusion

It would be interesting to see if Old English offers any further parallels to the pattern established by *frox* : *frogga* and *dox* : \**docga*, as the existence of other such pairs would buttress up the etymology proposed here. I would like to suggest that the Old English proper name \**Focga*, reconstructed on the basis of place-names such as *focgan*

<sup>14</sup> Cf. the frequent use of OE. *brūn* in poetic descriptions of gleaming objects and of *sweart* in descriptions of fire. Conventional modern glosses (such as 'brown' and 'black') fail to convey the Old English connotations of these and other colour terms.

<sup>15</sup> Thus in Scragg (1992: 423), who corrects the earlier definition ('become dark-coloured') found e.g. in Toller (1921).

<sup>16</sup> According to the OED, the earliest attestation of *tabby cat* is from 1695, and that of the abbreviation *tabby* from 1774.

<sup>17</sup> '[B]rownish, tawny or grey colour, marked with darker parallel stripes or streaks' (OED).

<sup>18</sup> The OED attributes this association of *tabby* with female cats to its secondary (folk-etymological) identification with the proper name *Tabby*, a pet form of *Tabitha*.

<sup>19</sup> Also *Burek*, a common name for a common dog.

*crundel* (Smith 1956: 179), is a hypocoristic variant of *fox*. As far as I know, such an interpretation has not been proposed before, and the name is generally regarded as connected with the reconstructed common noun \**fogga* 'aftermath, second grow of grass', the ancestor of ME./Mod.E. *fog*. The connection is questionable, however: first, because *fog* is probably a Scandinavian loan (Nor. *fogg* 'tall grass', cf. Smith 1956: 179, Hogg 1982: 196); secondly, because a word with the meaning of 'grass' or 'aftermath' makes a far less likely Old English personal name or nickname than one meaning 'fox', cf. such attested personal names as *Horsa*, *Crāwa* 'crow', *Bucca* 'he-goat', *Catta*, etc. It seems impossible to prove directly that \**focga* ← *fox*: English place-names such as *Foxwist Green*, Ch., or *Foxearth*, Ess., refer to foxholes and therefore unambiguously to foxes (Smith 1956: 186), but collocations involving a personal name do not reveal its etymology in this way. However, it is my contention that the etymology of \**Focga* suggested here makes more sense than any other proposed so far, and that the pairs *dox* : \**docga* and *fox* : \**focga* reinforce each other's plausibility.

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