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INDICE

Concetta Giliberto, <i>OE blēo, bleoh: the 'bright' colour</i>	5
Gerardo Larghi, <i>Ancora sul Lai de Milun di Maria di Francia</i>	19
Margherita Lecco, «Ce li pleroit molt a oïr» (v. 13). <i>Merveilleux e prospettive storiche in Claris et Laris</i>	51
Mikael Meuller Males, <i>The Dating of Bragi's Poetry</i>	63

OE *blēo*, *bleoh*: the ‘bright’ colour

ABSTRACT: In Old English, one of the words for ‘colour, dye’ is *blēo* (alternatively spelled *bleoh*, *blīo*, *blioh*), also used in the sense of ‘face colour, complexion’, and maybe deriving from PGmc **bliwa-* < IE **bhli-*, *bhlei-*, *bhlai-*, a root meaning ‘to shine’. The term, which continues in MEngl *blē* ‘colour, hue; appearance, guise’, is cognate with Ofris *bli*, *blie*, OS *blī* ‘colour, hue’ and MDu *blie*, *blye* ‘face colour’. Through the analysis of the occurrences of OE *blēo*, the contribute aims at investigating the semantic spectrum of the word, also in relation to its contexts of use and in comparison with the other Germanic cognate forms, particularly with the North Sea Germanic ones. After the Middle English period, the word falls into disuse, eventually being supplanted by the Anglo-Norman loan *colur*. Modern English *blee* survives as an archaic form, used quite rarely, mostly in poetic contexts.

ABSTRACT: In inglese antico, una delle parole per ‘colore, tinta’ è *blēo* (attestata anche nelle forme *bleoh*, *blīo*, *blioh*), usata anche nel senso di ‘colore del viso, carnagione’. La voce ags. *blēo* è forse riconducibile a un germ. **bliwa-* < ie. **bhli-*, *bhlei-*, *bhlai-*, radice che vale ‘splendere’. Il termine, che continua in mingl. *blē* ‘colore, tonalità; aspetto’, si confronta con afris. *bli*, *blie*, as. *blī* ‘colore, tonalità’ e med. ned. *blie*, *blye* ‘colore del viso’. Attraverso l’analisi delle occorrenze di ags. *blēo*, il contributo si propone di esplorare lo spettro semantico della parola, anche in relazione ai suoi contesti d’uso e alla luce del confronto con le altre forme parallele germaniche, in particolare con quelle di area Ingevene. Dopo il periodo del medio inglese, la parola cade in disuso, venendo infine soppiantata dal prestito anglo-normanno *colur*. Il termine dell’inglese moderno *blee* sopravvive come forma arcaica, usata assai raramente e soprattutto in contesti poetici.

KEYWORDS: Old English, colour names, *blēo*, noun modification, adjective

PAROLE-CHIAVE: inglese antico, nomi di colore, *blēo*, modificazione nominale, aggettivo

1. Introduction

The Old English word *blēo* (attested in a wide range of spellings, including *bleoh*, *blīo*, *blioh*) has usually the general sense of ‘colour, hue’,¹ but it also occurs with the meaning ‘aspect, appearance, form, shape, complexion’ (see *DOE*, s.v. *blēo*). The word, which continues in ME *blē* ‘colour, hue; appearance, guise’, has cognates in other West Germanic languages: OFris *blī*, *blie* ‘colour, form, appearance’, OS *blī* ‘colour, hue’, MDu *blie*, *blye* ‘face colour’.

As far as the etymology is concerned, OE *blēo* is possibly derived from PGmc **blīwa-* ‘coloured; beautiful’, a root with a more generic meaning indicating the complexion, the appearance of the skin, especially of the face.² Ultimately PGmc **blīwa-* may stem from IE **bhli-uo*, an extension of IE **bhel-* ‘to shine, flash, burn’, and also ‘shining, white’ (Pokorny 1959: 118-120).³ It is plausible that IE **bhel-* ‘shine’ (in its various by-forms **bhli-*, *bhlēi-*, *bhlai-*, Pokorny 1959: 155-156) denoted, in the first place, an intense degree of luminosity, which in turn could be used to derive either words for bright colours or for dark colours (Giacalone Ramat 1967: 188-189).

This should not surprise us, since for a long time, the most important features used to distinguish and define a colour were brightness and saturation. With reference to the scientific description of the chromatic system, the classification of colours is generally based on a set of parameters, of which three have proved to be particularly relevant for linguistic studies: hue, or tint, which denotes the colour commonly understood and perceived with a single band of wavelength in the visible spectrum of light; saturation, which refers to the degree of purity or intensity of a given colour; brightness, concerning the amount of light which appears to shine from something (Grossmann 1988: 4-5; Biggam 1997: 15-16; Biggam 2012: 3-5). Among the most ancient civilizations it was the dimension of luminosity and radiance that had greater prominence rather than that of hue, as is

¹ Along with the word *blēo* (and its various graphic variants), in the Old English *corpus* the following terms for ‘colour’ are also recorded: *dēag* ‘hue, tinge’, mainly used in the glosses to render a Latin name of a particular colour or dye, and *hiw* (alternative forms *hēow*, *hīew*, *hīow*) ‘hue, colour’ and ‘appearance, form, shape, figure’ (cf. *DOE*). Clark Hall’s *Concise Anglo-Saxon Dictionary* has also the entries «lit colour, dye» (1960: 220) and «telg (æ) m. dye, colour, tincture» (1960: 338).

² This is usually compared with Goth. *bleiþs* ‘kind-hearted, merciful’, ON *blīðr* ‘gentle, mild’, OE *blīðe* ‘joyful, glad, merry’, OS *blīthi* ‘shining, light’, OHG *blīdi* ‘merry, glad’ < PGmc **blīþ(j)az* (< IE **bhlei-tio-* or **bhli-tio-* ‘light, cheerful (of the sky, then of the face expression, the mood), happy’: Pokorny 1959: 155-156 and Orel 2003: 49).

³ It is interesting to observe that IE **bhel-* is the same root from which the Germanic languages derive the word for ‘blue’. OE *blāhāwen* (also spelled *blāwen*) ‘some shade of blue’, OHG *blāo*, *plāo* ‘blue, dark, grey’, ON *blár* ‘blueish, dark blue’, OFris *blāw* ‘blue’ (also spelled *blau*) stem from PGmc **blāwa-*, *blāwaz*, which in turn descends from IE **bhle-uo-s* ‘light, clear, bright, yellow, blond’ (cf. lat. *flavus* ‘golden yellow, blond’, and OIr. *blá* ‘yellow’, cf. Pokorny 1959: 160; Kroonen 2013: s.v. *blēwa-*), a form eventually going back to IE **bhel-* (Pokorny 1959: 118-120).

the case today (MacLaury *et al.* 1992). The early medieval English world is not an exception in this sense, as the colour vocabulary seems to confirm (Lerner 1951; Cameron 1968; Barley 1974; Matschi 2004). A significant example is represented by the passage of the *Phoenix* in which the appearance of the mythical bird is described:

ond þæt nebb lixeð
 swa glæs oþþe gim, geaflas scyne
 innan ond utan. Is seo eagebyrd
 stearc ond hiwe stane gelicast,
 gladum gimme, þonne in goldfate
 smiþa orþoncum biseted weorþeð.
 Is ymb þone sweoran, swylce sunnan hring,
 beaga beorhtast brogden feðrum.
 Wrætlic is seo womb neoþan, wundrum fæger,
 scir ond scyne. (*The Phoenix*, lines 299b-308a, ed. Krapp–Dobbie 1936: 102)

[And the beak gleams like glass or gemstone, its jaws sparkle within and without. The nature of its eye is strong and in hue like a stone, a brilliant gem when it is set into a golden vessel by the skill of smiths. About its neck, like a ring of sunlight, the brightest bracelet of feathers is woven. Wonderful is its belly beneath, wondrously fair, shining and beautiful.]⁴

The fabulous creature is here depicted in all its splendour, with a beak gleaming like a jewel, bright jaws and feathers brilliant like the sunshine. Along with the variety of hues that characterize its plumage, there is a marked insistence on the elements of brightness and shininess.

Starting from these premises, I shall now examine the occurrences of OE *blēo*, with the purpose to recognize, whenever possible, the associations with the notion of brilliance already inherent in its etymology and to shed new light on how the semantic flexibility of this word acts to express a variety of meanings in the various literary contexts.

2. The occurrences of OE *blēo*

The word *blēo* occurs about seventy times in the Old English *corpus*, in most cases with the indisputable meaning of 'colour'. In the Old English glossarial production, the term is used to render Lat. *color*, as in the entries «color *blio*», found in the glosses to the Book of Proverbs (Zupitza 1877: 38,910).⁵ The item «color *bleoð*», recorded in the Antwerp-London Glossary (Porter 2011: 103,2001), occurs in a heterogeneous section entitled *Omnia nomina tritici sunt*, particularly in a list of words pertaining to anatomy, along with other terms for specific colours (cf. *infra*).

⁴ All translation from Old English are mine, unless otherwise noted.

⁵ From the Book of Proverbs XXIII.31 «ne intuearis vinum quando flavescit cum splenduerit in vitro color eius» (Weber 2007).

The term also translates Lat. *chroma* in the interlinear glosses to the third Book of Abbo of Saint-Germain-des-Prés's *Bella Parisiaca urbis*, preserved in ms. London, British Library, Harley 3271, f. 118v: «cromam *bleoh*» (Stevenson–Lindsay 1929: 104,2).

The association of OE *blēo* with the meaning ‘colour’ is as well confirmed by the following occurrences: «concolor *anes bleos*» (‘of the same colour’) in Ælfric’s *Grammar* (Zupitza 1880: 47,16), «unicolor *anes bleos*» (‘one colour, monochrome’) in the Antwerp-London Glossary (Porter 2011: 103,2009), «bistinctus *twegra bleo*» (‘twice dyed; dyed in two colours’) in the Harley Glossary (Oliphant 1966: B 264), «discolor *mislic bleo*» (‘of different colours, variegated’) in the Antwerp-London Glossary (Porter 2011: 103,2010).

In a few instances, OE *blēo* is used to translate the name of a specific colour: «fucorum *bleohga*» (‘red or purple dye’) in the interlinear glosses to Aldhelm’s prose *De virginitate* (Napier 1900: 138, 5495),⁶ and «blauum. color est uestis *bleo*» (‘blue, azure; blue cloth’) in the Harley Glossary (Oliphant 1966: B 474). Since the words for ‘red’ and ‘blue’ are indeed attested in the Old English *corpus*, it is not clear the reason why, in these occurrences, the Latin *lemmata* are rendered by OE *blēo*. One can imagine that the glossator did not recognize the Latin word to be translated and therefore opted for a generic term, although for the entry in the Harley Glossary the phonemic similarity between *blēo* and *blāwen* ‘blue’ – due to the same etymological origin (cf. note 3) – could have encouraged the misunderstanding.

Apart from the glosses, OE *blēo* is also recorded in a number of literary texts where it is usually employed to describe natural elements, plants, minerals, animals. In all these occurrences the term has the meaning ‘colour’, which, indeed, seems to be confirmed by the Latin sources of some of these texts, as in the following passages drawn from the *Old English Herbarium*:⁷

LI. Ðeos wyr̥t þe man gry̥as 7 oðrum naman mædere nemneð byð cenned / fyrmust in Lucania, heo hæfð hwites marman **bleoh** 7 heo bið gefrætewud mid feower readum stælum. (De Vriend 1984: 96)

[This herb which is called *gryas* and by another name *mædere* [madder] and grows originally in Lucania, it has a white marble colour and it is adorned with four red stems.]⁸

CXXXIV. Ðeos wyr̥t ðe man action [...] nemneð [...] hafað wið þone wyr̥ttruman greatne stelan

⁶ «venustum pudicitiae vultum componens diversis virtutum coloribus quasi fucorum floribus depinxi» (Ehwald 1919: 321,21-22).

⁷ The *Old English Herbarium* is here cited from the edition of De Vriend (1984). I was not able to consult the most recent edition and translation of Niles–D’Aronco (2023) before the submission of the present contribution.

⁸ The Latin source has the following text: «Herba grias. Nascitur in Lucania, marmoris albi colorem habet, quattuor rubicundis ornata coliculis.» (De Vriend 1984: 97).

[...] 7 heo hafað on ufewardon þam stelan sæd ðistelegelic, ac hyt byð smælre 7 read on **bleo**. (De Vriend 1984: 174)

[This herb which is called *action* [...] has from the root a thick stalk [...] and at the upper part of the stalk it has a seed like a thistle, but it is thinner and of red colour.]⁹

CLVIII. Ðeos wurt [...] is gecweden iris Illyrica of ðære misenlicnysses hyre blostmæna, for þy þe ys geðuht þæt heo þone heofonlican bogan mid hyre **bleo** geefenlæce se is on Leden iris gecweden; 7 heo on Illyrico þam lande swiðost 7 strengost wexeþ [...]. (De Vriend 1984: 200)

[This herb [...] is called iris Illyrica from the variety of its flowers, since it is thought that its colour is equal to that of the celestial arc, which in Latin is called iris, and the greatest and most valuable quantity grows in the land of Illyricum.]¹⁰

The last passage of the *Old English Herbarium* is particularly significant for the present study, as it attributes to iris flowers a variety of colours comparable to that of the rainbow, hence his name. Already Dioscorides in his Περὶ ὕλης ἰατρικῆς (*On Medical Material* I.i.1-3) spoke of flowers of different colours, alluding to the various Iridaceae species; likewise Plinius writes that the name of this plant is linked to that of the iris, since «flore versicolori specie, sicut arcus caelestis, unde et nomen» (*Naturalis historia* XXI. xix.40-42), as well as Isidor, that says «Iris Illyrica a similitudine Iris caelestis nomen accepit» (*Etymologiae* XVII.ix.9) (cf. Lendinara 2013).

In the Old English Version of the *Heptateuch* (Crawford 1922: 310), the passage which describes the manna reads: «swa hi heton þone heofonlican mete þe hi God mid fedde; þæt wæs swilce coriandran sæd, hwites **bleos** swa cristalla» (so they call the celestial food with which God fed them; that was such coriander seed, of white colour like crystal).¹¹

In a number of instances, OE *blēo* is combined with the verbs *wendan*, *wrixlan* or *bregdan* to express the idea of the change of colour or appearance, as in the *The dream of the Rood* (lines 21b-22a, ed. Krapp 1932a: 61): «Geseah ic þæt fuse beacen / **wendan** wædum ond **bleom**» (I saw that iridescent sign changing garments and colours), or in *Elene* (lines 757b-758b, ed. Krapp 1932a: 87): «heardecg cwacaþ, beofaþ brogdenmæl, ond **bleom wrixleð**» (the hard blade vibrates, the veined sword trembles and changes colour).

The concept of colour as brightness is evident in the allegorical poem *The Panther* –

⁹ The Latin source has the following text: «Herba actionum. Folia habet similia cucurbitae sed maiora et duriora et prope radicem densam caulem longum duobus digitis, in capite caliculos in quibus semen cardis simile et angustius, colore rufo.» (De Vriend 1984: 175).

¹⁰ The Latin source has the following text: «De iride. Iris Illyrica a coelestis arcus similitudine nomen accepit [...]» (De Vriend 1984: 201).

¹¹ From the Book of Numbers XI.7: «erat autem man, quasi semen coriandri coloris bdelli» (Weber 2007).

the first section of the *Old English Physiologus* – where the animal, which is a symbol of Christ, is portrayed as a marvellous creature, kind to all beasts (save the dragon, symbol of Satan), and with a multi-coloured coat, reminiscent of Joseph’s tunic for its beauty and splendour:

Ðæt is wrætlic dēor, wundrum scyne
 hiwa gehwylces; swa hæleð secgað,
 gæsthalge guman, þætte Iosephes
 tunece wære telga gehwylces
bleom bregdende, þara beorhtra gehwylc
 æghwæs ænlicra oþrum lixte
 dryhta bearnum, swa þæs deores hiw,
 blæc brigda gehwæs, beorhtra and scynra
 wundrum lixeð, þætte wrætlicra
 æghwylc oþrum, ænlicra gien
 and fægerra, frætsum bliceð,
 symle sellicra. (*The Panther*, lines 19a-30a, ed. Krapp–Dobbie 1936: 169-170)

[This is a wondrous animal, which marvellously shines with all its colours. So men, those holy in spirit, say it was Joseph’s tunic, iridescent of colours of every gradation, each of which, more brilliant and more excellent than the others, shone among the children of men; just like the beast’s hue splendidly shines, glittering with every variety of colour gradation, brighter and more beautiful, so that each sparkles more admirable, more excellent and fair than the others, in its beauty ever more amazing.]

This passage, built on the allegorical association between the colourful beauty of the panther’s coat and the variety of colours of Joseph’s tunic (a biblical motif found in various versions of the *Physiologus*), insists strongly on the overlap between the perception of colour and that of brightness, still preponderant in early medieval England. The lexicon, quite varied and rich in synonyms, plays on the iridescence of the gradations and their brilliance; and beauty coincides with splendour and luminosity, much more than with hue, as well as the colours stand out for their lustre rather than for their chromatic varieties, which are still only partially perceived in this historical phase.

The category of colour plays a role in the various representations of the soul found in the homiletic tradition. In the sermon on the Nativity of Christ, Ælfric (Skeat 1881: I, 20), emphasizing the immaterial character of the soul, asserts that «Heo is ungesæwenlic and unlichomlic, butan hæfe and butan **bleo**» (it is invisible and incorporeal, without weight and without colour). Ælfric’s doctrine drastically contrasts with the portrayals of the corporealized and concrete soul provided in the anonymous vernacular homilies (Lockett 2011: 412).¹²

¹² The main source of Ælfric’s view of human soul, meant as an ethereal entity and imperceptible to the senses, is Alcuin’s *De ratione animae*, a work which must have enjoyed a considerable circulation in early medieval England.

In the fourth Vercelli homily, a sermon of eschatological content, OE *blēo* occurs once again with reference to the nature of the human body and soul, reflecting their merits and faults. The homily shows a reworking of the discourse of the soul to the body, one of the most widespread eschatological motifs in the medieval literary traditions.¹³ The narrator describes first the reunion on Doomsday of the soul and body of a good man, then the reunion of the soul and body of a wicked man. When entering heaven, the blessed soul addresses to its body, praising for its good works and virtues. The homilist then dwells on the metamorphosis undergone by the body, which transforms from dead flesh into a shining beacon of light:

þonne bryt se lichoma on manigfealdum **bleon**; ærest he bið on medmicles mannes hiwe, þonne æt nehstan on þam fægerestan manes hiwe; swa æt nehstan þæt he þara wyrta fægernesse, lilian 7 rosan, 7 þonne swa forð þæt he hæfð gelic hiw golde 7 scolfre 7 swa þam deorwyrðestan gymcynne 7 eorcnanstanum; 7 æt nehstan þæt he glitenað swa steorra, 7 lyht swa mone, 7 beorhtaþ swa sunne þonne hio biorhtust bið scinende. (Scragg 1992: 96)

[Then the body breaks into manifold colours; at first he will have the colour of a small man, then next [he has] the colour of the fairest man; then next he has the beauty of flowers, lilies and roses, and then so forth, so that he has a shape [or ‘colour’] like gold and silver, and also the most precious kind of gems and precious stones; and then it shines like stars, and it glows like the moon, and it sparkles like the sun when it shines brightest.]

As can be observed, the body of the virtuous man assumes ever more brilliant colours until it becomes luminous like the sun when it is at its brightest.

Conversely, the evil soul harshly reproaches its body, going through all the sins of which it is guilty, irretrievably condemning both to eternal damnation. The corpse experiences a macabre transformation from discoloured flesh to a coal-black being, a change that also reverberates in the soul itself:

Men þa leofestan, þonne stent ðæt deade flæsc aswornod, 7 ne mæg andwyrde syllan þam his gaste, 7 swiðe laðlicum swate, 7 him feallað of unfægere dropan, 7 bryt on manig hiw. Hwilum he bið swæt swiðe laðlicum men gelic, þonne wannað he 7 doxaþ; oðre hwile he bið blæc 7 æhiwe; hwilum he bið collsweart. Ond gelice sio sawl hiwað on yfel **bleoh** swa same swa se lichoma, 7 bið gyt wyrstan hiwes. 7 standað butu swiðe forhte 7 bifigende onbidað domes. (Scragg 1992: 101-102)

[Dearly beloved, then the dead flesh stands confounded and may give no answer to his soul, and he oozes a very loathsome fluid, and horrid drops fall from him, and he breaks into many forms. Some-

¹³ The origin of the theme of the address of the soul to the body probably dates back to the first centuries of the Christian era. The form of the dialogue, characterised by aggressive and vehement tones, makes its appearance not before the twelfth century. For an overview of the legend of the soul’s speech to the body, see, among others: Batiouchkof (1891), Bossy (1976), Boitani–Torti (1999). The motif finds a particular development in early medieval England in the poems *Soul and body I* and *Soul and body II*, contained respectively in the Vercelli Book and in the Exeter Book, cf. Moffat 1990. On the dissemination of the theme in medieval English literature, cf. Cataldi 2018, to which one can refer for further bibliographic references.

times he is like a very disgusting man, then he turns discoloured and dark; sometimes he is black and colourless; sometimes he is coal-black. And likewise, the soul transforms into an evil colour, in the same way as the body, and it is still of worse shape. And they both stand very scared and, trembling, they await judgment.]

In these passages – where the emphasis is on the description of the changes that both the virtuous and the evil body undergo when addressed by their respective souls¹⁴ – OE *blēo* is semantically ambiguous, since it expresses the concept of ‘colour’, but at the same time it can also be interpreted as ‘aspect, form, shape’.

Borderline cases like this, in which the interference between the two levels of meaning is evident, are scattered in the Old English *corpus*. In the wisdom poem *Solomon and Saturn*, in the dialogue dealing with the charismatic qualities of the *Pater Noster*, a formidable ‘prayer-weapon’ to combat the devil, OE *blēo* occurs with the meaning ‘form, shape’:

mæg simle se godes cwīde gumena gehwylcum
ealra feonda gehwane fleondne gebrengan
ðurh mannes muð, manfulra heap
sweartne geswencan, næfre hie ðæs syllice
bleom bregdað, æfter bancofan
feðerhoman onfoð. (*Solomon and Saturn I*, lines 146a-151a, ed. Dobbie 1942: 37)

[The God’s word [the *Pater Noster*] always may, for every man, put to flight each and every demon, through the mouth of a man, it may oppress the army of evil ones, the black ones, never can they so wonderfully change shape [or colours] after they put a feather-coat on the body.]

The passage refers to the ability attributed to the devil to change his appearance to deceive man, and which the power of the *Pater Noster* can defeat («næfre hie ðæs syllice **bleom** bregdað») (cf. Fox 2009: 134-135).

A comparison can also be made with the shape-changing of the demons in *Guthlac B*, which – during their assaults against the saint – take on the appearance of wild animals, humans and dragons (cf. Dendle 2002: 104-114 and Whitenack 2019: 111). Again, the word *blēo* occurs here to denote the various forms assumed by the evil spirits:

Hwilum wedende swa wilde deor
cirmdon on corðre, hwilum cyrdon eft
minne mansceaþan on mennisc hiw
breahtma maeste, hwilum brugdon eft
awyrgde wærlogan on wyrmes **bleo** (*Guthlac B*, lines 907-911, ed. Roberts 1979: 110)

[Sometimes, raging as wild animals, they cried out in a troop; sometimes, the wretched sinners

¹⁴ Regarding the change of aspect and colour of soul and body in Vercelli Homily IV, cf. also Di Sciacca (2002: 235-242), Zacher (2009: 196-198), Cataldi (2018: 88-89) and Cioffi (2020: 164-165 and 172-173).

again turned into human shape with the greatest of noises; sometimes the cursed faithless ones again changed into the form of a dragon.]

An echo of the demon’s skill of changing aspect is found in *Juliana* (lines 362b-363, ed. Krapp and Dobbie 1936: 123), when Satan explains that he appears in various guises to corrupt the faithful: «Þus ic soðfæstum / þurh mislic **bleo** mod oncyrrre» (Thus I, in various forms, turn the minds of those steadfast in truth). Again, in this context, OE *blēo* does not mean ‘colour’, but rather ‘form, guise, appearance’.

A further instance of occurrence of OE *blēo* in the sense of ‘form, appearance’ is provided by the verse translation of Metre 31 of Boethius’s *De consolatione Philosophiae*:

Hwæt, ðu meht ongitan, gif his ðe geman lyst,
 þætte mislice manega wuhta
 geond eorðan farað ungelice.
 habbað blioh and fær, bu ungelice,
 and mægwlitas manegra cynna
 cuð and uncuð. (*The Meters of Boethius* 31, lines 1-6a, ed. Krapp 1932b: 203)

[Lo’, you may perceive, if you wish to take heed of it, that many creatures move on earth variously and differently; they have different form and life, and different dwellings, and species of many kinds, known and unknown.]

Such occurrences, in which the boundary between the notion of ‘colour’ and that of ‘appearance’ is rather blurred, together with others, whose meaning is indisputably that of ‘shape, appearance, figure’, suggest the beginning of a process of semantic shift that continues during the Middle English period.

3. The Germanic cognates

For the present investigation, a comparison with the attestations of parallel forms of OE *blēo* in other Germanic languages could be helpful. The written evidence shows that cognates of the Old English word with the meaning ‘colour’ are to be found only in the Ingveonic languages.

OS *blī*, a form with the meaning ‘colour’ or ‘blemish’, is only attested in the glosses,¹⁵ i.e.: in the glosses to Isidore’s *Etymologiae* (XII.vii.61) in MS. Straßburg, Universitätsbibliothek C IV. 15 (107.41): «Columbae dictae, quod earum colla ad singulas conver-

¹⁵ In the *Heliand* and the *Old Saxon Genesis* the word does not occur. Rather, in these sources the adjectival form *blīthi* ‘shining, light; happy, cheerful’ (< PGmc **blīþ(j)az*, cf. note 2) is attested (Sehrt 1966: 55).

siones mutant **colores**: *so siu umbilodod so uuandlod siu ira bli*» (Digilio 2008: 160);¹⁶ and again, in Isidore's *Etymologiae* (XII.i.58) in the same manuscript (106.12): «Iacob contra naturam **colorum** similitudines procurauit [...] quales umbras arietum desuper ascendentium in aquarum speculo contemplabantur: *sulic so te scimo uuas thermo uuetharo an thermo uuatara. So bli uurthon thia sciep*» (Digilio 2008: 160).¹⁷

Quite interesting is the comparison with the more recent Old Frisian *corpus*, where the form *bli*, *blie* is attested in the sense of 'face colour, complexion'. An occurrence is recorded in the *General Compensation Tariffs* preserved in the First Emsingo Manuscript:

[3] Jef hua a sin haued slein werth, a thera fiuuer breinlouena en, thet him **bli** went se and hi mondekes ne mughe vther bedda wesa dey ieftha tuene, sa is sin bote [bi ene] trimene ielde an niughen ethar. (E1 = Buma and Ebel 1967: 52)

[If someone is hit on the head at one of the four skull bones, so that his **complexion** is changed and every month he cannot leave the bed for a day or two, so his compensation is a third of the wergeld and nine oaths.]¹⁸

In this passage (as well as in other similar dispositions), the term *bli* denotes the natural colour, texture and hue of a person's face. OFris *bli* is then recorded in a section introduced by the title *Thet is ac frisesk riucht* preserved in the First Riustring Codex:

[3] Thet is ak frisesk riucht: Sa hwersa en wif anna ene were cumth and ther nen bern ne tiuch, sa hach mat hiri fon there were to utrande alsaden, sa hiut heth thard ebrocht, tha driuanda and tha dreganda, skinande gold and fiarfote kuic. Thet hach ma fon there were to swerande mith twilif hondon, thet hit hebbe alle utad alsa **bli**, sa hiut hede anda were ebrocht. (R1 = Buma and Ebel 1963: 102)

[This is also Frisian law: If a woman comes to an estate by marriage and does not give birth to a child, then one should give her everything out of the estate just as she brought it in: the possessions

¹⁶ «They are called doves (*columba*) because their necks (*collum*) change color every time they turn», English translation from Barney *et al.* (2006: 268).

¹⁷ «In this way Jacob obtained similarities of colors contrary to nature, for his sheep conceived offspring similar to the image of the ram mounting them from above that they saw as a reflection in the water», English translation from Barney *et al.* (2006: 250).

¹⁸ Pretty similar is the disposition number 37 included in the section entitled *De capite* of the *Emsingo Compensation Tariff* attested from the Second Emsingo Manuscript (E2 = Buma and Ebel 1967: 110): «Jefter hwa vppa sin haud slajjn werth inna sinra breijnclouwena en, thet him sin **bli** want werthe [and] inna alracke monathe lidze dei iefte tuene and thet hi thet muge bereda mith sine afte prestere, sa is thiu [bote] en thrimen lif.» (If someone is hit on the head on one part of the skull, so that his **complexion** changes, and he lies in bed for a day or two every month, and if he can prove that with his competent priest, the penance is a third of the wergeld [man compensation']). With slight differences, the disposition 46 occurring in the Third Emsingo Manuscript (E3 = Buma and Ebel 1967: 170) reads as follows: «Jef ther wa oppa sin haud slain werth in siner breinlouena en, thet him sin **bli** ewant wirthe anda inna alrac monethe lidze dey and nacht ieftha twa etmelde, anda hi thet muge birede mith sin afta prester, sa is thiu bote en thrimne lif. (If someone is hit on the head on one part of the skull, so that his **complexion** changes, and every month he lies in bed for a day and a night or twice for twenty-four hours, and he can prove that with his competent priest, so the penance is a third of the wergeld [man compensation']).)

that are driven and borne, shiny gold and four-legged cattle. With twelve hands one should swear that one had given her everything in the same **state** as she had put into the estate.]

Here the interpretation of *bli* is controversial. According to Richthofen’s *Altfriesisches Wörterbuch* (1840: 653), *bli* in this occurrence should be compared with OFris *blide* ‘happy’ (cf. Goth. *bleiþs*, OE *blīpe*, MLG *blīde*, MDu. *blide*, see note 2), and therefore be interpreted as ‘happy, cheerful, joyful, bright; good-looking’. However, in the passage of R1 quoted above, a meaning ‘happy, cheerful, joyful’ does not make sense; in addition, the loss of the dental stop *-d-* in such a conservative language as the Old West Frisian of R1 is highly improbable. The more recent *Altfriesisches Handwörterbuch* (Hofmann–Popkema 2008: 67) offers the translation ‘im selben Werte wie’ followed by a question mark. An interpretation of the phrase *alsa bli sa as* ‘in the same state’, in the sense of ‘appearance’, ‘look’ is more convincing.

Nevertheless, a form *bli* (spelled *blij*) (Hofmann–Popkema 2008: 67) with the meaning ‘joyful, pleased’ actually occurs in the *Statutes of Magnus* included in the so-called *Jus Municipale Frisionum* (J: ms. Leeuwarden, Tresoar, R 5, c. 1530): «Dae dit breef beraet was, hoe frij ende **blij** dae manich edel Fresa was (When this letter was finished, how happy and pleased was there some noble Friese!) (Buma and Ebel 1977: 134). The adjective *blij* is here combined in a hendiadys with *frij* ‘happy’ to describe the exultation of the Frisians receiving the statutes of their freedom.

4. Conclusions: OE *blēo*: decay of a word

On the basis of the evidence collected so far, one could imagine a process of semantic evolution which gradually leads OE *blēo* to change its meaning from the original one of ‘colour’ (also etymologically linked to the notion of ‘splendour’ and ‘brilliance’) to the secondary one of ‘shape, appearance, figure’.

The word continues in Middle English, still covering a varied semantic spectrum, though the occurrences with the meaning ‘skin colour, natural complexion; facial expression; countenance’ are double those in which the term conveys the idea of ‘colour’ (Kurath, H. et al. 1952–2001, *s.v.* *blē*). The decline in the use of this word with the meaning ‘colour’ is accelerating after the Norman Conquest, when the concept of colour is fully lexicalized following the borrowing from the French language of the loanword ‘colur, colour’ (Anglo-Norman *colur*, Old French *colour*, *color*), which will be definitively assimilated in English by the time of Chaucer (Anderson 2003: 172). On the one hand, therefore, due to the prestige enjoyed by the Anglo-Norman language, and on the other, in conjunction with the shift of attention from the category of brilliance to that of hue, the synonym conflict between ME *blē* and Anglo-Norman *colur* is resolved in favour of the latter.

All in all, one can assume that the native term, which was strongly anchored to the concept of luminosity, was at a certain point perceived as anachronistic, ending up falling into oblivion. Today, in Modern English the word is still attested in the form *blee*, but only in rare contexts, mostly in poetry, as – for instances – in the delicate verses of the Victorian poetess Elizabeth Barrett Browning: «Then the captain, young Lord Leigh, with his eyes so grey of *blee*» (*Rhyme of the Duchess May* stanza XXVI: Browning 1850: II, 57).

Concetta Giliberto
Università degli Studi di Palermo

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