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REFLECTIONS ON THE COLOR OF ESAU'S POTTAGE OF LENTILS (*STJÓRN* 160.26-161.9)

Genesis 25:29-34 provides us with a unique episode wherein the first-born Esau sells his birthright to his younger brother Jacob for some bread and a pottage of lentils:

Coxit autem Iacob pulmentum; ad quem cum, venisset Esau de agro lassus, ait: Da mihi de coctione hac rufa, quia oppido lassus sum. Quam ob causam vocatum est nomen eius Edom. Cui dixit Iacob: Vende mihi primogenita tua. Ille respondit: En morior, quid mihi proderunt primogenita? Ait Iacob: Iura ergo mihi. Iuravit ei Esau et vendidit primogenita. Et sic, accepto pane et lentis edulio, comedit et bibit, et abiit, parvipendens quod primogenita vendidisset.

[And Jacob boiled pottage: to whom Esau, coming faint out of the field, Said: give me of this red pottage, for I am exceeding faint. For which reason his name was called Edom. And Jacob said to him: Sell me thy first birthright. He answered: Lo I die, what wil the first birthright avail me. Jacob said: Swear therefore to me. Esau swore to him, and sold his first birthright. And so taking bread and the pottage of lentils, he ate, and drank, and went his way; making little account of having sold his first birthright].

The Old Norse-Icelandic version of this story is found in *Stjórn* I (1862:1-299), a history Bible written at the request of King Hákon Magnússon in the early part of the fourteenth century. It deals with the contents of Genesis-Exodus 18 and is based on the Vulgate, Peter Comestor's *Historia Scholastica*, Vincent of Beauvais's *Speculum Historiale*, Isidore of Seville's *Etymologiae*, the works of Augustine, William Durand's *Rationale Officiorum Divinorum*, and other sources.¹ The passage reads as follows:

1 For a discussion of the sources of *Stjórn* I, see Astås (1991:68-84) and Jakob Benediktsson (2004:28-32).

Pat bar til einu sinni sem Jacob hafði gort ser ertrauelling. at Esau kom af akri edr eng til hans miok modr af einnihuerri orku. ok sagdi sua til hans. Gef mer nockurn part af uellinginum. þiat ek er storliga modr uordinn. Sem hann segði sua. Miok hungrar mik. enn þo ma ek eigi fyrir mædi sakir gera mer nu uellinginn. Jacob bad hann selia sér sina frumburdi. Hann svaraði. Huat skal mer frumburðrinn ef ek deyr. Suer mer at þi sagdi Jacob. at þu skalt þat hallda. Esau sór ok selldi frumburdina. tok þa badi ertr ok braud. ok át sem honum likadi. hugsandi at hann mundi deyia ef hann hefði eigi þa þegar i stad etit. for sidan i brott ok uirdi litils þat er hann hafði frumburdanna rettindi ok forprisanir sellt. Enn fyrir þann skyld er ertrnar þær sem hann keypti uaru raudar edr bleikar. þa uar hann þar af kalladr Edom. ella af þi sem Ysidorus segir. at hans likami uar miok raudlitaðr. Hafði hann .iii. nöfn. ok af sinu tilfelli huert. hann het Esau sua sem raudr. ok Seyr þat er lodinn. ok Edom þat er bleikr edr blodligr. (*Stjórn* 1862:160.26-161.9)

The source of the former part of the passage is the Vulgate; the source of the latter part is, as the compiler clearly indicates, Isidore of Seville („sem Ysidorus segir“):

Esau trinomius est, et ex propriis causis varie nuncupatur. Dicitur enim Esau, id est rufus, ob coctionem scilicet rufae lentis ita appellatus, cuius edulio primogenita perdidit. Edom autem ob ruborem corporis dictus est, quod Latine sanguineus dicitur. Seir vero, quod fuerit hispidus et pilosus; quando enim natus est, totus sicut pellis pilosus erat. Atque idem tribus nominibus appellatur: Esau, id est rufus; Edom, id est sanguineus; Seir, id est pilosus, quia non habuit lenitatem. (*Etymologiae* VII.vi.,3-34)

What evidently prompted the compiler to turn to Isidore was a desire to include somewhat more detailed information about the Hebrew word/name Edom than that provided by the Vulgate. This is in line with what Astås (1991:81) calls the ‘catchword principle’:

When the compiler finds that an animal or a plant is insufficiently treated in text from V[ulgate], H[istoria] S[cholastica] or S[peculum]

H[istoriale], he inserts additional information from I[sidore's] E[tymologiae] on the subject in question.²

The Norse compiler claims that Esau was called Edom because the lentils he ate were 'raudar edr bleikar,' and at the end of the passage, he specifies that Edom means 'bleikr edr blodligr.' Only *raudar* and *blodligr* translate identifiable words in the Latin text. There is nothing in the Latin text(s) corresponding to the hue adjective *bleikr*, which, as evident from the Arnarnagaeian Commission's *Ordbog* (s.v. *bleikr*), as well as other Old Norse-Icelandic dictionaries, denotes different hues according to its context.³ According to the *Ordbog*, *bleikr* appears most frequently in the meaning „bleg (ɔ: med mindre intens farve end den naturlige, ?bleget // pale (ɔ: of weak or reduced color), wan, ?bleached“, as in, for example, „gevr hon [sólin] af ser litit lios oc bendir firir með bleikum lit margs mannz feigð“ (*Alexanders saga* 1925:70.32-71.1) and „stundum var hann raudr sem blod en stundum bleikr sem bast edr blarr sem hel edr fölr sem nárr suo at ymsir þessir litir færduzt j hann suo bra honum við“ (*Flatayjarbók* 1860-1868. 2:136.35-37). However, the term is also commonly used in the meaning „blond, lys // blond, fair, light-coloured“ (translation offered by the *Ordbog*), as in, for example, „Alexannnder s(on) Priami var huitr ahaurunnd hýr madr herdimikill. sterkr oc storradr harid bleikt oc bla augun“ (*Trójumanna saga* 1963:66.11-12) and „Fögr er hlífðin, svá at mér hefir hon aldri jafnfögr sýnz, bleikir akrar ok slegin tún“ (*Njáls saga* 1954:182.20-22).⁴ When used to describe the color of horses and cows, the term means, according to the *Ordbog*, „lys, ?lys gråbrun, ?bleggul, ?skimlet (~ fr. vair) // [...] light-coloured, ?fawn, ?pale yellow, dappled (~ fr. vair)“; examples of the term being used to describe the color of these animals include „Því næst riðu fram or konungs fylking Riker ok Marant, annarr á bleikum hesti en annarr á grám“ (*Karlamagnúss saga* 1860: 302.38-39) and „ek sá hér upp rísa at Hofi uxa bleikan, mikinn ok skrautligan“ (*Vápnfirðinga saga* 1950:48.18-19).

In the passage concerning Esau's selling of this birthright for a pottage of lentils, the term *bleikr* does not, according to the Arnarnagaeian Commis-

² Astås (1991:81) notes that „From a collation of I[sidore's] E[tymologiae]-passages in the *Stjórn* I text with variant readings in Lindsay's edition, we learn that the IE-manuscript of the Old Norse compiler can be traced back to the Carolingian C-manuscript (10th century).“

³ Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957) and Fritzner (1973).

⁴ Cf. *Alexanders saga* 1925:27. For a discussion of this phrase, see Lönnroth (1970) and (1976:123, 151, 160).

sion's *Ordbog*, mean any of the hues listed above.⁵ Instead, it is suggested that *bleikr* here means „?(lys) røð // ?(light) red.“ The suggestion is a bold one, for in none of the other occurrences (approximately 80) listed by the *Ordbog* is *bleikr* used in the meaning „(light) red.“⁶ Nonetheless, the suggestion offered by the Arnarnaganaean Commission's *Ordbog* is not a far-fetched one, for the history of *bleikr*, which should possibly be regarded as a macrocolor covering, at least partly, the category of pale or light colors, is an interesting one.⁷ As Old Norse-Icelandic developed into modern Icelandic, the term clearly lost a fair portion of its semantic portfolio, including 'pale,' 'wan,' 'bleached,' 'blond,' and 'fair,' and it now appears exclusively in the meaning 'pink' and to describe the color of horses and cows. It is difficult to determine when the semantic change took place. The 88 examples of *bleikur* listed by *Orðabók Háskólans*⁸ indicate that it was not until the first half of the twentieth century or maybe even the mid-twentieth century that *bleikur* appears in the meaning pink and that it continued to denote also pale until the late twentieth century, though here it is, of course, important to bear in mind that writers often have a tendency to archaize. Certainly in the spoken language, it seems that *bleikur* is no longer used in the meaning pale, but it continues to be used to describe the color of horses and cows.⁹

The possibility that the *Stjórn* examples of *bleikr* mean '(light) red' and that they are the only examples of the adjective in that meaning that have been preserved from the Old Norse-Icelandic period cannot, of course, be excluded. But it would seem unlikely, for in addition to not including examples of *bleikr* in the meaning '?(light) red,' the *Ordbog* does not include a single example of *bleikr* being used to describe the color of plants or food. In most of the ex-

⁵ Fritzner (1973) lists the occurrences under the definition „bleg, hvid, lysgul (jvf. blíkja)“; regarding the latter occurrence ('Edom þat er bleikr edr blodligr'), he argues that the color is a result of wounds or loss of blood („paa Grund af Saar eller Blodtab“). Cleasby and Vigfusson (1957) do not include the two occurrences.

⁶ I am grateful to Eva Rode for providing me with xeroxed copies of the slips of the *Ordbog*.

⁷ Biggam describes a macrocolor as follows: „Not every language has a single colour lexeme per colour category, that is, a word such as N[ew] E[nglish] *green* for the green category. To Modern English speakers, red, orange, brown and purple are separate categories with separate lexemes denoting them, but speakers of other languages, although perfectly capable of seeing these four colours, may denote them with a single lexeme. Such a colour concept is a macrocolour“ (1997:18).

⁸ The reference to *Orðabók Háskólans* is to the dictionary's website: <http://www.lexis.hi.is/cgi-bin/ritmal/leitord.cgi?adg=inns1>

⁹ Guðrún Kvaran (pers. correspondence 29th of June 2005).

amples (about half), *bleikr* is used about facial color or skin tone. In these instances, the term is frequently equated with *nár* (e.g., 'bleikr sem nár' (*Bærings saga* 1884: 86.32) or *bast* (e.g., „þviat stvndvm setti hana raða sem bloð, en stvndvm bleika sem bast“ (*Bærings saga* 1884: 97.38-40), and it often appears together with *blóðlauss* (e.g., „ok fyrir þui at hon sa hann blæikan ok bloðlausan. þa hugði hon at hann være dauðr“ (*Strengleikar* 1979:20.18-19) and *litlauss* (e.g., „hann var bleikr ok litlauss í andliti ok honum horfin öll hans frægð“ (*Karlamagnúss saga* 1860:285.11-12). In eight of the examples, *bleikr* is used about human facial hair; one of these is the oldest example recorded by the *Ordbog* and may be dated to the second quarter of the thirteenth century: „Har hans var aðrummægin ræikar blæict en aðrumægin rautt“ (*Óláfs saga helga* 1922:42.3-4). In nine of the examples, the term is used to describe the color of domestic animals. In six, it is used about silver and gold. In three, it is used about stones. In another three, it is used about the color of fields or meadows. It is also used to describe the rays of the sun and the moon, and in four of the examples, it is used as a by-name. *Bleikr* is contrasted with *blár*, *eplótttr*, *grár*, *hvítr*, *rauðr*, *rauðblár*, and *svartr*.

In order to understand the compiler's choice and use of *bleikr* in the passage concerning Esau's selling of his birthright for a pottage of lentils, one has to bear in mind the events surrounding the episode. At birth, Esau is said to be „rauðr ok lodinn allr sem eitt skinn“ (Stjórn 1862:160.8-9; cf. „rufus [...] et totus in morem pellis hispidus“ [Genesis 25:25]).¹⁰ When he grows up, he becomes a skilful hunter and his father Isaac's favorite son, partly because he is the first-born and partly because Isaac eats of his hunting. His brother Jacob becomes the favorite of his mother Rebecca, who eavesdrops on her old husband when he tells Esau to hunt and prepare fresh game so that he may bless

¹⁰ Sarna (1989:180) makes the following comment on the color red: „Hebrew *admoni* is also used – admiringly – of David in 1 Samuel 16:12 and 17:14. The term, therefore, is not likely to mean redheadedness, which was popularly associated with the sinister and the dangerous. More likely, a ruddy complexion is intended. This may well be connected with the convention found in Egyptian and Cretan art, as well as in the Ugaritic texts, that equates red skin with heroic stature.“ About Esau's hairiness, he comments: „This detail anticipates the crucial role of Esau's hairiness later on in the narrative. Hebrew *se'ar*, 'hair' (*sa'ir*, 'hairy'), is also an allusion to the land of Seir, the habitat of Esau/Edom, as mentioned in 32:4 and in other texts. This region probably derived its name from the shaggy nature of the terrain. [...] Esau's unusual hairiness brings to mind the account of Enkidu in the Gilgamesh Epic. His entire body is also said to have been covered with hair, a condition that was popularly taken to be a sign of boorish uncouthness.“

Esau sated from this meal. Accordingly, Rebecca, who is ambitious on Jacob's behalf, decides to have Jacob masquerade as Esau. She dresses him in Esau's clothes and covers his hands and neck with the hairy skins of two kids, so that when touched by his blind father, he will feel like his brother. From these domesticated beasts she also prepares a stew as if they are the hunted game. Isaac signals suspicion by expressing his surprise at how quickly Esau has returned from his hunt and by remarking that his son has the voice of Jacob. He is reassured, however, by the feel of his hairy hands and the smell of Esau's clothes, and so Jacob receives his father's best blessing.

A key element in the story is Esau's appearance, which is reflected in his two names: Esau (meaning 'hairy') and Edom (meaning 'ruddy'). These two characteristics – his unusual hairiness and red color – are pointed out at his birth, and here the compiler renders the hue adjective 'rufus' as 'rauðr,' which, as evident from the roughly 210 examples listed by the *Ordbog*, covers a wide range of objects. It is used to describe human facial color, the color of human head and facial hair, as well as, for example, the color of blood, honey, silk, cows, horses, fire, weapons, clothing, fabric, gold, wine, and the color of the sun and the rose. It is commonly used as a by-name, and it is frequently equated with the color of blood, as in, for example, „Erlingr var þá rauðr sem blóð í andliti“ and „var þá rauðr sem dreyri“ (*Heimskringla* 1893-1901 2:259.13; 3:27.16).

However, when Esau's ruddy color is equated with the color of the lentil stew,¹¹ the compiler renders the same hue adjective as „rauðr eða bleikr.“ It appears that the compiler had difficulty believing – and perhaps rightly so – that Esau's body color was identical to the color of the deep red lentils and felt he could not use the same color term about both lentils and body color. Bearing in mind that Esau was as hairy as an animal (Jacob dressed in animal skins to pass as him), he therefore decided on the macrocolor *bleikr*, probably indicating the hue fawn (defined as „grayish yellowish brown to light grayish or moderate reddish brown or moderate yellowish pink“),¹² which, as noted above, is used to describe the color of domestic animals. The following state-

¹¹ The statement that the lentils are red is in itself interesting. Sarna (1989:182) points out that the lentils that were easily available to Jacob were yellowish red or light brown. For the deep red color that the story specifies, he would either have had to obtain Egyptian lentils, which are red, or add something to the pottage to give it an exceptionally red hue. See also Fass (1992:371).

¹² *The American Heritage Dictionary* (1976): s.v. *fawn*.

ment that „Edom þat er bleikr edr blodligr“ is a word play involving Hebrew *adom* (~ Edom) and *dam* (meaning ‘blood’), which was evidently known to Isidore;¹³ *blóðligr* is therefore not a (near-)synonym of *bleikr*, which is commonly associated with loss or lack of blood.

The conclusion must be that while the suggestion in the Arnarnagnaean Commission's *Ordbog* that *bleikr* means ‘light red’ in the Genesis story of Esau's selling his birthright cannot be refuted, it would, in the light of the context in which the hue adjective occurs, seem more likely that *bleikr* does not refer to a solid color but rather a color with elements of red, and that it is used here in its more common meaning to denote the color of domestic animals.

¹³ Sarna (1989:363). The word play occurs in several texts, e.g., Isaiah 34:3, 5-7, Ezekiel 35:1-7 (Seir).

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EFNISÁGRIP

Höfundur rekur merkingu litarorðsins *bleikr* í fornu máli og sýnir með dæmum, einkum í frásögn Gamla testamentisins af baunagrauts áti Esaú, þar sem hann lætur frumburðarrétt sinn í hendur Jakobs bróður síns, að orðið merkir eitthvað rauðleitt, þó að það komi einnig fyrir í merkingunni *þolr*. Það er ekki fyrr en á 19. öld sem litarorðið fær þá merkingu sem nú er algengust.

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