The Old English Words
for the Concepts “Virgin” and “Virginity”

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Abstract

The Anglo-Saxon period was a rich era for the concept of virginity, which was often explored in literature and art. The word “virgin” and its derivatives were used to express concepts related to purity and innocence. This study examines the usage and evolution of these terms in early English literature, focusing on how they were employed by authors to convey themes of purity and morality. The analysis is contextualized against the backdrop of broader cultural and social dynamics, highlighting the significance of these words in the development of English language and literature.

Introduction

Virginity was a favourite theme in Anglo-Saxon Literature. The statement can be confirmed by Aldhelm’s prose De Virginitate as one of the literary testimonies; Aldhelm was “one of the principal authors on the English curriculum”, and heavy glosses (both in Latin and in English) in the manuscripts of his prose De Virginitate prove how attentively it was studied. The chief aim of the present article is to discuss the words employed by Anglo-Saxon authors or translators to express the concepts “virgin” and “virginity”, the discussion being preceded by a survey of the Hebrew, Greek and Latin attitudes toward the ideas “virgin” and “virginity”, and the terms established by them which reflect their social

aspect.

1. bĕtūlāh in the Jewish society

In the Jewish society bĕtūlāh, the word expressing the concept of “virgin”, was often used as signifying merely “a maiden” or “a young unmarried girl”, and thus did not always emphasize the physical integrity of the woman. 2) It, however, does not mean that virginity is the concept irrelevant to the matrimonial institution in their society. The importance of virginity as an element attached to maidens, can be observed in the Old Testament (Gen 24, 16; 34, 1–7; Judg 19, 24). The priest (sacerdos) and the high priest (pontifex) were requested to take a virgin bride; the priest was also allowed to take a widow for his wife, only when she was a priest’s widow, but it did not apply in the case of the high priest (Lev 21, 13–14; Ezk 44, 22). When a bride is falsely accused of being found not to be a virgin by her husband, her parents must prove her virginity by showing “evidence” (signa virginitatis), as in the following passage:

\[
\text{si duxerit vir uxor et postea eam odio habuerit}
\]
\[
\text{quae si erit occasione quibus dimitat eam}
\]
\[
\text{obiens ei nomen pessimum et dixerit}
\]
\[
\text{uxorem hanc accepit et ingressus ad eam non inveni virginem}
\]
\[
\text{tollent eam pater et mater eius}
\]
\[
\text{et ferent secum signa virginitatis eius ad seniores urbis in porta sunt}
\]
\[
\text{et dicit pater filiam meam dedi huic uxorum}
\]
\[
\text{quam qua odiit inponet ei nomen pessimum}
\]
\[
\text{ut dicat non inveni filiam tuam virginem}
\]
\[
\text{et ecce haec sunt signa virginitatis filiae meae}
\]
\[
\text{expandent vestimentum coram senibus civitatis}
\]
[If a man marry a wife, and afterwards hate her, and seek occasions to put her away, objecting unto her a very ill name, and say, I took this wife, and companying with her: I found her not a virgin. Her father and mother shall take her, and shall carry with them the signs of her virginity to the ancients of the city that are in the gate, and the father shall say: I gave my daughter unto this man to wife, whom because he hates, he layeth unto her a very ill name, so that he saith, I found not thy daughter a virgin, and behold these are the signs of my daughter’s virginity. They shall spread the vesture before the ancients of the city.}\]

(Deut 22, 13–17; underlines mine)


3) The Latin Biblical quotations are hereafter cited, unless specified, from Biblia Sacra Iuxta Vulgatam Versionem (Stuttgart : Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft 1969 ; repr. 1985). Translation is quoted, with the spelling and the punctuation modernised by the present writer, from The Holie Bible, Doway 1609, facsimile reproduction (kyoto: Rinsen Book Co. Ltd. 1990).
The evidence presented before the elders (senses) of the city is the cloth (vestimentum) of the nuptial bed.\footnote{McKenzie (1965, p. 914) interprets this as “the blood-stained garments of the nuptial couch, retained by the parents as proof of the rupture of the hymen.”} If the charge made by the husband is proved false, he is to be punished; he must pay a fine of one hundred shekels of silver, which is ultimately given to the bride’s father, and he must take her to wife (Deut 22, 18–19). If the charge is true, the woman is to be stoned to death (Deut 22, 20–21). A woman, however, should not retain her virginity to the end of her life. Jephthah’s daughter, who is his only child and is to be sacrificed, bewails her virginity, because she is destined to meet her death, without reaching womanhood in marriage, childless (Jdg 11, 37).

2. Greek παρθένος, παρθένια, παρθενία; Latin virgo, virginitas

In the verses mentioned above, the Greek παρθένος (f. or m.) and παρθένια (neut. pl.) are the terms employed to express the concepts “virgin” and “signs of virginity” in the Septuagint: for example, παρθένος ἤν, ἀνήρ οὐκ ἐγὼ αὐτήν “a virgin, neither had any man known her” (Gen 24,16),\footnote{The readings of the Authorized Version are applied to the Greek quotations from the Septuagint.} τὰ παρθένια τῆς παιδός “the signs of the girl’s virginity” (Deut 22,15). Originally in the ancient Greek society παρθένος seems to have meant a maiden, or an unmarried girl beyond puberty,\footnote{The etymology of this word is uncertain. Cf. Henry George Liddell & Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon (Oxford: Clarendon Press 1940; repr. 1958); Friedrich (1964–76), Vol. V.; Ernest Klein, A Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the English Language (Amsterdam: Elsevier Publishing Company 1967). However, Friedrich (p. 827) mentions that a connection with -θένος “to swell”, “to bloom” is pointed out by Herzog-Hauser, 1910, and Boisacq, 747.} as in Homer II. 22, 126–8;\footnote{οὐ μὲν τοις νῦν ἐστιν ἀπὸ δρόσου οὐδ’ ἀπὸ πέτρης τῷ ὀφριζόμενα, ἃ τε παρθένος ἢθεός τε, παρθένος ἢθεός τ’ ὀφριζέτων ἀλλήλοις. (In no wise may I now from oak-tree or from rock hold dalliance with him, even as youth and maiden—youth and maiden!—hold dalliance one with the other.) Trans. Loeb.} virginity is not an element indispensable to this word and it is also employed for a young unmarried woman who is not a virgin (Homer II. 2, 512–15).\footnote{ὑλὲς Ἀρης, οὕς τέκνην Ἀστυνόη δόμῳ Ἀκτόρος Ἀζελίκο, παρθένου αἰδώς, ἄπεργον εἰσαναβάς, Ἀρη βραχερῷ ὁ δὲ οἶ παρελέβατο λάθης. (Sons of Ares, whom, in the palace of Actor, son of Zeus, Astyoche, the honoured maiden, conceived of mighty Ares, when she had entered into her upper chamber; for he lay with her in secret.) Trans. Loeb.} At Is 7, 14 it is used even for a young married woman, rendering Hebrew ḥâ’almâ;\footnote{Gerhard Kittel, and Gerhard Friedrich (1964–76), vol. V, p. 831; Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, The New Jerome Biblical Commentary (London: Geoffrey Chapman 1989; repr. 1991), p. 235, which says “Ḥâ’almâ is not the technical term for a virgin (ḥêtûlā). This is best understood as a wife of Ahaz”.} ἑδὼ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἐξεῖ καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καθάπερ τὸ ὅναμα αὐτοῦ ἔμμανουη “Behold, a virgin (?) shall conceive, and bear a son, and shall call his name Immanuel” (parenthesised question mark mine). With its nuance of “being not married” intensified, it appears to have developed the sense of “virgin”; thus Παρθένος is the title of Athena, the Virgin Goddess.\footnote{παρθένον (m.), derived from παρθένος, when in plural, signifies “maidens’ apartments in a house”, and “the western cella of the Parthenon or temple of Athena at Athens”; see H. G. Liddell & R. Scott (1940), A Greek-English Lexicon, p. 1339.} In the New Testament there are passages in which virginity is ascetically idealized (1 Co 7, 1; 8; 32–35); it is recommended by St Paul himself, not by command of the Lord (1 Co 7, 25).}
In Rev 14, 4 virginity in men is praised “as creating a special bond of union with Jesus”, and here παρθένοι (m. pl.) is used in the sense “men who have never had sexual relations with women”.

The Latin terms virgo and virginitas, from which the English words virgin and virginity are derived, are employed in the Vulgate to describe those concepts. The word virgo, perhaps etymologically connected with virga “a shoot, sprout, twig”, meant “a young woman of marriageable age” in general, as well as “a virgin”, in which sense inviolate chastity of a maiden or a woman is emphasized, and which is also applied to a man without sexual experience. Concerning its derivative virginitas, what seems to be interesting is the phraseology to express the idea of “the signs of virginity” in Deut 22, 13–17; as mentioned above, in the Septuagint is employed the neuter plural τὰ παρθένια, which can be regarded as a substantivised adjective with an article preceding, whereas in the Latin version it is expressed in the two words signa virginitatis, the neuter plural noun signa being added.

In the Gospels the words meaning “virgin” and “virginity” appear with reference to the Virgin Mary (Mt 1, 23; Lk 1, 27), to the ten wise and foolish virgins (Mt 25, 1–13), and to a widow who had lived with her husband seven years from her virginity (Lk 2, 36). Here also the Greek word used for “virgin” is παρθένος, and παρθένια (f.) is employed to express “virginity”; in the Vulgate the Latin virgo and virginitas render those Greek words. A brief mention should be made of Mt 1, 23, which reads in Greek as follows:

…”

The Latin translation in the Vulgate is:

ecce virgo in utero habebit et pariet filium et vocabunt nomen eius Emmanuel
quod est interpretatum Nobiscum Deus.

The first two lines in the above Greek verse, i.e. ἰδοὺ ἡ παρθένος ἐν γαστρὶ ἐξει καὶ τέξεται υἱόν, καὶ καλέσουσιν τὸ ὅνομα αὐτοῦ ᾴμμανουήλ, are quoted from Is 7, 14, where Hebrew הָאָלֹם “a young woman of marriageable age” is translated into παρθένος in the Septuagint, as pointed out before, and into virgo in the Vulgate. Since the παρθένος in Is 7, 14 cannot be regarded as signifying “a virgin”, the verse cannot be taken as the starting point for the virgin birth. Concerning the choice of the word παρθένος in Mt 1, 23, it is suggested that Matthew, who very likely knew both of the Hebrew and the Greek readings, “consciously chose the latter here”, and also that he “seized upon the LXX rendering of it to confirm the virgin birth story which was already established in the Christian tradition.”

13) In the Lindisfarne Gospels there are Latin texts with Nothumbrian glosses added before each Gospel, and some of them have sentences which contain virgo or virginitas. They must be discussed on another occasion.
14) Bauer, Bauer Encyclopedia of Biblical Theology, 3 vols (London and Sydney: Sheed and Ward Ltd 1970) vol. 2, p. 943; Bauer (1970), at the same page, also points out “the fact that in the later Greek translations of the Old Testament (second century: Aquila, Theodotion, Symmachus), which emerged in the time of the anti-christian polemic, the neutral word nēanis (“young woman) was adopted in place of parthenos in Is 7:14.”
3. The Old English words meaning “virgin” and “virginity”

The English words virgin and virginity came to be used in the course of the Middle English period; the earliest quotation citation of the word virgin in the OED is from Trin. Coll. Hom. 185 (c 1200) and that of the word virginity from Cursor M. 24681 (a 1300). Therefore, in both of the early and the later versions of Wycliffe’s Bible (c 1385 and c 1395), the term virgin occurs as the term for the Latin virgo; thus the Vigin Mary is referred to as virgin at Mt 1.3, and the ten wise and foolish virgins as virgins at Mt 25.1, Mt 25.7, Mt 25.11. However, the older term maiden was still employed in both versions to refer to the Virgin Mary at Lk 1.27, where furthermore terminological discrepancy is observed among the readings of the MSS; one MS of the early version adopts the word virgin, and several MSS of the later version employ the word maid. The term for virginitas at Lk 2.36 is not virginity; in both versions it is maidenhood (maydenhed in the early version; maydynhode in the later version), which refers to the virginity of Anna, a widow prophetess. Later versions of the Bible, such as Tyndale (1534), Rhemes (1582), the Authorized Version (1611), are consistent in employing the terms virgin and virginity in those Gospel passages except at Mt 1.23 in Tyndale’s edition, where the word maid is used to refer to the Virgin Mary.

Before borrowing the words virgin and virginity, the OE words used seemingly to express those concepts were: 1) fæinne, hægstæld, ides, meag, meagden, meagdenmann, meag(e)p, meagbmann, meowl; 2) fænnhad, hægstældhad, hægestaldn, meagsthad, meag(e)p had; 3) fæmnhades mann. The words classified under 1) are simplexes and compounds seemingly, or already interpreted by scholars as, signifying “virgin,” all of which, except the hapax legomenon meagbmann, have adjacent senses such as “girl, maiden”, “daughter”, “(generically) woman”, “female servant”; those under 2) are compounds meaning “state or condition of a virgin, virginity”, which are comprised of words under 1) and the suffix -had (ModE -hood) or -nis (ModE -ness); fæmnhades mann under 3) is regarded as two words in BTS, but by Hall as one word meaning “virgin”.10 The idea of virginity, as is mentioned by Bäck with regard to the frequent occurrence of the compound meagbhad “virginity” (p. 219), was

17) (=Matthew) often inserts quotations of this kind by way of commentary in order to establish a connection between the fact which he has received and is handing down (and which are initially quite independent of the Old Testament records) and the salvific history recorded in the Old Testament.” (Italicized insertion mine)
obviously "a favourite theme in the literature of the time", and enhanced interest in the theme seems to have caused the variety of the words in which the sense "virgin" or "virginity" developed in the course of the OE period.

4. *fæmne* and *hægesteald*: the terms in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels

The words used in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels to render Latin *virgo* and *virginitas* are *fæmne*, *hehstald* (a variant of *hægesteald*), *fæmnhad*, *hehstaldhad* (a variant of *hægestealdhad*), and *hehstaltniss*. What is meant by "the Anglo-Saxon Gospels" is the three versions of the Gospels printed by Skeat in his collated edition (1871–87). The three versions are the Lindisfarne Gospels, the Rushworth Gospels, and the West-Saxon Gospels. The former two contain the Latin Gospels with interlinear glosses dated to the second half of the tenth century, and the last one is the Old English translation of the Gospels (c 1000).

The word *hehstald* (or *hægesteald*) is a compound of *haga* "a place fenced in, enclosure" and *-steald* "possessor", the proper meaning of the word being "a person who owns an enclosure", from which developed the senses "(young) warrior", "unmarried man", "virgin", and "youth". The word occurs 65 times in all the Old English texts recorded in *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (abbreviated to *MCOE* hereafter). It is employed in the Lindisfarne Gospels as a term for "virgin" glossed over *virgo* (14 times):

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heonu hehstald in hrif scealhabba 1 hæfis 7 ge-cennes
ecce virgo in utero habebit et pariet
sunu 7 hia geceiges noma his 9et is
filium et uocabunt nomen eius emmanuhel quod est
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22) Healey, Antonette Dipaolo, and Richard L. Venezky, *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English* (Toronto: University of Toronto 1980). In the 65 instances of the word *hægesteald* are included 7 instances of a place name and the controversial 2 instances from Iudicium Dei, Rituale IV & V, appropriateness of which needs further discussion on another occasion.

23) Seven of them occur in the Introductory passages preceding each Gospel.
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getrahtet midus god
interpretatum nobiscum deus

(Li Mt 1, 23)

Here the Latin virgo refers to the Virgin Mary, and it is glossed with hehstald, which was originally a word for a male person. This word occurs as a gloss for virgo also in the Rushworth Gospels, Lk 1.27, but only once. Its compound hehstaldhad is employed as a gloss rendering virginitas at Lk 2.36 both in the Lindisfarne Gospels and in the Rushworth Gospels. The compound hehstaltnis is also employed once for virginitas by the glossator of the Lindisfarne Gospels at Jl 1.3, which is page 1, line 3 of an introductory passage to St John’s Gospel. Those are the terms employed as glosses to virgo and virginitas in the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Rushworth Gospels. Other compounds also occur in the other Old English texts; they are hehstallic “virginal” (once), hægsteadman “young warrior, youth, unmarried man” (4 times), hagustaldes ham (once), hagustaldcumbe (once), and hagustaldsee (4 times), the last three being place names.24

The MCOE records 540 instances of the simplex fåemne; its derivatives and compounds are fåemnhad (10 times), fåemnha (d) lic (8 times), fåemnelic or fåennelic (5 times), fåemnhashmann (once), nunnfæmne (8 times), halifemne (once), and mynsterfæmne (once). The OE fåemne is cognate with OSax. fēnea, féhmia; Frs. faem; OFr. famne, fomne, femne, fowne, fone; Otc. feima; Lat. fēmina (“a female, woman”).25 After introducing and explaining various past theories as to the etymology of the OE fåemne, including comparative researches on the change in the sound of the stem vowel of the equivalent in other languages, Bäck (pp. 184–86) reaches the conclusion that from the assumed meaning “proctress” (which he deduces from “to protect, take care of”, the generalized meaning of IE root *pā(i) “to tend cattle”) developed the sense “mistress of the house, consort, wife”, and then “woman”, which he describes as the meaning in the oldest English texts, and from which are derived the other senses, “(young) marriageable but unmarried woman”, “girl, maiden”, “virgin”, and “nun”.

With regard to the terminology in the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, fåemne and fåemnhad are the terms employed for virgo and virginitas in two of the three versions. The glossator of the Lindisfarne Gospels did not employ those terms; the two glossators of the Rushworth Gospels and the translator of the West-Saxon Gospels used them. Farman, one of the glossators of the Rushworth Gospels, took charge of Matthew, Mark 1–2.15, and John 18.1–3; the rest was done by Owun, the other glossator.26 Farman, who is independent of the Lindisfarne glosses, is consistent in employing fåemne as the term for virgo. Owun, who is believed to have copied the Lindisfarne glosses, expectedly employs hehstald for the latter virgo at Lk 1.27 and hehstaldhad at Lk 2.36. He, however, uses faefne (a variant of fåemne) for the first virgo at Lk 1.27.

to fåefne gweddad i gifastnad were ðas noma
ad uriginem dispensatam uiro cui nomen
was of huse dauïes 7 noma ðare hehstalde maria
erat ioseph de domu dauid & nomen uriginis maria

(Ru Lk 1, 27)

25) BT, q.v. fåemne. Holthausen (1934, q.v. fåemne) adds Avestan paēman “Milch”, Lat. opimus, Gk nios “fett”, etc.
It follows that Owun employed two kinds of terms for *virgo* at Lk 1.27, *fæne* and *hehestald*, and that he became independent of the Lindisfarne gloss when he employed *fæne*. This is the only instance of the form *fæne* in the whole Old English literature. The translator of the West-Saxon Gospels consistently employed *fæmne* as the term for *virgo* and *fæmhwad* for *virginitas*. One verse from the Gospel of St Luke will suffice to illustrate the terminology in the West-Saxon Gospels:

> to beweddude fæmnan anum were. þæs nama wæs iosep. of dauides huse. and þære fæmnan nama wæs maria.

(Lk 1.27)

5. *ides*

The *MCOE* records 72 instances of this word. The etymology of the word *ides* is uncertain. BT’s signification is “woman”; Hall’s is “virgin: (†) woman, wife, lady, queen”. It is a poetic word; the following quotation from OE poem *Genesis* may be interpreted as illustrating the sense “virgin” of this word:

> “Her syndon inne unwemme twa
   dohtor mine. Doð, swa ic eow bidde
   (ne can þara idesa owðer gieta
   þurh gebedsceipe beorna neawest)
   and geswicað þære synne. Ic eow sylle þa,
   ær ge sceonde wið gesceapu fremmen,
   ungifre yfel ylde bearnum.
   Onfoð þæm fæmnum, lætæd frið ægon
   gistas mine, þa ic for gode wille
   gemundbyrdan, gif ic mot, for eow.”

(Gen A 2466–75; underline mine)

The word *idesa* refers to Lot’s daughters. It is learned from the context that the daughters are *unwemme* “spotless”, and that they do not know intercourse yet by sleeping with a man. The context, therefore, may incline lexicographers or translators to take the word *idesa* as used in the sense “virgin”. However, it may be that it is not the word *idesa* but the adjective *unwemme* and the context that gives an information that Lot’s daughters are “virgins”. *Ides* here, as Bäck (p. 236) classifies, may be regarded as conveying the information “maiden” or “girl”. Bäck registers no instance of the word used in the sense “virgin”. On the other hand, it must also be noted that the word *ides* occurs as a gloss to *virgo* at CollIGl 13 (Zupitza) 15. It is the only one instance of the word used as a gloss to *virgo*; it occurs as a


28) Bäck, p. 234. BT says, “it is supposed by Grimm to have been applied, in the earliest times, like the Greek *vúmph*, to superhuman beings, occupying a position between goddessesses and mere women, v.D.M. 372”.

29) ‘Here are within two spotless [maidsens], my daughters: neither of these damsels knows intercourse as yet through sleeping with a man: do then as I bid you, and cease from this sin. I give them both to you, before you commit this vileness against nature, heinous evil against the sons of men. Receive these maidens and let my guests go free, since I will defend them against you as well as I can, before God!’ The OE passage is cited from ASPR I; translation is cited from Mason, Lawrence (1990), *An Anglo-Saxon Genesis: Genesis A* translated by Lawrence Mason, illustrations from the manuscript (Felinfach: Llanerc Enterprises 1990; first published in 1915)
gloss for *virguncula* 7 times. All the other 64 instances of the word occur in verse only.

6. *mæg, mægden, mægeþ, meowle*

The OE words *mæg, mægden, mægeþ,* and *meowle* occur in the senses “girl”, “maiden”, “woman”, etc. as well as “virgin”, and it seems that those OE words are all etymologically connected. The primitive form of the OE *mæg* and *megeþ* is PG *mæþ* “girl, maiden”, which goes back to IE *mæthóto*- (a feminine formation to IE *maktu*- “boy, young man”); the diminutive of the IE feminine form gives PG *mæþ-óm-,* and OE *mægden,* the original sense being “little girl”; the IE masculine *maktu*- gives PG *mæþ-u-* “boy, young man”, and further PG *mæþū* with the feminine suffix -ī, becomes ultimately OE *meowle* with a diminutive suffix -l-, its etymological meaning being “little girl”.

Almost all instances of the words *mæg, megeþ, and meowle* are found in poetry. The following quotations from *Crist A* and *B* illustrate *mæg, megeþ, and meowle* referring to the Virgin Mary:

> Cweðo siode cæge mæg  
> symle sigores full, Sancta Maria:  

*Christ A* 87–88, underlined line)

> sīþan he Marian, mægða weolman,  
> mære meowlan, mundheals geceas,  

*Christ B* 445–46, underlines mine)

It seems that the words *mæg, megeþ, and meowle* in the above sentences are used in the sense “virgin”.

The OE word *mægd* is found in the following law text also, and it is the only one instance of the word in prose:

> Gif mon mægd gebiged, ceapi geceapod sy, gif hit ufacene is.  

*Law Abt 77, underline mine)*

Here BT translates *mægb* by “a woman”. However, *mægb* here cannot be a woman in general: in this law, especially *Law Abt 73–83,* the word is used in contrast to *frīwif* “free woman” and *widuwe*...
“widow”, and therefore, as shown above, Liebermann narrows its meaning to “Jungfrau”, Bäck (p. 214) classifying it under “(young) marriageable but unmarried woman”. The same can be said about its compounds maegbmann “maiden” or “virgin” and maegbot “the fine for violating a maid, virgin”; both of them are hapax legomena, occurring in the above law text, and their first element maeg- is contrasted with friwif and widuwe:

Gif man maegbmon nede genimeŋ: ðam agende L scillinga 7 eft æt ðam agende sinne willan ætgebice.\(^{36}\) (Law Abt 82.1, underline mine)

Gif friwif locbore leswaes hwæt gedeŋ, XXX scili’ gebete.

Maegbot sy swa friges mannes.\(^{37}\) (Law Abt 73–74, underlines mine)

Concerning the use of maegb and its compounds found in the above-mentioned laws, Bäck’s following remark deserves quotation:

... the text is Æthelberht’s laws, which is originally Kentish, from c. 601–604, but extant in late MSS only (c. 1120); the use is apparently a relic from the time when the word was used in common prose, the compounds maegbmann and maegbot also found in this text pointing to a more frequent use earlier.\(^{38}\)

7. maened

The word maegden is treated by Bäck (p. xii) as one of the two most central words in OE for the concept “girl”; the other is fæmne. The MCOE records as many as 751 instances of the word maegden. Its original signification “little girl” developed, in the course of the OE period, into “girl, maiden”, “(young) marriageable but unmarried woman”, “virgin”, “female servant”, etc. As the earliest quotation of the sense “girl, maiden”, which is the nearest sense to the original one, the OED cites from the West-Saxon Gospels (Mt 9,24), where maened is used to render puella. Bäck (p. 200), however, proposes the following quotation from Juliana 607–8 as the oldest example of this sense, and therefore of this word:

Da weard þære halgan hyht geniwaed
and þæs maegdnes mod miclum geflissad.\(^{39}\) (Jul 607–8, underline mine)

According to Bäck’s research, this word is found almost exclusively in prose texts, the example cited above being one of the two instances recorded in OE poetry.\(^{40}\) Bäck then (p. 201) proceeds to discuss the use of the word in the legends of saints, pointing out that “from c. 1000 the female saints are generally called maegden (the number of fæmne being small)”, and concludes that “on the whole

\(^{36}\) ‘Wenn jemand eine Jungfrau gewaltsam entführt, [büsse er] dem Eigentümer [der Vermundchaft über sie] 50 Schillinge und erkaufe nachher von diesem Eigentümer dessen Einwilligung [zur Ehe].’

\(^{37}\) ‘Wenn eine Freie, eine Lockenträgerin, etwas Unzüchtiges thut, büsse [ihr Schäden ihrem Vormunde] 30 Scill. [Die für Verletzung einer] Jungfrau [zu entrichtende] Busse sei so [hoch] wie [für die Verletzung] eines freien Mannes.’ BT translates the latter part, “let the fine be paid by an unmarried woman be the same as that by a free man (for the same offence)”.

\(^{38}\) Bäck, p. 214.

\(^{39}\) Cited from Gollancz (1895). ‘Then was the holy damsels’ hope renewed, the maiden’s mind was greatly cheered.’ Translation by Gollancz.

\(^{40}\) The instance of maegden in Juliana is controversial, as Bäck points out at p. 201.
The Old English Words for the Concepts “Virgin” and “Virginty”

*maegden* before c. 1000 meant only ‘girl, maiden’, not ‘virgin’. In the following quotation concerning Is 7, 14, Ælfric, in his treatise *On the Old and New Testament*, dated 1005–6, comments:

Isaías was gehaten sum halig witega on ēðera kininga timan, swa swa us kỴ́̃̈ boc. Se witegode be Criste swiðe gewislice, swiche he godespellere wære, swiðe gewyrdelice, 7 cwæð on his gesetnysse swa swa we secgær her: *Ecce virgo concepĭet & parĭet filium & vocăbitur nomen eius Emmanuel, & reliqua.* Efne maedan [fol. 1298] sceal geacænian 7 oncennan sunu 7 his nama bið gecegæd “God sylf ys mid us.”

(ÆLet 4 (SigewardZ) 570–82, underline mine)

Here the prophetic verse in the Old Testament is associated with the birth of Christ; the word *maedan* used to render *virgo* indicates the Virgin, as in the following remark in the same treatise, which concerns John the Baptist and Christ:

ac Crist næs na getead lo þissere wiðmētenysse, se þe acenned wæs of ðam cleeæn maedene.

(ÆLet 4 (SigewardZ) 856–57)

The implication of the pureness in virginity of the word *maedan* is further intensified by modification of the adjective *halgan* in the following passage from Ælfric’s Second Series of *Catholic Homilies* (dated 995):

MINE GEBROÐRU ðæ leofostan on þisum dæge we wyrðæ ðæs hælendes acennednesse æfter þære menniscynsizza; ðæ wæs tôðæ acenned of ðam halgan maedene MARIAN mid lichaman. mid mid swaðe. se ðæ wæs æfre mid ðam fæder wunigende on þære godcundynsizza.

(ÆCHom II, 1, 1–5, underlines mine)

With regard to the development of the sense “virgin” in *maegden*, Bäck (p. 203), pointing out the fact that the bulk of instances are furnished by Ælfric, makes the following remark in comparison with the sense “virgin” in *fæmne*, which was the usual word meaning “virgin” before c. 1000: “after that *maegden* is found in great numbers, being the regular WS word for ‘virgin’. In the Anglo-Saxon Gospels, the word *maegden* occurs 20 times in *Li* and 16 times in *Ru, WSCP* and *WSH*, but it is used to render Latin *puella* “girl”, not for *virgo*.

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42) Crawford (1922), pp. 40–41. 'A holy prophet there was, in time of the Kings, named *Isaías*, as the booke sheweth vs, who prophesied of Christ so euident and assuredly, as if he he were an Evangelist; and speaketh in his booke euem as we say here, *Ecce virgo concepĭet & parĭet filium, & vocăbitur nomen eius Emmanuel, & reliqua*: Behold a Virgin shall concieve and bring forth a sonne, and his name shall be called *God Selfe is with us*.'
43) *Ibid.* p. 52. ‘Yet in this comparison Christ is not reckoned, who was borne of a pure Virgin.’
44) Godden (1979), p. 3. As for the date, see Godden (1979, p. xciii) and Godden (1980, p. 207). ‘My dearest brethren, on this day we celebrate our Saviour’s birth according to humanity. He was to-day born of the holy maiden Mary, with body and with soul, who was ever existing with the Father in the Godhead.’ Translation by Thorpe (1846).
45) *Li* is for the Lindisfarne Gospels, *Ru* for the Rushworth Gospels, *WSCP* for MS 140 of the Library of Corpus Christi College, Cambridge, and *WSH* for MS Hatton 38 of the Bodleian Library. The difference in occurrence of this word among the MSS arises in Mt14,11, where *Li* has no expressed subject for the verb *tulit* “brought”, while *Ru1, WSCP* and *WSH* have *maegden* as the subject for the verb—Ru1 inserts *puella* before *dedit* (for *tulit* in *Li*); in Lk8,52, where *WSCP* and *WSH* expresses *maedan* as the subject for the verb *nis* rendering *non est* “is not”; in Mk5,41, where *WSCP* and *WSH* have *hire* for *puellae*; in Mk5,41, where *Ru2* seems to have followed the first gloss of *Li* and has *dohter, Li* having *maegden* as the second gloss also; in Mk5,42, where *WSCP* and *WSH* have *heo* and *hio* for *puella* Moreover, in *Li* each Gospel has introductory passages, in which also appears *puella* glossed with *maegden* 3 times (Mt I 18,10; Mk I 3,8; Lk I 6,1).
8. mædenmann

The word mæden was used also as the first element of the compound mægdenmann, which became extinct about the middle of the ME period (the last quotation citation in the *OED* dates *a* 1310). The *MCOE* records 10 examples of the compound, all of them occurring in prose (an instance at *ÆGI* 2.68, mædenmann, occurs as a gloss for *uirgo*); Bäck (pp. 231–32) remarks that it occurs in all dialects, but the sense “virgin” is found in WS texts from c 1000. The word is used to signify “girl, maiden”, “(young) marriageable but unmarried woman”, “female servant”, as well as “virgin”. The following quotation from Ælfric illustrates the use of mædenmann for the Virgin Mary:

\[
\begin{align*}
& \text{Ure hælend Crist} \quad \text{cydce, } \text{þæt he lufode} \\
& \text{þa } \text{hælgan cænnyse} \quad \text{on his } \text{þerowum swutelice,} \\
& \text{þa } \text{þæ he mædenmann} \quad \text{hion } \text{to meder } \text{gæces.}^{56}
\end{align*}
\]

(*ÆLET* 5 (Sygeführt) 13–15, underline mine)

This word in the following law is regarded as signifying “female servant” with a connotation of “virgin”.

\[
\text{Gif man wíð cœninges mægdenmann geligeþ, L scillinga gebete.}^{47}
\]

(*LawAbt* 10, underline mine)

In the same law text occurs, as discussed previously, a parallel formation mægphpmann, which is used in contrast to *widowe* and means “young marriageable but unmarried woman”. A final remark will be made on an interesting compound with *mægden*. This word is also combined with *æw*, the OE word for “marriage”, and forms the compound *mægdenæw*, a hapax legomenon, which occurs in the 11th century Law text, meaning “marriage with a virgin”:

\[
\text{Dæt bið rihthic lif, } \text{þet cnıht þurhwunge on hys } \text{cnithade, oddæt he on rihtre } \text{mægdenæwe gewifge, } \text{and habbe} \\
\text{þa } \text{siddan } \text{and } \text{nænige } \text{oðre, } \text{þa } \text{hwile } \text{seo } \text{libbe.}^{48}
\]

(*WPOL* 2.1.2, 88; *WPOL* 2.1.1, 188; underline mine)

It is stated here that a young man should retain his bachelorhood, or virginity?, until he lawfully marries a virgin.

**Summary**

Various words were employed in Anglo-Saxon literature as the terms to express the concepts “virgin” and “virginity”. *Fæmne* and *hagustald*, once important words as terms for “virgin” in the OE period, did not survive well into the ME period. Another term *mæden* prevalent and important in the OE period still survives in modern English, but its use for “virgin” has become archaic or literary. Those OE words and

46) Quoted from Assmann (1889), pp. 13–14. ‘Our Saviour Christ said that he loved the holy purity of his servants clearly, since he chose a virgin to his mother’. Translation by the present writer.
48) Quoted from Jost (1959, p. 130). BT translates: “that is right life, that a young man remain a bachelor until in lawful matrimony he take a maiden to wife, and let him have her afterwards and no other while she lives”.

their compounds were not originally used for the concepts “virgin” and “virginity”. They were later chosen as terms for those concepts by Anglo-Saxon authors or translators.

Bäck’s research (1934) is a pioneer work and thus very important in the history of the semasiological research into the words for “girl/maiden”. However, because of further advances in MS or textual studies, and because of advances in lexical studies, such as the publication of *A Microfiche Concordance to Old English*, it seems that his research needs to be reexamined. Some instances of the words discussed in the present article can be regarded as used in the sense “virgin”, as Bäck aptly interpreted, but others cannot be regarded so. In some cases discrepancy in interpretation can be observed among lexicographers or translators.

Further semasiological research should be carried on concerning the major OE words employed for the concept “virgin” or “virginity”, such as *fæmne, hehstald, maðen*, their derivatives and compounds, as well as *mægþod*. As discussed in the present article, they occur in various texts. Even by the glimpses at the glosses at Lk 1.27 in the Lindisfarne Gospels and the Rushworth Gospels can be recognised not only an interesting terminological difference between the two texts, but also interesting terminological confusion of *hehstald* and *fæfne* by Owun, one of the two glossators of the Rushworth Gospels. Furthermore, it is also learned that the form *fæfne*, which is a variant of *fæmne*, is unique to Owun. The comprehensive and exhaustive research into the use of those words in connection with the discussion of the Anglo-Saxon literary world, and especially with the background of the Anglo-Saxon texts, will cast further illumination upon the semasiological development of the terms for the concepts “virgin” and “virginity”.