David L. White

Failure of Devoicing with Gothic /g-γ/ and the Meaning of Gothic <h>

It has long been known (e.g. Wright 1954[1910]: 76-77, 80-8;) that though the Gothic labial and dental phonemes /b-ƀ/ and /d-đ/ show final devoicing to /f,θ/, the velar phoneme /g-γ/ does not show parallel devoicing to /h-x/, which would have been spelled <h> (Robinson 1992: 6). For convenience the devoicing in question has been called "final" here, notwithstanding the fact that technically it occurs wherever a voiced phoneme does not follow. Though the conventional wisdom posits that Gothic used <h> to spell a phoneme [h-x], and that Gothic had a rule of final devoicing for fricatives, together these propositions wrongly predict that Gothic /g-γ/ should undergo final devoicing appear as <h>. One of the two propositions given above must be wrong, and the first question is which one. Since a natural phonetic rule like final devoicing would be expected to apply across the board, our suspicion must fall first on the proposition that Gothic used <h> to spell a phoneme [h-x]. If [x] produced by final devoicing of /g-γ/ was regarded not as belonging with [h] in the phoneme spelled <h> but as belonging with [γ] in the phoneme spelled <g>, then <g> is what we would expect to see, and that is what we do see.

So if Gothic <h> did not spell a phoneme /h-x/, then what did it spell? The frequent appearance of Gothic <h> in moraic position, as in <mahts> ('might'), and with lowering of any earlier preceding /i,u/ to /e,o/, as in <-taihun> ('told'), traditionally regarded as spelling /-tehun/ from /-tihun/, indicates that [h] is not a realistic possibility. For (contrastive) [h] to exist in moraic position, though not unheard of (Sanskrit, Malay), would be unusual, nor would [h], having no true oral component, be expected to exert any distorting influence on preceding vowels. The best possibility, given that uvulars are known to exert a lowering effect on adjacent high vowels, appears to be that Gothic <h> spelled a phoneme that at least included uvular [X], and possibly nothing else, which is to say that Gothic <h> spelled either /h-X/ or /X/. If Gothic <h> did spell uvular /X/, the simplest explanation would be that there was an unconditioned change of velar /x/ to uvular /X/ before non-moraic /x/ became pronounced as [h]. If so, a new alternation between /g-γ/ and /X/, now involving a significant shift of consonantal place, would no longer be as natural as the other devoicings were, and would so be vulnerable to loss, with either /X/ or /g-γ/ being generalized in any given case. The spelling <h> would not then appear for the devoicing of /g-γ/ to [x], which is the fact that needs to be explained. Cases like <-taihun> would represent /X/ being generalized, while cases like <dag> would represent /g-γ/ being generalized. Some supporting evidence that such a split of former [x] into either /X/ or /g-γ/ did in fact occur is found in the cases of <h> appearing in Gothic where <g> would be expected given by Barber (1932: 18-24), which appear to indicate that an earlier alternation involving final devoicing of /g-γ/ was later eliminated through a process of generalizing either /X/ or /g-γ/ with, as would be expected, somewhat random results.

References:
Barber, Charles. 1932. *Die Vorgeschichtliche Betonung der Germanischen Substantiva und Adjektiva*. Heidelberg: Carl Winters Universitätsbuchhandlung.
Robinson, Orrin. 1992. *Old English and Its Closest Relatives: A Survey of the Earliest Germanic Languages.* Stanford: Stanford University Press.
Wright, Joseph. 1954 [1910]. *A Grammar of the Gothic Language; second edition with a supplement to the grammar by O.L Sayce.* Oxford: Clarendon Press.