East Germanic Is a Valid Subgrouping[1]

Vendela Ruby

Introduction There is a gap in our understanding of Germanic phylogeny: did non-Northwest Gmc languages like Gothic, Vandalic, and Burgundian form a separate East Gmc branch? The traditional view is that they did (HR:43), but recent work (H, HR, Kim 2024) argues that Gothic, Vandalic, and Burgundian could be "individual splits from the [Proto-Gmc] root" (HR:67) as there are no shared innovations. I argue that final devoicing of fricatives but not stops was a shared East Gmc innovation. This addresses the gap in our knowledge about Germanic, supporting the traditional hypothesis that East Gmc is a valid subgrouping.

Predictions and data Proto-Gmc 'voiced stops' were fricatives after vowels: *b, *d > *β, *ð / V_ (see Ringe 2006: 215 for details, especially for velars, which are not relevant here). I claim that East Gmc devoiced the fricative allophones only. This predicts that **1)** word-final fricatives (*/b, d/ after vowels) are consistently voiceless, while word-final stops (*/b, d/ after consonants) are consistently voiced, **2)** voiced fricatives are occasionally reanalysed as voiceless if they are often heard word-finally, and **3)** voiceless fricatives are occasionally reanalysed as voiced, since e.g. word-final [...θ] is ambiguous between *θ and *ð < *d. Prediction 1) holds in general in Gothic and Vandalic, (1)-(2), as expected of a sound change. Prediction 2) holds in isolated words in Gothic and Burgundian, (3)-(4), and prediction 3) holds in isolated words in all three languages, (5)-(7), as expected of reanalyses.

(1) Gothic final */d/
a. [band]   b. [miθ]
 <band>   <miþ>
 'bound'   'with'
 Wright (1910: 9, 12)

(2) Vandalic final */d/
a. [aɣishild]   b. [gaizare:θ]
 <agisild>   <geisirith>
 'Fear-Battle (name)' 'Spear-Advice (name)'
 H:130, FO:146   H:133, FO:158

(3) Gothic /blo:θ/ < *blo:ð < *blo:d
[blo:θis]
<bloþis>
'blood (genitive)'
Bernhardsson (2011: 121)

(4) Burgundian /gais/ < *gaiz
[gaisaɸriðus]
<gaissefredus>
'Spear-Peace (name)'
HR:74

(5) Gothic [anz-] < *ans-
[anza]
<anza>
'beam (dative)'
Bernhardsson (2011: 119)

(6) Vandalic [ɸrið-] < *ɸriθ-
[ɸriðus]
<fridus>
'Peace (name)'
H:128, FO:154

(7) Burgundian [ɸrið-] < *ɸriθ-
[ɸriðumundi]
<fredemundi>
'Peace-Protector (name)'
HR:73

Subgrouping Final devoicing is common, so its value for subgrouping is limited (H:113, HR:62, Kim 2024: 32, 36). However, Goths, Vandals, and Burgundians are all known from around the Vistula in the early centuries BCE (Kim 2024: 39), and had devoicing of fricatives but not of stops. This is consistent with forms from Gepidic (Vogel 1885: 210), Herulian (Maenchen-Helfen 1947: 837), and Rugian (Mommsen 1898: 7). Devoicing occurred very early, with Gothic devoicing on the Kovel' spearhead dating to the early 3rd century CE (Rübekeil 2017: 992). Rather than assume this rarer form of devoicing developed thrice in the same place and time by chance, I treat fricative devoicing as one change in Proto-East Gmc.

Conclusion Gothic, Vandalic, and Burgundian shared final devoicing of fricatives but not stops. This was likely a single shared innovation in Proto-East Gmc, and not three unrelated sound changes, supporting a Germanic family tree with a separate East Gmc branch.

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1   FO = Francovich-Onesti (2002), Gmc = Germanic, H = Hartmann (2020), HR = Hartmann & Riegger (2022)