In influential handbooks of Old Norse-Icelandic or Old West Norse (hereafter OWN) and of comparative Germanic linguistics, an archaic 2nd person present singular form est of the verb vera/vesa “to be” is often given side-by-side with well-attested archaic twelfth-century forms such as 3rd person pres. sg. es and 2 preterite sg. vast (e.g. in Iversen 1974: 112, Lehmann 1986: 205, Noreen 1923: 359, Prokosch 1939: 220). Est is assumed to have been replaced by the later form ert by analogy with the -r- common to the rest of the verb’s paradigm, e.g. the 2 pres. pl. eruð, the past participle verit, etc. (Finnur Jónsson 1901: 92, Noreen 1923: 359).

However, est is not attested in any Old Icelandic (hereafter OIc) manuscript, nor can its existence in earlier OIc be inferred from rhymes in skaldic poetry. And while the 2 pres. sg. form est is sporadically attested in Old Norwegian (ONorw) and a similar 2 pres. sg. form æst is attested from the more distantly-related Old Swedish (OSwed), we do not need to suppose that the amply-attested form ert came about by analogical remodeling of est, since each form can be explained by its own independent etymology.

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Occurrences of *(þú)* es/est/æst

The sole attestation in OIC of a 2 pres. sg. form with -s- is found in Clemens saga, in the older section of Cod. AM 645 4o, where the aberrant form attested is not est but “es þv” (page 13r26; see also editions: Carron 2005: 8, Larsson 1885: 38, and cf. Larsson 1891: 356–63). This could be a unique survival of the original 2 pres. sg form es (cf. Gothic is, as well as the archaic OIC 3 pres. sg. es, which represents the original 2 pres. sg., as does the 3 pres. sg. in all classes of verbs in OIC except the preterite-present verbs). More likely it is a scribal error; the ms. vacillates between the forms es and er for the relative particle and for the 3 pres. sg. of vera, and a simple slip could have resulted in writing “es þv” rather than “er þv,” which occurs in AM 645 4to (Larsson 1885: lxix). It is also possible that a form es and/or er, identical to the 3 pres sg., competed with the form ert for a period, arising out of analogy with the usual state of OWN verbs, which have identical 2 pres. and 3 pres. sg. Whatever the explanation for this lone occurrence of es as a 2 pres. sg., it is not an occurrence of est, and this part of this manuscript, which dates to the first half of the thirteenth century (Carron 2005: xxiv–xxv), otherwise has 20 occurrences of 2 pres. sg. forms with -r-, spelled variously ert, ért, ertu, erþv (Larsson 1891: 361). And no other forms of the 2 pres. sg. with -s- are found elsewhere in the OIC corpus, including in the early Icelandic Homily Book (cf. de Leeuw van Weenen 2004: 172).

The form ert occurs in skothending (rhyme of consonants in syllable coda; in this case ert: skortir) in a skaldic stanza written by the Icelander Einarr Skúlason (fl. ca. 1140), who shows by other rhymes that the 3rd person pres. sing. “is” remains es in his twelfth century OIC (Finnur Jónsson 1901: 92–93). Having reviewed the corpus of skaldic poetry in Finnur Jónsson’s Den norsk-islandske skjaldedigtning (1912–15), I have found no occurrences of the 2 pres. sg. of vera/vesa in a rhyming position that could suggest the existence of a form est.

Widely-cited authorities such as Noreen (1923: 359) together with Finnur Jónsson (1901: 92) have assumed that est was replaced by ert earlier than es was replaced by er. However, the form est/æst does not seem to be an archaic forerunner of ert, but rather a regionally restricted variant of the 2 pres. sg. of vera. The 2 sg. pres. æst is sporadically attested in the OSwed Äldre Västgötalagen (e.g. in Collin and Schlyter 1827: 38, 39), which dates from the early thirteenth century (Wessén 1965: vii). The form est also occurs three times in the Old Norwegian Homily Book (Indrebø 1931: 8, 9, 149; cf. Holtmark 1955: 703), written
by two hands, both of whose language is identifiably Northwest Norwegian (Hægstad 1907: 41–54). The manuscript is dated to the early thirteenth century (Indrebø 1931: *38), but Indrebø dates the exempla for the homilies in question to ca. 1150 based on archaic features, one of which is the verb form (þú) est (Ibid.: *39–*57). It is notable, however, that of all the occurrences of the copula verb vera in the Norwegian Homily Book, the only other form with -s- is a single occurrence of the infinitive vesa (cf. Holtsmark 1955: 703–711).

Etymology

The form æst/est could be explained by the etymology which Prokosch and Noreen offer for est (viz. the original 2 sg. es + -t from the analogy of preterite-present verbs and/or the accretion of the 2 sg. nom. personal pronoun – see Prokosch 1939: 220 and Noreen 1913: 213). But the sporadic attestation of this OSwed and ONorw form cannot be taken to imply that the form ert is derived from it. With the single aforementioned exception of one occurrence of the infinitive vesa in the Norwegian Homily Book, the form æst/est does not occur in mss. that contain other forms of the copula with archaic -s- (indeed, in the literary period, it is almost only in OIc that we do see forms such as vesa, es, vas, but conspicuously never est), and an alternative etymology, which does not require an intermediate form est, can be offered for the attested OWN ert. By this account, OWN ert is a cognate of Old English (OE) eart.

The 2 pres. sg. of the cognate verb wesan “to be” in OE is attested in the forms eart (West Saxon), earð (Mercian), and ard (Northumbrian); the 3 pres. sg. in all dialects is is (Hogg and Fulk 2011: 309–13; for the relation of this form to Gothic 3 pres. sg. ist see Mezger 1937: 139 n. 4). The OE 2 pres. sg. forms presuppose Proto-Germanic (PGmc) *arþ, part of the paradigm of a preterite-present verb built to the Proto-Indo-European root *er/or- “arise, arouse” (Hogg and Fulk 2011: 312, Ringe 2006: 261, Seebold 1970: 80–1). The 2 pres. sg. of this verb was added by suppletion to the paradigm of the verb “to be” in Pre-OE and, according to my account, in Pre-OWN as well. This otherwise lost preterite-present verb also supplies the present plural in Mercian OE (earun) and Northumbrian OE (arun, aron), though the resemblance of these forms to the OWN present pl. forms erum, erud, eru is probably coincidence; the vowel /e/ of the OWN forms is better accounted for if these are
descended from PGmc 1 pres. pl. *izum etc. with OWN lowering of *
\(i > e\) *R (< \(z\)) (Ringe 2006: 195;) cf. the Old Gutnish 3 pres. pl. *iru
(Noreen 1904: 475).

If OWN *eart is indeed from PGmc *arþ as I suggest, then its vocalism
may be expected to have been influenced by the remainder of the present
paradigm of archaic OWN *vesa (1 sg. *em, 3 sg. *es, 1 pl. *erum, 2 pl. *eruð,
3 pl. *eru); otherwise PGmc *arþ should lautgesetzlich have produced
OIC *art. The -t of *ert is expected as the result of the devoicing of word-
final *ð after nasals and liquids in Proto-Scandinavian (Iversen 1973: 32)
and/or as the result of analogy to the 2 pres. sg. ending of the preterite-
present verbs, as the unique 2 pres. sg. ending *-ð/-þ would have been
subject to heavy analogical pressure from the common preterite-present
ending -t at any stage of the language’s development from PGmc to OIC.
This latter explanation accounts for final -t in West Saxon OE *eart as well
(Prokosch 1939: 221).

In conclusion, the notion that *est is an archaic 2nd person pres. sing.
of the verb “to be,” later analogically remodeled to *ert, requires rethinking,
as the two forms *ert and *est can be accounted for by two separate ety-
malogies, and the occurrence of *est appears to be regionally restricted
rather than archaic. It is possible that the two forms once coexisted, with
the form *ert generalized earlier in OIC than in some dialects of ONorw
and OSwed.

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