CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

I. Language, Proper Names, and Archaic Features

The study of proper names is relevant to many fields of inquiry. Among these may be included literature, sociology, settlement history, prosopography, and the history of religion, to name a few.¹ For our purposes it is the contribution of onomastics to the study of language that claims attention.

A. Language and Proper Names

There is a consensus among onomatologists that proper names can be derived, both semantically and morphologically, from an appellative (= common noun) or some other "pre-individualizing" ground form.² Initially the proper name and the ground form from which it is derived are homophones. The range of their use, however, is markedly different. Kurylowicz has pointed out that any appellative has both a content and a zone of employment, and the latter is related inversely to the former: the more specific the semantic content, the more restrained the employment of a given word.³ Since the proper name has an exceedingly rich content, its range of applicability is reduced to the minimum. Originally it referred to a class composed of a single


individual, and therefore in principle is not transmissible. Whereas common nouns 'designate', proper nouns 'name'.

Since proper nouns do not follow the same currents of change that common nouns do, eventually the homophony that existed between the proper name and its ground form is resolved. While the proper name goes its own way, the appellative develops separately in time. To cite two examples, the German proper names Witte and Grote are archaic fossilized forms of the current adjectives weiß and groß, meaning "white" and "great." This divergence can best be understood against the backdrop of one of the most fundamental principles of linguistics--language change. The two aspects of this change are addition and subtraction. Concomitant with creating new forms by internal development and borrowing, old forms fall into disuse, either disappearing entirely or continuing in limited use as archaisms. Weinreich and others have constructed a theory of language change that recognizes the coexistence of an archaic and an innovating form within a grammar. An opposition exists between these forms, and when the social and linguistic issues attached to them are resolved and the opposition is no longer maintained, the receding variant disappears, unless, as we may add, it is retained as an archaism.

Although the appellative or ground form undergoes changes involving many different linguistic levels and many different mechanisms, the proper name is not liable to some of these mechanisms, and in turn undergoes mechanisms of its own (e.g., "Jacob" becomes "Jim"). Indeed to some extent change would be contrary to its very function. As Pulgram states: "...once a proper name has become attached to an individual entity, ...a change would run counter to the aim of its func-

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5 These examples are cited by Georg Kampffmeyer, "Südarabisches," ZDMG 54 (1900) 633-34. To be sure, the difference between the two sets of forms is of a regional and dialectal nature as well. Note also the German names Otto, Berta, and Minna, which preserve the masculine and feminine endings of Old High German, which were elsewhere reduced to ë (so F. W. Geers, "Das endschwache Zeitwort in hebräischen Eigenamen," AJSL 27 [1910-11] 302).