Old English has an elaborate lexical scheme to express the notion and measurement of time. Different time words and phrases highlight different aspects of time, such as short or long duration, a well-defined point in time, the time appointed for a certain action, or a period with a distinct beginning or end. Most of these words and expressions define time with the help of the time-space coordinates, which in itself is not surprising. Time is generally conceptualized metaphorically in physical terms, as if it had physical dimensions and were located in space.¹ The conceptual metaphor TIME IS SPACE provides a structure for understanding time and for describing it through language. The following study of select Old English time words suggests that in Anglo-Saxon England the concept of time was connected with a specific space, the house or hall, which adds a culture-specific aspect to this otherwise wide-spread conceptual metaphor. The intersection of temporal and spatial dimensions in the image of the hall is well illustrated by the use of the hall as a metaphor for human life by King Edwin’s thane in Bede’s *Historia Ecclesiastica Gentis Anglorum* (book two, chapter thirteen).² Lexical evidence further reveals that these


temporal and spatial coordinates are supplemented by a third coordinate of ‘action’ and the three form an inseparable unity.

The objective of the present paper is twofold. On the one hand I will explore how time is conceptualized through structure, how temporal structure is reflected in language, and how that relates to physical space. First I will discuss competing medieval notions of the structure of time, which will be followed by an overview of the semantic field of “time” in Old English, in order to understand the place in the lexical spectrum of three specific words, Old English *fyrst*, *hwil*, and *fæc*, which constitute the linguistic evidence for my argument. On the other hand, since conceptual categories are embedded in culture and operate at a deeper level than their lexical realizations, in the second part of the paper I will investigate whether the concept of time as reflected in the lexical evidence can be attested outside of language. The findings of the lexical analysis are thus juxtaposed with evidence of a very different kind, namely that provided by Norse mythology. Norse myths offer an insight into traditional narratives of time relating to those that the Anglo-Saxons might have had. Such a comparison is justified by the close affinities between certain aspects of Anglo-Saxon and early medieval Scandinavian culture, as well as the common origin of the Anglo-Saxon and Norse cosmologies. The approach is of course tentative and the use of Norse mythological source material in an Anglo-Saxon context is somewhat problematic. Nonetheless, these narratives

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4 As Alaric Hall has recently argued, for example, the early Anglo-Saxon conceptions of the relationships of human beings to mythological races were fundamentally similar to those attested in skaldic verse. See Alaric Hall, *Elves in Anglo-Saxon England. Matters of Belief, Health, Gender and Identity*, Anglo-Saxon Studies 8 (Woodbridge: Boydell, 2007).