

OBW: a minor mystery

The Whorl list — 3 messages, 3 voices, 23 Jul 2000

<https://urth.darkrealm.vip/thread/whorl/868>

Exported from an unofficial mirror of a public mailing list. Copyright in each message remains with the person who wrote it. Email addresses are obscured as `user at host`, the form the original archive published. This file was rebuilt from parsed fields rather than retained headers, so it is faithful in content but not byte-exact.

William Ansley — 23 Jul 2000, 22:59

I have just finished IGJ. Although I hadn't intended to, I re-read OBW in its entirety first. I certainly noticed several things that I hadn't the first two times I read it but one trivial point stuck in my mind. I am going into great depth about this point, even though I say it is trivial because Wolfe must have had something definite in mind here and it seems as if it is possible to figure it out, to some degree, at least.

It is a matter of the units of measure Horn mentions in OBW. The most common unit mentioned is the "hand". I did a little horseback riding long ago and seemed to recall that that a hand was 4 inches (10.16 cm). Webster's Third International Dictionary confirmed this and didn't reveal any other measurements associated with hand. Horn also uses cubit as a measurement frequently. According to the dictionary (and my own memory) the historical length of a cubit is uncertain but it is generally agreed to have been about 18 inches (45.72 cm).

The problem I have with this is that the way Horn uses hand it seems as if it must be a unit closer to 8 inches (20.32 cm). Otherwise certain passages in OBW don't seem to make sense. For example (I have added my own notes in square brackets):

Earlier I wrote that she [Mucor] is not tall, but that was misleading. Majesty is not a mere matter of a hand or two over the eight.

OBW, p. 106, lines 4-6

The blade [of Sinew's hunting knife] was a hand and two fingers in length, two fingers wide [...]

OBW, p. 144, lines 30-31

My own height, I should say was three cubits and two hands at that time -- a good deal less than it is now.

OBW, p. 196, lines 3-4

Now, I interpret the first passage I quote above to mean that eight hands is the average height for a woman (or person in general) and that a hand or two over that would be (majestically, to shallow thinkers) tall. But eight traditional hands is only 32 inches (81.28 cm), far too short for a full grown woman, unless being on The Whorl has somehow turned all the colonists into midgets. But if we say a hand on Blue is 8 inches, then eight hands becomes 64 inches (162.56 cm), a much more reasonable average height for a woman, at least by modern standards. If it is 7 inches (17.78 cm) then eight hands becomes 56 inches (142.24 cm), short by modern standards, but still reasonable.

The second passage describes Sinew's hunting knife, which Horn refers to as long at least once.

I loaned Maytera the long hunting knife Sinew had given me, and held my fish steady for her.

OBW, p. 9,1 lines 30-31

If a hand is the traditional measure, and assuming a finger is an inch (which is not necessarily a safe assumption), then the blade would be 6 inches (15.24 cm) long. Now, I don't think that qualifies as a long hunting knife. However if a hand is 8 inches, then the blade becomes 10 inches (25.4 cm) long. If 7, then 9 inches (22.86 cm). A hunting knife with a blade of this length seems to me to more appropriately be described as long.

For the third passage I am assuming a cubit is 18 inches (45.72 cm), which is certainly questionable if hand represents a non-traditional measure, but if Wolfe has redefined all units of measure then nothing definite can be established. With this assumption, Horn's height is 62 inches or 5 feet 2 inches (157.48 cm) using the traditional measure for a hand. Surely this is a bit short. If we assume that a hand is 8 inches then Horn's height is 70 inches or 5 feet 10 inches (177.8 cm) which seems more like it. If we have a 7 inch hand then Horn is 68 inches or 5 feet 8 inches (172.72 cm) tall.

Now all the units of measure used by Horn are based on the lengths of parts of the body. A 'finger' is probably the width of a finger, between 0.5 (1.27 cm) and 1 inch (2.54 cm). A cubit is the length from the elbow to the tip of the longest outstretched fingertip (18 inches). A traditional hand is the width of the palm of the hand (4 inches). But perhaps Wolfe is thinking of the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the pinkie when the fingers are spread as far as possible. This is traditionally known as a "span" and is traditionally 9 inches (22.86 cm). Or perhaps Wolfe version of 'hand' is measured from the base of the hand the the tip of the middle finger (which might well come to between 7 and 8 inches).

Another thing we need to know before we can reach any definite conclusions is whether the units of measure Horn is using are standard (like current English units such as the foot) or not. In the latter case, each person would use his or her own foot to measure out a length, to continue with the same example.

Well, I have gone on far too long about this, so I'll stop here.

William Ansley

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

matthew.malthouse — 24 Jul 2000, 09:02 · follows William Ansley

On 24/07/2000 03:59:24 William Ansley wrote:

I have just finished IGJ. Although I hadn't intended to, I re-read OBW in its entirety first. I certainly noticed several things that I hadn't the first two times I read it but one trivial point stuck in my mind. I am going into great depth about this point, even though I say it is trivial because Wolfe must have had something definite in mind here and it seems as if it is possible to figure it out, to some degree, at least.

It is a matter of the units of measure Horn mentions in OBW. The most common unit mentioned is the "hand". I did a little horseback riding

long go and seemed to recall that that a hand was 4 inches (10.16 cm). Webster's Third International Dictionary confirmed this and didn't reveal any other measurements associated with hand. Horn also uses cubit as a measurement frequently. According to the dictionary (and my own memory) the historical length of a cubit is uncertain but it is generally agreed to have been about 18 inches (45.72 cm).

The problem I have with this is that the way Horn uses hand it seems as if it must be a unit closer to 8 inches (20.32 cm). Otherwise certain passages in OBW don't seem to make sense. For example (I have added my own notes in square brackets):

....

Now all the units of measure used by Horn are based on the lengths of parts of the body. A 'finger' is probably the width of a finger, between 0.5 (1.27 cm) and 1 inch (2.54 cm). A cubit is the length from the elbow to the tip of the longest outstretched fingertip (18 inches). A traditional hand is the width of the palm of the hand (4 inches). But perhaps Wolfe is thinking of the distance from the tip of the thumb to the tip of the pinkie when the fingers are spread as far as possible. This is traditionally known as a "span" and is traditionally 9 inches (22.86 cm). Or perhaps Wolfe version of 'hand' is measured from the base of the hand the the tip of the middle finger (which might well come to between 7 and 8 inches).

A "hand" could plausibly be the length from heel to fingertip - in my case 7 inches or alternatively the span from thumb to little finger-tip 9 inches.

Matthew

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.

Fernando Q. Gouvea — 24 Jul 2000, 09:07 · follows matthew.malthouse

**** On Sun, 23 Jul 2000 22:59:24 -0400, William Ansley <wansley at warwick.net> said:

WA> Now all the units of measure used by Horn are based on the lengths of WA> parts of the body. A 'finger' is probably the width of a finger, WA> between 0.5 (1.27 cm) and 1 inch (2.54 cm). A cubit is the length from WA> the elbow to the tip of the longest outstretched fingertip (18 WA> inches). A traditional hand is the width of the palm of the hand (4 WA> inches). But perhaps Wolfe is thinking of the distance from the tip of WA> the thumb to the tip of the pinkie when the fingers are spread as far WA> as possible. This is traditionally known as a "span" and is WA> traditionally 9 inches (22.86 cm). Or perhaps Wolfe version of 'hand' WA> is measured from the base of the hand the the tip of the middle finger WA> (which might well come to between 7 and 8 inches).

I had been assuming that a "hand" was what you call a "span", sort of unconsciously, I guess because the common measure in Brazil (called "um palmo") assumes the outstretched hand. The measurements do seem to make more sense if we take a hand to mean the outstretched hand, though the other option, from the heel of the hand to the tip of the fingers, would also seem to give reasonable values.

WA> Another thing we need to know before we can reach any definite WA> conclusions is whether the units of measure Horn is using are standard WA> (like current English units such as the foot) or not. In the latter WA> case, each person would use his or her

own foot to measure out a WA> length, to continue with the same example.

I think we can be pretty certain that they are not standard, at least as used in everyday talk. Standardization would imply measuring devices, which I don't think we've seen at all. So we should take all these measurements as approximate.

Fernando

Fernando Q. Gouvea
Department of Mathematics Editor, FOCUS and MAA Online
Colby College <http://www.maa.org>
Waterville, ME 04901
fqgouvea@colby.edu <http://www.colby.edu/math>
=====

Nihilism should commence with oneself.

*This is WHORL, for discussion of Gene Wolfe's Book of the Long Sun.