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On the Etymology of *Adel*

A topos in the undergraduate lectures of the honorand, which I can personally attest to be of at least two years' standing and suspect to be a deal older, is the account of how he would stand before the undergraduate denizens of the Leeds parish of Adel and announce to them how blessed they were to inhabit a place whose name, etymologically, was related to Old Icelandic *aðal*, whose own etymological meaning is of course 'noble'. The tale proceeds, however, with the admission that, belatedly consulting the authorities on the subject, he discovered that Adel in fact took its name from Old English *adela*, cognate not with *aðal* but with *eðja*, and meaning 'filth, dirt, dirty place; foul filth; bilge-water' and possibly even 'sewer, privy' (*Dictionary of Old English*, s.v.).

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, *adela* comes into Modern English as *addle*, the most familiar usage of which, at least to the present writer, is in the compound *addle-brained*, 'applied contemptuously to one whose intellect seems muddled'. The identification with *adela* was first made, to my knowledge, in 1936 in Eilert Ekwall's *Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, where Ekwall noted, in addition to later forms, the Domesday Book spelling *Adele*, and the marginally later form *Adela*. A. H. Smith set his own seal of approval on the etymology in both his *English Place-Name Elements* and *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire* (EPNS 25, s.v *adela*; 33, p. 189), and it has since been repeated in A. D. Mills's *Dictionary of British Place-Names*. It is perhaps, indeed, the undistinguished etymology so uniformly asserted by these works that accounts for the complete absence of Adel from the most recent major survey, Victor Watt's *Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*.

It will not, then, come as a surprise that an inhabitant of Adel might wish for an alternative etymology for his parish-name. Indeed, the rise during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries of the spelling *Adel* in favour of *Addle* (which had been usual from the sixteenth century) seems to have stemmed precisely from a desire to dissociate the parish from the common noun *addle*, still current in Yorkshire dialect in the meaning 'muck-heap' (Simpson, *Archæologia Adelensis*, 3; Draper, *Adel and its Norman Church*, 4). Nor, however, would the concerned citizen be without philological grounds for questioning the *adela* etymology. In his *Namenkundliche Studien zum Germanenproblem*, Jürgen Udolph identified no fewer than five examples of place-names containing *adela* in England and a further nine elsewhere (pp. 295–99). However, Adel is the only example in which *adela* is not a determiner, modifying some more generic place-name element, but the entire name: to name a field *Adellmeade*

(Gloucester) or a track *Addle Path* (Dorset) is one thing, but to name a whole parish 'sewer' seems extreme. Moreover, it is common for the medial syllables of Old English words to go missing in Domesday Book's place-name spellings: to adopt an old standby in philological argumentation, we might suggest that the Domesday form *Adele* is in fact too similar to Old English *adela* for plausibility and is more likely to be a contracted form of some longer (and nobler) name. One thinks of Kenneth Cameron's bald but firm assertion that in the field-name Adeldayles in Lincolnshire 'the first el. is a pers.n. rather than **adela** 'filth, a sewer', perhaps the OE Ēadhild fem. or ContGerm *Adela* fem.' (EPNS 77, p. 160; the second element is Old Norse *deill*). Of course, it would be possible to argue that the Old English *adela* had undergone no phonological reduction in the name of Adel precisely because it retained its full semantic force right to the end of the eleventh century, but there are at least grounds for seeking alternative explanations.

Nor is it only the honorand who has provided them. In 1715, the great Leeds historian Ralph Thoresby gamely attempted to present '*Adle* or *Adel*' as a reflex of '*Agel* or *Adelocum* of the Ancients' (*Ducatus Leodiensis*, p. 161). He at first assumed that *-locum* was the Latin for 'place', but, on reading Olaus Verelius's *Index linguæ veteris Scytho-Scandica sive Gothica,* suggested that the element might be 'Loekr *rivus*, Leekur *rivulus*', corresponding to Icelandic *lækur* (p. 267). Such an early Germanic pedigree for *Adel* would be intriguing. But, although he went to some lengths rhetorically to maneouvre round the problem, Thoresby could not quite bring himself to deny that the reliable form of the Roman name is in fact *Segelocum,* and that Segelocum was altogether too far south to be Adel. (It was in fact at Littleborough, Nottinghamshire, and the second element is cognate with Welsh *llwch* 'lake': Rivett and Smith, *Place-Names of Roman Britain*, 453.) Accordingly, a century later, Thomas Dunham Whitacker offered, without further comment, 'ADEL, The Adhill of the Liber Regis, which probably gives the true etymology of the word, the Hill of Ada, the first Saxon colonist of the place' (*Loidis and Elmete*, p. 174). This explanation was apparently warmly received and was repeated frequently into the twentieth century in, for example, the 1822 edition of Thomas Langdale's *Topographical Dictionary of Yorkshire* (s.v.), John Mayhall's 1860 *Annals and History of Leeds* (p. 19), and James B. Johnston's *The Place-Names of England and Wales*, from 1915 (s.v. *Addle*).

The concensus was disturbed in 1879, by Henry Trail Simpson in his *Archæologia Adelensis*. The fact alone that Simpson managed to sustain a two-hundred and ninety-seven page monograph on the subject of Adel is a mark of his erudition, but so too is his etymology of its name. Satisfied neither with Whitacker's etymology nor the 'groundless superstition' that 'the name of Adel was given to the parish in honour of Adela, one of the

daughters of the Conqueror', Simpson succeeded, across a mere eleven pages, in making reference to, *inter alia*, a 'Saxon, or Dano-Saxon' family by the name of *Idle*; a 'Teutonic goddess' called *Ada*; Adad, 'a chief goddess of the Assyrians'; the Irish missionary monk Aidan; and *Alme 'i.e.* "the learned," … the name given by the modern Arabs and Egyptians to the dancing and singing girls of Egypt' (pp. 2–16). The resulting discourse is, at least to the trained linguist, almost completely baffling (one might even say Adel-brained). Nevertheless, Simpson's argument can, surely, hardly fail to please Adel's academic community, since he emerged claiming that Adel was once the central point of devotion in a 'territory then devoted to the worship of the "God of wisdom" ' (whose worship had been brought there by the Phoenicians). Sadly for Simpson, his energetic attempts to elevate Adel's etymology seem not to have been influential, confidence in Whitaker's vision of Ada the Anglo-Saxon settler passing unshaken into the twentieth century.

But Whitacker's recourse to the form *Adhill* is certainly wishful thinking: even if this form is real (it is not listed among the forms collected by Smith for the EPNS), **Ada-hyll* or **Adan hyll* cannot explain the final vowel of Domesday *Adele,* and it is in any case too late, too unusual, and too easily explained as folk-etymologisation to be taken as a basis for an etymology. Nor does William H. Draper's suggestion in 1909 of 'a word "edzel" meaning aspen trees' (*Adel and its Norman Church*, p. 4) inspire confidence. Draper was also the first commentator to make a serious bid in print for taking *Adel* as a cognate of *aðal* (or at least Old English *æðele*). But Simpson had already considered this possibility (p. 3), and it may not come as a comfort to the honorand to know that he dismissed it as mere whimsy. Simpson must, moreover, have been right: neither the *Dictionary of Old English* nor the *Middle English Dictionary* records *æðele* as a place-name element. This is, of course, a contrast to Iceland, where *aðal-* is common in place-names, and *Aðalá* not unattested. *Aðalá* has its attractions: it might have pleased Thoresby to find that, even if Adel had not terminated in a Scytho-Scandic *Loekr,* it at least originated as a river-name; the parish is not unduly far south of the river Wharfe, a major waterway; and it lies in the Wapentake of Skyrack whose name, while not from Old Norse, is at least a Norse-influenced form of Old English *scir-ac* 'shire-oak'.

But I suspect that it was another member of Leeds University's English department who hit on the least implausible etymology for Adel hitherto published: F. W. Moorman, in his *Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, from 1910. 'The O.E. termination *-léah*', he wrote, 'often appears as *-le* in Domesday Book, *e.g., Gisele*=Guiseley', and in pointing to *Bootle* as a reflex of Domesday *Boltelai* succeeded in providing some parallel for both the contraction of *Adele* to *Addle* and the spelling *Adela*.

'The meaning of Adel', he concluded, 'is accordingly "the lea of Ada'—or, we might suggest, any of a range of similarly-named suspects such as Eadda, Eada, Ædda and the like. That Ekwall should resist this etymology is characteristic of his effort to break with a long and none too glorious tradition of inventing Anglo-Saxon personal names as a means to explain place-names; but perhaps on this occasion his revisionism was misdirected.

It would of course be pleasing to conclude with the argument that any inhabitant of Adel might by virtue of his place of residence be called an *æðeling*; sadly this is not the case, though at least we need no longer imagine him to be an addle-dweller. Besides, as readers of the *Wife of Bath's Tale* will be aware, 'genterye | is nat annexed to possessioun':

> Looke who that is moost vertuous alway,
> Pryvee and apert, and moost entendeth ay
> To do the gentil deedes that he kan;

and *Eada-lēah* is not, by this count, without its *æðelingas*.