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SILVERDALE IN LANCASHIRE: THE PLACE-NAME AND THE HOARD¹

IN September 2011, a large hoard of Viking silver dating from around AD 905 was found at Silverdale in Lancashire.² Despite the transparency of the place-name, a reference to buried treasure had never been suspected; and even now, the connection cannot be taken for granted. As David Parsons has warned with regard to the putative meaning ‘place with a smithy’ for Hammerwich, the site of the Staffordshire Hoard, ‘there must be no jumping to conclusions’.³ A literal interpretation of Silverdale is problematized firstly by the weight of scholarly tradition in favour of an alternative explanation, and secondly by the fact that it seems counter-productive for a place-name to draw attention to a treasure that was buried in order to keep it secret. This article will deal with each of these points in turn, and will conclude by making a case for a direct connection between the Silverdale Hoard and the place-name by which it is known.

Historical spellings of Silverdale are as follows:

¹ A version of this paper was presented within a lecture to the North Clyde Archaeological Society in Helensburgh on 2 November 2016. I am grateful to those present for useful feedback and discussion, and in particular to Dr Carole Biggam and Dr Irené Wotherspoon.

² The Silverdale Hoard is held by the Museum of Lancashire in Preston. Details and images are available at <http://collections.lancsmuseums.gov.uk/narratives/narrative.php?irn=591> (last accessed 26 October 2016).

³ David Parsons, ‘The name “Hammerwich”’, *Papers from the Staffordshire Hoard Symposium*, ed. Helen Geake (Portable Antiquities Scheme, 2011):

<https://finds.org.uk/staffshoardsymposium/papers/davidparsons> (last accessed 26 October 2016).

Selredal 1199, 1246

de Selderdal 1246, *Selderdal* 1341

Celverdale 1292

Sylverdale 1292

Siluerdale 1320-46

Silverdale 1382, 1507⁴

Taken together, these convincingly establish a derivation from Old English (OE) *seolfor* ‘silver’ and OE *dæl* ‘valley’. The latter, a topographical generic which means ‘pit, hollow’ in early Anglo-Saxon place-names, appears to have developed the sense ‘main valley’ through the influence of the cognate Old Norse *dalr*, and is therefore datable here to late Old English.⁵ Although familiar from place-names, the term is not common as a lexical item, with a total of only about 40 occurrences recorded by the editors of the Toronto *Dictionary of Old English*.⁶ The first element, on the other hand, is common as a lexical item but rare in place-names, and its interpretation here is open to question.

⁴ Eilert Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922), 189; Denise Kenyon, ‘Addenda and corrigenda to E Ekwall *The Place-Names of Lancashire*’, *JEPNS*, xvii (1984-5), 20-106, at 104. Henry Cecil Wyld in collaboration with T. Oakes Hirst, *The Place-Names of Lancashire: Their Origin and History* (London, 1911), 232-3, include a 1241 spelling *Siuerdelege*, on the basis of which they derive the first element of Silverdale from the Old English personal name *Sigeward*. As Ekwall notes, however, this spelling relates to a place-name elsewhere in Lancashire.

⁵ Kenneth Cameron, *English Place Names*, new edn (London, 1996), 190; Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), 110-12.

⁶ *Dictionary of Old English A–G*, version 2.0. CD-ROM, April 2008, s.v. *dæl*,

Nearly a century ago, Eilert Ekwall put forward the following explanation of Silverdale:

The name simply means ‘silver valley’. It refers to the silver-grey rocks which form a prominent characteristic of the place. Such lime-stone rocks are found especially in the high ridge N[orth] of the church (called Silverdale Nab by West, *Guide to the Lakes*, 1778), at the cove near the sea where Cove Hall is, and in the hill E[ast] of the church. No doubt these cliffs were formerly to be seen in more places than they are now.⁷

The same interpretation appeared in his seminal dictionary of English place-names,⁸ and has been repeated in subsequent dictionaries and reference books.⁹ To the best of my knowledge, it has never been challenged in the scholarly literature.¹⁰ With hindsight, it probably should have been.

⁷ Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire*, 189-90.

⁸ Eilert Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 1-4 edns. (Oxford, 1936-60).

⁹ Examples include Kenneth Cameron, *English Place-Names* (London, 1961), 180 (the corresponding section has been revised for the 1996 edition, and this example does not appear); Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, 111; Adrian Room, *The Penguin Dictionary of British Place Names* (London, 2003), 431; Victor Watts, *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names* (Cambridge, 2004), 551; A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names*, rev edn. (Oxford, 2011), 421. Gillian Fellows-Jensen, *Scandinavian Settlement names in the North-West* (Copenhagen, 1985), 249, takes the second element to be the Scandinavian cognate *dalr* ‘valley’, but otherwise follows Ekwall’s interpretation, stating: ‘The specific is the OE appellative *seolfor* n. “silver”, referring to the silver-grey limestone rocks here (PNLa 189-90)’.

¹⁰ However, the page for Silverdale on the Mourholme Local History Society website claims that ‘The origin of its name is lost – but almost certainly has nothing to do with the silver colour of its birch and hazel woods, or its

Even without the material evidence of the Viking silver, a reference to grey rocks is deeply problematic – and not only because it rests on an unproven assumption that the rocks ‘were formerly to be seen in more places than they are now’. OE *seolfor* is a common word that refers exclusively to the precious metal, and is not recorded with a metonymic meaning relating to colour.¹¹ Indeed, as the *Oxford English Dictionary* reveals, *silver* is not attested as a colour term in English until the late fourteenth century, and even then, its use is mainly poetic (s.v. *silver*, *n.* and *adj.*, A.6 and B5).¹² This in itself is not a major obstacle. It is not uncommon for place-names to preserve antedatings of words or of uses of words otherwise attested only centuries later, alongside extending evidence for registers of language.¹³ More serious is the fact that even during the Middle and Early Modern English periods, *silver* does not appear to include the grey part of the colour spectrum. All the early quotations in *OED* relate to dew, flowing water, or stars, while from the late sixteenth and early seventeenth

limestone outcrops. Selredal is its earliest recorded name (1199), and may derive from a Norse name, Soelvers.’ (<http://www.mourholme.co.uk/?History:Silverdale>; accessed 23 October 2016) Whereas the derivation proposed here from a Norse name is implausible, it is interesting to see that local opinion rules out a reference to colour. The page is not dated, but a reference to the 2011 census makes it possible to infer that it postdates discovery of the Silverdale Hoard.

¹¹ T. N. Toller, *An Anglo-Saxon Dictionary Based on the Manuscript Collections of the Late Joseph Bosworth* (Oxford, 1898); *Supplement* by T. N. Toller (1921); *Addenda* by A. Campbell (1972); Jane Roberts and Christian Kay with Lynne Grundy, *A Thesaurus of Old English*, 2 vols (London, 1995); Antonette diPaolo Healey with John Price Wilkin and Xin Xiang, *Dictionary of Old English Web Corpus* (Toronto, 2009): <http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/pages/pub/web-corpus.html> (last accessed 30 October 2016). The range of potential spellings variants makes it difficult to establish exact figures, but there are around 250 collocations with *gold* alone.

¹² www.oed.com (last accessed 26 October 2016).

¹³ See for instance Philip Durkin, *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (Oxford, 2009), 277-80.

centuries the meaning broadens to skin and hair colour. There is no evidence that it could encompass a limestone grey.

Indeed, it may be doubted whether the route by which *silver* becomes a colour term is through hue at all. As Carole Biggam explains, colour is made up of a range of phenomena including hue, saturation, tone, and brightness.¹⁴ Whereas speakers of Present-Day English tend to prioritise hue to the exclusion of the other elements, Biggam warns that ‘the reader should not assume that all other societies do the same, or did the same in the past’.¹⁵ The earliest quotations for *silver* as a colour term in *OED* are as follows:

c1405 (▶ c1385) Chaucer Knight’s Tale (Hengwrt) (2003) l. 636 And firy
Phebus..dryeth in the greues The siluer dropes hangynge on the leues.

c1407 Lydgate Reson & Sensuallyte 937 The freshnes of the clere wellys..Made the
colde siluer stremes To shyne ageyn the sonne bemes.

c1450 Lydgate Secrees 1316 The lusty Silvir dewh in the grene meedys.

The salient aspect here is not hue but brightness, and it may therefore be possible to suggest that it is this aspect of *silver* that led to its development as a colour term.¹⁶ With regard to the first element of Silverdale, one could perhaps argue that the rocks may have appeared to sparkle in sunlight, but this is far from compelling.

¹⁴ C. P. Biggam, *The Semantics of Colour. A Historical Approach* (Cambridge, 2012), 1-5.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁶ We might compare OE *blāc*, where the primary meaning ‘bright, shining’ leads to a secondary sense ‘pale in colour’ (*Dictionary of Old English A–G*, s.v. *blāc*, 1, 2b).

A further problem is that colour terms in place-names are overwhelmingly Basic Colour Terms such as *black*, *white*, and *red*, rather than non-Basic terms such as *magenta*, *puce* or *silver*.¹⁷ This was established for Old English from a corpus of place-names recorded in England and southern Scotland by AD 1100,¹⁸ and was further supported by a study of all colour terms in the place-names of four parishes in the Scottish border county of Berwickshire up to the present day.¹⁹ There are of course exceptions, but they are rare, and it would be an unlikely coincidence to find such an exception which at the same time represented both a significant antedating and a significant semantic extension of the putative colour term.

Place-names are highly repetitive, so it is relevant to consider comparative evidence from other occurrences of the same first element. The entry for OE *seolfor* in the main dictionary of English place-name elements, published 70 years ago, reads as follows:

seolfor OE, **silfr** ON, ‘silver’, may in some examples of the common street-name Silver Street refer to silver-smiths. But in p[lace]n[ame]s this concrete meaning is unlikely. For the most part *silver* may well be an elliptical form of some older plant-name, though apart from Sellers L[ancashire] (a compound of *seolfor* and **hrīs**), such

¹⁷ The foundational work on Basic Colour Terms is Brent Berlin and Paul Kay, *Basic Colour Terms: Their Universality and Evolution* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1969; 2nd ed. 1991). More recent developments are summarised and discussed in Biggam, *The Semantics of Colour*.

¹⁸ Carole Hough, ‘Colours of the landscape: Old English colour terms in place-names’, *Progress in Colour Studies. Volume 1. Language and Culture*, ed. C. P. Biggam and C. J. Kay (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2006), 181-98.

¹⁹ Leonie Dunlop and Carole Hough, ‘Colour terms in the names of coastal and inland features: a study of four Berwickshire parishes’, *Colour Studies. A Broad Spectrum*, ed. Wendy Anderson, Carole P. Biggam, Carole Hough, and Christian Kay (Amsterdam and Philadelphia, 2014), 307-22.

plant-names as *silver-thistle* and the like are not evidenced before the 16th century and most are much later. In some p[lace]n[ame]s and stream-names it might allude to the colour or appearance, and in f[ield-]n[ame]s and some p[lace]n[ame]s there might be a jocular reference to the richness of the ground or an allusion to the rent paid. (a) Silver Beck Cu (**bekkr**), Silverdale La 189 (**dæ**l, from the grey limestone), Silver Ley Ess 627, Silverley C (**lēah**). (b) Monksilver So (perhaps an old r[iver]n[ame]). [The form *silver* in p[lace]n[ame]s is late and usually replaces the ME *seluer* of the p[lace]n[ame] spellings through the influence of StE *silver*.]²⁰

Some parts of the entry have stood the test of time better than others. Like Sellers in Lancashire, Silver Ley in Essex and Silverley in Cambridgeshire may plausibly be attributed to an elliptical form of a plant-name.²¹ The same is formally possible in Silverdale, although plant-names are relatively uncommon in combination with OE *dæl*,²² and no additional occurrences of the formation have come to light in subsequent volumes of the English Place-Name Survey.²³ So too, references to water in Silver Beck in Cumberland and Monksilver in

²⁰ A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, EPNS, 25-6 (Cambridge, 1956), ii, 119. This seminal dictionary is gradually being superseded by the ongoing *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names* (David Parsons *et al.*, Nottingham, 1997-), which has not yet reached letter S.

²¹ P. H. Reaney, *The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and The Isle of Ely*, EPNS, 19 (Cambridge, 1943), 124.

²² Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*, 110-2, 237-42.

²³ I have only been able to trace two further examples of Silverdale, both of which are recorded late and may represent transferred names from a surname or from the Lancashire place-name. Silverdale in Stainforth, West Riding of Yorkshire, is recorded in 1771, but EPNS offers no explanation beyond a cross-reference to Silver Hill in the same county, itself described as ‘probably referring to the colour or richness of the land, but the exact significance is unknown’ (A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, EPNS, 30-7 (Cambridge, 1961-3), vi, 155; iii, 270). Silverdale near Newcastle under Lyme in Staffordshire is first recorded

Somerset align with the second *OED* quotation above, supporting the view that the salient aspect is brightness rather than hue. However, the dismissal of a concrete meaning in place-names as ‘unlikely’ can no longer be accepted. Whereas early place-name surveys focused almost exclusively on the names of settlements and of major landscape features, considerable attention is now paid to so-called ‘minor names’, including field-names and the names of minor landscape features. These have brought to light evidence of a concrete meaning which may have implications for the interpretation of Silverdale, as discussed below.

The field-names of Sowerby in the West Riding of Yorkshire include *the Silver-field*, recorded in 1775.²⁴ The source is Watson’s *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Halifax*, which mentions the field-name within a report of an earlier discovery of Roman coins, ‘all of silver’.²⁵ After describing the coins themselves, Watson goes on to say:

I apprehend that it is a mistake to say that these coins were found a little above the town of Sowerby, for there is no tradition of any such thing; on the contrary, it is very commonly said, that a number of these were discovered a little below the town, in a place ever since called the Silver-field.

The phrase ‘ever since’ shows that in this instance, the name was given to commemorate the find.

A similar motivation accounts for the name Silver Hill in the parish of Abdie in Fife, Scotland, first recorded on the Ordnance Survey 6 inch 1st edition map of 1855. As the Fife

in 1796, and may derive from the Silverdale Iron Company founded c.1792 (David Horovitz, *The Place-Names of Staffordshire* (Brewood, 2005), 495).

²⁴ Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, iii, 157.

²⁵ John Watson, *The History and Antiquities of the Parish of Halifax* (London, 1775), 54-55.

place-name survey explains, the Ordnance Survey Name Book attributes the name to the discovery of silver coins and other objects on the site around 1814:

‘On this hill a few years <ago> was found several ancient coins’ (OS Name Book 41, 5). This is adduced by the surveyor as an explanation of the name, and is a reference to the discovery of a quantity of silver coins and gold bracelets and necklaces there in c.1814.²⁶

Again, then, the name was bestowed as a direct result of the find.

A particularly interesting case is represented by Silver Field at Flusco, near Newbiggin in Cumberland, the location of the discovery in 1989 of pieces of Viking-age silver, including both thistle type and bossed penannular brooches. In this instance the field-name was already in existence, but had only been on record since 1785, when a comparable thistle brooch had been found in the same location. It is in fact likely that another such thistle brooch was found there in 1830, although the find-spot was recorded no more precisely than ‘near Penrith’. Colin Richardson examines the evidence in some detail, and reports that:

The laboratory analysis of the brooches and fragments found in Silver Field in 1989 produced two interesting results. The silver composition is consistent with results obtained for other Hiberno-Viking silver of the late ninth and early tenth centuries.

²⁶ Simon Taylor with Gilbert Márkus, *The Place-Names of Fife*, 5 vols (Donington, 2006-12), iv, 98. The Ordnance Survey Name Books record spellings and etymologies of place-names provided by local informants, and are freely available on the ScotlandsPlaces website at <http://www.scotlandsplaces.gov.uk/>.

Secondly, and more particularly, it closely matches the metal of the silver brooches found in 1785 and 1830.²⁷

Unfortunately it is uncertain whether or not the field-name predates the original find in 1785. Diana Whaley implies as much, citing it in connection with a tradition of buried treasure on Silver Holme (Windermere): ‘Such traditions are not always wrong’.²⁸ Alternatively, however, it is possible that the earlier find gave rise to the name, while leaving much more still to be discovered.

I suggest that a similar explanation may account for Silverdale, circumventing the logistical difficulty of a place-name drawing attention to treasure intended to be kept hidden. As with the three field-names discussed above, the place-name was not created by the same group of speakers who buried the treasure. The hoard is Viking; the place-name is Anglo-Saxon. Indeed, since the place-name is datable to the late Anglo-Saxon period through the generic element OE *dæl*, it also demonstrably post-dates the burial. The most plausible scenario may be that at some time during the three centuries between the burial of the hoard and the earliest record of Silverdale, one or more items made their way to the surface, and that the discovery was commemorated in the place-name.

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²⁷ Colin Richardson, ‘A find of Viking-period silver brooches and fragments from Flusco, Newbiggin, Cumbria’, *Transactions of the Cumberland & Westmorland Antiquarian & Archaeological Society*, n.s. xcvi (1996), 35-44, at 42.

²⁸ Diana Whaley, *A Dictionary of Lake District Place-Names* (Nottingham, 2006), 308.