

IV

The Name of *Maelmin*, near Yeavinger

Andrew Breeze

Bede mentions many Celtic names. Though they pose various problems, we can still offer explanations for some of his forms. *Deira* seems to derive from a Brittonic form meaning “brave ones, fierce ones” (cf. Welsh *dewr* “brave”); *Dal Riada* means “division of Riad, people of Riad” (and is nothing to do with Scottish Gaelic *dail* “meadow”); *Coldingham* refers to Colud, an obscure chieftain whose fort it was; *Abercorn* means “river-mouth of the horn-shaped hill”; the river Nidd (of North Yorkshire), which disappears underground, is apparently the “dropper”, like the river Neath in Glamorgan.¹ Even the name of Bede’s own community of Wearmouth-Jarrow shows Celtic influence, since *Wear* means “winding (river)”.² In addition to toponyms, Bede mentions many Celtic personal names, the most familiar being that of *Cædmon* the poet, which probably means “battle pony”.³ Elsewhere we have *Maban* “baby, little boy” – an apt name for a chorister who taught singing to the monks of Hexham.⁴ We also have hybrid forms like *Trumwine* and *Trumhere*, where the second elements are Germanic but the first is Brittonic (cf. Welsh *trwm* “heavy”).⁵

What follows discusses the place-name *Maelmin*, apparently known only from Bede’s statement that the kings after Edwin (d. 633) abandoned the palace at Yeavinger (perhaps burnt by Cadwallon) and built another at *Maelmin*.⁶ Noting the similarity of names, Camden placed *Maelmin* at Milfield, five miles north-west of Wooler and two miles north-north-east of Yeavinger.⁷ In 1955 he was vindicated by air photography, which located the royal residence on farmland east of the village (NT 941339).⁸

Yet, though the identification of *Maelmin* is famous, its name (which is Brittonic) may not have been fully explained. The second element is the easier. It can be related to Welsh *min* “lip, mouth, margin, side, bank, brim”; Middle Cornish *myn* “margin, lip”; Middle and Modern Breton *min* “face, mouth”.⁹ This element occurs in Welsh place-names. *Minffordd* “roadside” is a settlement (SH 5938) between Porthmadog and Ffestiniog in Gwynedd; *Minllyn* “waterside” is another hamlet (SH 8514), on the bank of the Dyfi in the hills east of Dolgellau. So a meaning “side, brink” makes sense in the context of *Maelmin*, located by the river Till.

As for the first part, this contains Old English short *a* (written *æ* in later texts). That points to original Brittonic short *a* which (as Jackson shows) was regularly substituted by *æ* in Old English.¹⁰ Of possible forms the only likely one is Primitive Welsh or Cumbric **mal*, equivalent to Middle Welsh *mall* “bragget, malt; corrupt, rotten”, which actually occurs in a Welsh place-name, that of *Malltraeth* (*traeth* = “beach”) in Anglesey.¹¹ Since *Malltraeth* is a lowland area with a sandy bay backed by a marsh, the meaning “decayed beach, rotted strand” is natural here. *Malltraeth* must have been a region of ooze and decay where it was hard to get a footing.

How does this explain *Maelmin*? The king’s hall there lay by the meadowland 200 yards from the river Till. So an interpretation “decayed margin, rotted river bank” makes good sense. The palace, situated on a rise followed by the modern road, was surely located by relatively ill-drained land from which it was named. It can be compared here with such other Northumberland places as *Allerwash*

“alder swamp” (Old English *wasse* “marsh”), Byker “village marsh” (Old Norse *kjarr* “carr”), or Matfen “Matta’s fen”, where habitable sites rose a few feet above uninhabitable waterlogged ground.¹²

This explanation seems likelier than that of “bare hill” put forward by Cox, and (hesitantly) of “bare mountain, blunt tract of wild enclosed land” by Hope-Taylor.¹³ We can say against this, first, that the vowel of the Primitive Welsh and Cumbric reflexes of British **mail* “bare” should give a long open *e* in Old English, which would not be represented by the *a* of Bede’s *Maelmin* (his *Mailros*, Melrose, “bare moor” in Scotland is not relevant here, as it shows Irish influence).¹⁴ Second, *Maelmin* is by a riverside meadow, not a hill, bare or otherwise. Third, the element *min* “mountain” does not exist in Celtic.

Bede’s *Maelmin* can thus reasonably be taken as a Brittonic form meaning “decayed (river-) bank, marshy edge”. It may in part be represented by the name of Milfield nearby. But the history of that would (of course) be quite obscure, if Bede had not recorded Celtic *Maelmin* for us.¹⁵

NOTES

¹ A. C. Breeze, “The origin of the name *Deira*”, *Trans. Yorkshire Dialect Soc.*, 19/97 (1997), 35–9; “Some Celtic place-names of Scotland, including *Dalriada*, *Kincardine*, *Abercorn*, *Coldingham*, and *Girvan*”, *Scottish Language*, 18 (1999), 34–51; “The names of Yorkshire’s Cray Beck, River Balder and River Nidd”, *Trans. Yorkshire Dialect Soc.*, 19/100 (2000), 27–33.

² A. C. Breeze, “The name of the River Wear”, *Durham Archaeological Journal*, 13 (1997), 87–8.

³ D. Ellis Evans, *Gaulish Personal Names*, Oxford (1967), 222–3; Ifor Williams, *The Beginnings of Welsh Poetry*, Cardiff (1972), 18–19; A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place Names of Roman Britain*, London (1979), 411–2.

⁴ Cf. A. C. Breeze, “Welsh *babau* ‘baby’ and *Ancrone Wisse*”, *Notes and Queries*, 238 (1993), 12–3.

⁵ A. C. Breeze, *Medieval Welsh Literature*, Dublin (1997), 17.

⁶ B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (eds.), *Bede’s Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, Oxford (1969), 188; A. C. Breeze, “Seventh-century Northumbria and a poem to Cadwallon”, *Northern History*, 38 (2001), 145–52.

⁷ William Camden, *Britannia*, London (1637), 815 (d) [which I have not seen]; C. Plummer (ed.), *Venerabilis Baedae Historia Ecclesiastica*, Oxford (1896), II, 105.

⁸ B. K. Hope-Taylor, *Yeaving: An Anglo-British Centre of Early Northumbria*, London (1977), pls. 7, 8, 9 and fig. 7; T. Gates and C. O’Brien, “Cropmarks at Milfield and New Bewick and the recognition of Grubenhäuser in Northumberland”, *AA*⁵, 16 (1988), 1–9. For other sites in the immediate area see: F. Harding, “Excavations in the prehistoric ritual complex near Milfield, Northumberland”, *Proc. Prehistoric Soc.*, 46 (1981), 87–135; C. Waddington, *A Landscape Archaeological Study of the Mesolithic-Neolithic in the Milfield Basin, Northumberland* [BAR, British series, 291], Oxford (1999). For these references I thank Professor R. N. Bailey.

⁹ *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru*, Caerdydd (1950–), 2460.

¹⁰ K. H. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, Edinburgh (1953), 271–2.

¹¹ *Geiriadur*, 2331.

¹² E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th ed., Oxford (1960), 6, 80, 318.

¹³ B. H. Cox, “The place-names of the earliest English records”, *Journal of the English Place-Name Soc.*, 6 (1973–4), 24; Hope-Taylor, *op. cit.* (note 8), 15–6.

¹⁴ Jackson, *op. cit.* (note 10), 326–7.

¹⁵ The name does not figure in: A. Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham*, Cambridge (1920); Jackson, *op. cit.* (note 10); Ekwall, *op. cit.* (note 12); or C. Smith, “Romano-British place-names in Bede”, *Anglo-Saxon Studies in Archaeology and History*, 1 (1979), 1–19. It figures, without any etymology, in J. Campbell, “Bede’s names for places”, in (ed. P. H. Sawyer), *Names, Words and Graves*, Leeds (1978), 44, 53.