

HAMBLEDEN: THE BENT VALLEY

ARNOLD H. J. BAINES

In 1015 the atheling Athelstan, son of King Ethelred 'the Unready', made his will,¹ shortly before his untimely death. He left twenty-one separate estates, eighteen of which are named, in at least eight counties. Unfortunately he did not give county addresses, and names such as *Northtune* (Norton), *Westtune* (Weston), and *Cumtune* (Compton) are too common to be identified.² *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire*,³ the first of the great continuing series of county surveys, claimed three of these estates for our county. The first, which Athelstan had bought from his father for 250 mancuses of gold and left to the Old Minster at Winchester for both their souls, is beyond doubt Marlow: *Merelaþan* (dative plural) is "(at) the leavings of the mere", what was left when the pool dried out.⁴

For the second estate, three hides *at Lutegareshale* which Athelstan left to Godwine the Driveller, to whom he was indebted, there are four claimants: Ludgershall in Bucks, Luggershall in Gloucestershire, Lurgashall in Sussex and Ludgershall in Wiltshire. The last is the most probable,⁵ as Athelstan's stud, which he left to his staghuntsman, was on the adjacent Coldridge. Moreover a generation later the two manors in the Bucks Ludgershall were of nine hides and two hides.⁶ *Lūtegār* is quite possibly a personal name with genitive inflexion, but is more probably a trapping spear (*lūtian* 'to hide, lurk'), concealed in a *healh* (corner, secret place).⁷

The third estate, *at hamelan dene*, requires more consideration. It is not at all clear whether the devisee, Ælfmær, from whom Athelstan had acquired it, is the same as his seneschal Ælfmær, mentioned later, who received eight hides at

Catherington in Hampshire. Sawyer⁸ identified the estate with Hambleton in that county, as did Dorothy Whitelock, whose "Hambleton, Hants" must be a slip.⁹ The Hambletons are in Rutland, Lancashire and the West and North Ridings of Yorkshire. The Bucks identification proposed by Mawer and Stenton was accepted by Smith,¹⁰ Ekwall,¹¹ and Mills,¹² and it seems critical that Hambleton is a *dūn* 'large hill', not a *denu* 'valley'.¹³

The element *hamel* or (better) *hamol* is normally combined with words for hills; when so used it was taken by Mills as 'crooked or irregularly shaped' and by Smith as 'scarred'.¹⁴ In the most recent discussion Barrie Cox¹⁵ takes *hamol* as 'mutilated' and claims that it is "used topographically of a flat-topped hill; one which appears to have been sliced off". This suits the Rutland Upper or Great Hambleton (*hamelduna* 1067) quite well. The original *caput* of Rutland may well have been on this hilltop. Since 1977 Middle and Lower Hambleton have been submerged by Rutland Water.

Mawer and Stenton said of Hambleden that "it is probable that we have the adj. *hamel* here. It may describe the valley here for it winds a good deal and its sides are much indented with combs, but in our ignorance of the precise significance of *hamel* it is difficult to say more". Toller¹⁷ had previously suggested 'broken, rugged', and Mills later took it as 'crooked or undulating valley'. 'Undulating' will do well for a district name in the Chilterns, the *paga Hæmele* around Hemel Hempstead,¹⁸ but not for a valley. The Hambleden valley, as we now call it pleonastically, is not rugged and can hardly be called winding. Coming up from the Thames, as

the newcomers who named it surely did, it is straight enough until one reaches the turn above Skirmett, like the bend of a knee, when it becomes the Turville valley, and this turning may provide the clue to its derivation. *Hamol* can be taken as an adjective regularly formed from *ham* 'ham, the back of the knee' like *stigol* 'steep' from *stig* 'ascending path' or *wacol* 'watchful' from *waco* 'a wake, watch'.¹⁹ *Hamela* would then be the weak form of *hamol* as suggested by Campbell.²⁰ As the adjective is not on record in Old English in any form except as a place-name element, it is legitimate to infer its meaning from local topography and from the noun that could have given rise to it. *Ham* in the required sense is well evidenced by glosses, including Ælfric's use of it for *poples*²¹ 'the ham or angle of the knee', notably in Pliny²²; *elephas poplites intus flectit hominis modo*. Virgil has *duplicato poplite* 'with bent knee(s)' in the last scene of his epic, when Turnus dares to uproot a great boundary stone to throw at Aeneas.²³

Ham is clearly distinguished from *hām* 'house, village' by its short vowel, and less clearly from *hamm* 'water-meadow, enclosure' by its feminine gender. In place-names, *-hām* and *-hamm* were sometimes confused before the Norman Conquest, as in the Chronicle forms for Buckingham. Although *hamm* often denotes land in the bend of a river, there may be no semantic connection; it is more probably cognate with *hemm* 'hem, border'.²⁴

Besides the noun and the adjective, however, there is the related verb; and it is clear, not least from the Chronicle account of cruelties inflicted on the adherents of Athelstan's brother Alfred, that *hamelian* is 'to maim, mutilate'.²⁵ In the closely related Old Frisian it can be 'to demolish'. Possibly a common Germanic verb meaning 'bend, turn, twist, wrench', like Latin *torquere*, was applied to the relevant forms of torture, then stretched (as in Latin) to connote torments generally, but then specialised to 'mutilate'.²⁶ Hence it was quite natural to conclude that *hamol* used of a hill meant 'scarred, mutilated, cut off'; but a 'maimed valley' gives no good sense.

For Hambleton Ekwall preferred *Hamela* as a personal name (weak masc. gen. *Hamelan*); this seems to be appropriate for one or more of the northern Hambletons with habitative *tūn*, and

could be a by-name referring to some deprivation or disfigurement. The Laws use a variant *homola* for one who has had his hair involuntarily cropped; for this insult King Alfred imposed a heavy compensation of ten shillings²⁷ (for cutting off the beard, twenty shillings).²⁸ This may perhaps be why Ekwall considered that an alternative topographical meaning of *hamol* might be 'bare, treeless', though this would hardly be needed in the Chilterns. Despite these ramifications of meaning, it is submitted that the primary sense underlying these related words is more likely to be 'bent' than 'cut' or 'hurt', and for a valley a single abrupt bend is what is needed to make it *hamol*. This allows the delectable Hambleton a descriptive name that is accurate and at least not pejorative.

One final possibility requires examination: that *hamol* could sometimes be a noun rather than an adjective, since the suffix *-ol* can be used to form concrete nouns. Such a name is evidenced as a river name by *innan hamele* 'into (the) Hamble (Hants)', probably 'crooked (stream)'.²⁹ In the northern Hambletons where there is no trace of a medial inflexion, an uninflected *hamol* might well occur with one of the meanings 'scarred, truncated or bare (hill)'; though for the Hambleton in Barkstone Ash wapentake the relevant hill, in a low-lying area, is both wooded and conical.³⁰ For our Hambleton the simplex *hamele* occurs once in 1208. But the declension of a substantive *hamol* would be strong masculine like *fugol*, 'bird', *sceamol* 'shamble, bench', *stapol* 'pillar', or *stadol* 'staddle', or possibly strong neuter like *gafol* 'tax, rent'. In either case the genitive singular would be *-es*, not *-an*. Further, the use of the genitive is much more usual when the first member is personal than when it is topographical. If the first element is indeed a noun it would have to be *hamela*, which is on record only with a personal sense, 'the shorn one'. The Hambleton brook is not shorn or maimed, and is hardly more crooked than the valley itself; it rises below the Skirmett-Turville bend, though it could once have risen intermittently further up. The River Thames itself has a great retroflex bend between Hambleton Mill and Remenham, and just possibly *hamela* with an earlier sense 'something bent or crooked' could relate to this reach, with Hambleton as the valley associated with it; but 'bent valley' seems simpler and more acceptable both grammatically and topographically.

REFERENCES

1. D. Whitelock, *Anglo-Saxon Wills* (1930) no. 20, pp. 56–63; W. B. Sanders, *Facsimiles of Anglo-Saxon Manuscripts* (1878–84) I, 18, III, 38
2. All place-names cited from pre-Conquest sources are in the dative case (used as locative)
3. A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire* (1925) 104, 177, 186
4. For its state c. 1090 see A. H. J. Baines, 'St Wulfstan in Buckinghamshire', *Recs. Bucks* 30 (1988) 42–52 at p. 50
5. A. Mawer, *Studia Neophilologica*, xiv, 93 f.
6. Domesday Book I, 145b, 151b
7. E. Tengstrand, *A contribution to the study of genitival composition in Old English place-names* (Uppsala 1940) 222f.
8. P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters* (1968) no. 1503 at p. 420
9. D. Whitelock ed., *Engl. Hist. Docs. I* (1955) no. 130, at p. 550
10. A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements* (1956) i, 231
11. E. Ekwall, *Concise Oxf. Dict. Engl. Place-names* 4th edn. (1960) 214
12. A. D. Mills, *Dict. Engl. Place-Names* (1993) 155
13. It is *Hamelandune* 956, *Hamelanduna* 1049, *Hamledune* 1086
14. Ref. 10 and A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire* iii, 127; iv, 29; vi, 63
15. B. Cox, *The Place-Names of Rutland* (1994) 179–80.
16. Ref. 3, p. 177
17. T. N. Toller, *Anglo-Saxon Dict., Suppl.* (1921) 505, citing Athelstan's will
18. J. E. Gover, A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Hertfordshire* (1938) 41; the first published reference to Marion Gibbs's discovery of the Bodleian MS James 23, which showed that Hertfordshire was East Saxon territory in the diocese of London by c. 705 at latest. *Paga* for 'district' looks Frankish; it was previously known only from Asser, who frequently uses it for 'shire'. The ancient bounds of Hemel Hempstead, extending southwards to the Chess, may define a Gallic *pagus* or rural district, subordinate to Verulamium until it was taken over by Saxons; cf. K. Bailey, 'The Middle Saxons', in S. Bassett ed., *The Origins of Anglo-Saxon Kingdoms* (1989) 111, 119
19. Ref. 10, ii, 54–5
20. A. Campbell, in T. N. Toller, *A. S. Dict. Supplement, Addenda* (1978) 39. The *-an* in oblique cases was soon reduced to *-e-*. (*Hamledene* 1086, *Hameleden* 1182) and then lost (*Hameldene* 1227)
21. Ælfric, Glossary in Codex Junii 71, p. 75; T. Wright, *Anglo-Saxon and Old English Vocabularies I* (2nd edn, ed. R. P. Wulcker, 1884) 160/13
22. C. Plinius Secundus, *Nat. Hist.* 11: 45, 102
23. P. Virgilius Maro, *Aeneid* xii. 927; "his knocking knees were bent beneath the load" (trans. J. Dryden)
24. Ref. 10, i, 230, 242. John Minsheu (*Ductor ad linguas* 1617) described a *Hamme* as "a little plot of ground growing by the rivers or Thames-side, commonly crooked". This neatly combines the concepts 'enclosed, marginal, bent'; but which of these was primary?
25. A. S. Chron. (C) s.a. 1036; the earliest rhyming ballad to survive
26. Further specialised in German: *hammeln* is 'to geld (lambs)'; cf. *hammel* 'wether', *hdm(m)ling* 'eunuch'
27. Laws of Alfred, s. 35.3 (trans. in *Engl. Hist. Docs. I*, no. 33, at p. 378): "*gif he hine on bismor to homolan bescire mid x. scill' gebete*". The Latin text has "si eum radat [scrapes] in contumeliam". For shearing the head as a mark of disgrace, cf. I *Corinthians* 11: 5–6 and the commentaries
28. *Ibid* s. 35.5. In Old Frisian, *berdes homelenga is* 'bar-bae truncatio'
29. P. H. Sawyer, *A.S. Charters* no. 360, at Winchester College; dated 900–901 but perhaps forged a century later (Stevenson); suspicious (Whitelock) but regarded as original by Finberg (*Early Charters of Wessex* (1964) no. 34) and accepted as original by Ekwall (Ref. 11, and *Engl. River-Names* (1928) 189)
30. See A. H. Smith, *P.-N. West Riding* iv, 29; Addenda, p. xi