FOUR MIDDLE ENGLISH NOTES: *CALF* 'SHANK', *SILK* 'PREY', CLANVOWE'S CUCKOO, AND WILLIAM WORCESTRE'S 'DONYTON'

1. AN IRISH-NORSE ETYMOLOGY FOR *CALF* 'FLESHY PART OF SHANK'

The *Oxford English Dictionary* records *calf* 'fleshy hinder part of the shank of the leg' from the fourteenth century, citing the classic instance from the description of the Reeve in the *General Prologue* to *The Canterbury Tales*:

> Fful longe were his legges and ful lene,
> Ylyk a staf; ther was no calf ysene.

OED takes *calf* as apparently borrowed from Norse *kálfi*, of unknown origin, though adoption from Irish or Gaelic *calpa* 'leg, calf of leg' has been conjectured. Later *dictionaries* differ. Hence de Vries described Old Norse *kalfa* 'bone' as a poetic word which gave *kalfi* 'calf (of leg)', Modern Icelandic *kálfi*. He derived *kalfa* itself from *kalfr* 'calf, young of cow', seeing an analogy for an animal-name used for a body part in Norse *mús* 'mouse; muscle'. But de Vries, despite citing Björkman for derivation of English *calf* (of leg) from Norse, noted Falk and Torp's doubts here (Björkman 1900-2: 214; Falk & Torp 1910-11: 488; de Vries 1962: 298). Onions stated that English *calf* was borrowed from *kálfi*, which he described as of 'unknown origin, whence also Irish and Gaelic *calpa*' (1966: 136). Lesley Brown derives *calf* from Norse *kálfi* 'of unknown origin' (1993: 319).

English *calf* (of leg) is surely from Norse *kálfi*, just as *leg* is from Norse *leggr* 'hollow (limb-)bone; leg'. But where is *kálfi* from? Here we take issue with de Vries. We shall try to show that *kalpa* and *kálfi* are from Irish *colpthae* 'shank; calf', and not vice versa, as Onions thought. *Kálfi* would thus be a Celtic loanword in Scandinavian, and *calf* a word of Irish origin

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that reached English via Norse. It would here resemble English *cross*, from Norse *kross*, from Middle Irish *cross*, itself from Low Latin **crox* (Vendryes 1987: 246-247).

Middle Irish *colpthae* 'thick part of leg between knee and ankle; animal's shank', Modern Irish *colpa* 'calf; handle (of flail), cudgel', and Scottish Gaelic *calpa* 'calf of the leg' are well attested. Early evidence here occurs in the seventh- century life of St Patrick by Muirchú. This refers to *ostium Colpdi*, Inber Colptha or the mouth of the river Boyne, where (in Irish tradition) Colpda was drowned (Hogan 1910: 285, 457; de Paor 1993: 183). Here may be mentioned the village of Colp south-east of Drogheda on the east coast of Ireland, and the epithet *colpthae* in the names of Aed Colpdai and Dond Colptha. Occurring so early, the Irish word cannot be from Norse. It also figures in Irish saga. In the ninth-century *Cattle Raid of Cooley*, Queen Medb is visited by the prophetess Fedelm, of distracting beauty, whose golden hair reaches down to *a da colptha* 'the calves of her legs' (Best & Bergin 1929: 143; Vendryes 1987: 156-7). In the tenth-century tale of king Rónán, unwelcome visitors come as he is drying *a cholptha frisin tenid* 'his legs at the fire', from which murder results (Dillon 1946: 45; Greene 1955: 6).

On the origin of *colpthae*, Celticists agree it is from Old Irish *colba* 'pillar, column, support', which occurs in a seventh-century hymn to St Bridget by Ultán of Ardbraccan, who calls her *lethcholba flatha la Patraic* 'co-pillar with St Patrick of heaven's kingdom' (Stokes & Strachan 1901-03: II, 326). The semantic development would be from 'column, support', to 'lower leg, shank', to 'fleshy part of shank, calf'. As for *colba*, Pedersen thought it cognate with Middle Welsh *celffeint* 'decayed stump', related to Greek *kolos* 'docked, stunted' and Russian *kolz* 'pole, post', from Indo-European **cel-* 'break, cut, split' (*Geiriadur* 1950-2002: 457; Vendryes 1987: 157). Nevertheless, it may rather be linked with Early Modern Welsh *colfen* 'branch, bough' as a loan from Vulgar Latin *columa* 'column' (noted by Quintilian), or as a cognate of Latin *columna* 'column' and *celsus* 'high' from Indo-European **cel-* 'exalted' (*Geiriadur* 1950-2002: 543; Vendryes 1987: 157).

Whatever *colba*'s origins, its early use suggests Old Norse *kalfa* 'bone' and Icelandic *kálfi* 'calf' are from Middle Irish *colpthae* 'shank; calf': not the reverse. If so, it is reasonable to take English *calf* (of leg) as a Norse loanword of Irish origin, like *cross*.

2. AN IRISH ETYMOLOGY FOR *SILK* 'QUARRY, GAME' IN *THE LAND OF COKAYGNE*

London, British Library, MS Harley 913 is a Franciscan miscellany compiled in Ireland near the beginning of the fourteenth century (Pearsall 1977: 295; Wada 2003: 222-30). One poem in it is *The Land of Cokaygne*, a lively satire on Irish monks, which contains the word *silk*, perhaps more difficult to explain than one might think. The location of the satirized monastery casts light on this problem. Heuser took the 'monastery' as the Franciscan friary at Kildare; Smithers objected, pointing out that the poem's 'wel fair abbei / Of white monkes and of grei' must have been Cistercian; despite that, Bennett stated 'It is folly to read these scenes as satirical or as alluding to a particular Irish abbey' (Bennett & Smithers 1968: 341; Bennett 1986: 17).

However, Jeffares has vindicated Smithers by identifying the abbey as Inishlounaght, otherwise known as Suir (1982: 11). This Cistercian house was founded in 1148 on a site by the river Suir some two miles west-south-west of Clonmel in County Tipperary, in southern Ireland. It was dissolved in 1540, but a few fragments of it still survive (Killanin & Duignan 1967: 174).

The crux *silk* occurs at line 150 of *The Land of Cokaygne*, in a passage (Bennett & Smithers 1968: 143) which helps identify the 'wel fair abbei' as Inishlounaght.

> Another abbei is therbi–
> Forsoth, a gret fair nunnerie,
> Vp a riuer of swet milke,
> Whar is gret plente of silk.

Now, the name 'Inishlounaght' derives from *inis* 'water meadow' and *leamhnacht* 'new milk, sweet milk', which the poet alludes to in his 'riuer of

swet milke'. Inishlounaght was the scene of an incident in 1228 (not the 1260s, as Jeffares claims), when Stephen of Lexington was making a visitation of Irish Cistercian houses. After his representative was wounded by henchmen of the prior of Inishlounaght, who ambushed him from behind a hedge by 'the house of the nuns which adjoined the abbey', Stephen came himself, restored order, and closed the convent of nuns. He closed similar convents of nuns adjoining the Cistercian abbeys of Jerpoint (near Kilkenny) and Mellifont (near Drogheda). Gwynn and Hadcock consider the Inishlounaght nuns 'probably lived well away from the monks' enclosure, possibly serving in the almonry or lay infirmary beside the outer gate and chapel' (Gwynn & Hadcock 1970: 135, 318). But Fr Colmcille took a bleaker view. Remarking that events at Inishlounaght almost pass belief, he describes the nuns' house as joined to the abbey, and the monks and nuns as sharing living accommodation (Griesser 1946: 14; Conway 1968: 117-118). It is hard to believe the lives of monks and nuns were innocent, and easy to see how they might give rise to the poet's ribaldry (Watt 1972: 54-60).

This evidence shows the Cistercian abbey of *The Land of Cokaygne* was based on that of Inishlounaght. The pun on *leamhnacht* also shows the poet knew Irish. When this point is grasped, we can explain the line 'Wher is gret plente of silk'. Commentators have taken *silk* here in its obvious sense. Yet this reading is unnatural. If the Cokaygne nuns wore silk habits, the poet expresses this most oddly. Nor should we assume silk was found in the region. Although the poet indulges in fantasy, this seems a strained reading of the text at this point.

Could *silk* thus be a Hiberno-English word borrowed from Irish? If we consult the dictionaries, we find Old Irish *selg* 'hunting; quarry, prey, game', Modern Irish *seilg* 'hunt, chase; game, prey, quarry'. Irish *seilg* (a cognate of Welsh *hela*) is a common word at all periods. In Modern Irish, *mála seilge* is a 'game bag', and *seilg an lae* is a 'day's catch' of fish (*Geiriadur* 1950-2002: 1844; O Dónaill 1977: 1084). This suggests an explanation of *silk* in our poem. The poet apparently refers to fish in the river or game on its banks. This interpretation of *silk* makes sense in its context. When talking of the countryside we might refer to game or fish as abundant, but hardly to silk as abundant.

If the explanation of *silk* as 'quarry, game' is correct, we identify an Irish loan in *The Land of Cokaygne*, which we can add to *russin* 'afternoon snack' earlier in the poem, as well as to *corrin* 'can, pot', *daisser* 'sprinkler', and *tromchery* 'animal's liver' in a satire on Dubliners in the same manuscript (Bennett & Smithers 1968: 337; Breeze 1993: 16; Breeze 1996: 150-2).

3. THE NAME OF 'CUCKOO' IN CLANVOWE'S *BOKE OF CUPIDE*

In his *The Boke of Cupide*, Sir John Clanvowe (*c*. 1341-91) plays upon the name of the cuckoo. At line 185 of the poem, warning of possible abandonment by a sweetheart, the cuckoo tells the nightingale, "And then shalt thou hoten as do I." The nightingale at once replies,

> ffye!' quoth she, 'on thi name and on the.
> The god of love ne let the neuere ythe [thrive]!

In his edition of the poem Scattergood echoes Skeat in explaining this as a pun on *cuckoo* and *cuckold* (1975, 46, 84). But Roscow disagrees. He points out that the context is one of love, not marriage; that the nightingale is female, so can hardly be cuckolded; and that evidence that *cuckoo* meant *cuckold* at this date is lacking (1998: 183-184).

Roscow is surely right. But he does not explain what Clanvowe actually meant by 'hoten as do I'. The answer to this seems given by the *OED* entry for *cuckoo*. This notes the meaning 'fool' as applied to a person, originally with reference to the bird's monotonous call. The earliest example (of 1581) makes this clear: 'This lesson you learned of your Cowled Coockowes, to braule alwayes with bare names.' The allusion is not to adultery or laying eggs in the nests of others, but to (allegedly) fatuous utterance.

English dialectal *gowk* 'cuckoo' also means 'fool, half-wit', for which the oldest evidence in *OED* is the adverb *gowkedly* of *c*. 1570. *Gowk* is from Old Norse: its German cognate *Gauch* now means 'fool, simpleton; oddity, oddball', the original sense 'cuckoo' surviving in dialect alone. A third *OED* entry, for obsolete *yeke* 'cuckoo', notes cognate Middle Low German *gok* 'simpleton' (a fourth, of *goky* 'fool' in *Piers Plowman*, may also be relevant

here). So the use of words for 'cuckoo' to mean 'fool' is an old one. If (as seems likely) it existed in English long before the attestations given in *OED*, this would explain Clanvowe's allusion.

The cuckoo's warning would thus not concern adultery. He merely warns how abandonment by a sweetheart might make one look a fool. This more delicate explanation, making perfect sense in the context, accords with the poem's emphasis on the simplicity of the cuckoo's song, which he calls 'trewe and pleyn' (118), so that 'euery wight may vnderstonde me' (121). It also accords with what Roscow calls the 'conventional courtly treatment of romantic love' of Clanvowe's poem, which is careful to avoid sordidness. In short, it suggests Clanvowe's meaning was more subtle and innocent than editors have thought it.

4. WILLIAM WORCESTRE ON 'DONYTON', SUFFOLK

On 8 November 1428, John Mowbray, second duke of Norfolk, was coming from dinner with Cardinal Beaufort at London Bridge when his barge sank (Gairdner 1876). William Worcestre (1415-before 1485) lists various gentlemen with him who survived, but adds that some sixteen of his household drowned. One of the dead was 'John of Pysale of "Donyton" where Lord Bardolf dwelt' (Harvey 1969: 360, 361).

The identity of 'Donyton' has puzzled editors. But reference to *DNB* solves the problem. Its entry for Thomas Bardolf (1368-1408), warrior, mentions his son-in-law Sir William Phelip (1383-1441). Phelip, who fought at Agincourt and became treasurer of Henry V's household and chamberlain to Henry VI, was created Baron Bardolf in 1437. His main residences were at Erpingham (NGR TG 1931) in Norfolk and Dennington (TM 2867), Suffolk.

Phelip was not Lord Bardolf in 1428, when the accident happened; and he had long been dead by the time Worcestre wrote. However, it was as Lord Bardolf that he was remembered. So 'Donyton' is surely Dennington in north-east Suffolk, two miles north of Framlingham, where the great castle of the Mowbrays still stands. The location of 'Donyton' thus not only shows where the luckless John of Pysale came from; it also underlines the East Anglian connections of the Mowbray family in the early fifteenth century.

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