THE SEVERN SEA ISLANDS IN THE
ANGLO-SAXON CHRONICLE

IN the Bristol Channel between Glamorgan and Somerset are the small but conspicuous islands Steep Holm and Flat Holm. They are mentioned in the annals of the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* calibted to refer to 914 CE., but the evidence of the different manuscripts of the *Chronicle* has given rise to what has been thought to be a contradiction in the historical narrative. The purpose of this note is to show that there is no contradiction, and that therefore one conventional etymology needs revision.

Manuscripts B (annal 914), C (915), and D (915) of the *Chronicle* state that Viking raiders launched an attack in Somerset near Watchet and at Porlock before being beaten off and taking refuge on Steep Holm, where the survivors ran short of food and many starved to death before the remnant escaped into Dyfed and then to Ireland. Manuscript A (annal 918) says instead that they went to Flat Holm, or at least that is the common understanding of the *Chronicle*’s editors and translators Whitelock et al., Garmonsway, Bately, and Swanton, and of Bosworth-Toller and Owen-Morgan.¹

MSS. B, C, and D agree on the wording:

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{þa sæton hie ute on þam iglande æt Steapan Reolice} & \quad \text{(B)} \\
\text{þa sæton hie ute on þam iglande æt Steapan Reolice} & \quad \text{(C)} \\
\text{þa sæton hie ute on þam iglande æt Steapan Reolice} & \quad \text{(D)} \\
\end{align*}
\]

MS. A has:

\[
\text{þa sæton hie ute on þam iglande æt Bradan Reolice}
\]

It is generally accepted that the Severn Sea islands are meant, and that *re(o)lic* here in the dative case, is the Old Irish word *reilic* ‘graveyard’ (Latin *reliquiae* ‘relics, remains’) borrowed into Old English.² The problem is why the accounts differ, one referring to a ‘steep’ island and the other to a ‘broad’ one. The expression *æt Steapan Reolice* refers beyond reasonable doubt to Steep Holm; but all translators and commentators have inferred, on the doubtful premiss that places are generally mononymous, that *æt Bradan Reolice* must refer to a different island and that the only serious candidate is Flat Holm. This view leaves us with uncertainty about where the raiders fled to: the relatively accessible Flat Holm or the relatively inaccessible Steep Holm. The uncertainty also affects our interpretation of the *Chronicle*, MS. D, annal 1067,³ which deals with the flight of Gytha, mother of king Harold, who fled *into Bradan Reolice*, but there is nothing in the wording of this annal which favours one island over the other.

A simple case can be made that *æt Bradan Reolice* and *into Bradan Reolice* also refer to Steep Holm. It is sparked by the observation that Flat Holm fails conspicuously to be broad in the normal sense. It is 0.63 km (0.39 miles) by 0.61 km (0.38 miles), that is, its maximum and minimum dimensions are about the same and it is subcircular. It also fails to be broader than Steep Holm, which is about 1 km (0.6 miles) by 0.4 km (0.26 miles). If either island is ‘broad’ in the modern sense of having one horizontal dimension greater than the other and greater than that of some comparator, it is Steep Holm. But the main plank of the case is the fact that *broad*, the modern form of *brâd*, is used in current place-name qualifiers in western and south-western England to mean ‘big’, as in Broad Campden and Broad


² Gregory Toner and others (eds), *Electronic Dictionary of the Irish Language* <www.dil.ie>, R-35–012, accessed 1 August 2013. The nomenclature of these islands over the centuries is a matter of great interest beyond the specific point dealt with in this note.

³ Edition *ad libitum*. 
Marston (Gloucestershire); Broadbury (i.e. Broad Bray: Brad(e)ry in 1407), Broad Clyst, Broadhambury, Broadhempston, and Broadnymett (Devon); Broad Blundson, Broad Chalke, Broad Hinton, and Broad Town (Wiltshire); Broadmayne, Broadwey, and Broadwindsor (Dorset); with occasional possibilities in other counties. Each of these names in Broad distinguishes its place from a nearby counterpart with a different qualifier: respectively Chipping Campden, Long or Dry Marston, Knight’s Bray (and others), Ashclyst (and others), Payhembury, Little Hempston, Nichols Nymett (and several others), Little Blunsdon (generally called Blunsdon St Andrew), Bower Chalke, Little Hinton, Little Town, Little Mayne, Littlewindsor, and Upwey (and many others).

We can be sure that in most or all of these cases broad means ‘big’, even though the sense ‘broad’ or ‘across’ as opposed to ‘long’ was established as early as Old English, witness the description in the Chronicle (MS. E, annal 1000) Brittene igland is ehta hund mila lang and twa hund brad. The sense ‘big’ is guaranteed by lexical variation and by translation in the record of some names, including some where Broad is no longer current. Broad Campden is recorded as Large Campden in 1291 (though large could here be understood in the narrower modern French sense of ‘broad’; the village is Parva Campedene in 1216, after its rival Chipping Campden had been established as a market town in about 1180 and presumably outgrown it). Great Rislington in the same county appears as Risen-dune Magna in about 1075 and Bradersendon in 1220. Broadhempston is Hemestone majoris in 1266. Greatweeke in Chagford, Devon, is Brodewyk in the time of Edward III. Broad Chalke is Magna Chelke in 1289, Grete Chalke in 1312, and Brode Chalk in 1380. Broadwindsor is Magna Wyndesor in 1249. Marston Magna in Somerset is Brod(e)mer-ston in Tudor times. This interpretation is also supported by the fact that nine of the seventeen counterpart names, including those in notes 11–13, have Little (sometimes along with alternative names and sometimes along with other counterpart manors).

All of these names with the qualifier Broad first appear after the Conquest, the earliest being Broad Town in Wiltshire, some time before 1200. But it requires no great stretch of the semantic imagination to believe that the meaning ‘big’ was established earlier than this. It is impossible to be sure that the many names including Old English brād, for example the various Bradleys, or Bradney in Somerset, do not simply mean ‘big wood or clearing’, ‘big island’ rather than ‘broad wood or clearing’, ‘broad island’. Indeed this looks like a modern distinction without a difference in many instances, as seems certain with the frequent name Broad Oak. We recall from the poem Christ and Satan that the Devil brohte him to bearme brade stanas, where we are surely not compelled to think of the stones as merely broad (even in a non-southwestern dialect), nor that the word is chosen only for its alliterative virtues; and the brad gold in

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6 J. E. B. Gover, A. Mawer, and F. M. Stenton (eds), The Place-Names of Wiltshire (Cambridge, 1939), 30–1, 203–4, 296, 265.
8 E. g. the early-modern Broadhidley (Worcestershire), Broad Colney (Hertfordshire), Broadhalfpenny (Hampshire/Sussex), and Broad Tenterden (Kent), which may be open to other interpretations, and the apparently modern Broad Meend (Monmouthshire).
9 See also Oxford English Dictionary, online, accessed 14 October 2013; ‘broad’, adj., 2.a. A sense with a non-specific dimensionality has long been available.
10 Edition ad libitum.
11 Smith, Place-Names of Gloucestershire, vol. 1, 201; contrasting with Little and Wyck Rislington.
12 Gover et al., Place-Names of Devon, vol. 2, 426; contrasting with Little Weeke.
14 This name may be anomalous in that it may pick up a pre-existing place-name, the hill-name Brodeour (Gover et al., Place-Names of Wiltshire, 265). That applies to none of the other cases in point.
15 Quoted from line 671 of the online plain text at <http://www8.georgetown.edu/departments/medieval/labyrinth/library/oe/texts/a1.4.html>, accessed 1 August 2013.
Beowulf surely should be taken to mean great amounts of it.\footnote{Fr. Klaeber (ed.), \textit{Beowulf and the Fight at Finnsburg}, 3rd edn (Lexington, MA, 1950), line 1056; R. D. Fulk, Robert E. Bjork, and John D. Niles (eds), \textit{Klaeber’s Beowulf} (Toronto, 2008).}

The editors of the English Place-Name Society volumes for Devon, Wiltshire, and Dorset all endorse the characteristically western and south-western meaning of \textit{broad}, at least in place-name qualifiers. Smith, in \textit{The Place-Names of Gloucestershire}, seems to avoid concluding that it meant ‘big’, despite the translation evidence from Campden and Rissington cited above, believing that the relevant Campden and Marston were literally and distinctively broad as opposed to long and thin.\footnote{‘Abundant’, in Antonette diPaolo Healey (ed.), \textit{The \{Toronto\} Dictionary of Old English, A-G Online}, \texttt{http://www.doe.utoronto.ca/pages/pub/fasc-a-g-web.html}, accessed 14 October 2013.}

It seems likely, then, that the islands at \textit{Steapan Reolice} of MSS. B, C, and D of the \textit{Chronicle} and at \textit{Bradan Relice} of MS. A are one and the same, namely Steep Holm, the ‘big island’. It is the larger island in area (and also in ‘breadth’, if that can be taken to mean its larger dimension), but mainly in bulk. It is a cliff-girt rock 78 metres (256 feet) high, whilst Flat Holm is much lower, only 32 metres (105 feet) at its highest point. Once they were stuck on Steep Holm, the unfortunate Vikings were truly at the mercy of the weather and tides because of its difficult landing-places.\footnote{Place-Names of Gloucestershire, as note 4. There is nothing detailed on the suggested sense of the word in David N. Parsons and Tania Styles, \textit{The Vocabulary of English Place-Names}, brace-cæster (Nottingham, 2000), 4.}

But that same fact will have made it a more secure refuge for Gytha \textit{manegra godra manna wif mid hyre}, 150 years later (\textit{Chronicle}, MS. D, annal 1067), than Flat Holm would have been.

A consequence of this conclusion is that the widely accepted etymology of the name of Flat Holm needs attention. It is usually taken to be from Old Norse \textit{floti} or Old English \textit{flota} ‘fleet’ with reference to the events of 914 CE, and afterwards influenced by the common English word. This idea is based on the fact that it first appears in fourteenth-century documents as \textit{Floltholm}, \textit{Floteholmes}.\footnote{For references to bad Bristol Channel storms or getting stranded, see Stan and Joan Rendell, \textit{Steep Holm’s Pioneers} (Weston-super-Mare, 2003), 22, 37, 40, 56–8, 68–9, 70, 77, 126.} Scandinavian names in North Germanic */a/ with \textit{u}-mutation usually appear in England with \textit{a/},\footnote{B. G. Charles, \textit{Non-Celtic Place-Names in Wales} (London, 1938), 163; accepts that it is the ‘flat island’ without discussion.} but it is possible that this name originates later than the bulk of relevant names in England, was given by Dublin Vikings, is from \textit{u}-mutated \textit{flot} ‘piece of flat ground’, and could therefore be rendered with English or Welsh \textit{/o/}. So if such a relatively late Scandinavian origin is accepted, there is no objection to its being ‘flat island’, a reasonable description especially in comparison with Steep Holm.\footnote{Richard Coates, ‘Behind the dictionary forms of Scandinavian elements in England’, \textit{Journal of the English Place-Name Society} xxxviii (2006), 43–61, at 49–52 (Table 1).} Alternatively it may be from Old English \textit{flot} ‘deep water, sea’, since it is the closer of the two islands to the (present-day) deepwater channel in the Severn Sea. Whichever explanation is preferred, the name does not have to allude to the tenth-century events which probably took place on Steep Holm.

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\textbf{FELA FRICGENDE: ROYAL ENTERTAINMENT IN THE HALL HEOROT (BEOWULF, LINES 2105–14)}

AFTER returning from Denmark to Hygelac’s court, Beowulf gives an account of his achievements both in the hall Heorot and in Grendel’s mere and describes the festivities held when he had victoriously fought against Grendel: he was amply rewarded with gifts. The direct account of these events is found in lines 991–1250 of \textit{Beowulf}. In Beowulf’s speech (lines