

Ely

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Bailey, in his discussion of *gē* names, has pointed out that Ely would be anomalous if really from *el-gē* ‘eel district’, being remote from the areas (Kent, Surrey, and Essex) where definite examples of these names occur, and moreover there is no parallel for the use of a fish-name in compounds with *gē*. Even Elford near Ely is not an eel-name, but probably an *elde* ‘old’ ford (PN Cambs 238). Bede’s phrase *in regione, quae uocatur Elge* (LE 4.17) has been taken (PN Cambs 214) to indicate that he understood *gē* as *regio*, but this is not conclusive.

In the OE sources, it is odd that the presumed nominative *Elge* does not occur, but we find only an invariant *Elig* (*Elige* once) for oblique cases: *on Elig, into Elig, fram Elig, of Elig, æt Elig, to Elig, is geceged Elige, into Ælig* (S776, S779, S780, S781, S896, S1110, S1489, S1503, TCOE). This looks like bad English – I would have expected a dative *Elige* or *Elie*. Nevertheless, this usage does seem to imitate the Latin text of LE, which has *ad Heli, in Ely*, etc. It is clearly from this oblique *Elig* that the modern Ely descends. We also find *on Eligbyrig, on Eligabirig, on Eliga byrig, on Elig mynstre, into Eligmynstre* in OE sources.

There is no doubt that the last element was re-interpreted very early as *ēg* ‘island’, or perhaps better a new name was formed on the stem *El-*. But the whole compound still needs more examination.

Ely was founded as a minster by *Æðelþryð* in 673 (about the time of Bede’s birth), who had married Ecgfrith of Northumbria in 660. Now Bede uses the name *Ælia* for Jerusalem, a survival of the classical *Ælia Capitolina*, from the name of the *gens* of Hadrian. In this he follows Adamnan. Adamnan’s usage of *Helia* (twice only, and with inorganic H-; *De locis sanctis*, book 1, XX.1; IAG 198) is interesting: “*Ab Helia [...] terra petrosa et aspera*” ‘from Jerusalem, . . . ground rocky and rugged’. When Bede adapts this passage, he adds an explanation of the name’s origin: “*Aelio Hadriano* Caesare, a quo etiam nunc *Aelia uocatur*” (*De locis sanctis*, book 1.1; IAG 252; italics as in IAG). In the same work *Aelia* appears several times again (V.1, “*aspera loca*”; VII.4; VIII.1). *Ælia* is otherwise scarce in Latin sources from England, since *Ierusalem, Hierusalem* were the usual names. Since it is certain that *Ælia* was used by Adamnan and Bede, it is also very likely to have current amongst their followers, so the existence of a vernacular adaptation of *Aelia* is plausible. **Elge* would be a good anglicization of *Ælia*. The passage of the diphthong *æ* to *ē* (?*Aesica* > *Esica*, LHEB 324ff) and hiatus *ia* to /ja/ and eventual /j[259?]/ (*filia* > *figlia, fille*, Väänänen ¶59, ¶76) are well-established features of vulgar Latin.

When writing of Ely in HE, Bede writes the name as *Elge*. His description of the environment of Ely is *regio Elge undique est aquis ac paludibus circumdata, neque lapides maiores habet*. This appears in the OE version of Bede (IV.xxi.320) as *Elia lond is æghwonan mid wætrum & mid fennum ymbseald, ne hit micle stanas hafað*. This seems to be inspired by Adamnan’s *terra petrosa et aspera*. In emphasizing the surrounding flat fens and lack of large stones, Bede apparently wants to contrast Ely’s physical setting with *Ælia*, Jerusalem, as if they had the same name but looked very different. The unique OE spelling *Elia* here is closer to a Latin *Ælia* than any other in the surviving records, except perhaps *Eligabirig*. Could *Æðelþryð*

have applied the name *Ælia* to Ely so that her minster was seen as a new Jerusalem? Roman Newcastle had a name from the same source, *Pons Ælia* (PNRB 241), so perhaps she also was commemorating a town which was at or near the capital of her husband. Bede might have known the ancient Roman name of Newcastle in his nearby seat of Jarrow. (It may even be possible that *Ælia* was already the ancient Roman name of Ely; a Roman road (Margary 23b) reaches to Ely from Cambridge, though no Roman settlement is known at Ely.) Note that another probable Holy Land name at Ely is The Gallery, earlier *Galilee* (PN Cambs 215), and the name Ely Porta also exists. *Porta* is the traditional Latin word for the gates of Jerusalem.

Looking back at the declensional system in the light of this idea, *Heli* in the Latin *ad Heli* could perhaps represent a classical first-declension dative *Æliae*, and if so the English *Ely* is simply a usage of this Latin dative (nothing resembling an ablative *Æliā* is found anywhere). Note that it is the more formal *Eligabirig* in which we see a form closely resembling *Ælia*. The *-a* in *Elia* and *Eliga* needs some explanation - if not the present one, then what?

Against this theory, we may recall that Bede famously etymologizes the name as referring to the many eels which could be caught in the fens around Ely: “*copia anguillarum, quae in eisdem paludibus capiuntur, nomen accepit*” (HE 4.19). And a contradictory (and absurd) Hebrew etymology appears in LE 1.15 (Blake p.32): *el* ‘Deus’, *ge* ‘terra’, thus “*Dei terra*”. This at least shows that the element *-ge* was not understood by the author of LE Book 1, writing at some unknown time in or before the twelfth century. Could Bede have known (or believed) that the name of Ely was a version of *Ælia*, but said otherwise? There is the possibility the attitude of the church had changed, and it was not thought appropriate to have a new Jerusalem, and so a deliberate attempt to change the name was propagated. Or perhaps *De locis sanctis* is not a genuine work of Bede, meaning that it was not he who made the comparison with the rough stony ground around Jerusalem and we have therefore no reason to believe that Bede thought that the name was from *Ælia*. A final possibility is of course that the similarity of the names is pure coincidence, and this last issue is irrelevant.

K. Bailey: Some observations on *gē*, *gau*, and *go*. JEPNS 31 (1998-9), 63-76 at 71

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PN Cambs = P. H. Reaney, *The Place-names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, EPNS, Cambridge 1943.

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S = P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon charters: an annotated list and bibliography*, London: Royal Historical Society, 1968

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