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Whitby Revisited: Bede's Explanation of *Streanaeshalch*

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Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of the English People* (completed 731) is one of the most important sources for the study of English place-names.¹ Bede's work is valued by onomasts primarily as a source for the earliest known forms of Anglo-Saxon place-names. Barrow upon Humber, Peterborough, Rochester and Hexham, for example, are all first recorded here. Without Bede, we would be unaware of many Old English (OE) names that have since been replaced: that the old Roman station of *Calcaria* at modern day Tadcaster was known to the Anglo-Saxons as *Kælcacaestir*, for instance, or that the earlier name for Beverley was *Inderauuda* 'in the wood of the men of Deira' (i.e. southern Northumbria). However, Bede's interest to the place-name scholar is not restricted to the recording of early forms. He often translates, explains or interprets these names in his Latin text. Bede's translation of Selsey as *Insula vituli marini* 'island of the marine calf' fits well with early forms of the name, which suggest it comes from OE *seoles ēg* 'seal's island'.² His interpretation of *Heorotea*, the Old English name for

¹ The Latin text is taken from *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited and translated by B. Colgrave and R. A. B. Mynors (Oxford, 1969). For the Old English Bede, I follow *The Old English Version of Bede's Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited and translated by T. Miller, Early English Texts Society, 4 vols, o.s. 95, 96, 110 and 111 (London, 1890-98). Modern English translations follow these editions, in which the translation of a passage always appears on the page following; for this reason page references for translations are to be deduced from that of the original passage. County surveys of the English Place-Name Society [= EPNS] are cited as 'PN' + abbreviated county-name.

² *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 374 (Book IV, Chapter 13). For modern accounts of the derivation of Selsey see PN Sussex, I, 82-83, E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-*

Hartlepool, as *Insula Cerui* 'island of the hart' also seems perfectly reasonable,³ as do his accounts of Ely as 'eel-district' and of OE *Hreutford* as *Vadum harundis* 'ford of the reeds'.⁴

It might be assumed that modern onomasts would defer to Bede not only for early spellings of Old English place-names but also for accurate accounts of their meaning—after all, as a native-speaking informant he was in a good position to know. However, the usefulness of Bede's interpretations to the study of place-name origins is contingent on his assumptions about the uses to which names could properly be put in Christian history, assumptions which differ markedly from those upon which the modern discipline of place-name studies operates. This paper attempts to show how an understanding of Bede's approach to onomastics can throw new light on a much-discussed place-name crux, his interpretation of the Old English name for Whitby.

Bede's aim in writing the *Ecclesiastical History* was not just to inform, but also to edify and improve his audience. In the preface to his history, he sets out the sources for his account, but also advises:

Sive enim historia de bonis bona referat, ad imitandum bonum auditor sollicitus instigatur; seu mala commemoret de prauis, nihilominus religiosus ac pius auditor siue lector deuitando quod noxium est ac peruersum, ipse sollertius ad exsequenda ea quae bona ac Deo digna esse cognouerit, accenditur.

Names, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 411, and A. D. Mills *The Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1998), p. 306.

³ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 292 (Book III, Chapter 24). See A. Mawer, *The Place-Names of Northumberland and Durham* (Cambridge, 1920), p. 104 and Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 222. OE *Bede*, edited by Miller, interprets the name *Heorot ea* 'hart island' (I 2, 236).

⁴ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. 396 and 382 (Book IV, Chapters 19 and 16). For the etymology of Ely (OE *ēl* 'eel', **gē* 'district') see *PN Cambs.*, p. 214, Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 166, and Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 129. Bede's *Hreutford* is identified with modern-day Redbridge, Hampshire. *Hreodford* is the form given by OE *Bede*, edited by Miller, I 2, 308. R. Coates, *Hampshire Place-Names* (Southampton, 1993) notes 'there are still conspicuous reed-beds here' (p. 137); cf. Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 383.

[Should history tell of good men and their good estate, the thoughtful listener is spurred on to imitate the good; should it record the evil ends of wicked men, no less effectually the devout and earnest listener or reader is kindled to eschew what is harmful and perverse, and himself with greater care pursue those things which he has learned to be good and pleasing in the sight of God.]⁵

Essentially then, Bede's *Ecclesiastical History* is a moral and didactic enterprise. The vast bulk of his literary output consisted of commentary on the Bible—a history of the Christian church every bit as much as the works of Eusebius and Orosius—which served as an important source for this work.⁶ Biblical onomastics values a name as a key to its bearer's significance in Christian history, and the treatment of names in the *Ecclesiastical History* often owes more to this tradition than it does to the discipline of historical linguistics, with its rigorous separation of linguistic form and semantic content. In approaching names thus, Bede was following the example of Jerome in his works on Hebrew names in the Bible, works which he was instrumental in bringing to the attention of Anglo-Saxon writers.⁷

These factors had important implications for Bede's conception of the uses of place-names in a Christian history. In the second chapter of book three, for example, he tells how St Oswald set up a wooden cross and prayed with his troops before going into battle against the heathen force of Cædwalla. The pagans are defeated and splinters from the cross, even the moss that grows on it, subsequently prove to have miraculous healing powers. Bede binds this Christian legend to its geographical setting in the minds of his audience by explaining the place-name as follows:

Vocatur locus ille lingua Anglorum Hefenfeld, quod dici potest latine

⁵ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 2.

⁶ On the Bible as a source for the *Ecclesiastical History*, see further J. McClure, 'Bede's Old Testament kings', in *Ideal and Reality in Frankish and Anglo-Saxon Society: Studies Presented to J. M. Wallace-Hadrill*, edited by P. Wormald, D. Bullough and R. Collins (Oxford, 1983), pp. 76–98.

⁷ On Anglo-Saxon onomastics see further F. C. Robinson, 'The significance of names in Old English literature', *Anglia*, 86 (1968), 14–58.

Caelestis Campus, quod certo utique praesagio futurorum antiquitus nomen accepit; significans nimirum quod ibidem caeleste erigendum tropeum, caelestis inchoanda uictoria, caelestia usque hodie forent miracula celebranda.

[This place is called in English Heavenfield, and in Latin *Caelestis campus*, a name which it certainly received in days of old as an omen of future happenings; it signified that a heavenly sign was to be erected there, a heavenly victory won, and that heavenly miracles were to take place there to this day.]⁸

This account seems to have gained some currency as a vernacular place-name etymology. The OE Bede renders the passage quite closely, and Ælfric alludes it in his Life of Oswald.⁹ The popular explanation of the name Heavenfield would seem to be founded on the belief that, in England as in Israel, the nation's Christian destiny is written of old into its place-names. Like his more famous account of Pope Gregory's interpretation of the names of a Northumbrian kingdom, its ruler and its people, Bede's treatment of Heavenfield allows him to drive home the message that his land was predestined to be Christian, and thus to reinforce national belief.

Bede's account of the Anglo-Saxon name for the site of the double monastery led by Abbess Hild in the seventh century may belong to the same tradition. Five times in the *Ecclesiastical History* he refers to this place by its Old English name, the commonest spelling of which is *Streanaeshalch*.¹⁰ This place is traditionally connected with the town of Whitby—the present name is of Scandinavian origin, first recorded in

⁸ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 216 (Book III, Chapter 2).

⁹ See *OE Bede*, edited and translated by Miller, I 1, 156 and *Ælfric's Lives of Saints*, edited and translated by W. W. Skeat, 2 vols, Early English Texts Society, o.s. 76, 82, 94 and 114 (London, 1881–90), II, 128.

¹⁰ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 292 (Book III, Chapter 24), pp. 406 and 408 (Book IV, Chapter 23), p. 428 (Book IV, Chapter 26) and p. 564 (Book V, Chapter 24).

Domesday Book, and probably no older than the tenth century.¹¹

As Christine Fell points out, since there appears to be no evidence that it was made until some five centuries after Hild's day, and then by chroniclers whose accounts of the period are often best described as creative, the identification of *Streanaeshalch* with Whitby can by no means be taken for granted.¹² Nevertheless, she sets out several pieces of evidence that speak convincingly in its favour. Firstly, the charter by which William de Percy gave land for the building of the Norman abbey in 1072 refers to its hilltop site as *Prestebi* 'farm of the priests' (OE *prēost*, Old Norse *bý*). If A. H. Smith is correct in asserting that as a place-name element, OE *prēost* 'may denote a place set aside for the endowment of priests or monks', this name might suggest a continuity between the Norman foundation at Whitby and an Anglo-Saxon one of the kind Bede tells us was at *Streanaeshalch*.¹³ Secondly, Bede states that *Streanaeshalch* is thirteen miles from a place he calls *Haconos*, the same distance that separates Whitby and modern-day Hackness.¹⁴ And thirdly, the remains of an Anglo-Saxon monastic foundation of an appropriate date have been uncovered beneath de Percy's abbey at Whitby.¹⁵ Thus, Fell concedes, 'Until the archæologists can offer us

¹¹ Smith, *PN YorksNR*, p. 126; Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 513; Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 356.

¹² C. E. Fell, 'Hild, abbess of Streonæshalch', in *Hagiography and Medieval Literature: A Symposium*, edited by H. Bekker-Nielsen and others (Odense, 1981), pp. 76–99 (pp. 82–85). William of Malmesbury and Simeon of Durham identify *Streanaeshalch* as the place called (*H*)*witebi* in their day. See *Willelmi Malmesbiriensis Monachi De Gestis Regum Anglorum Libri Quinque*, edited by W. Stubbs, 2 vols, Rolls Series, Chronicles and Memorials, 90 (London, 1887), I, 56 and *Symeonis Monachi Opera Omnia*, edited by T. Arnold, 2 vols, Rolls Series, Chronicles and Memorials, 75 (London, 1882), I, 111.

¹³ See the entry for *prēost* in A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 25–26 (London, 1956), II, 73.

¹⁴ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 414 (Book IV, Chapter 23).

¹⁵ The site was excavated soon after it came into the possession of H.M. Office of Works in 1920, but the findings were not published until 1943, much of the relevant documentation having been destroyed in the Second World War. See Peers and Ralegh Radford 1943 and the more recent accounts of the Whitby

another early Anglo-Saxon monastery for consideration we should perhaps accept that the twelfth-century historians got it right'.¹⁶

The second time Bede mentions *Streanaeshalch* is in his account of the Synod of Whitby, where he explains the name thus.

Mota ergo ibi quaestione de pascha uel tonsura uel aliis rebus ecclesiasticus, dispositum est ut in monasterio, quod dicitur Streanaeshalc, quod interpretatur Sinus Fari, cui tunc Hild abbatissa Deo deuota femina praefuit, synodus fieri, et haec quaestio terminari deberet.

[When this question of Easter and of the tonsure and other ecclesiastical matters was raised, it was decided to hold a council to settle the dispute at a monastery called [*Streanaeshalch*], a name which means [*Sinus Fari*]; at this time Hild, a woman devoted to God, was abbess.]¹⁷

This passage presents three problems: the etymology of OE *Streanaeshalch*, the meaning of Latin *Sinus Fari*, and the relationship between the two. Many interpretations have been made of both the Old English name and of Bede's Latin gloss, each justified to a greater or lesser extent by the topography and history of the site, but none has produced a convincing answer to the question of why the gloss should have been chosen to explain the name. Drawing on knowledge of Bede's etymological practice elsewhere in the *Ecclesiastical History*, this paper suggests a new solution to this problem.

The second element of the Old English name is easily recognisable as the common topographical generic *halh*. Margaret Gelling has noted applications of this word in place-names to a variety of natural features, from hollows and valleys to dry ground in marshland and land in river bend. The usual translation is, unhelpfully, 'nook'.¹⁸ In a recent study, Patrick Stiles has attempted to harmonise these diverse and apparently

finds in *The Archaeology of Anglo-Saxon England*, edited by D. M. Wilson (London, 1976), especially the reports by R. Cramp (pp. 223–29, 453–57) and P. A. Rahtz (pp. 459–62).

¹⁶ Fell, 'Hild', p. 84.

¹⁷ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 298.

¹⁸ M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), pp. 100–11.

contradictory concepts by suggesting that they share the core sense 'deviation from a plane'.¹⁹ Thus, on a horizontal plane, *halh* could refer equally to sunken ground (hollows and valleys) or its opposite, raised land (dry islands in a marsh); on the vertical, it encompasses both recesses (nooks, remote places) and projections (e.g. of administrative boundaries), much like our modern word 'corner'.

It is not immediately obvious in what sense the word *halh* was applied to Whitby, but there can be little doubt that it was. The description 'valley' might be appropriate to the Anglo-Saxon settlement at Whitby: though the remains of the monastery have been uncovered near the existing abbey ruins, on a headland about a hundred and seventy-five feet above sea level, early habitation probably took place on the flood plain of the River Esk and its tributaries, an area that barely rises above twenty-five feet.²⁰ However, Gelling has shown that valleys referred to as *halh* are typically short (in contrast to *cumb* sites) and shallow (in contrast to *denu* sites), often involving only a slight change in contour. This does not square well with the topography of the Esk valley at Whitby, which is some hundred and fifty feet deep, 'backing on steep slopes and cliffs on nearly all sides'.²¹ On the other hand, the cliff-top site of the monastery, and its position on the edge of the North York Moors, might well qualify Whitby for description as a 'remote place', a sense of *halh* which is attested in literary sources.²² OE *halh* is also used for land isolated from its surroundings in administrative terms, a sense in which Gelling notes its application to, for example, outlying parts of a parish, and which might conceivably be relevant here. To this question we shall return.

As far as identification is concerned, the first element of *Streanaeshalch* is far more problematic. Early accounts identified it as

¹⁹ P. V. Stiles, 'Old English *halh*, 'Slightly raised ground isolated by marsh'', in *Names, Places and People: An Onomastic Miscellany for John McNeal Dodgson*, edited by A. R. Rumble and A. D. Mills (Stamford, 1997), pp. 330–344 (pp. 333–35).

²⁰ G. H. J. Daysh, *A Survey of Whitby and the Surrounding Areas* (Eton, 1958), p. 54.

²¹ Daysh, *Whitby Survey*, p. 54.

²² See Stiles, 'OE *halh*', p. 338.

the genitive (*Strēones*) of a personal name *Strēon*, giving 'Strēon's nook or hollow'.²³ However, the same combination of elements seems to recur elsewhere—in Strensall, North Yorkshire, and in two features in the charter bounds of two Worcestershire settlements, Bengeworth and Wick Episcopi, the last of which appears to contain the weak equivalent *strēona*.²⁴ That all four of these places are hollows or nooks coincidentally associated with men called *Strēon* or *Strēona* seems unlikely, and as Gelling has pointed out, there are grounds for suspecting that this recurring place-name is not an *ad hoc* combination of name-forming elements but a meaningful compound in its own right.²⁵ Others have argued that the first element of this construction is the genitival form of the common noun that may lie behind this personal name, OE *ge-strēon*: this substantive certainly seems preferable to the personal name as a derivation for *Streanaeshalch*, and there are no more obvious words that would fit the shape of the Old English name.²⁶ The primary meaning of this word was 'work, business' but it was commonly extended to the reward for labour, that is 'gain, increase' in material terms (i.e. 'profit, wealth, treasure') and possibly also in biological ones

²³ For this suggestion, see Smith, *PN North Yorks*, p. 13.

²⁴ For Strensall, see *PN YorksNR*, p. 13. The relevant phrase in the Bengeworth bounds reads *in streones halh*: see the printed edition, *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxoni*, edited by J. M. Kemble, 6 vols (London, 1839–48), no. 1358. For manuscript details and authenticity, see P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-Saxon Charters: An Annotated List and Bibliography*, Royal Historical Society Guides and Handbooks, 8 (London, 1968), no. 1590. Sawyer dates the manuscript to the twelfth century. The bounds of Wick Episcopi contain the features *on streon halh*, *be streonen halæ*, *Cartularium Saxonicum*, edited by W. de G. Birch, 3 vols (London, 1885–99), no. 1139. Details are given in *PN Worcs*, p. 89, note 2. The charter is dated 961 x 972 and preserved in an early eleventh-century manuscript; see further Sawyer, *Charters*, no. 1370.

²⁵ M. Gelling, *Signposts to the Past*, 3rd edn (London, 1997), p. 189.

²⁶ The personal name *Strēon(a)* is assumed to have arisen from the noun *ge-strēon* as a nickname meaning 'the profiteer', or 'the wealthy'. See R. Coates, 'The slighting of Strensall', *Journal of the English Place-Name Society*, 13 (1979–80), pp. 50–53 (p. 52).

('generation, reproduction, descent').²⁷ A *strēones-halh* could then be anything from a 'nook of treasure' to a 'hollow of labour or gain'—perhaps, as Ekwall suggests, one reclaimed by draining or, as Mills offers, 'given as a reward'.²⁸ Dorothy Whitelock is presumably referring to biological reproduction in her translation 'corner of generation'.²⁹ Richard Coates certainly is when he proposes that places so named might be secluded spots used for illicit lovemaking,³⁰ a possibility that Mills takes up in the most recent dictionary of English place-names.³¹

Bede's Latin explanation of the *Streanaeshalch*, *Sinus Fari*, is usually rendered 'bay of the lighthouse' or 'Bay of the Beacon' in published translations of Bede's history.³² However, reference to a harbour is not the only possibility here. According to Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary*, *sinus* certainly can mean 'bay', but its basic sense is 'curve ... fold', and like *halh* it can refer to convex land formations as well as concave ones, headlands and promontaries as well as harbours and inlets.³³ The *Oxford Latin Dictionary* senses 8a 'a depression, hollow, cavity; a hollow in the ground' and 9 'a natural hollow or recess (esp. as forming a remote part of the country, etc.)' provide an excellent fit

²⁷ The meaning of the word is discussed in detail by R. Coates, 'Slighting', pp. 51–52. *OED* (*strain* sb.¹) claims that the sense 'offspring' is unattested in Old English, but Coates argues for it on the basis of the verb *gestreonan* and early Middle English usage.

²⁸ Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 314.

²⁹ *English Historical Documents c.500–1066*, edited by D. Whitelock, 2nd edn (London, 1979), p. 640. Rosemary Cramp's suggestion 'haven of the tribe' seems to be a paraphrase of this. See *Anglo-Saxon Archaeology*, edited by Wilson, p. 223, note 68.

³⁰ Coates, 'Slighting', pp. 50–53.

³¹ Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 314.

³² *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 299; *Ecclesiastical History of the English People*, edited by L. Sherley-Price (London, 1990), p. 187.

³³ C. T. Lewis and C. Short, *A Latin Dictionary* (Oxford, 1879), p. 1709. 'Curve ... fold' is Lewis and Short's sense I for *sinus*. 'Bay' and 'point of land' are both listed under II.B.

for the attested senses of *halh*, which, it may be noted, do not include 'bay'.

It seems that the reason why 'bay' has been chosen from the various senses of *sinus* in standard translations of Bede is that *fari* is consistently interpreted as a reference to a lighthouse. 'Lighthouse' is well attested as a meaning for *farus*, though the sense 'light' or 'lamp' is more common in medieval sources.³⁴ There were five Roman signal stations along North Yorkshire's coast with the North Sea, at Huntcliff, Goldsborough, Ravenscar, Scarborough and Filey. Since Goldsborough cannot be seen from Ravenscar, some thirteen miles along the coast, a signalling point would seem to have been required between the two, on the shoulder of land near Whitby, for the chain of communication to have operated unbroken. This does not appear to be confirmed by archaeological remains, but coastal erosion since the Roman period here has been extensive.³⁵ Rosemary Cramp assumes the presence of a signal station in the Anglo-Saxon period when she writes of the Anglo-Saxon monastery 'in view of the eleven late Roman coins and Roman pottery from the site the "haven of the watchtower" from Bede's Latin is apt'.³⁶ *Farus* could also be used of a beacon, and the Old English word *ād* seems to have been used of beacons in some place-names.³⁷ But neither lighthouse nor beacon would explain the other examples of the Old

³⁴ See the discussion in P. H. Blair, 'Whitby as a centre of learning in the seventh century', in *Learning and Literature in Anglo-Saxon England: Studies Presented to Peter Clemoes on the Occasion of his Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, edited by H. Gneuss and M. Lapidge (Cambridge, 1985), p. 11 and the entry on *farus* in *Glossarium Mediæ et Infimæ Latinitatis*, edited by C. DuCange and others, 8 vols (Paris, 1840–57) III, 209, which gives 'Cœnator, cœnatorium' as the word's primary sense. It has no entry in either Lewis and Short's *Latin Dictionary* or in R. E. Latham, D. R. Howlett and others, *A Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources* (London, 1975–).

³⁵ Tyler Bell, personal communication.

³⁶ In *Archæology*, edited by Wilson, p. 223, note 68.

³⁷ See the evidence presented by R. Forsberg, 'On Old English *ād* in English place-names', *Namn och Bygd*, 58 (1970), 20–82, and the entry for *ād* in *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names: A-Box*, edited by D. Parsons and T. Styles (Nottingham, 1997), pp. 5–6.

English place-name in Yorkshire and Worcestershire, which are certainly inland and apparently low-lying.

This discussion leads us at last to the question of the relationship between the Old English name and Bede's Latin gloss. It seems clear that *sinus* is as near an equivalent to OE *halh* as one could ever hope to find. Topographically, both can be applied to hollows, valleys or remote corners of land. They share the ability to refer to both concave and convex features, as deviations from a plane. There is also evidence to suggest that like *halh*, *sinus* could refer to land cut off from its surroundings by human agency as well as natural. A word of this shape appears elsewhere in a British context, inscribed on the Latinus stone, a pillar on the site of the early monastery at Whithorn in Galloway which Bede identifies as the foundation of St Ninian, missionary among the Picts.³⁸ This monument bears a Latin text dated to the mid-fifth century, recording the erection of *[h]ic sinum* to the memory of one Latinus and his young daughter by his grandson (or possibly nephew) Barrovadus.³⁹ Most interpreters have taken *sinum* as a mistake for *signum* 'sign, memorial', referring to the stone itself. However, Charles Thomas has recently argued against this emendation. He notes that as an extension of its basic sense 'fold, curve', *sinus* could refer to the bosom, either as a curved object or by association with the fold in the Roman toga. Thomas suggests that on the Latinus stone, *sinus* represents a figurative use of the word for breast, as in the phrase 'bosom of the family', for a place of protection or asylum, that place being the monastic enclosure at Whithorn.⁴⁰ This compares well with the sense 'hiding place' attested for *halh* in one of Wulfstan's homilies and a Prudentius gloss on Latin *cubilis* 'resting place'. In the administrative sense Gelling proposes, *halh*

³⁸ *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, p. 222 (Book 3, Chapter 4).

³⁹ See C. Thomas, *The Early Christian Archaeology of Northern Britain* (London, Glasgow and New York, 1971), pp. 98–99; C. A. R. Radford, 'Excavations at Whithorn (Final Report)', *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 34 (1957), 131–94 (pp. 170–75), and note 40 below.

⁴⁰ C. Thomas, *Whithorn's Christian Beginnings*, Whithorn Lectures, 1 (Whithorn, 1992).

could also reasonably have been applied to a monastic enclosure like that at Anglo-Saxon Whitby, which it would presumably have been necessary to distinguish from the surrounding land for such purposes as the levying of tithes and land rents.

While the semantic fields of OE *halh* and Latin *sinus* overlap to a remarkable extent, then, one sense which they do not appear to share is the translator's favourite, 'bay'. None of the published interpretations of Latin *farus*, meanwhile, appears to connect with any of the published readings of *ge-strēon* in the compound *strēones-halh*. 'Halh of the lighthouse' may well have been an appropriate description of the site of Anglo-Saxon Whitby, but while several meanings have been suggested for OE *ge-strēon*, 'lighthouse' is certainly not one of them.

Several different strategies have been proposed to overcome this discrepancy. Some who trace the Old English name from *ge-strēon* in the sense 'descent' have suggested that Bede's *fari* is a mistake for *faræ*, the genitive singular of medieval Latin *fara*, which also meant 'descent'.⁴¹ Others who prefer the meaning 'business, profit' for *ge-strēon*, suggest that the manuscripts should be emended here to *fori*, the genitive inflection of Latin *forum* 'market place'. It should be stressed, however, that *fari* is the spelling given in extant manuscripts, and Bede does not tend to make mistakes of this kind.⁴² Emendation should be a last resort. If we accept Coates's reading of *Streanaeshalch*, it could be argued that the mismatch between the true meaning of the name and Bede's explanation of it was entirely deliberate: given what we know of his procedure elsewhere, if the compound *strēones-halh* did contain a reference to illicit sexual intercourse it seems likely that he would have gone to considerable pains to disguise the fact by inventing for this centre of the Northumbrian church a more edifying origin. Yet why *Sinus Fari* was considered particularly appropriate for this purpose remains unexplained.

In a recent analysis of the name, Peter Hunter Blair tried to solve this problem. He argued that Bede's wording here—'Strenaeshalc, *quod*

⁴¹ *PN YorksNR*, p. 126; Whitelock, *English Historical Documents*, p. 696.

⁴² *Ecclesiastical History*, edited and translated by Colgrave and Mynors, pp. xxxix-xxxxl.

interpretatur Sinus Fari' where we would expect rather 'Strenaeshalc, *id est Sinus Fari*'—is an important clue to his procedure: in Hunter Blair's view, Bede was not translating the English name with its Latin equivalent here, but interpreting it in an exegetical manner, as he seems to have done with Heavenfield. Later in his history (Book IV, Chapter 3), Bede gives an account of the life of St Hild. When Hild was still an infant, he relates, her mother dreamed that she found hidden beneath her dress a precious necklace which, as she gazed upon it, shone and lit up all Britain. According to Hunter Blair, Bede is telling us that this incident prefigured the fate of her daughter, whose life as abbess of Whitby was to be an example of the works of light. So, he argues, it is Hild that provides the missing link between OE *ge-strēon* and Latin *farus*: she is both the treasure in the folds of her mother's garment, and the spiritual light shining forth from the monastery at Whitby.⁴³

Blair's account fits well with what we know of Bede's practice elsewhere. Bede might well have recognised the Old English word for treasure in the name by which he knew Whitby, and have played on the connection with the legend of Hild in his interpretation. He was, however, expecting a great deal from his readers if he thought they would pick up this reference, since he does not tell the relevant story until the next book of his history. Had he wanted to stress a link between Hild and the name *Streanaeshalch*, surely the appropriate place to have done so would have been in his account of her life in Book IV rather than in that of the Synod of Whitby, in which she plays a remarkably minor role.

I would like to make the case for a different connection between OE *strēones* and Latin *fari*, one that does not demand that the audience draw upon anything beyond the passage at hand. It has already been established that OE *ge-strēon* had the basic sense 'work', but the word regularly glosses Latin *negotium*, which has senses that range from 'business' to 'affair, matter, situation'. For example, *ge-strēon* glosses *negotiationes* in the Psalm 70.15 of the Lambeth and Regius psalters: 'Os meum pronuntiabit iustitiam tuam tota die salutare tuum. Quia non

⁴³ Blair, 'Whitby', pp. 9-12.

cognoui negotiationes'.⁴⁴ The Authorised Version (71.15) reads 'My mouth shall shew forth thy righteousness and thy salvation all the day; for I know not the numbers thereof', where 'numbers' has the sense 'details, proceedings'. *Ge-strēon* also glosses *causa*, which can denote a lawsuit or, in rhetoric, a concrete question or case for discussion.⁴⁵ In a gloss to Aldhelm preserved in Brussels, Royal Library 1650, *ge-strēon* renders 'negotium i labor opus vel causa'.⁴⁶ In a gloss on Aldhelm's verse *De Laudibus Virginitate* the same term renders *questus*, 'complaint, suit, case', which comes from the same root as Modern English *question*.

Tum petit Augusti suffragia *questu*
Vindictet ut flagris bernarum crimina sontum;

[Then, with his *case*, he seeks Augustus's approval, so that he may punish the crimes of the guilty slaves with scourges]⁴⁷

Medieval Latin has an adjective *farius* 'eloquent', related to the verb *fari* 'to speak'; it is also used as a noun in British sources, meaning 'talk' or 'fine words'.⁴⁸ In the tenth century Harley glossary (MS London, British Library, Harley 3376), *farius* glosses *verbum* 'word' as well as *fama* 'fame, rumour, report' and *crimen* 'verdict, judgement'. Bede's *fari*

⁴⁴ *Der Lambeth Psalter*, edited by U. L. Lindelöf (Helsingfors, 1909–14); *Der altenglische Regius-Psalter*, edited by F. Roeder, Studien zur englischen Philologie, 18 (Halle, 1904).

⁴⁵ Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, pp. 303–04; *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, edited by Latham, Howlett and others, p. 304.

⁴⁶ L. Goossens, *The Old English Glosses of MS. Brussels, Royal Library 1650* (Brussels, 1974), gloss no. 2595.

⁴⁷ R. Ehwald, 'Aldhelmi Opera', *Monumenta Germaniae Historica: Auctorem Antiquissorem*, 15, 1 (1919), p. 445, lines 2248–49. Thanks to Matthew Robinson for help with the English translation. A. S. Napier, *Old English Glosses, Chiefly Unpublished*, Anecdota Oxoniensia, 4, Medieval and Modern Series 11 (Oxford, 1900), text 9, gloss no. 14, has *gestreo* as a rendition of the ablative *questu*. For the sense of *questus* see Lewis and Short, *Latin Dictionary*, p. 1510.

⁴⁸ Latham, Howlett and others, *Dictionary of Medieval Latin from British Sources*, p. 906.

would be a contraction of the genitive form *farii* of a kind which might be expected in later Latin.⁴⁹ If *ge-strēon* can mean 'business, case, matter for discussion' and *farius* can denote 'words, judgement', both terms could be taken as different expressions for the same referent: an official discussion or meeting. In his account of the name, Bede states 'it was decided to hold a council [*synodus fieri*] to settle the dispute at a monastery called [*Streanæshalch*], a name which means *Sinus Fari*'. The verbal echo of *Sinus Fari* and *synodus fieri* also seems suggestive. In his explanation of the place-name, then Bede may be interpreting *strēones-halh* as 'halh of the meeting or discussion'—that is, the synod of 664.

Of course, Whitby is highly unlikely to have been named after this particular meeting, and in all probability bore its Old English name long before 664. If the scenario outlined above is correct, then Bede's explanation is certainly intended as an exegetical interpretation of the name rather than an attempt at etymology in any modern sense, as Hunter-Blair stressed. Here, as in the case of Heavenfield, he seems to be taking a place-name he knows was 'given of old' and reading it as a prophecy of important ecclesiastical events that happened there subsequently. The recurring compound *strēones-halh* might conceivably be an appellative with the meaning 'hollow of the meeting', Bede's only act of ahistorical interpretation being his retrospective identification of the North Yorkshire instance with the synod of Whitby. There are parallel formations in other place-names where an Old English word for 'meeting, discussion' is combined with a topographical generic: Matlock is OE *mæðel-āc* 'meeting oak' and Matlask, Norfolk, *mæðel-æsc* 'meeting ash';⁵⁰ Runnymede is an original *rūn-ēg* 'council-island', with *mede* 'meadow' added later;⁵¹ OE *spell* 'speech' often appears in the

⁴⁹ 'The gen. sing. in *-i* from adjectives in *-ius* occurs occasionally in inscriptions and in late authors'. B. L. Glidersleeve and G. Lodge, *Latin Grammar*, 3rd edn (London, 1997), §75.

⁵⁰ *PN Derbys.*, pp. 388–89; Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 318; K. Cameron, *English Place Names*, new edn (London, 1996), p. 139; Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 237; Smith, *Elements*, II, p. 34.

⁵¹ Cameron, *English Place-Names*, p. 140; Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 396; Mills, *Dictionary*, p. 294; Smith, *Elements*, II, p. 89; though see also *PN Surrey*, p. 124.

names of hundred or wapentake meeting-places, as in Spellow, Lancashire (with *hlāw* 'mound') and Spelhoe, Northamptonshire (with *hōh* 'bank').⁵² But the aim of this discussion has been to explain why Bede interprets the name as he does, and not to make pronouncements as to its true derivation. It is just as likely that none of the four names in *strēones-halh* refers to meetings at all, and as far as Bede was concerned, this fact was probably beside the point. Given his procedure elsewhere, it could be argued that Bede's explanation springs first and foremost from his desire to link Whitby in the minds of his audience with the historically significant event that happened there. The truth about the origin of names in OE *strēones-halh* may lie with any of the possibilities outlined here, or with none of them; but uncovering it has not been my intention here. On that score, I suspect, Whitby can expect many more visitors in years to come.⁵³

⁵² *PN Northumbs*, pp. 131–32; Cameron, *English Place-Names*, p. 140; E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922), p. 115; Ekwall, *Dictionary*, p. 433; Smith, *Elements*, II, 136.

⁵³ An earlier version of this paper was read at the annual conference of the Society for Name Studies in Britain and Ireland at Bearsden, Glasgow in April 1997. I am grateful to all those who offered their comments on the paper at that stage, especially Oliver Padel, Peter Kitson, Margaret Gelling and Alex James, as well as to my colleague David Parsons, who encouraged me to write it in the first place. Special thanks are owed to Matthew Robinson for his help on matters Latin. Errors that remain are, of course, my own.

The Lancashire Place-Names Alkincoats and Heskin

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The following is an attempt to clarify the origin of the Lancashire place-names Alkincoats and Heskin, both of Celtic derivation. They are discussed separately.

Alkincoats

Alkincoats is a house on the northern fringe of Colne, an industrial town in north-east Lancashire. The house, located a mile from the Yorkshire border, is an old one, its name written in Gothic script on the Ordnance Survey map; but its name seems even older than its structure, as we shall see.

The name Alkincoats is attested as *Altenecote* 1201, *Altenecot* 1241. Ekwall describes the derivation as 'obscure'.¹ Since no convincing English or Norse etymology has been found for it, a Celtic one becomes a possibility. Cumbric (a sister-language of Welsh) was spoken in this region until at least the late seventh century, by which time the whole of modern Lancashire was in English hands.² A relic of this is the name Colne itself, originally a river-name (like its Wiltshire equivalent Calne), perhaps cognate with that of the Callan in Breconshire.³ Another Celtic

¹ E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922), p. 87; idem, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 6.

² K. H. Jackson, 'Angles and Britons in Northumbria and Cumbria', in *Angles and Britons. O'Donnell Lectures*, edited by Henry Lewis (Cardiff, 1963), pp. 60–84 (pp. 70–71).

³ R. J. Thomas, *Enwau Afonydd a Nentydd Cymru* (Cardiff, 1938), p. 46; Ifor Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd* (Liverpool, 1945), pp. 26–27; W. F. H. Nicolaisen, M. Gelling and M. Richards, *The Names of Towns and Cities in Britain* (London, 1970), p. 76.