Thoughts on L'Ancresse, Guernsey

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This Guernsey place-name is usually considered to derive from some word for `anchorage', and that is what it is supposed to mean.[1] Since the place is adjacent to a small harbour (`A Lyttell baye that boots maye Lande in', Report of Royal Commissioners, Hatfield House Salisbury MSS. 207/12 (1563), unpaginated), this view is not surprising. There are problems with it, though. If it contains *ancre* `anchor', what does the rest consist of? There is no suffix in any variety of Norman French with the necessary meaning. In any case, the normal Guernsey word for `anchorage' is something different, according to Mrs De Garis' dictionary:[2] *mouoillage* or *mollière*. That is not a knock-down argument against such a meaning for *ancresse*, of course, but it gives one pause for thought when coupled with the word-formational problem.

An earlier view was that of the Rev. Tourtel;[3] he believed it was `[n]o doubt a Kel[tic] term', and compared Breton *ankclhier* [sic! for *ankel(c)hier*?] `that which goes round, circular'. We may ignore this nonsense.

The name is much more likely to derive from Popular Latin **anacoretia* `state of being a hermit; a hermitage', unattested though regularly related to the frequent *anac(h)oreta / -ita* `hermit', and formed like *abbatia* `abbacy, office of abbot; an abbey' on the stem of *abbas* (*abbat-*) `abbot'. This hypothetical word differs from *abbatia* in that *abbatía* is stressed on the

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[1] M. De Garis, `Glossary of Guernsey place-names', *Report and Transactions, Société Guernesiaise*, 20 (1976), 66–103 (p. 88).

[2] M. De Garis, *Dictiounnaire Angllais-Guernesiais*, 3rd edn (Chichester, 1982), p. 4.

[3] R. H. Tourtel, `Ancient names of the bays, creeks, rocks, &c., on and near the coast of the islands of the bailiwick, with notes, &c.', *Report and Transactions, Société Guernesiaise*, 3 (1898), 298–341; 4 (1902), 135–40; and 4 (1903), 208–22, especially p. 317 of the first article (his item no. 836). Tourtel's work is a valuable collection of over 2,000 coastal names in the Bailiwick of Guernsey, but his explanations of them are almost all valueless; he had a great gift for missing the obvious, and for abusing Breton dictionaries.

suffix, but my proposed *anacorétia* on the root. Several words containing the Greek suffix *-(e)ia*, which bore stress which was maintained when first borrowed into Latin, in later Latin had the stress retracted (e.g. *ecclésia*, *blasphémia* for earlier *ecclesía*, *blasphemía*). There is therefore little difficulty in assuming that an original ecclesiastical Latin **anacoretía* (from Greek _ναχωρητεία) became **anacorétia*. This word would develop normally by well-understood changes to **ancrece* in Old French, and no great amount of linguistic special pleading is necessary. The spelling with <ss> could have arisen at any time after the collapse of the phonemic distinction between /ts/ and /s/ (here, /ts/ is represented by the second <c>). This change occurred probably in the thirteenth century.[4] Phonetically, [ʃ] rather than [s] might be expected here in Guernesiais, but the [s] of literary Norman[5]—and indeed of standard French—often replaces local [ʃ] when Guernsey names are spelt; for example *piaeche* `parcel of land' (from *petia*—note this also has Latin *-tia*) is commonly rendered *piéce* or *pièce* as well as *piéche* in local texts.[6]

Some historical or archaeological support is desirable, though, for this etymological suggestion, and it is elusive. No folklore assists us, to judge by the contents of De Garis' *Folklore of Guernsey*.[7] The name appears originally to denote the Common, but presumably derives from some feature situated there, as it is not itself a word for `common'. A wild spot at the northern extremity of the Clos du Valle is a plausible enough place for a hermitage, but none has been reported. Did some hermit, I wonder, hole up in one of the Neolithic passage-graves of La Varde or La Plate Mare, such that it could have been called a hermitage?[8] And was any hermitage late-medieval, or did the site maintain a traditional designation after being covered by windblown sand around the end of the first millennium? The

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[4] M. K. Pope, *From Latin to Modern French* (Manchester, 1934), §195.

[5] E. S. Lewis, `Guernsey: its people and dialect', *Publications of the Modern Language Association*, 10 [i.e. 3 of the new series] (1895), at 70.

[6] This has fallen together with the Guernesiais counterpart of the word *place* `place', cf. *naom dé piaeche* `place-name'.

[7] M. De Garis, *Folklore of Guernsey* (privately published, 1975).

[8] La Varde was used in historic times for other prosaic purposes such as storage, as noted by R. Jessup, `Landscapes: some antiquarian moods and fancies', in *Collectanea Historica. Essays in Memory of Stuart Rigold*, edited by A. Detsicas (Maidstone, 1981), pp. 14–19 (p. 16).

earliest record of its name is in the Hatfield House MS. mentioned above (1563; `A poynte of the Lande called Ancrese', which makes it clear that the name was—by then, at least—that of a land feature). It is absent from the earliest extant *livre de perchage* of Fief St Michel, Clos du Valle (1591) and from legal transactions in general, as one might expect from its being common land if the neighbours were not busy encroaching.

An alternative possibility, to me less attractive, is that there was some coastal feature called **L'Ancre* `the hermit', perhaps **La Rocque à l'Ancre*. This might have come to be known by the feminized form *L'Ancresse* in the same way that *La Rocque au Prêtre* in Écréhou came to be called *La Prêtresse*.[9] This naming strategy appears to apply exclusively to rocks.

Gerard Mercator mapped Guernsey in his *Atlas* (1595),[10] and on it placed *Lancress^e de anekres*. The last two words appear to be some kind of rendering in his native Dutch of the same name. *De* is the definite article, and his name is therefore a partial calque on the French, with the Dutch head noun as synchronically obscure as the French. Why Mercator put *ane-* with the extra vowel is unknown; the datum seems too late for an application of the Middle Dutch prefix *ane-* which became *aan-*. John Speed's map of Guernsey in the *Theatrum imperii Magnæ Britanniæ* (1611/12)[11] marks L'Ancresse as *Lancresse de Auekers*. This he presumably took uncritically from Mercator, and printed <u> for <n>, a very common typographical error. The map of the islands by Alain Manison Mallett (Paris, 1683) shows *Lankresse*, which is essentially the modern name.

If any of this is correct, we are led to the ironical conclusion that *L'Ancresse* really did mean `anchorage', but in the other, obsolete, sense of that word, namely `hermit's cell'.[12]

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[9] F. Le Maistre, `Les Écréhous: a toponymy', *Bulletin de la Société Jersiaise*, 24 (1986), 232–36 plus fold-out map (p. 233).

[10] R. A. Skelton, `Early atlases', *Geographical Magazine*, 32 (1960), 529–43 (p. 535).

[11] J. Speed, *Theatrum Imperii Magnæ Britanniæ* (London). Republished as *The counties of Britain. A Tudor atlas by John Speed* (London, 1995), pp. 10–11. Speed's atlas is usually dated to 1610, but some of the maps in it are dated 1611 and some of the Scottish ones even 1612. The conventional view is clearly wrong.

[12] The only other early references known to me are *Lancras*, *Lancras Bay*, both in the Legge Survey of 1680 (National Maritime Museum MS., full reference unknown).