Elslack—Olenacum:
An Onomastic Relic of Pre-Roman Britain?

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This study proposes a new etymology for the Yorkshire place-name Elslack, and aims to derive the present-day name from the name of the Roman fort of *Olikana / Olenacum*, which was probably sited at Elslack.[1] It is further suggested that the antique name may be derived from a notable feature of the watercourse near Elslack.

Olikana—Ilkley or *Olenacum—Elslack*?
The British Celtic place-name *Olikana* is documented in the Alexandrine scholar Ptolemy's *Geography* (first century AD).[2] It was for a long time assumed that this name of a fort is still preserved in the Yorkshire place-name Ilkley, where there are archaeological remains of a Roman fort. This identification is, however, a matter of dispute. Ekwall expresses serious doubts as to whether the present form of the name Ilkley can regularly be derived from the Latin, and adopts an Anglo-Saxon etymology,[3] and Jackson, although he does indicate how *Ilk-* might have developed regularly from older *Olikana*,

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1 I am indebted to W. B. Lockwood, Reading & Goslar, and the *Nomina* referees for help and criticism during the preparation of this study.

2 λίκανα (Book 2, Chapter 3,10), three manuscripts have the variant λόκανα—see *Claudii Ptolemæi Geographia e codicibus recognovit, prolegomenis, annotatione, indicibus, tabulis*, edited by C. Müller (1883–1901), I:i, 97.

3 E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), p. 262, s.n. *Ilkley*: `probably "*Illica*'s LĒAH", *Illica* being a derivative of *Illa* in Eleigh, Illington'.

follows Ekwall in preferring an English explanation.[4] In the standard reference work on the place-names of the West Riding, Smith accepts the identity of *Olikana* and *Ilkley*, although the burden of his argument is no more than: `It would ... be straining coincidence too far not to admit the identity of *Olicana* and Ilkley'.[5]

4K. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain* (Edinburgh, 1953), p. 258.

5A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society, 30–37 (Cambridge, 1961–63), IV, 210–12.

While Ptolemy cites the name in the form *Olíkana* (or the variant *Olókana*), two other ancient sources give different forms for what must surely be the same place-name: the Ravenna Geographer (around 700 AD, using earlier sources) mentions an *Olerica*,[6] and the `Notitia Dignitatum' (fourth/fifth century AD, using older sources) a fort *Olenaco* (variant *Elenaco*).[7]

There are strong arguments for locating the fort not at Ilkley, but a good twelve miles west thereof at Elslack near Skipton-in-Craven. Rivet and Smith, using the distances quoted in Ptolemy's *Geography*, place the fort at Elslack,[8] where excavations show that a site known locally as Burwen Castle was indeed a Roman fort.[9] On the basis of philological arguments, they also tentatively but plausibly emend the antique name to the *Olenacum* of the `Notitia Dignitatum'.[10] The form *Olikana* is explained as a misreading in Ptolemy (written in Greek) of Latin sources. They suppose Ilkley to have borne the name *Verbeia*,[11] found on a Roman inscription from Ilkley.[12] Linguistically and geographically, then, *Olikana* is not Ilkley.

I would like to argue that there are further, linguistic reasons which make the form *Olenacum* and its

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6Chapter V,31,20: see *Ravennatis anonymi cosmographia et Guidonis Geographica*, edited by J. Schnetz (Leipzig, 1940), p. 107,5.

7`Praefectus alae primae Herculeae Olenaco' (XL,55): see *Notitia Dignitatum*, edited by O. Seeck (Berlin, 1876), p. 212.

8A. L. F. Rivet and C. Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain* (Cambridge and Princeton, 1979), pp. 119–20 and 142.

9Cf. Th. May, 'The Roman forts at Elslack', *Proceedings of the Yorkshire Archaeological Society*, 21 (1911), 113–67.

10Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, pp. 430–31.

11*Ibid*., p. 493.

12R. G. Collingwood and R. P. Wright, *The Roman Inscriptions of Britain. I. Inscriptions on Stone* (Oxford, 1965), pp. 212–13 (no. 635).

identification with Elslack plausible. A remarkable topographic feature of Earby Beck near Elslack offers a tangible motivation for the name *Olenacum*. And given that *Olenacum* was the name of the Roman fort at Elslack, then it is possible, by means of a series of plausible and mainly well documented sound-changes, to derive the first element of Elslack from the British name.[13]

Derivation of *Olenacum*

The name has so far posed an etymological puzzle. While the suffix *-acum* is common in the formation of place-names throughout the areas in which Celtic languages were spoken as a means of word-formation by derivation from a wide range of bases, often personal names,[14] the radical **olen-* would seem to have no obvious and un-ambiguous source. It cannot unequivocally be derived from a known personal name. Rivet and Smith conclude: `The most one can say is that the name possibly means "property of" a man whose name was **Olen*-'.[15] For superficially similar place-names in Gaul such as (present-day) Oléac, Ouillon, Olizy and others, Dauzat and Rostaing assume derivations from personal names such as *Ollus*, *Olius*, *Olisius*.[16] In Roman times, *Olus*, *Olenius* and *Olenus*,

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13Early citations include *Eleslac* 1086, *Ellesclac*, *Haylslak*, *Ailselaik* 1219, *Elleslake* 1231, *Elselak* 1240, *Elsclak* 1361: cf. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VI, 44–45.

14For Gaul cf. A. Dauzat, *La toponymie française* (Paris, 1939), pp. 239–42; A. Longnon, *Les noms de lieu de la France* (Paris, 1920), pp. 75–87.

15Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*, p. 431.

16A. Dauzat and Ch. Rostaing, *Dictionnaire étymologique des noms de lieux en France*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1978), pp. 506–07; the Latin personal name *Olius* is also postulated by P. Skok, *Die mit den Suffixen -âcum, -ânum, -ascum und -uscum gebildeten südfranzösischen Ortsnamen* (Halle a.d. Saale, 1906), p. 113, for *Huillieux* (dép. Ain) (post 859 *Oleiaco*). A similar suggestion is made by Rivet and Smith, *The Place-Names of Roman Britain*,

-*os* are all found as personal names,[17] but in contrast to the place-name *Olenacum*, they have a long first vowel, as Greek transcriptions with <ῶ> show, and this disqualifies them as suitable etyma.

Rivet and Smith do not consider deriving the name from an appellative or a hydronym.[18] The Roman fort at Elslack lies on high land adjacent to the confluence of Earby Beck (the main watercourse, also known as Thornton Beck) and its tributary Elslack Beck, and could well derive its name from the watercourses. Krahe registers a number of river-names of similar form in his study of Old European hydronomy:[19] *Olna* (the Orne in Belgium),[20] *Olona* (the Olonne in France and also ancient

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p. 431.

17J. Perin, *Onomasticon totius latinitatis*, 2 vols (Padua, 1913–20), II, 374 and 375.

18Both are widely accepted methods of name formation; thus M. Roblin, *Le terroir de Paris aux époques gallo-romaine et franque*, 2nd edn (Paris, 1971), pp. 38–66 (p. 41), sees –*acus* as being `associé plus souvent à des noms communs indiquant le relief, la qualité du terrain, la prédominance d'une espèce végétale, qu'à des noms propres de personnes'; cf. A. Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*, 3 vols (Heidelberg, 1952–56), II.i, 220. And Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 545, s.n. *York*, concludes of the major attested British –*acum* name: `*Eburacon* might then well be derived directly from the tree-name', thus avoiding the necessity of inventing an intermediate stage with a personal name. The Modern Welsh derivative of –*ac-*, the adjective suffix –*og*, is frequently combined with nouns denoting features of the landscape and often used in place-names: Cegidog (Clwyd) from *cegid* 'hemlock', Ffawyddog (Powys) from *ffawydd* 'beech', cf. A. Lias, *A Guide to Welsh Place-Names* (Llanrwst, 1994), pp. 19–20 and 37–38, I. Williams, *Enwau Lleoedd* (Liverpool, 1945), p. 50.

19H. Krahe, 'Die Struktur der alteuropäischen Hydronomie', *Akademie der Wissenschaften und der Literatur Mainz. Abhandlungen der Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaftlichen Klasse*, 1962, 5, 287–342 (p. 332).

20Cf. also A. Carnoy, *Dictionnaire étymologique du nom des*

name of various rivers in France and Italy), as examples of hydronyms which predate individual Indo-European languages and reach back to a very early period in which separate linguistic families had not yet developed. Holder's Celtic vocabulary quotes further place-names and river-names such as Olino and Olonna from Switzerland and Spain,[21] Carnoy adds the Belgian Olenne and Oleye[22] and Bahlow the German Oleff and Olpe,[23] all of which make Krahe's suggestion of a hydronym quite plausible. An etymology might exploit Flutre's explanation for the name of the river Lot (eighth/ninth century *Olitis*) in France as being derived from an Indo-European root-form **ol-* 'to flow'.[24] The meaning would then have been 'settlement near the river **olen-*'.

But the most convincing explanation must surely take account of a remarkable topographic feature of Earby Beck at Elslack, which offers a tangible motivation for the first act of naming. Between the upstream village of Thornton-in-Craven and Elslack, adjacent to the crossing-point with the old Roman road, Earby Beck doubles back

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communes de Belgique (Louvain, 1939–40), pp. 440–41, who wrongly postulates a supposed Celtic **ollos* 'big', a root which more recent research has shown to be not primitive Celtic, but a more recent Irish coinage with a convincing derivation of its own: cf. J. Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, 2 vols (Berne and Munich, 1959–69), I, 24.

21A. Holder, *Alt-Celtischer Sprachschatz*, 3 vols (Leipzig, 1896–1913), II, 845 and 848–49.

22Carnoy, *Dictionnaire étymologique*, p. 430.

23H. Bahlow, *Deutschlands geographische Namenwelt* (Frankfurt, 1965), p. 363, derives these names and several others from an alleged Indo-European root *ol* (*al*, *el*, *ul*, *il*) meaning 'marsh, marshy waters, swamp'—an etymology not supported by any of the standard etymological dictionaries.

24L.-F. Flutre, *Recherches sur les Éléments prégaulois dans la toponymie de la Lozère* (Paris, 1957), pp. 209–10; Flutre is thinking of an -*o*-grade ablaut of the root **el-* 'to drift, move' postulated by Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I, 306–07.

sharply on itself as it flows along the fringes of Elslack Moor. In view of this elbow-like river-course, it would be tempting to see the name as a derivative (with suffix *-acum*) of a British Celtic *olīna, meaning 'elbow', predecessor of Welsh *elin* 'elbow'.[25] According to this hypothesis then, *olīna would refer to the sharp bend in Earby Beck near the crossing point of the Roman road and ancient lanes preceding it, and *olīnāc- is taken to be a derivation thereof as the name of the adjacent settlement. Parallels are to be found in names such as Ellbögen (near Innsbruck, Tyrol, Austria), Ellenbogen (near Bezau, Vorarlberg, Austria), Katzenelnbogen (near Limburg, Rhineland-Palatinate, Germany),[26] Loket (twice, near Karlovy Vary and near Dolní Kralovice, Czech Republic; Czech *loket* means 'elbow'),[27] and Gòmbito (province of Cremona, Italy; cf. Italian *gomito* 'elbow').[28]

   The Latin form *Olenacum* postulated by Rivet and Smith and documented in the `Notitia Dignitatum' could be taken to show pretonic shortening of ī;[29] given this

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25Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, p. 595; *Geiriadur Prifysgol Cymru* (Cardiff, 1950–), p. 1206; Pokorny, *Indogermanisches etymologisches Wörterbuch*, I, 307–08 (*olna). The root is also attested in the first syllable of English *elbow*, in Latin *ulna* and Greek 'λένη.

26On names with *Ellbogen* 'elbow' for a crooked water-course in the German-speaking world see Bach, *Deutsche Namenkunde*, II,1, 266 and 288. On *boga* 'bow' in English place-names cf. *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Á—Box)*, edited by D. Parsons and T. Styles with C. Hough (Nottingham, 1997), p. 121.

27A. Profous, *Místní jména v Cechách*, 5 vols (Prague, 1947–60), II, 655–56.

28G. Gasca Queiazza *et al.*, *Dizionario di Toponomastica. Storia e significato dei nomi geografici italiani* (Turin, 1990), p. 310.

29Cf. the sporadic evidence cited by Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, pp. 269 and 304–05; further instances are documented in C. Smith, 'Vulgar Latin in Roman Britain', in *Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt. Geschichte und Kultur Roms im Spiegel der neueren Forschung*, edited by H.

assumption, then the spelling with –*e*- for –*i*- is a well documented feature in Vulgar Latin,[30] and the Latin form can be seen as being directly derived from the British name.

Transmission into English

The traditional etymology of Elslack derives the first element from an Old English personal name, and the second from Old English *lacu* 'stream'. Thus, Smith explains Elslack as `Elli's stream', from an Old English personal name *El*(*l*)*e*, `clearly the original name of Elslack Beck'.[31] Ekwall offers a similar account: `*Elli's* or *Elesa's* stream'.[32] Personal names of suitable forms are indeed attested in Old English.[33] If the second element is *lacu* 'stream', this poses a problem for a derivation of the first element from the name of the Roman fort, as the origin of the -*s*- cannot be explained; possessive -*s*, quite normal with a personal name, would have to be introduced into the compound in an *ad hoc* manner. If the first element is a reflex of *Olenacum* or its Celtic etymon, then a more suitable etymology for the second element would be Old Norse *slakki* 'depression', 'shallow valley', which suits both the valleys of Earby and Elslack becks at Elslack—a

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Temporini and W. Haase, XXIX, *Sprache und Literatur*, edited by W. Haase (Berlin, 1983), part 2, pp. 893–948 (p. 905).

30Smith, 'Vulgar Latin in Roman Britain', pp. 902 and 905. Cf. P. Stotz, *Handbuch zur lateinischen Sprache des Mittelalters*. III *Lautlehre* (Munich, 1996), pp. 38–39.

31Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VI, 45.

32Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 165, s.n. *Elslack*.

33W. G. Searle, *Onomasticon Anglo-Saxonicum: a List of Anglo-Saxon Proper Names from the time of Beda to that of King John* (Cambridge, 1897), p. 226, registers several personal names which might suit: *Eli*, *Ella*, *Elle*, *Elli* and *Ello*. See also M. Redin, *Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English* (Uppsala, 1919), for instance *Elesa*, p. 95.

derivation originally suggested by Whitaker[34], but which Smith refutes because of two early spellings *Ailselaik* (1219) and *Elselak* (1240). But Smith's interpretation itself is open to question. Margaret Gelling, discussing Smith's explanation, writes:

> the evidence of these [spellings] is by no means conclusive and is outweighed by that of numerous other early forms. The watercourse at Elslack is a small mountain stream, and this would be an atypical use of **lacu**, which is otherwise only recorded once in YOW [West Riding of Yorkshire], in Fishlake, where it is used of a side-channel of the R. Don.[35]

She therefore proposes that Elslack does indeed contain a reflex of Old Norse *slakki*.[36] The present-day local pronunciation of the name is [ˈɛlˌslak] (and not [ˈɛlzˌ-]),[37] and this also speaks against Smith's view.

As for the first element, I aim to show that the retention of the ancient name is philologically quite plausible. How was the British name passed on to the English? The proposed basis is a British **olīnāc-* 'place at the elbow bend'. The region will have remained British until the seventh century AD.[38] **olinac-* would then give a seventh-

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34Th.-J. Whitaker, *The History of Craven*, 3rd edn (Leeds and London, 1878), p. 114: `A slack, in the dialect of this county, is a depression in the surface of the earth'; cf. J. Wright, *English Dialect Dictionary*, 6 vols (Oxford, 1898–1905), V, 492–93.

35M. Gelling, *Place-Names in the Landscape* (London, 1984), p. 123.

36In the re-write of the book, Gelling notes that `the first element presents a problem if the name is assumed to contain *slakki*' (M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), p. 142).

37Enquiries in Elslack in August 1999, among older, Elslack-born villagers.

38N. K. Chadwick, 'The Celtic background of early Anglo-Saxon England', in *Celt and Saxon. Studies in the Early British Border*, edited by K. Jackson *et al*. (Cambridge, 1963), pp. 323–52 (pp.

century British *elīnōg-* with *i*-affection.[39] The Romano-British form would be borrowed into Old English as a conjectural *élinac-*, later *élenac-*, with Germanic first syllable accent and a short second vowel *-e-*,[40] and perhaps at this stage becoming the first element in a compound, and reduced to *élen-* with loss of the last syllable;[41] hence on to *eln-*, with syncope;[42] this would be the Old English form current before the coming of the

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329–30); F. M. Stenton, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1971), p. 74; cf. A. Rowley, 'The origins of the name of Craven', *Beiträge zur Namenforschung*, 34 (1999), 25–45 (p. 28).

39Cf. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, pp. 597–605. Actually, Jackson, p. 258, discussing the derivation of *Olicana*, assumes that the loan would reach English without *i*-affection: `*lic-* would not give AS. *Elic-* but Pr.AS. *Olic* > *Ylic-*, since internal affection would not have occurred so early', but in fact Jackson himself, p. 616, says of the dating of *i*-affection that `English place names seem to show its existence in the North in the seventh century'. If British *i*-affection really were not applicable, then Old English umlaut of *o* in loan-words would have produced the same effect: cf. A. Campbell, *Old English Grammar* (Oxford, 1959), § 196.

40In accordance with Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, §§ 503, 511 and 369.

41What became of the onomastic suffix *-ac-* in Old English is difficult to ascertain (cf. Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, p. 233). The only surviving comparable name would seem to be be British *Eburacum* (York) > Old English *Eoforwicceaster* (644 AD), *Eferwic* (8th cent.) in Bede (Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 545), where no trace of the British *-ac-* survives in Anglo-Saxon; here however popular etymology probably played a role, leading to a reinterpretation of the first element as Old English *eofor* 'boar' (cf. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, p. 545; Jackson, *Language and History in Early Britain*, p. 655).

42Campbell, *Old English Grammar*, § 389, 390. Cf. the development of West Germanic *alina* to tenth-century Old English *eln* 'ell' (*Oxford English Dictionary*, edited by J. A. Simpson and E. S. C. Weiner, 2nd edn (Oxford, 1989), s.v. *ell¹*).

Norsemen.

There remains only assimilation to *ell-* and further to *el-* to be postulated as an irregularity. After compounding with *slakki* at the very latest, the complex internal group *-lnsls-* would in any case be ripe for simplification. Several of the thirteenth-century forms do show a double *-ll-*, alongside spellings with the single letter already found in the earliest attestation from the Domesday Book.[43]

Apart from the loss of *-ac-* and the assimilation of *eln-* to *el-*, which may both be attributable to phonetic processes due to compounding, these are regular sound changes.

In most respects, this etymology is equal to or better than that offered by Smith. The onomastic element *slack* is better suited to the topography of Elslack than **lacu-*, and the retention of the ancient name is a plausible hypothesis (and is adopted wherever possible by Smith himself), even though the form is obscured by a series of sound changes each well founded in itself, but whose summation in this single instance may be seen as somewhat speculative, although well established cases such as *Eboracum* > York, *Letoceto* > Lichfield or *Sorviodurum* > Salisbury show quite clearly how strongly sound change and reinterpretation can affect the shape of a name.[44] Quite unusual is the compounding of a British name with a Scandinavian element. It is a matter of conjecture whether the compound is a Scandinavian formation using an earlier Engl-ish name loaned as a simplex from British, or whether a Scandinavian second element supplanted an earlier English one. The latter assumption would seem the more plausible: Scandinavian influence on older English compounds is in fact assumed for nearby Gargrave, Skipton, Kelbrook and Bracewell,[45]

43See note 13.

44Cf. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, pp. 545, 297 and 402, s.nn. *York*, *Lichfield* and *Salisbury*.

45Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, VI,

and there would be a certain similarity with the development of the name of York.[46]

   The new etymology of Elslack proposed here can be summarized as follows. The name of the Roman fort *Olenacum* at Elslack is of British Celtic origin and was adopted by the Anglo-Saxons and used as the first element of a compound, which perhaps denoted the valley of Earby Beck at Elslack. On the coming of the Scandinavians, their word for valley replaced the previous English word. The settlement assumed the name of the watercourse.

Conclusion
Although Elslack is a mere hamlet, omitted from all but the largest-scale maps, its name represents important historical evidence. Elslack shows, so I would like to argue, an onomastic continuity reaching back to prehistoric times.

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53, 72, 33 and 38; cf. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, pp. 192 and 425, s.nn. *Gargrave* and *Skipton on Swale*.
46See note 41.