Maidenburgh, Geoffrey of Wells and Rabanus Maurus

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Richard Coates has given a history of the place-name type Maiden Castle, indirectly linking its first application in Edinburgh to an earlier Syrian castle.[1] In the process he gives a discussion of the place-name types Maidenbower and Maidenburgh. Though the story is already a little complex, I think that a few parts of it might be missing, and this note is intended to provide some filling for these gaps. I suspect that the true explanation of all these names involves a blending and confusion of several sources, which might never be fully unravelled. The name Maidenbower occurs in fiction and legend about the same time as it is found first attached to real places, so we very likely have here a fanciful type of naming in which the motivation of the name-giver will always be obscure. My method here is to discuss three thematic strands which to me seem relevant to the place-names. I cannot prove a connection, but at least the first two (classical and biblical) are part of long-lasting cultural traditions which have not been mentioned in the toponymic literature on the Maiden names. They may provide at least as good a motivation as the Syrian castle.

Our first strand is classical. The name of the Parthenon in Athens means something like 'house of the maiden (Athena)', and of course sits on a high castle-like rock, the Acropolis. This famous place seems likely to have been the inspiration for the names of several other ancient places with comparable situations. *Parthenico* in Sicily is twice referred to in the Antonine Itinerary.[2] This is the modern Partinico, which also sits below a huge Acropolis-like rock, with an escarpment quite like the Salisbury Crags in Edinburgh. Something similar occurs with *Parthano* in the Antonine Itinerary.[3] This is the modern Garmisch-Parthenkirchen in Bavaria, which is surrounded by hills on all sides. Next, *Parthenopis* (and

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[1] Richard Coates, 'Maiden Castle, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Hārūn al-Rašīd', *Nomina*, 29 (2006), 5–60 (p. 37 ff).

[2] *Itineraria Antonini Augusti et Burdigalense*, edited by Otto Cuntz (repr. Stuttgart, 1990), pp. 13, 14.

[3] *Itineraria Antonini Augusti et Burdigalense*, p. 37, 41

perhaps *Parthenopolis*) was a name for Naples, as in *Parthenopis quae et* [*sic*] *Neapolis* in the geography of Guido.[4] The 'acropolis' here is probably Vesuvius. There was also a Parthenium in Crimea, which is stated by Telfer to have been near the city of Chersonesus which had a 'temple to a virgin, a divinity'.[5] Bartin in Turkey also seems to have been anciently Parthenium, and has a rocky escarpment to its south-east. The name also occurs in literature: Mount Parthenium in Arcadia is the site of the myth of Heracles and Augê in the History of Diodorus Siculus,[6] and also occurs in the Hymns of Callimachus[7] and the Argonautica of Valerius Flaccus.[8] This must be the same place as that referred to as being 'above Tegea' in Book 6 of the Persian Wars of Herodotus.[9] The theme of a maiden associated with a rock was thus widespread in antiquity, whether or not it stems from the Parthenon in Athens.

    A second strand starts from a biblical text, Luke 10.38, which in the Vulgate reads *Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum et mulier quaedam, Martha nomine, excepit illum in domum suam* 'Jesus entered a certain castle and a woman there, called Martha, welcomed him into her house'. This bland statement, in which *castellum* really just means 'village', was enough for medieval theologians who practised the most extreme form of biblical exegesis, and so thought the whole bible was written in a secret code, to state that the castle was really Mary, or more precisely the womb of Mary. The earliest example of this seems to be Rabanus Maurus of Mainz (died 856) in his *Allegoriae in universam sacram Scripturam*, whose comment was *Castellum est Virgo Maria, ut in Evangelio, 'Intravit Jesus in quoddam castellum', quod Christus in singularis virginus venit uterum* 'The castle was the Virgin Mary, so that "Jesus entered a

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[4] *Ravennatis anonymi cosmographia et Guidonis geographica*, edited by Joseph Schnetz, (repr. Stuttgart, 1990), p. 130.

[5] J. Buchan Telfer, *The Crimea and Transcausasia* (London, 1876), p. 30.

[6] Diodorus Siculus, *Library of History*, edited by C. H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library, 279, (London, 1968), 4.33.7 ff.

[7] Callimachus, *Hymns, epigrams, select fragments*, edited by Stanley Lombardo and Diane Rayor (Baltimore, 1988), p. 55.

[8] Valerius Flaccus, *The voyage of the Argo*, edited by David R. Slavitt (Baltimore, 1999), p. 101.

[9] Herodotus, *The History of Herodotus of Halicarnassus*, trans. by G. Rawlinson, rev. by A. W. Lawrence (London, 1935).

castle", means that Christ came into a unique virgin's womb'.[10] Similar comments can be found in the works of Bernard of Clervaux (1090–1153), Anthony of Padua (*c*.1195–1231), Durandus (1237–1296), and Eckhart (*c*.1260–*c*.1328), but for our purpose English writers are more relevant. The text was noted by Ælfric and given an English version, though he took it literally and refrained from commenting on it: *Se Hǣlend becōm intō sumere ēaðelican byrig* 'The saviour came into a poor village'.[11] More importantly for the English developments, a sermon once thought to have been by Anselm[12] and now known to be by Escures (Archbishop of Canterbury, *c*.1068–1122)[13] states: *Ðes Cæstel, þære ure drihten in-com, betacned rihtlice þæt synderlice unwæmme mæden Maria* 'This castle, into which our lord came, truly betokened the especially unblemished maiden Mary'.[14] The word 'maiden' alone can also mean Mary.[15]. This usage is found also in the Middle English *Prisoner's prayer* edited by Ekwall: *Maiden that bare the heuen king* .[16] Note here the endingless genitive *heuen*, which is found also with *maiden* below. [17]

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[10] *Patrologia Latina*, edited by Jacques-Paul Migne, 221 volumes, (Paris, 1844–1864), 113, p. 885.

[11] *The Homilies of the Anglo-Saxon Church: the First Part, containing the Sermones Catholici or Homilies of Ælfric*, 2 vols, edited by B. Thorpe (London, 1844–6), II, 438.

[12] *Early English homilies from the twelfth-century MS Vespasian D xiv*, edited by Rubie D.-N. Warner, Early English Text Society, Original Series 152 (London, 1917).

[13] Martin Brett, 'Escures, Ralph d' (*c*.1068–1122)', in *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford, 2004); online edn, May 2009 <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/23047>, accessed 8 April 2010.

[14] Max Förster, 'Die spätaltenglische Übersetzung der Pseudo-Anselmschen Marienpredigt', *Palaestra*, 148 (1925), 8–69.

[15] This is sense 2(c) in the *Middle English Dictionary*, edited by H. Kurath et al. (Ann Arbor, 1956-2001) [hereafter *MED*], s.v. maid(e *n*.

[16] Eilert Ekwall, *Selected Papers* (Lund, 1963), p. 142.

[17] An early example of the 'maiden's bower' idea may occur in the OE section of a charter of AD 956 relating to Wroughton in Wiltshire: *on mædena coua . of mædæna coua*, which appears to mean 'cove of the maids' (P. H. Sawyer, *Anglo-saxon charters : an annotated list and bibliography*, (London, 1968), 585).

This widely distributed amplification of the single biblical sentence is surely relevant to Maidenburgh Street in Colchester (Figure 1).[18] Reaney could easily translate it as 'maiden's fort', but could not motivate it; he fully recognized the difficulty of finding a plausible motivation. Apparently he had not seen the great seal of the Borough of Colchester (Figure 1) which carries a slightly abbreviated version of Luke 10.38, with an image of a castle, which could have been intended to represent Colchester castle (near which is Maidenburgh St.), or the walled city of Colchester itself. Notice that the text has removed the reference to Martha, so that the 'woman' can be taken to be Mary instead. Colchester is of course a hill-top town, and this would have reinforced the 'acropolis' image. We have thus a symbol of the civic pride of the city of Colchester, with both classical and biblical allusions. I think we need look no further for an explanation of Maidenburgh Street. It must be an old name if the second element *burh* still carries its OE sense of 'fortification'. *Maidenburge* in Cambridge was apparently applied to the Norman castle on the hill overlooking the town,[19] so a similar motivation may well have applied here too. Two metaphorical devices seem to have been confused here: one being the image of the city on a hill-top, and the other the city overlooked by a mountain.

In Middle English literature we find yet further extensions of the theme of Mary as a castle. The *Château d'amour* of Robert Grosseteste (*c.*1170–1253, Bishop of Lincoln) is an extended allegory in which Mary is seen as a castle on a rock.[20] Line 757 says *Þis is þe castel of loue and lisse*;[21] and lines 769–770 read *þe roche þat is so trewe and trusti/ þat is þe Maydenes herte for-þi.*[22] And in the Middle English poem which Bödekker calls *Christi Höllenfahrt* (a version of the Harrowing of Hell),

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[18] P. H. Reaney. *The Place-names of Essex*, English Place-Name Society, 12 (Cambridge, 1935), 371.

[19] P. H. Reaney, *The Place-names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely*, English Place-Name Society, 19 (Cambridge, 1943), p. 39.

[20] *The Middle English translations of Robert Grosseteste's Château d'Amour*, edited by Kari Sajavaara (Helsinki, 1967).

[21] *Lisse* 'peace'.

[22] *For- þi* 'therefore'.

lines 30 to 31 say of Jesus that *he lyhte of ys heȝe tour/ in to seinte Marie bour* 'he alighted from his high tower/ into holy Mary's bower'.[23]

Figure 1: The medieval great seal of the Borough of Colchester, bearing the text: *Intravit ihc: in quoddam castellum et mulier quedam excepit illum* 'Jesus entered a certain castle and a woman there welcomed him'. Essex Record Office (Chelmsford) I/Mp 90/5/1/9. Reproduced with permission of Essex Record Office.

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[23] *Altenglische Dichtungen des MS. Harl. 2253*, edited by K. Böddeker (Berlin, 1878), p. 271.

During the Middle English period the final consonant of *burgh* 'castle, fort, town' was gradually being lost, rendering it homophonous (except for vowel length) with *bour* 'bower, chamber, shelter'. Thus the two words were sometimes confused, and this confusion is explicit in three quotations in *MED*: 'grete cities and bowrys [L ciuitatibus]' (*a*.1398); 'In þat bour [Cmb: burȝ, Auch: bourh]' (*a*.1400); and 'to bedleem[24] boure' (*a*.1475).[25] Now this gives rise to a very useful coincidence, almost a pun (which only works in the English language): since the womb of Mary is quite naturally called a bower, in the sense 'bedchamber', and Mary is also frequently likened to a castle, then 'maidenburgh' can become 'maidenbower' and still keep an acceptable sense. I suspect this may have happened in place-names, though I cannot point to a clear-cut example. The term 'maiden's bower' apparently recurs for the name of a maze game, otherwise called the Walls of Troy.[26] Unfortunately Heller supplies neither sources nor dates for this usage.

There is no doubt that the Latin expression *virginalis thalamus* was used for the womb of Mary, though *thalamus* (of Greek origin) is literally '(bed)-chamber'. We have it explicitly in Aquinas' commentary on Psalm 18: *Thalamus uterus virginalis est*.[27] It is also in a letter of Agobard, Bishop of Lyon (*c*.779–840): *in thalamo uteri virginalis*,[28] and identically in the Chronicle of Ortlieb of Zwiefalten (*c*.1138).[29] This would explain Geoffrey of Wells' invention of the name *Maydenbure* for the place where St. Edmund (the East Anglian king and martyr) first landed in England, in his version of the Edmund legend. Geoffrey is writing before 1156, so we have a real place called Maidenbower before the first record

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[24] *Bedleem* 'Bethlehem'.

[25] *MED* s.v. *bour* (n.) 1. (d).

[26] John. L. Heller, 'Labyrinth or Troy Town?', *The Classical Journal*, 42.3 (1946), 122–139 (p. 137).

[27] Thomas Aquinas, *In Psalmis Davidis Expositio* (Venice, 1775).

[28] *Epistolae Karolini aevi* (incorporating *Epistolae Merowingici et Karolini aevi*), 6 vols, edited by Wilhelm Gundlach, Ernst Dümmler et al., Monumenta Germaniae Historica, III, edited by Ernst Dümmler, Karl Hampe, *et al*. (Berlin, 1898–99), Epistle 18, p. 233.

[29] *Chronica et annales aevi Salici*, edited by G. H. Pertz, Monumenta Germaniae Historica (Hannover, 1851), Epistle 12, p. 72.

in 1173 of any place called Maiden Castle.[30] Geoffrey placed this event in Hunstanton in Norfolk, and wrote: *ad promontorium quoddam parvum et pulchrum, quod usque hodie Maydenbure appelatur, et Latine Virginalis Thalamus interpretatur* 'at a certain small and beautiful headland, which even today is called *Maydenbure*, and in Latin means "womb of the virgin"'.[31] Edmund is thus given Christ-like qualities by being made to arrive in a virginal womb.[32] Geoffrey reinforces this by mistranslating Hunstanton (really *Hūnstānstūn* 'Hūnstān's farm'), as 'town of the honey-coloured stone', thus evoking the walls of Jerusalum, or perhaps Bethlehem. The name Maidenbower is repeated in the Anglo-Norman life of Edmund by Piramus: *dune petite terele/ A merveile aäte e bele/ Ki a cel temps esteit clamee/ E ki uncore est apellee/ Maidenesboure en engleis/ Chambre as puceles en franceis* 'of a little headland/ of marvellous shape and beauty/ which at that time was called/ and still is called/ Maidensbower in English/ "chamber of the maidens" in French'.[33] We are not far from a *mons veneris* here.

A third and final strand is much more abstract, and though it is probably further removed from any English place-name, should nevertheless be noted for a possible indirect bearing on our subject. It concerns the 'figurative castle', a common allegory in which the castle stands for all kinds of philosophical concepts. The medieval German poem *Minneburg* describes a castle of love, and also mentions the *Friedenburg*, the castle of peace .[34] There is a real Minneburg in the Neckar valley, and there is a real Friedberg near Augsburg. Such ideas have been further discussed in

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[30] Coates, 'Maiden Castle, Geoffrey of Monmouth and Hārūn al-Rašīd', p. 20.

[31] This is the version in *Memorials of St. Edmund's Abbey*, 3 vols, edited by Thomas Arnold (London, 1890–1896), I, 99; a variant is in Lord Francis Hervey, *Corolla Sancti Eadmundi: the garland of Saint Edmund, king and martyr* (London, 1907), p. 148.

[32] There is an illuminated version of the life of Edmund of *c*.1125-35, probably from the Abbey of Bury St. Edmunds, in Pierpont Morgan Library MS M.736. Folio 7r illustrates Edmund's landing at Maidenbower: <http://utu.morganlibrary.org/medren/single_image2.cfm?imagename=m736.007r.jpg&PAGE=ICA000077546>.

[33] *La vie Seint Edmund le rei*, edited by Florence Leftwich Ravenel (Philadelphia, 1906), p. 100.

[34] *Die Minneburg*, edited by Hans Pyritz (Hildesheim, 1991).

a thesis by Cornelius.[35] In addition to the 'virgin as a castle' theme which I have already treated, Cornelius' chapters cover the castle of the body, the castle as warden of the soul, the castle and the abbey, the castle besieged, and the castle and pilgrimage. Chaucer uses similar ideas in his Tale of Melibee.[36] These themes apparently do not lend themselves to concretization as real places in the way that the virgin as a castle does. Cornelius does not mention toponymy. More recently, Wheatley has covered some of the same ideas, and thinks that a castle-like convent built in Bethany by Queen Melisende of Jerusalem (1131–1152) was modelled on the *castellum* of Luke 10.38.[37] If there was an association with the Templars as suggested by Wheatley, then we have a mode of transfer of such a concept back to England.

We thus have several motivations for place-names of the type 'Maiden bower' and 'Maidenburgh', all involving biblical elaboration and legendary history. In the most important theme, 'Maiden' meant Mary, and an ancient tradition likened Mary to a castle. This association seems to have been lost before any real place was called Maiden Castle, yet the abstract idea of a "Maiden Castle" was certainly circulating, and probably popular, in the twelfth century. It is therefore not really surprising to find real places named Maiden Castle.

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[35] Roberta D. Cornelius, 'The figurative castle', (PhD dissertation, Bryn Mawr College, Philadelphia, 1930).

[36] 'The Tale of Melibee', in *The Riverside Chaucer*, edited by Larry D. Benson, 3rd edn (Oxford, 1987), pp. 217–39.

[37] A. Wheatley, *The Idea of the Castle in Medieval England* (Woodbridge, 2004), p. 87.