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Hæwenhnydele: an Anglo-Saxon Medicinal Plant

The Anglo-Saxon plant-name, *hæwenhnydele*, occurs eight times in surviving records, with various spellings. It is found in two Latin-to-Old English glossaries: the Brussels Glossary (Wright, 1884, 296), and the Durham Glossary (Von Lindheim, 1941, 10). It also occurs twice in the medical compilation known as *Lacnunga*, (Grattan & Singer, 1952, 98, 122), and it occurs four times in the Old English *Herbarium* (Cockayne, 1864-6, I, 374; De Vriend, 1984, 7, 74). Wherever *hæwenhnydele* translates a Latin plant-name, that name is *Herba Britannica.*

The opinions of scholars as to the identity of this plant are far from unanimous. Cockayne interpreted it as English Scurvy-Grass (*Cochlearia anglica* L.) with a question mark (Cockayne, 1864-6, I, 127), but he also suggested Hemp Nettle, with a question mark, referring to the *Galeopsis* genus (Cockayne, 1864-6, III, 329). Von Lindheim described *hæwenhnydele* as "...an expression difficult to explain" (Von Lindheim, 1941, 33), but Grattan and Singer described their identification of it with Purple Dead-Nettle (*Lamium purpureum* L.) as "fairly safe" (Grattan & Singer, 1952, 87-8). Bierbaumer wisely concluded that the identification was "unclarified" (Bierbaumer, 1975-9, II, 59), but Hunt, from later mediaeval evidence only, suggested that the mystery plant was the Cowslip (*Primula veris* L.), with another question mark (Hunt, 1989, 214).

I intend to approach this problem by trying to reconstruct the decision processes of an Anglo-Saxon translator faced with a need to identify *Britannica* in his Latin sources. By far the most information comes from the Old English *Herbarium,* a translation of the Latin *Herbarium Apulei Platonici* and associated works. This 4th century Latin herbal is a compilation from works by writers such as Dioscorides and Pliny the Elder, and also from herbal traditions which do not otherwise survive. The account of *Britannica* in the Latin *Herbarium* has been researched (Biggam, 1993, 214-21), and found to combine Pliny's description of *Britannica* with accounts of Betony (*Stachys officinalis* (L.) Trev.), as a result of the similarity of the Greek names for these two plants: *Brettaniki* and *Bettoniki.* It should always be remembered that the transmission of texts before the invention of printing was prone to error. A text from Greece, for example, may have been copied hundreds of

times before an Anglo-Saxon saw it in a Latin translation. Each copying created errors, and perpetuated, altered, or corrected earlier ones, but, moreover, early copyists had no concept of intellectual property, and often inserted sections from other texts without acknowledgement.

At a date within the 8th to 10th century (Cameron, 1983, 149; De Vriend, 1984, xlii), an Anglo-Saxon scholar came to translate the *Herbarium* account of *Britannica* into Old English. He must have made his identification of the plant from some or all of the following points of information in his source text: the cures which it is said to effect, the instructions on how to collect, store, and use it in these cures, a list of its names in several languages, and an illustration.

The first point concerns the cures, and those which are listed in the Latin texts closest to the Old English version, are for mouth sores, painful and loose teeth, upset stomach, and *paralysis*. Clearly, if the Anglo-Saxon translator knew of a native plant which effected the same cures, that would influence his identification, but it would be unlikely since his source text had confused two different plants.

The earliest surviving source text for most of these cures occurs in Pliny's account of how, in the campaigns of Germanicus Caesar across the Rhine between 14 and 16 A.D., the Roman soldiers began to lose their teeth and control of their knee-joints (Pliny the Elder, VII, 151). They were suffering from scurvy, a Vitamin C deficiency disease. The Frisians, who were allies of the Romans at this time, told them to eat *Britannica*, and they were quickly cured. From this account, it is evident that, whatever *Britannica* was, it contained quantities of Vitamin C. Recent research on Pliny's narrative supports earlier suggestions that one of the best candidates for this plant is English Scurvy-Grass (Biggam, 1993, 212-4), but we should not assume that the Anglo-Saxon translator of the *Herbarium* made the same identification.

Although Pliny's encyclopaedia was known in Anglo-Saxon England, the translator appears to have been unaware that *Britannica* occurred in it, as can be seen from his translation of the term, *paralysis.* The word was a borrowing from Greek *paralisis* which means, literally, 'a loosening at the side', but the Latin term was less specific, and was used of various types of impaired muscle control.

Unaware that this cure originated in Pliny's account of collapsing knees, the Anglo-Saxon translator appears to have analysed the Greek word, since he translated *paralysis* as *sidan sar* 'affliction of the side', which is much closer to the Greek meaning than the Latin. Thus the evident scholarship of the translator weakened the link with scurvy.

The information from the source text concerning the collection, storage, and use of the plant would only have helped the translator to identify it if exactly the same procedures were followed in his own medical traditions. There is little evidence on this point, but it seems unlikely that the very specific instructions, (De Vriend, 1984, 75-7), would coincide with traditional English procedures.

The translator also had the evidence of the synonyms, the names for *Britannica* in several languages. The lists of synonyms in these early herbals are of considerable antiquity, and often contain names in non-European languages, some of which were already extinct by the mediaeval period. Under these circumstances, considerable distortion resulted, so that the names, as they were intended, were probably meaningless to our translator. However, I suspect that an error in one of them was used by him as a clue to the plant's appearance.

The Latin text informed the translator that "the prophets" called this plant *caeluros* (Howald & Sigerist, 1927, 71). This is an error for a name which appears in other Latin manuscripts of this text as *aeluros* or *eluros*, but a translator with only one manuscript to consult would not know this. I believe he connected the erroneous name with Latin *caeruleus* 'blue', and this introduces the first element of the Old English name *hæwenhnydele*.

Hæwen is one of several problem words in Old English colour semantics. The Old English colour system differs considerably from both the Middle English and the Modern English systems, and this necessitates care in translation. Dictionary definitions of *hæwen* usually involve 'blue, purple, azure, green', and 'discoloured', but recent research has shown that the usual meaning of *hæwen* is 'blue', followed by 'grey' (Biggam, 1993, 189-339). Thus the name *caeluros*, understood as *caeruleus*, is compatible with the Old English word *hæwen*.

The Anglo-Saxon translator, therefore, had only two clues to help him identify *Britannica:* the colour blue, and the illustration (Plate 1). He did not make wild guesses at the plant identifications. Where he did not know, he left a blank in the manuscript where the Old English name was required, and this was done in 41 of the total 185 plant entries in the *Herbarium* (Cameron, 1993, 63). This suggests that, in the case of *Britannica,* he believed he had identified the plant. Our final clue occurs in the second element of the name he used, *-hnydele.*

Hnydele appears in the surviving manuscripts with and without *n,* but it has been argued elsewhere that the form with *n* is probably more accurate (Biggam, 1993, 229-31). It is suggested here that the ultimate origin of *-hnydele* is the Indo-European root **nē-* 'to sew', which gave rise to two groups of words in Indo-European languages. The first group involved the concept of the sewing instrument, such as Old High German *nâdela* 'needle', and the second group involved the concept of the sewing material, such as Old Norse *hnoða* 'a ball of thread'. Both groups produced related words which stressed the shape of these objects, so that Modern Icelandic *hnúður* 'a knob, a head of a pin', for example, stresses the spherical shape of a ball of thread. A Modern English example is the dialectal *noddle* 'head'. This concern with heads suggests a connection with the globular structures evident in the manuscript illustration of *hæwenhnydele*. Since *-hnydele* probably has a diminutive ending, it is suggested that *hæwenhnydele* means 'little blue heads'.

There are, of course, several plants which would suit this name, but two of them are supported by further evidence. The first plant, Devil's-Bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis* Moench) is supported by the manuscript illustration. The resemblance is so noticeable that I accepted this identification before further evidence emerged (Biggam, 1993, 233-4), and it was gratifying to find that botanists at the Edinburgh symposium also saw the similarity. I am grateful to them for their valuable opinions. However, there is also evidence, consisting of two popular names, which supports an identification with the Cornflower (*Centaurea cyanus* L.).

The first name appears in Hunt's list of popular names for the Cornflower (Hunt, 1989, 145), occuring in the forms *nydel, nedul, nedull,* and *nedyll* in three 15th century herbal manuscripts. These words are etymologically acceptable as descendants of *-hnydele.*

The second popular name is *hawdods,* which occurs in only two recorded instances. It can be found in Fitzherbert's *Book of Husbandry,* published in 1534, in a list of the main weeds which grew in the crops of the day (Fitzherbert, 1882, 30). Fitzherbert describes the plant as having a blue flower. *Hawdods* occur again in the diary of John Hobson, who lived in Yorkshire in the early 18th century, and was told that this plant grew in the fields in summer (Morehouse, 1877, I, 296). Britten and Holland suggest *hawdods* are Cornflowers (Britten & Holland, 1886). In the north of Britain, Old English *hæwen* became *haw,* which still occurs in Scots (Robinson, 1985). It is also possible to interpret *-dods* as 'heads', since the OED2 lists *dod* and *dodd* as having a primary sense of 'rounded head' (Simpson & Weiner, 1989). The etymology of *hawdods,* therefore, appears to be identical with that of *hæwenhnydele,* with the exception of the diminutive.

It is clear that the Devil's-Bit Scabious theory stresses the manuscript illustration, and the Cornflower theory stresses the evidence of popular names, but it has to be admitted that both types of evidence are somewhat fragile. First of all, the illustrations may not have been taken seriously by the Anglo-Saxon translator. He must have been aware that the text sometimes contradicted features of the illustrations, and he probably suspected, quite rightly, that some of them had become attached to the wrong plants. He knew, furthermore, that artists squashed or stretched features of the plants according to the space available in the manuscript, since the text was generally written first, and he must have noticed that even recognisable illustrations were stylised and often fanciful.

If the illustration is of dubious value, what about popular names? It is well known that popular plant-names often denote different plants in different parts of the country, and can be used of more than one species in a single district. Grigson shows, for example, that Devil's-Bit Scabious and Cornflower are both known by the following names in different regions: Bachelor's Buttons, Blue Bobs, Blue Bonnets, Blue Buttons, and Blue Cap (Grigson, 1955).

It would appear, therefore, that the translator did one of two things after deciding that the plant had blue flowers. He was either prepared to accept the apparent depiction of Devil's-Bit Scabious, or he noticed the distinctive little heads in an illustration which he otherwise distrusted, and was reminded of his name for the Cornflower. It is assumed that he did not make up the name to fit the evidence, since he could have done that for all the plants he left without Old English names. Whichever identification is correct, it can be seen that, as a result of confusions in textual transmission, the very effective cure of English Scurvy-Grass for the disease of scurvy, was lost to the Anglo-Saxons in this particular text.

Finally, it is interesting to look briefly at a separate Anglo-Saxon attempt to identify *Britannica*, which *did* result in an effective cure. In the Durham Glossary, *Britannica* is translated by *hæwenhnydele* and, also, by *vihtmeresvyrt* (Von Lindheim, 1941, 10). The manuscript is a 12th century Anglo-Norman copy of an earlier Anglo-Saxon manuscript, the copy having been made by a scribe who was not entirely familiar with Old English, and who consistently wrote *v* for *w*, and altered *æ* to *e* or *ea*. Thus, the correct Old English name should be *wihtmereswyrt* or *wihtmæreswyrt*. There is more than one possible interpretation of this name, but it has been argued elsewhere (Biggam, 1993, 236-7) that the best one is 'the plant which grows in clear pools'.

Certain evidence from glossaries suggests that the identification should be a cress. There are several entries in Latin-to-Old English glossaries which translate Latin *brittia* with Old English *cærse* (Wright, 1884, I, 271; Hessels, 1890, 25), and it seems likely that *brittia* could have been mistaken for an abbreviation of *Britannica*, while Old English *cærse* means 'cress'. It should be noted that early glossaries were often compiled by collecting translations of Latin words from several different manuscripts, so it looks as if the Durham Glossary has recorded the efforts of two different translators to interpret *Britannica*, one deciding on the Cornflower or Devil's-Bit Scabious, and the other on a cress.

The thought processes of the second translator cannot be reconstructed, since no full text with this translation survives, but it is interesting that Pliny's *Britannica* may be English Scurvy-

Grass, and *grass* in this plant-name is a distortion of *cress.* Since the second translator appears to have had more information about *Britannica* than the first, it is tempting to suggest that *wihtmereswyrt* originated as a gloss to *Britannica* in Pliny's account of the Romans in Frisia. Since the cresses are well-known for their Vitamin C content, this cure for scurvy was as good as any modern tablet.

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Summary

The Old English plant-name, hæwenhnydele, occurs in herbal and medical texts, and in glossaries containing translated Latin plant-names. Where it is linked with a Latin name, that name is always Herba Britannica, a cure for scurvy. Some scholars, rather naively assuming that the two names must refer to the same plant, have thought the identity of hæwenhnydele almost obvious, whereas others, knowing the frequently garbled accounts of herbal cures inherited by the Anglo-Saxons, have despaired of ever identifying it. An Anglo-Saxon translator, working on the Old English version of the Latin Pseudo-Apuleius, inherited an account of Herba Britannica which was a confusion of two different plants, compiled from several sources. The information available to him is discussed, in an effort to understand how he made an identification. Evidence such as the synonyms attached to the plant entry, the etymology of hæwenhnydele, and the illustration of the plant are presented. There is also a brief discussion of the two recorded occurrences of the rural plant-name hawdod from the 16th and 18th centuries, and whether this name could be cognate with hæwenhnydele. In the Durham Glossary, another name, vihtmeresvyrt, is linked with Herba Britannica and hæwenhnydele. This name is also discussed, and is found to denote a well-known source of Vitamin C, the cure for scurvy. This paper demonstrates that the attempts of the Anglo-Saxons to identify Herba Britannica, and to link their guesses with real herbal cures, are an impressive rationalisation of an almost nonsensical Latin plant record.