



Hough, C. (2020) The etymology of pot 'deep hole, pit'. *Notes and Queries*, 67(1), pp. 27-31. (doi: [10.1093/notesj/gjz163](https://doi.org/10.1093/notesj/gjz163)).

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Deposited on: 11 May 2020

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THE ETYMOLOGY OF *POT* ‘DEEP HOLE, PIT’

OED has ten headword entries for *pot*, comprising six nouns and four verbs.¹ All were last revised for the online third edition in December 2006. This note is concerned with the first two noun entries, with the primary senses ‘A vessel used for storage, cooking, etc.’ (s.v. *pot*, *n.*¹) and ‘A deep hole or excavation; a pit dug in the ground’ (s.v. *pot*, *n.*²). The former is explained as ‘A word inherited from Germanic’, with a lengthy etymological note identifying cognates in West Germanic, North Germanic, Romance and other languages. The latter is described as ‘Of uncertain origin’, with an etymological note suggesting ‘perhaps the same word as *pot n.*¹, or perhaps < early Scandinavian’, and going on to state ‘The regional distribution of the word would appear to support the latter derivation’. The distribution in question is ‘Chiefly Scottish and English regional (northern)’. Also identified as Scottish is the obsolete verb ‘to fill with pits, dig pits in’ etc., that derives from this sense (s.v. *pot*, *v.*¹).

Although first recorded in 1431–2, the topographical meaning is carried back to Old English by place-name evidence. The final part of the etymological note (*OED*, s.v. *pot*, *n.*²) reads:

Attested earlier in several place names from Scotland and the north of England, as *Potlack* (1086; now Potlock Farm, Derbyshire), *Goldingpottes* (1218; recorded in the lands of Kelso Abbey, Roxburghshire), *Sandpot* (1227; now Sandpot, North

¹ <https://www.oed.com/>

Riding, Yorkshire), *Potwell* (13th cent.; recorded in the lands of Dunfermline Abbey, Fife), *Pozbek* (1314; now Pott Beck, North Riding, Yorkshire), etc.

Apparently also attested in a few field names (and surnames derived from them) from the south of England: *la Potte* (1248; Crondall, Hampshire, now lost; also in the name of Avicia *de la Potte* (1248)), *la Potte* (1392; now Potcommon, Sussex; earlier in the names of Margery *atte Potte* (1296), Robto. *atte Potte* (1327)); however, the original sense in these examples is unclear (there are no marked depressions in the topography), and they may represent a different word. The first element in *Potesgraue* (1086; now Potsgrove, Bedfordshire) may perhaps show this word (there is a small lake in the vicinity), but it has been alternatively explained as either a shortening of *poteres* (see POTTER *n.*¹) or an unattested Old English personal name (compare the place name *Pottingtun* (also *Potintun*, *Potingdun*; 12th cent. in late copies of several charters, one of which perhaps dates from *c*1075; now Porter's Plantation, Bengeworth, Worcestershire)).

Further examples have now come to light, including Blackpotts (*blakepote c.*1190 x 1203) in the historical county of Berwickshire in the Scottish Borders, the study area for a research project funded by The Leverhulme Trust at the University of Glasgow from 2016–2019.² The project, *Recovering the Earliest English Language in Scotland: evidence from place-names*, uses place-name evidence to investigate the Northumbrian dialect of Old English. It is often difficult to distinguish the extent of Norse influence on northern varieties of the language,

² The research for this paper was undertaken as part of the Leverhulme-funded project. One of the main outputs is the online *The Berwickshire Place-Name Resource*, where historical spellings and further information on Blackpotts and other place-names can be found: www.gla.ac.uk/reels.

and Berwickshire was chosen partly because the absence of major Scandinavian settlement in the area increases the probability that linguistic features are native to Old English. The same applies to *Goldingpottes* in Roxburghshire and the more doubtful examples from southern England identified by the *OED* editors.³ Again, these are not areas characterised by Norse settlement, making it less likely that *pot n.*² ‘A deep hole or excavation; a pit dug in the ground’ derives from early Scandinavian. Indeed, the editors of Scottish Language Dictionaries simply describe the etymology as ‘unknown’.⁴

The alternative possibility put forward by the *OED* editors, ‘perhaps the same word as *pot n.*¹’, deserves further consideration. The quotation evidence shows only one attested occurrence of the latter in Old English, but again, the documentary evidence is substantially supplemented by place-names:

Apparently also attested early in place names, as *Pottun* (late 10th cent.; now Potton, Bedfordshire), *Poterne* (1086; now Potterne; Wiltshire), *Pottafoord* (now lost; 12th cent. in a copy of a Suffolk charter of 970), *Pottwyll* (now lost; a1400 in a copy of a Wiltshire charter of 994). When used as an element in place names, probably denoting either places where pots were made or places where ancient pottery had been unearthed. (*OED*, s.v. *pot, n.*¹)

Both Potterne and the lost *Pottafoord* are directly paralleled by names from OE *crocca* ‘earthenware pot, crock’, a term independently attested *c.*35 times, mostly in glossaries and

³ As regards the lost surname *la Potte* (1248) in the Hampshire parish of Crondall, a reference to a pit is topographically appropriate, and indeed the parish name itself means ‘at the (chalk-)pits’, from OE *crundel* ‘pit’ (Richard Coates, *Hampshire Place Names* (Southampton, 1993), 61).

⁴ Scottish Language Dictionaries, *Concise Scots Dictionary*, 2nd edn (Edinburgh, 2017), s.v. *pot*^{1.1}.

medical texts.⁵ Place-name occurrences include Crockford in Surrey, from OE *ford* ‘ford’, as well as two instances of Crockern in Devon and Dorset, from OE *ærn* ‘building, house’.⁶ OE *ford* is the second most common topographical generic in English place-names,⁷ so the occurrence of parallel compounds with *crocca* and with *pott* may be coincidental. The compounds with OE *ærn* are more significant, and evidently refer to ‘places where pots were made’. The sense ‘building used for a specific purpose’ is the most common meaning of *ærn* in place-names according to Parsons *et al*, who also identify a second occurrence of Potterne in Dorset.⁸ The correspondences with formations from OE *crocca* leave no room for doubt that the place-names do indeed contain OE *pott* ‘pot’, notwithstanding some caution on this point expressed by Smith.⁹

The significance of the place-name evidence is to establish that OE *pott* ‘pot’, the ancestor of *pot*, *n.*¹, was in fairly common use during the Anglo-Saxon period, with sufficient time depth to be the origin of OE *pott* ‘deep hole’, the ancestor of *pot*, *n.*². A semantic connection is provided by the conceptual metaphor LANDSCAPE IS A CONTAINER, which leads to terms for containers being used systematically in a transferred metaphorical sense for

⁵ Angus Cameron, Ashley Crandell Amos and Antoinette DiPaolo Healey, *Dictionary of Old English: A to I Online* (Toronto, 2018), s.v. *crocca*.

⁶ A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols (Cambridge, 1956), i, 112, s.v. *crocc*.

⁷ Margaret Gelling and Ann Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), 71.

⁸ David N. Parsons and Tania Styles with Carole Hough, *The Vocabulary of English Place-Names (Á-BOX)* (Nottingham, 1997), 31–2, s.v. *ærn*.

⁹ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, ii, 72, s.v. *pott*, describes the term as ‘late OE’, and states that it ‘may occur in some p[lace-]n[ame]s, but the usual word for “pot” in OE was crocc, and the early history of *pot* itself is obscure ...’

landscape features.¹⁰ The online Metaphor Map of English, a comprehensive compilation of metaphorical links throughout the history of English based on the electronic database underlying the *Historical Thesaurus of the Oxford English Dictionary*, identifies strong links between the semantic categories 3K05 Containers and 1A04 Landscape, High and Low Land.¹¹ In all instances, the source category for the metaphor is Containers, and the target category is Landscape, High and Low Land. Eleven examples are provided to illustrate the connection, each of which leads to the corresponding entry in the online Historical Thesaurus (HT),¹² where the term can be seen in its semantic context. The semantic categories used for the Metaphor Map are broader than those used by HT, but nine of the eleven examples (*basin, basin, bowl, cauldron, cuvette, kettle, pan, pocket, trough*) appear within HT 01.01.04.04.02.01 n. Hollow/Depression. The term *basin* is duplicated because it has been transferred twice, with general reference to a large hollow c.1854–1860, and with a more specific reference to a large hollow containing water from 1712 onwards. In both instances, the metaphor is motivated by shape, but the second also illustrates the way in which entailments of the metaphor may include the contents of the container, with basins being characteristically used to hold fluids.¹³ Of the remaining two examples, *furnace* appears

¹⁰ Container metaphors are ubiquitous in language. Another conceptual metaphor, THE MIND IS A CONTAINER, is linked to *potty* in the sense ‘crazy, mad’ by Philip Durkin, *The Oxford Guide to Etymology* (Oxford, 2009), 256–7.

¹¹ *Mapping Metaphor with the Historical Thesaurus*, s.v., ‘Table: Connections to / from “3K05”, Category “3K05” selected, strength: both,’ accessed 1 August 2019, <https://mappingmetaphor.arts.gla.ac.uk/drilldown/?subCat=3K05&changeBoxSelected=3K05&viewChange=y&strength=both&changeViewOpt=changeTable>.

¹² <https://ht.ac.uk/>.

¹³ The LANDSCAPE IS A CONTAINER metaphor is discussed further in Carole Hough, ‘The Metaphorical Landscape’, in Wendy Anderson, Ellen Bramwell, and Carole Hough (eds), *Mapping English Metaphor Through Time* (Oxford, 2016), 13–31, at 20–1.

within HT 01.0.04.04.01.04 n. Volcano, while *pot* appears within HT 01.01.04.04.02.02 n. Hole/Pit. As with all HT entries, a link leads directly to the corresponding *OED* entry, which in the latter instance is *pot, n.²*.¹⁴

Ten of the eleven examples of the LANDSCAPE IS A CONTAINER metaphor cited in the Metaphor Map of English are treated as polysemous senses under a single headword entry in *OED*. By contrast, *pot, n.¹* and *pot, n.²* are treated as homonymous terms under separate headword entries. In view of the semantic connection established by the Metaphor Map, it would seem appropriate for the two entries to be combined.

There may be further implications. As noted above, nine of the eleven examples appear within HT 01.01.04.04.02.01 n. Hollow/Depression. So too does the sole example of the link between categories 3K05 Containers and 1A04 Landscape, High and Low Land in the Metaphor Map of Old English, a sister resource of the Metaphor Map of English based on HT data from the *Thesaurus of Old English*.¹⁵ The example is OE *byden* ‘vessel; depression’, where the entailments of the metaphor again include the liquid contents of the container.¹⁶ The *Dictionary of Old English* describes the literal sense ‘vessel, container’ as ‘mainly rendering Lat. names of containers, usu. for fluids’,¹⁷ while HT places the topographical sense under 01.01.04.04.02.01 n. Hollow/Depression subsection 06 Containing Water.

¹⁴ HT is based on the second edition of *OED*, so the date given for this transferred sense is 1375–, which has been revised to 1431–2 for the third edition.

¹⁵ <https://oldenglishthesaurus.arts.gla.ac.uk/>.

¹⁶ *Mapping Metaphor with the Historical Thesaurus*, s.v., ‘Table: Connections to / from “3K05”, Category “3K05” selected, strength: both,’ accessed 1 August 2019, <http://mappingmetaphor.arts.gla.ac.uk/old-english/drilldown/?subCat=3K05&changeBoxSelected=3K05&viewChange=y&strength=both&changeViewOp=t=changeTable>.

¹⁷ Cameron *et al*, *Dictionary of Old English*, s.v. *byden*.

The examples provided by the two Metaphor Maps are not intended to be exhaustive, but link to the corresponding sections of HT where any further occurrences of individual metaphors can be found. Thus the ten examples linked to HT 01.01.04.04.02.01 n. Hollow/Depression can be supplemented by others within the same section, including *punch-bowl* and *tinaja*. By contrast, the only other container word to appear under HT 01.01.04.04.02.02 n. Hole/Pit is *cup*, recorded in a topographical sense from 1868 onwards. Even this might more appropriately belong under HT 01.01.04.04.02.01 n. Hollow/Depression, since the corresponding *OED* entry (s.v. *cup*, n.) lists it under sense 5 ‘A rounded cavity, small hollow, or depression in the surface of the ground or of a rock. *spec.* in *Golf*’, and the quotation evidence is more consistent with Hollow/Depression than with Hole/Pit:

1868 ‘H. LEE’ *Basil Godfrey's Caprice* i. 7 The church..stood in a cup of the hillside.

If this suggestion is correct, *pot*, n.² remains the sole example of the LANDSCAPE IS A CONTAINER metaphor in HT 01.01.04.04.02.02 n. Hole/Pit.

Returning to the place-name evidence, it may be possible to find an explanation for this apparent anomaly. Earliest on record are Potlock in Derbyshire and Blackpotts in Berwickshire, both of which refer to depressions rather than to holes or pits. The editor of the Derbyshire volumes of the English Place-Name Survey explains Potlock as ‘probably “stream in a depression”’, and draws attention to occurrences of the same formation in field-names.¹⁸ A lost *Potlock* in the same county, first recorded during the reign of Henry III,

¹⁸ Kenneth Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols, EPNS, 27-9 (Cambridge, 1959), ii, 464–5. As the discussion makes clear, the element of doubt reflected by the word ‘probably’ relates to the second element rather than to the first. Paul Cavill, *A New Dictionary of English Field-Names* (Nottingham, 2018), 339, also

contains the same first element with a different generic: ‘enclosure in a depression’.¹⁹ A similar interpretation fits the topography of Blackpotts, where the meaning again appears to be ‘depression’ rather than ‘hole’ or ‘pit’. It is also worth revisiting the Bedfordshire place-name Potton, cited above from the *OED*, s.v. *pot*, n.¹. Writing nearly 100 years ago, the editors of the Bedfordshire Survey volume expressed some uncertainty about the meaning:

This would seem clearly to be ‘pot-farm,’ but in what sense we cannot be sure. It may be so because pots were once made there. *pot* is also used topographically to denote a deep hole or pit. Such an application is unsuitable here (unless one can apply it to a very wide and shallow depression) and the word in this sense seems to be confined to the North Country.²⁰

Subsequent progress on the English Place-Name Survey has shown that it would be highly unusual for OE *tūn* ‘farm’ to combine with a term for a manufactured product, while combinations with topographical terms are very common.²¹ Although the interpretation ‘pot-farm’ does not appear to have been challenged,²² it is also difficult to envisage pottery as the main or most distinctive product of a farm, as opposed to that of an *ærn* ‘building’ in the place-names Crockern and Potterne discussed above. Most significant in the present context,

takes Old English occurrences in field-names to refer to ‘a depression’, while leaving open the possibility that Middle English occurrences may refer to either ‘a pit or depression’.

¹⁹ Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, i, 34.

²⁰ A. Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire*, EPNS, 3 (Cambridge, 1926), 106.

²¹ Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, ii, 188–98, s.v. *tūn*.

²² A. D. Mills, *A Dictionary of British Place Names*, rev. edn (Oxford, 2011), 375, explains Potton as ‘farmstead where pots are made’.

however, is the Bedfordshire editors' parenthetical comment: 'unless one can apply it to a very wide and shallow depression'. Evidently such an interpretation is topographically appropriate to Potton, and would have been the preferred explanation if the editors had been aware of any linguistic support for it. In light of the parallels with Blackpotts and Potlock, combined with the evidence from the Metaphor Maps of English and Old English, I suggest that Potton should be re-interpreted as 'farm in a depression'.

In conclusion, I suggest that the earliest topographical sense of *pot* was 'depression', as indicated by the place-name evidence and supported by comparison with the predominant trajectory of the LANDSCAPE IS A CONTAINER metaphor. This is closely related to the attested sense 'hole, pit', although not identical to it. It would not be unusual for a metaphorical development to be represented earliest or only in place-names, nor for a single term to be used in two different but related senses, as with *basin* discussed above. There therefore appear to be two main possibilities. One is that the container word *pot* was transferred twice, first with reference to a depression, and later with reference to a hole or pit. The other is that it was transferred only once, with reference to a depression, and subsequently underwent polysemous development to refer to a hole or pit. It remains possible that the latter sense may have been influenced or reinforced in some areas by Scandinavian contact. However, as the sense 'depression' is reflected in place-names the length and breadth of the Anglo-Saxon kingdoms, from Bedfordshire in the south, through Derbyshire in the Midlands, to Berwickshire in the north, it seems reasonable to conclude that this was a native Old English development.

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