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# Are there any Elves in Anglo-Saxon Place-Names?<sup>1</sup>

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The prospect of finding evidence for Anglo-Saxon non-Christian beliefs in place-names has long attracted scholars.<sup>2</sup> Hitherto, research on ‘pagan place-names’, in parallel to the extensive work done in Scandinavia, has focused on names likely to denote ritual sites or to contain names of individual gods.<sup>3</sup> However, in line with Kousgård Sørensen’s plea for

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<sup>2</sup> See prominently B. Dickins, ‘English names and Old English heathenism’, *Essays and Studies by Members of the English Association*, 19 (1933), 148–60; M. Gelling, ‘Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism’, *University of Birmingham Historical Journal*, 8 (1962), 7–25; *eadem*, ‘Further thoughts on pagan place-names’, in *Otium et Negotium: Studies in Onomatology and Library Science Presented to Olof von Feilitzen*, edited by F. Sandgren (Stockholm, 1973), pp. 109–28 (repr. in *Place-Name Evidence for the Anglo-Saxon Invasion and Scandinavian Settlements: Eight Studies*, collected by K. Cameron ([Nottingham], 1977), pp. 99–114); D. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism* (London, 1992), pp. 5–21.

<sup>3</sup> See B. Holmberg, ‘Views on cultic place-names in Denmark: a review of research’, in *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names, Based on Papers Read at the Symposium on Encounters Between Religions in Old Nordic Times and Cultic Place-Names Held at Åbo, Finland, on the 19<sup>th</sup>–21<sup>st</sup> August 1987*, edited by T. Ahlbäck (Åbo, 1990), pp. 381–93; ‘Recent research

more work on names attesting to ‘den såkalt “*lavere*” religion’ (‘the so-called “lower” religion’) in Scandinavia, the expansion of research into names attesting to other kinds of supernatural beings seems desirable.<sup>4</sup> But our evidence is problematic. As Cameron commented,

there are some names which reflect a popular mythology, a belief in the supernatural world of dragons, elves, goblins, demons, giants, dwarfs, and monsters. Such creations of the popular imagination lived on long after the introduction of Christianity and traces of these beliefs still exist today, but we really have no idea when the place-names referring to them were given.<sup>5</sup>

The purpose of the present article is to reassess those place-names so far etymologised to contain *ælf*, the Old English etymon of *elf*, to establish which if any can reliably be used in research on Anglo-Saxon beliefs. The methodological demands upon researchers seeking to use place-names as evidence for past beliefs are somewhat different from those seeking systematically to etymologise the place-names of a given region, but the remarks here should also help to clarify some more general problems faced by these etymologists. The key challenge to convincingly identifying place-names containing *ælf* is the possibility that they contain personal names of similar form. No *ælf*-place-name can be identified for Anglo-Saxon England with complete confidence. If this leads us to conclude that elves (to substitute the modern English reflex for the Old

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into sacral names’, in *Developments Around the Baltic and the North Sea in the Viking Age*, edited by B. Ambrosiani and H. Clarke, Birka Studies, 3 (Stockholm, 1994), pp. 280–93; *eadem*, ‘Über sakrale Ortsnamen und Personennamen im Norden’, in *Germanische Religionsgeschichte: Quellen und Quellenprobleme*, edited by H. Beck, D. Ellmers and K. Schier, Ergänzungsbände zum Reallexicon der germanischen Altertumskunde, 5 (Berlin, 1992), pp. 541–51; T. Andersson, ‘Orts- und Personennamen als Aussagequelle für die altgermanische Religion’, in *ibid.*, pp. 508–40.

<sup>4</sup> J. K. Sørensen, ‘Stednavne og folketro’, in *Sakrale navne: Rapport fra NORNAs sekstende symposium i Gilleleje 30.11.–2.12.1990*, edited by G. Fellows-Jensen and B. Holmberg, NORNA-rapporter, 48 (Uppsala, 1992), pp. 221–34 (p. 222).

<sup>5</sup> K. Cameron, *English Place-Names*, new edn (London, 1996), p. 122.

English term *ælf*) rarely appeared in Anglo-Saxon place-names, we need not be surprised: I have argued elsewhere that elves tended in early Anglo-Saxon language and belief to be linked with *ese* ‘pagan gods’ (singular *os*), and since convincing toponymic attestations of *os* have not been forthcoming, a similar dearth for *ælf* might be expected.<sup>6</sup> Likewise, *ælf*, its later English reflexes, and its West Germanic cognates often occur in collocation (*mutatis mutandis*) with Old English *mære*, a word denoting monstrous supernatural females which assailed people in their sleep. Again, *mære* has not to my knowledge been identified in place-names.<sup>7</sup> However, those names which do seem reasonably likely to contain *ælf* also show patterns in their second elements strong enough that it may still be possible to draw some general conclusions about Anglo-Saxon elves’ topographic associations.

The phonology of *ælf* is rather complex (and often misreported), the etymon *\*alβi-* being one of the rare Old English words producing masculine nominative and accusative plurals in *-e*, and potentially affected by all of first fronting, Anglian retraction, breaking, *i*-mutation and second fronting, producing Kentish *elf*, Anglian *ælf* and (in second-fronting varieties) *elf*, and late West Saxon *ylf*. The phonologically regular West Saxon form, however, also competed with a variant corresponding to the Anglian form *ælf*.<sup>8</sup> This *ælf*-variant was successful enough that *Ylf*- never occurs in Old English attestations of Anglo-Saxon personal names—only in a few Middle English toponymic reflexes—and *ælf* has become (as here) the usual citation form for the Old English word.<sup>9</sup> The Old English forms produced Middle English variants

<sup>6</sup> A. T. P. Hall, ‘The Meanings of *Elf* and Elves in Medieval England’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Glasgow, 2004), pp. 57–64 (available at <<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>>); Gelling, ‘Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism’, 18; cf. Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, p. 21.

<sup>7</sup> Hall, ‘The Meanings of *Elf*’, pp. 124–26, esp. n. 172; cf. A. H. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 25–26 (Cambridge, 1956); A. Hall, ‘The evidence for *maran*, the Anglo-Saxon “nightmares”’, *Neophilologus* (forthcoming).

<sup>8</sup> For details see Hall, ‘The Meanings of *Elf*’, pp. 14 n. 13, 212–17.

<sup>9</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by V. Watts (Cambridge, 2004), s.nn. *Ilfracombe* (< \*Ylfredes-), *Elmscott* (< \*Ylfmundes-)

prominently including *elf*, *alf*, *ulf* (for /ylf/) and *ilf* (with the unrounding of the vowel in /ylf/)—though otherwise regular sound-changes did not, of course, always affect place-names. Despite this complexity, however, the key problem for identifying *ælf* in place-names lies in its phonological similarity to Anglo-Saxon personal names, at three levels: in place-names, etymological dithematic personal names were sometimes reduced to forms which resemble forms of *ælf*; there was probably a simplex personal name *Ælf* which can also appear in place-names; and there was likewise possibly a simplex personal name *Ælfa*. Additional difficulties are caused by the possibility that some place-names which might plausibly derive from Anglo-Saxon ones containing *ælf* were in fact coined in the Middle English period.

### Non-attestations

A few previous identifications of *ælf* in place-names in the Old English corpus can be dispensed with straightforwardly as misinterpretations of our basic evidence. The suggestion that the *ylfethamm*—undoubtedly ‘swan-meadow’—in charter S820 refers to an ‘elf dwelling’ (implicitly reading *ylf-ham*) can be passed over, as can the association of *Ilfing*, the form taken by the name of the river Elbing in the Old English version of Orosius’s *Historiarum adversum paganos*, with *ælf*.<sup>10</sup> More complex is the lost name *elfaledes* (Gloucestershire), uniquely attested in a fifteenth-century copy of an undated Old English boundary clause, of land belonging, at the time when the clause was composed, to the minster of Deerhurst (S1551). The relevant passage reads *Of scirann more on elfaledes, of*

and perhaps *Ilsington* (putatively < \*Ylfstan-); cf. F. Colman, “‘Elves’ and Old English proper names”, in *From Runes to Romance: A Festschrift for Gunnar Persson on his Sixtieth Birthday, November 9, 1997*, edited by P. Råberg, Acta Universitatis Umensis, Umeå Studies in the Humanities, 140 (Umeå, 1997), pp. 21–31; also Elvendon discussed below.

<sup>10</sup> Colman, “‘Elves’ and Old English proper names”, p. 28. For *Ilfing* cf. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 286, s.v. *-ing*<sup>2</sup> §1. Numbers in my text prefixed by *S* refer to charters in S. E. Kelly, *The Electronic Sawyer: An Online Version of the Revised Edition of Sawyer’s ‘Anglo-Saxon Charters’, Section One [S 1–1602]* (1999): <<http://www.trin.cam.ac.uk/chartwww/eSawyer.99/eSawyer2.html>>, accessed 28–09–2004.

*elfaleden on hreodan burnan* ‘from the shiny bog to *elfaledes*, from *elfaleden* to the reedy stream’.<sup>11</sup> Smith etymologised the name as the genitive plural *elfa* plus *hleda* ‘seat’, translating it as ‘elves’ seat’; Hooke, working to relate the clause to present-day topography, commented that ‘one searches for the *elfaledes*, “elf seat”, in vain’.<sup>12</sup> And well one might, since the second element cannot be *hleda*. The language of our surviving text has been influenced by Middle English: the original text was presumably \**of sciran more on X-as, of X-um on hreodan burnan*. *Hleda* is a weak noun but, as this reconstruction suggests, the form *elfaledes* is surely underlain by a strong masculine plural. Moreover, Smith offered no secure parallels for *hleda* as a place-name element.<sup>13</sup> In view of the fact that the boundary frequently follows water features, *lædas* ‘drains, watercourses’ seems a promising option.<sup>14</sup> As for the first element, *elfa* does ostensibly look like the genitive plural of the second-fronted Mercian form *elf*, and it is admittedly hard to suggest a likely alternative if the attestation is to be considered Old English.<sup>15</sup> But since the form *elfaledes* is at least partly Middle English in form, it may be more Middle English than Old English, and if so, a range of possibilities arise. \**Elfet-lædas* ‘swan watercourses’ is not impossible, but it is hard to see how this would have produced the <a> spelling in *elfa*-. As I discuss below, it seems that we must reconstruct a simplex personal name *Ælfa*, making \**Elfa-lædas* or \**Elfan lædas* possible. Another option is to reanalyse the word entirely. Old English *fald*, *falod* ‘an enclosure for animals’ is well-attested as a second element: we may be dealing with, for example, a partially updated form

<sup>11</sup> *The Early Charters of the West Midlands*, edited by H. P. R. Finberg, Studies in Early English History, 2 (Leicester, 1961), p. 80.

<sup>12</sup> A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, 4 vols, English Place-Name Society, 38–41 (Cambridge, 1964–65), III, 147; D. Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape of North Gloucestershire: The Friends of Deerhurst Church Seventh Annual Lecture, 8th September 1990*, Deerhurst Lecture, 7 (n.p., 1990), p. 8.

<sup>13</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 250, s.v. *hlēda*.

<sup>14</sup> These features have often since been drained: Hooke, *The Anglo-Saxon Landscape*, pp. 7–8.

<sup>15</sup> For second fronting in this region see Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, IV, 66.

of *\*elm-faldodas* ‘elm-folds’, though a search of the boundary-clauses included in the *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* admittedly produces no parallels for the appearance of *fald* in the plural.<sup>16</sup> At any rate, however, the case for the presence of *ælf* in this place-name is unreliable. We may proceed now to more ambiguous names.

### **Middle English coinings of *elf*-names**

As I discuss below, a place-name attested in Middle English and ostensibly deriving from *ælf*- could have a range of other sources. Still, it is worth noting too that some of these names could also be etymologised as post-Anglo-Saxon, Middle English formations on *elf*- (sometimes perhaps with the inorganic composition vowel *-e-*). It is hard to find unambiguous examples of *elf*-names coined after the Anglo-Saxon period, but one is afforded in the trial for witchcraft in 1597 of an Aberdeenshire healer called Andro Man. His surviving indictment says that

Thow confessis that be the space of threttie twa yeris sensyn or thairby, thow begud to have carnall deall with that devilische spreit, the Quene of Elphen, on quhom thow begat dyveris bairnis, quhom thow hes sene sensyn; and that at hir first cumming, scho causit ane of thy cattell die vpon ane hillok callit the Elphillok, bot promiseist to do him gude theireftir.<sup>17</sup>

You confess that about thirty-two years previously or so, you began to have carnal dealings with that diabolical spirit, the Queen of *Elphen*, by whom you begot various children, whom you have seen since; and that at her first coming, she caused one of your cattle to die upon a hillock called the *Elphillok*, but promised to do good for him [*sic*] thereafter.

English came too late to Aberdeenshire for Anglo-Saxon nomenclature to be a possible source here. In theory, Andro’s *Elphillok* might involve

<sup>16</sup> *Dictionary of Old English Corpus* (Toronto, 2000); accessed from <<http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/o/oec/>>, 4–3–2005.

<sup>17</sup> *The Miscellany of the Spalding Club*, edited by J. Stuart, 5 vols, Spalding Club Publications 3, 6, 16, 20, 24 (Aberdeen, 1841–52), I, 119.

the Anglicisation of some Gaelic name, but in view of its explicit association with the Queen of Elphen (herself associated later in the indictment with *elphis* ‘elves’), there seems little reason not to etymologise the *Elphillock* as *elf* plus *hillock*, therefore identifying *elf* as a productive place-name element in Older Scots. Later medieval names like the lost Cumberland field-name Elf-Hills (apparently first attested as *Elfhow*, 1488) could fit this category.<sup>18</sup>

### Dithematic personal names

Place-names from dithematic personal names, in later sources, can appear misleadingly to derive from *ælf*. This becomes a major problem in texts from around the thirteenth century: thus Alvescot in Oxfordshire is attested in 1220 and often subsequently as *Alfescot*, which looks potentially like *\*ælfes cot(u)* ‘the elf’s cottage(s)’. But its Domesday form is *Elfegescote*, demonstrating an etymon *\*Ælfheahes cot(u)* ‘Ælfheah’s cottage(s)’.<sup>19</sup> Domesday attestations of place-names are, as here, usually conservative enough to show that a dithematic name is involved, but not always. Thus Alveston in Warwickshire, appearing already in Domesday as *Alvestone* and looking like *\*ælfes tun* (putatively ‘the elf’s enclosure’), is earlier attested as (*æt*) *Eanulfestun* ‘Eanwulf’s estate’.<sup>20</sup> For this reason alone, then, post-Old English forms can offer secure evidence for *ælf* only in carefully defined circumstances.

An etymology which can probably be revised on these grounds (if no other) is Smith’s etymology of Ailey Hill in Ripon, North Yorkshire, attested in 1228 as *Elueshov*, *Elueshowe*, as Old English *elf* plus Old Norse *haugr*, ‘the elf’s mound’.<sup>21</sup> The site has a long history as a burial site, and lay beside a Christian religious site from the 650s, making it an

<sup>18</sup> Etymologised to contain *ælf* by A. M. Armstrong, A. Mawer, F. M. Stenton and Bruce Dickins, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 20–22 (Cambridge, 1950–52), I, 209, III, 459.

<sup>19</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, s.n. *Alvescot*.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, s.n. *Alveston Warw*.

<sup>21</sup> A. H. Smith, *The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire*, 8 vols, English Place-Name Society, 30–37 (Cambridge, 1961–63), V, 168.



appealing candidate for a pre-Conversion ritual site.<sup>22</sup> But the Norse second element would encourage the reconstruction of entirely Norse etyma such as *\*Eyjólf's haugr* or *\*Eilafs haugr*.<sup>23</sup>

### The simplex personal name *Ælf*

More problematic again, however, is the likelihood that there was a monothematic Old English personal name *\*Ælf*. This is admittedly somewhat unexpected. I have mentioned that there is evidence associating Anglo-Saxon *ælf*e with *ese*, pagan gods. As such, a simplex name *Ælf* might be thought to break the rule of thumb in Germanic onomastics that although we may expect to find words denoting deities as the first element of dithematic names (e.g. *Godric* in Old English or *Þórkell* in Old Icelandic), we should not expect to see such words as simplex personal names, because this would presumptuously imply the name-bearer to be a god.<sup>24</sup> Moreover, Feilitzen found that there is ‘no safe independent evidence for OE *Ælf* except in place-names.’<sup>25</sup> However, as he recognised, *Ælf* may have been a shortened form of dithematic names in *Ælf-*, and is at least once attested as such in manuscript.<sup>26</sup> And the place-name evidence for a simplex name *Ælf* is strong. The least

<sup>22</sup> R. A. Hall and M. Whyman, ‘Settlement and monasticism at Ripon, North Yorkshire, from the 7th to 11th centuries A.D.’, *Medieval Archaeology*, 40 (1996), 62–150; J. Blair, *The Church in Anglo-Saxon Society* (Oxford, 2005), pp. 185–86.

<sup>23</sup> Cf. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, s.n. *Elston*.

<sup>24</sup> For example J. K. Sørensen, ‘The change of religion and the names’, in *Old Norse and Finnish Religions and Cultic Place-Names*, edited by Ahlbäck, pp. 394–403 (p. 395); Holmberg, ‘Views on cultic place-names’, p. 368.

<sup>25</sup> O. von Feilitzen, ‘Some Old English uncompounded personal names and bynames’, *Studia Neophilologica*, 40 (1968), 5–16 (p. 6 n. 1); *contra* M. Redin, *Studies on Uncompounded Personal Names in Old English*, Uppsala Universitets årsskrift 1919. Filosofi, språkvetenskap och historiska vetenskaper, 2 (Uppsala, 1919), pp. 3, 59 and 121.

<sup>26</sup> Edited in M. Förster, ‘Die altenglische Glossenhandschrift Plantinus 32 (Antwerpen) und Additional 32246 (London)’, *Anglia*, 41 (1917), 94–161 (pp. 153–54). Another possible example occurs in the witness list to S623.

ambiguous evidence is names in \**ælfing-* such as Alvingham in Lincolnshire (Domesday *Aluing(e)ha*). The functions and origins of *-ing-* in Old English place-names are diverse.<sup>27</sup> However, much the most likely etymon of *-ing-* in Alvingham-type names is a population name \**Ælfingas*: the alternatives would not account well for the unstressed vowel *e* in forms like *Aluingeha*. Population-names in *-ingas* normally take either place-names or masculine personal names as their first element, and as it is hard to see what place-name elements might underlie forms like \**ælfing-*, at least some of the Alvingham-type names surely contain a personal name.<sup>28</sup> Although the personal name in question might have been *Ælfa*, discussed further below, the likelihood that a name *Ælf* was involved is great enough to inspire caution in identifying the common noun *ælf* in a place-name.

The likely existence of *Ælf* as a personal name casts doubt upon several putative *ælf* place-names. Thus although the *Dictionary of Old English* cited the place-name *Ælfestun* (putatively ‘the *ælf*’s enclosure’, now Olveston in Gloucestershire) as evidence for *ælf*’s use as a place-name element, Smith etymologised it instead as “‘Ælf’*s* farmstead”, from the OE pers.n. *Ælf* and *tūn*.<sup>29</sup> Smith based his interpretation on a charter purportedly from 955×59 in a twelfth-century manuscript (S664). This is of questionable reliability, but the name also occurs in eleventh-century copies of a diploma of 1089 unknown to Smith, as *Alfestune* and *Ælfestune*.<sup>30</sup> Although *tun* here might mean ‘enclosure’, it is inordinately more likely to denote a settlement; meanwhile *-tun* names frequently take personal names as their first element, whereas I know of

<sup>27</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 282–85, s.v. *-ing*.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*; *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, p. xlvi and s.nn. *Alvingham*, *Alfington*, *Alphington*, *West Alvington*; cf. *Allweston*. Cf. Elvendon Farm discussed below.

<sup>29</sup> *Dictionary of Old English* (Toronto, 1988–), s.v. *ælf*, §2b; Smith, *The Place-Names of Gloucestershire*, III, 119–20; cf. his handling of the Cheltenham street-name *Alstone*, II, 103–04.

<sup>30</sup> D. A. E. Pelteret, *Catalogue of English Post-Conquest Vernacular Documents* (Boydell, 1990), pp. 86–87 [no. 63]; cf. pp. 121–22 [no. 147].

none which reliably takes a word for a supernatural being as its first element.<sup>31</sup>

Another name affected by this issue, this time attested in a thirteenth-century copy of a genuine Old English charter of 944 (S501), appears in the boundary clause for Shepherdswell (a.k.a. Sibertswold) in Kent as *7 lang Colredinga gemercan oð helfesdene, oð helfesdene oð lectan æcer* ‘along the border of the *Colredingas* as far as *helfesdene*; from [reading of for oð] *helfesdene* as far as the *lectan* field’.<sup>32</sup> Although Wallenberg adverted to the Old English word *hielfe* ‘handle’ (Kentish *helfe*) as a possible source for the first element, this is unlikely both because it seems not to appear otherwise in place-names and because, as *helfe* is a weak noun, we would expect *\*\*helvandene*.<sup>33</sup> However, although, as Cullen emphasised, we cannot be certain, Wallenberg’s other options, *ælf-* or *Ælf-*, with hypercorrect *h-*, are plausible.<sup>34</sup> Reliably choosing between them, however, is impossible.

There are some circumstances where a personal name *Ælf* can be shown to be unlikely. Although the point cannot be relied on absolutely, genitival *-s* in Old English personal names which are the first elements

<sup>31</sup> <sup>31</sup> Cf. Margaret Gelling’s handling of West Midland *-tun* names in *The West Midlands in the Early Middle Ages* (Leicester, 1992), pp. 122–24; for other names dismissed on these grounds, if not on the grounds of possible derivation from a dithematic name, see *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, s.n. *Alston Reservoir* (Lancashire); J. S. M. Macdonald, *The Place-Names of Roxburghshire* (Hawick, 1991), p. 16 (regarding Effledge, Roxburghshire).

<sup>32</sup> *Charters of St Augustine’s Abbey Canterbury and Minster-in-Thamet*, edited by S. E. Kelly, *Anglo-Saxon Charters*, 4 (Oxford, 1995), p. 104 [no. 27]. *Lectan* is obscure: see P. Cullen, ‘The Place-Names of the Lathes of St Augustin and Shipway, Kent’ (unpublished doctoral dissertation, University of Sussex, 1997), p. 455.

<sup>33</sup> J. K. Wallenberg, *Kentish Place-Names: A Topographical and Etymological Study of the Place-Name Material in Kentish Charters Dated before the Conquest* (Uppsala, 1931), p. 265; cf. Smith, *English Place-Name Elements; Middle English Dictionary* (Ann Arbor, 1952–2001), s.v. *helve*; accessed from <http://ets.umdl.umich.edu/m/mec/>, 4–3–2005.

<sup>34</sup> Cullen, ‘The Place-Names of the Lathes of St Augustin and Shipway, Kent’, p. 455.

of place-names is generally fairly stable, and is usually apparent at least in Middle English attestations of older place-names. Its absence from Middle English attestations of a place-name, then, could militate against identifying *Ælfes-* as a first element, in favour of the common noun *ælf-*. This reasoning is not reliable for much of England, as place-names were sometimes formed not with initial personal names in the genitive, but in the nominative (thus *Ælf-*); but conventional wisdom has it that nominative personal names were rare in Southern place-names.<sup>35</sup> This observation has ramifications for the name *ælfrucge*, in Kent, occurring in a copy (unfortunately a poor one) of what seems to be a genuine charter of 996 from the first half of the fifteenth century (S877).<sup>36</sup> The relevant text runs *of At ersce <to> ælfrucge, of ealfruige to peallestede* ‘from oat-field to *ælfrucge*, from *ealfruige* to ledge-place’.<sup>37</sup> Wallenberg and Miller have suggested that we probably have here *ælf* + *hrycg* ‘ridge’, with some post-Anglo-Saxon interference in the spelling.<sup>38</sup> It would admittedly be possible to read *ælf-*, *ealf-* as *\*healf* ‘half’, assuming *h-* loss and taking *æ* to be a hypercorrect spelling for *ea*, but each of Smith’s examples of names in *healf-* has words for portions of land as its second element (*hid* ‘hide’, *æcer* ‘field’, *snæd* ‘detached area of land’).<sup>39</sup> As Cullen has emphasised, the expected form of Old English *ælf* in Kent is *elf*, so we have to assume influence from Mercian or West Saxon, but this is paralleled.<sup>40</sup> For his part, Wallenberg was disconcerted by the form of the place-name given in a version of the text updated to

<sup>35</sup> For example M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Shropshire*, 4 vols so far published, English Place-Name Society, 62/63, 70, 76, 80 (Nottingham, 1990–2004), I, 13–14.

<sup>36</sup> On which see K. Lowe, “‘As fre as thowt’?: some medieval copies and translations of Old English wills”, *English Manuscript Studies 1100-1700*, 4 (1993), 1–23 (pp. 15–19).

<sup>37</sup> *Charters of the New Minster, Winchester*, edited by S. Miller, Anglo-Saxon Charters, 9 (Oxford, 2001), p. 146.

<sup>38</sup> Wallenberg, *Kentish Place-Names*, p. 347; *Charters of the New Minster*, edited by Miller, p. 156.

<sup>39</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 222, s.v. *half*.

<sup>40</sup> Cullen, ‘The Place-Names of the Lathes of St Augustin and Shipway, Kent’, p. 5.

Middle English, *alfryng*.<sup>41</sup> But I take this form to be a mistake, frequent in the scribe's work. In the case of *Alfryng*, the scribe presumably misread the minims in *-ruige* as the familiar noun *-ringe* (which he then spelt *-ryng(e)*—ironically to spare readers puzzling over minims in the future). Since place-names in the South of England whose first element was a personal name usually formed it in the genitive case, *\*ælfrycg* is reasonably likely to contain the common noun *ælf*.

Promising for another reason is the form *ylfing dene* in a boundary clause of a genuine charter of 956 (S622) concerning the bounds at Welford in Berkshire (where it is an addition to a source-text of 949, S552), attested in twelfth- and thirteenth-century manuscripts: *of dyran treowe on ylfing dene on ænne elebeam* 'from Deora's tree to *ylfing* valley to the lone ?elder tree'.<sup>42</sup> *Ylfing* here has been taken to attest to the common noun *ælf* (in its West Saxon form).<sup>43</sup> If it does, then the most likely of the various possible interpretations of the *-ing* is that it is the place-name-forming suffix: of the alternatives, the nominal suffix used to form words like *æðeling* 'noble man' would find no parallel here; we would tend to expect the patronymic suffix present in names like Alvingham to be in the genitive plural (thus *\*\*ylfinga dene*); and the connective particle *-ing-* is usually prefixed by personal names and suffixed by *-tun*.<sup>44</sup> The place-name-forming suffix is well-attested with first elements denoting beings, and in one literary context we even have the place-name *Wælcyriginc*, formed from *wælcyrige* 'martial supernatural female' plus *-ing* as a translation of *Gorgoneus* (itself

<sup>41</sup> *Kentish Place-Names*, p. 347; *Charters of the New Minster*, edited by Miller, p. 209.

<sup>42</sup> S622; *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, edited by S. E. Kelly, 2 vols, Anglo-Saxon Charters, 7–8 (Oxford, 2001), II, 272. For the troublesome form *dyran* for expected *deoran*, cf. A. Hall, 'Old Macdonald had a *fyrn*, *eo*, *eo*, *y*: two marginal developments of <eo> in Old and Middle English', *Quaestio: Selected Proceedings of the Cambridge Colloquium in Anglo-Saxon, Norse and Celtic*, 2 (2001), 60–90 (available from <<http://www.alarichall.org.uk>>).

<sup>43</sup> Colman, "'Elves" and Old English proper names', p. 28; *Charters of Abingdon Abbey*, edited by Kelly, II, 274; M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Berkshire*, 3 vols, English Place-Name Society, 49–51 (Cambridge, 1973–76), III, 667.

<sup>44</sup> Smith, *English Place-Name Elements*, I, 282–85, s.v. *-ing*.

formed from *Gorgon*, denoting a kind of mythological female monster) in chapter 9 of the Old English *Wonders of the East*.<sup>45</sup> I have argued that *ælf*e and *wælcyrigan* were in traditional Anglo-Saxon culture closely connected groups of beings; if this is correct, then *Wælcyriginc* helps to support the plausibility of reading *ylfing* to contain *ælf*.<sup>46</sup> This argument does not, however, reduce the likelihood that *ylfing* (whatever the significance of the *-ing* element) contains a personal name. What does is the fact that *Ælf*-names never otherwise appear in Anglo-Saxon writing in the form *Ylf(-)* (nor in the inferred earlier form *Ielf(-)*, except on coins as an epigraphic variant of *Ælf*). As I have mentioned above, post-Old English evidence shows that *Ylf*-pronunciations did exist in speech alongside *Ælf*-forms, so *ylfing* could still have originated as a personal name. But if so, the scribe from whose work our manuscripts derive chose not to write it in the conventional fashion. This may be because the place-name had become delexicalised: hearing *ylfing*, the original scribe failed to analyse the word as *Ylf-ing* and to spell it *Ælfing* even though, had he paused to think about it, he would have. But no other scribe seems to have had this problem, which suggests that *ylfing denu* was indeed ‘the valley of the elf-place’.

This reasoning might also, in theory, apply to the boundary *⁊ her is se wuda ðe into tune weorde hyrð . of hylfes hæcce innon sulc up æftær suluc on ða holan riðe ⁊lang riðe on ðæt brade wæter þonon ⁊lang wætlingan stræte to hylfes hæcce* ‘and here is the wood [reading *wudu*] which belongs to ?Tuna’s farm: from *hylfes hæcce* into the ?ditch, up along the ?ditch to the sunken stream, along the stream to the broad pool/river; from there along Watling Street to *hylfes hæcce*’.<sup>47</sup> *Hæcce* is

<sup>45</sup> Edited in A. Orchard, *Pride and Prodigies: Studies in the Monsters of the ‘Beowulf’-Manuscript*, rev. edn (Toronto, 2003), pp. 177 and 190; for the appropriateness of the translation and the semantics of *wælcyrige* see Hall, ‘The Meanings of *Elf*’, pp. 171–79, esp. p. 177 n. 227.

<sup>46</sup> ‘The Meanings of *Elf*’, pp. 38–40, 168–85, 197–98.

<sup>47</sup> *Cartularium Saxonicum: A Collection of Charters Relating to Anglo-Saxon History*, edited by W. de Gray Birch, 3 vols (London, 1885–93), III, 189 [no. 994]; amended with reference to J. E. B. Gover, Allen Mawer and F. M. Stenton, *The Place-Names of Middlesex*, English Place-Name Society, 18 (Cambridge, 1942), pp. 219–20.

straightforward enough, meaning a gate, here probably a wicket leading into the wood. *Hylfes* could be from *ylf* or *Ylf*, with hypercorrect *h*-probably added by the twelfth-century scribe; in which case the reasoning for *ylfing dene* would apply and we would infer *ylf*. But this additional variable makes it hard to be sure here that we do not have the corruption of some other word.

### The simplex personal name *Ælfa*

A further set of place-names unlikely to derive from *Ælf*- or *Ælfes*- are those containing a medial vowel but no *-s*- as in, for example, Alden in Lancashire: this is first attested in 1296 as *Alvedene*, following an earlier appearance in the name *Aldenehevet* in 1234.<sup>48</sup> The lack of an *-s*- makes this fairly unlikely to originate in *Ælfes*- or *ælfes*-, and although the reduction of a dithematic name like *Ælfheah*-, or of *\*Ælfing*-, is possible, it would have to have been dramatic to have produced the 1234 variant *Aldene*-. Moreover, as I discuss shortly, we have several names like *Alvedene*, and to explain them all as major reductions of this sort would strain credibility. It is therefore tempting in names like *Alvedene* to adduce *ælf*-, the genitive plural of *ælf*; thus Ekwall wrote of Alden that ‘the first el. may be O.E. *Ælfa* pers. n., or perhaps more likely the gen. pl. of O.E. *ælf*’.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, in southern and West Midland Middle English, *elf* was often transferred to the weak declension, thus taking plurals in *-en*; *ælf* had undergone this development already in at least some Old English varieties by the eleventh century.<sup>50</sup> In some regions, then, medial vowels could also reflect weak inflected forms of *ælf*. Perhaps because of Ekwall’s evident, albeit tentative, preference, Alden has been accepted since as an *elf*-name.<sup>51</sup> However, his alternative etymology, with an Old English personal name (*\*)Ælfa* (thus *\*Ælfan denu* or *\*Ælfa-denu*) deserves serious consideration.<sup>52</sup>

<sup>48</sup> E. Ekwall, *The Place-Names of Lancashire* (Manchester, 1922), p. 64.

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>50</sup> Hall, ‘The Meanings of *Elf*’, pp. 90–91, 216.

<sup>51</sup> Cameron, *English Place-Names*, p. 122.

<sup>52</sup> Cf. *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, s.nn. *Alvingham, Alfington, Alphington, West Alvington, Kirk Ella, West Ella*.

There is some manuscript evidence for a name *Ælfa*, though it is problematic. The will made in 1014 by Æthelstan Æðeling, the son of King Æthelred the Unready, recorded in two early-eleventh-century manuscripts, mentions news brought *be Ælfgare. Ælffan suna* ‘by Ælfgar, the son of Ælffa’.<sup>53</sup> The form *Ælffan* is odd, since Old English has no /lff/ combinations, and whereas Skeat interpreted it as an ‘ill-spelt’ form of *Ælfa*, other commentators have preferred to read *Æffa*. *Æffa*, along with its feminine variant *Æffe*, is reasonably well-attested; the *l* in the form *Ælffan* could easily be a scribal error caused by the preceding *Ælf-* name; and this interpretation is encouraged by a generally accurate fourteenth-century copy in BL Add. 15350 of a text very similar to the eleventh-century BL Stowe Charter, 37, which gives *be Alfgare Æffan suna*.<sup>54</sup> More promisingly, however, one Ælua appears in what Keynes has interpreted as a genuine witness-list to a forged charter, first found in thirteenth-century manuscripts (S954);<sup>55</sup> Redin was concerned that this Ælua might be the same as the Æffa who witnessed S962, but even if he was, this would not refute the witness-list’s evidence for a viable variant form *Ælfa*. There is, at any rate, a good enough chance that there was a personal name *Ælfa* that we must reckon with that possibility when trying to compile a reliable corpus of place-names attesting to *ælf*.

Students of Anglo-Saxon beliefs, then, cannot rely on a Middle English form like *Alvedene*, which if nothing else could be from *\*Ælfa-*. The same goes for Eldon Hill in Derbyshire, first attested in 1285 as *Elvedon*, which Cameron etymologised as ‘elves’ hill’; and the *Eluehull* attested in Cumberland in 1359, also etymologised to contain *ælf*.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>53</sup> S1503, *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, edited and translated by D. Whitelock (Cambridge, 1930), pp. 56–62 [no. 20] (p. 60).

<sup>54</sup> W. W. Skeat, *The Place-Names of Suffolk* (Cambridge, 1913), p. 16; contrast Redin, *Uncompounded Personal Names*, pp. 59, 115; *Anglo-Saxon Wills*, edited by Whitelock, pp. 60 n. 21, 61; *Codex Diplomaticus Aevi Saxonici*, edited by J. M. Kemble, 6 vols (London, 1839–48), III, p. 364 [no. 722].

<sup>55</sup> S. Keynes, ‘Cnut’s earls’, in *The Reign of Cnut: King of England, Denmark and Norway*, edited by A. R. Rumble (London, 1994), pp. 43–88 (pp. 52, 68 n. 145).

<sup>56</sup> K. Cameron, *The Place-Names of Derbyshire*, 3 vols, English Place-Name



More promisingly, because of his access to earlier attestations, Watts has interpreted Elveden in Suffolk, which has the Domesday forms *Eluedenā*, *Heluedana*, *Heluedona* and *Haluedona*, as ‘Probably “elf valley” ... OE **elf**, genitive pl. **elfa** + **denu**’.<sup>57</sup> Ekwall had previously preferred *elfet-denu*; certainly the assimilation of the *-t-* of *elfet-* to a following *-d-* is not unlikely even at this early date, and this word too could produce (*h*)*alue-* variants. But in any case, *\*Ælfa-denu* or *\*Ælfan denu* are also plausible.<sup>58</sup> Another example again is Elvendon Farm in Oxfordshire, analysed by Gelling as ‘Fairy hill’, with a second element *dun*.<sup>59</sup> The earliest forms of this name are Middle English, and show an alternation between /y-/ (spelt, in the Anglo-Norman fashion, as <u, v>, with *Ulvendon*’, *Vluindone* c.1240) and /e-/ (as in the next attestations, *Elveden*’, *Elvedune*, c.1260) lasting at least into the eighteenth century (with *Ilvingden Farm* 1797 showing the unrounded reflex /i/ of Old English /y/ beside the modern form *Elvendon*). Such reflexes are characteristic in Gelling’s Oxfordshire material of etymological *\*/y/*, which would fit an etymon *ylf*, the West Saxon form of *ælf*.<sup>60</sup> These forms could reflect *\*ylfan dun* ‘elf’s hill’ or ‘elves-hill’ or *\*ylfan(a) dun* ‘elves’ hill’, either coined after *ælf*’s shift to the weak declension or updated with it. But, if we did not wish to reconstruct *\*Ylfing(a)dun* (most likely ‘the hills of the descendants of Ylf’), we could as easily reconstruct *\*Ylfan dun*.

### Conclusions

Circumspection, then, is the order of the day. I have found only two names which are both reliably attested for Anglo-Saxon England and

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Society, 27–29 (Cambridge, 1959), I, 160; Armstrong *et al.*, *The Place-Names of Cumberland*, I, 50, II, 459.

<sup>57</sup> *The Cambridge Dictionary of English Place-Names*, edited by Watts, s.n. *Elveden*; cf. Cameron, *English Place-Names*, p. 122.

<sup>58</sup> E. Ekwall, *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of English Place-Names*, 4th edn (Oxford, 1960), s.n. *Elveden*.

<sup>59</sup> M. Gelling, *The Place-Names of Oxfordshire*, 2 vols, English Place-Name Society, 23–24 (Cambridge, 1953–54), I, 52.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, I, p. xxxii. It is not, therefore, necessary to invoke competition between West Saxon and Anglian forms of *ælf*.

reasonably likely to contain the common noun *ælf*: *ælfrucge* in Kent, and *ylfing dene* in Berkshire. There is, however, something more to be said than this. The names accepted here as possibly deriving from *ælf*—albeit possibly deriving from personal names or sometimes other sources—generally share with *ælfrucge* second elements denoting hills (Eldon Hill, *Eluehull*, Elvedon Farm) or, like *ylfing dene*, have the second element *-denu* ‘main valley’ (*helfesdene*, Alden and Elveden; the exception to these is *hylfes hæcce*). This is a tiny sample; moreover, it is partly determined by the assumption that place-names in *-tun* like Olvestun are more likely to contain personal names than the common noun *ælf*, so the range of second elements accepted is partly predetermined by the methodology. All the same, the consistent association of possible *ælf*-names with hills and valleys gives pause for thought. This semantic patterning proves no single instance as deriving from *ælf*, but assuming that some of these names do contain *ælf*, it does hint that *ælf* tended to be associated in Anglo-Saxon thought with hills and valleys.

Though far from conclusive, this evidence is consistent with some other pointers. Place-names containing the names of traditional Anglo-Saxon gods include two in *-denu*—*Wodnesdene* (now Hursley Bottom, in Wiltshire) and *Frigedene* (now Friden, Derbyshire)—while Gelling’s recent opinion has rehabilitated the valley Fryup in Yorkshire as a probable candidate for *\*Frigehop* (‘Frige’s remote, enclosed place’); and although there are no such names in *-dun* or *-hrycg*, there seems to be one in *-hoh* (‘ridge, spur’): Tysoe in Warwickshire, apparently from *\*Tiwes hoh*.<sup>61</sup> How significant this correlation with potential *ælf*-names is is hard to say; god-names are also often associated with *feld* (in early Old English ‘open, unobstructed space’) and *leah* (‘forest, wood, glade, clearing’), which contrasts with our potential *ælf*-place-names.<sup>62</sup> That what correlations we have are not merely the product of chance,

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<sup>61</sup>Gelling, ‘Place-names and Anglo-Saxon paganism’, 11–12; *eadem*, ‘Further thoughts’, p. 126; N. Brooks, M. Gelling and D. Johnson, ‘A new charter of King Edgar’, *Anglo-Saxon England*, 13 (1984), 137–55 (pp. 150–51); M. Gelling and A. Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names* (Stamford, 2000), p. 137.

<sup>62</sup>Gelling, ‘Further thoughts’; Wilson, *Anglo-Saxon Paganism*, pp. 13–16.

however, is at least suggested by a survey of etymologically English words for supernatural beings securely attested in Old English boundary clauses. These words all denote monstrous beings, and are generally compounded with place-name elements denoting quite different landscape features from those found with *ælf* and with gods' names. Leaving aside the problematic *pucelancyrce* (which resists identification as anything other than 'little goblin's church', S553)), we have *enta(n)*, *scuccan hlæw* ('hill, burial mound'; S465, S970; S138); *enta dic* ('(waterfilled) ditch, dyke'; S962); *grendles mere* (S416, S579); *grendeles, byrs pyt* ('(waterfilled) pit'; S255, S222); *pucan wyllle* ('pond, lake, pool, wetland'; S106, S508); and *grendeles gate* ('gate'; S1450).<sup>63</sup> The place-names in *-hlæw* overlap with place-names containing god-names (e.g. *Thunoreshlæw*, Kent), while the names which seem to contain *Grendel*, the name of one of the monsters of *Beowulf*, might rather denote green depressions (cf. the *grendel* of S669); and needless to say, a thorough and critical investigation of later evidence for such words in place-names would improve this data. But the indications that monsters were associated with different topographic features from gods and elves are clear.

Our Old English textual evidence provides no hint as to the topographical associations of *ælf*: the Old English illness-name *wæterælfadl*—often understood as 'water-elf illness'—is almost certainly in fact 'elf-illness associated with fluids', while glosses compounding variants on *ælf* with words for topographical features, such as *dunælfen* and *wæterælfen*, are doubtless nonce-compounds created to reflect their Latin lemmata.<sup>64</sup> A full investigation of later textual evidence is beyond my present scope, but high medieval English literature mentioning elves is dominated by works based directly on French or Anglo-Norman literature, which may owe more to French (or at times Welsh or Breton) traditions than to English. Other material might reflect Anglo-Saxon traditions, but does not use the word *elf*, once more making its relevance less assured. One source, however, is impressive: the *Southern English Legendary*, composed in the Worcester/Gloucester area around the

<sup>63</sup> Translations based on Gelling and Cole, *The Landscape of Place-Names*.

<sup>64</sup> Hall, 'The Meanings of *Elf*', pp. 81–89, 116.

1270s, seems to afford a fairly direct reflection of thirteenth-century elf-beliefs, their place in the text being justified by their identification with angels who neither fought for nor against God and were banished to the earth (and who, the text seems to claim, may yet return to heaven):

<p>Al-one in some deerne stude ·  huy stondez þanne wel stille  And Mani fol heom lijth so bi ·  In wodes and in mede  ...  And ofte in fourme of wommane ·  In many derne weye  grete compaygnie men i-seoth of heom ·  boþe hoppie and pleiþe  þat Eluene beoth i-cleopede ·  and ofte heo comiez to toun  And bi daye mucche in wodes heo beoth ·  and bi niþte ope heiþe dounes  þat beoþ of þe wrecche goster ·  þat of heuene were inome  And mony of hom a Domesday ·  ssolleþ zute to reste come<sup>65</sup></p>	<p>Alone in some hidden place  they stand then very quiet/still,  and many a fool lies with them thus,  in woods and in meadows.  ...  And often in form of women  on many a hidden path  men see a great company of them,  both to dance and play,  that are called <i>eluene</i>.  And often they come to a settlement,  and by day they are often in woods,  and by night upon high hills.  that are from among the wretched spirits  who/which were taken out of heaven.  And many of them yet  will come to rest on Doomsday.</p>
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Here, then, *eluene* are associated with woods, meadows and high hills. They visit settlements, but it is clear that these are not their native haunts. Admittedly, the associations are not precisely the same as the hills and valleys hinted at by our Old English place-names; and equally, we might simply conclude from the text, as did Robert of Gloucester,

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<sup>65</sup> *The South English Legendary: Edited from Corpus Christi College Cambridge MS. 415 and British Museum MS. Harley 2277 with Variants from Bodley MS. Ashmole 43 and British Museum MS. Cotton Julius D. IX*, edited by C. D'Evelyn and A. J. Mill, 3 vols, Early English Text Society, 235, 236, 244 (London, 1956–59), II, 409; cf. *The Early South-English Legendary or Lives of Saints I: MS. Laud, 108, in the Bodleian Library*, edited by C. Horstmann, Early English Text Society, 87 (London, 1887), pp. 306–07; Hall, 'The Meanings of *Elf*', pp. 141–44; on provenance see M. Görlach, *Studies in Middle English Saints' Legends*, Anglistische Forschungen, 257 (Heidelberg, 1998), p. 27.

that elves inhabited *wilde studes* 'wild places'.<sup>66</sup> All the same, this traditional-looking text situates *elves* in the landscape in a fashion broadly consistent with those place-names which might plausibly contain *ælf*; and with the toponymic associations of Anglo-Saxon gods, by contrast with the toponymic associations of Anglo-Saxon monsters.

The evidence of place-names for Anglo-Saxon beliefs in elves is vanishingly slight, but what there is is consistent with a wider range of evidence for medieval English elves' association with lonely hills and valleys.

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<sup>66</sup> Lines 2749–54, at line 2751, of *The Metrical Chronicle of Robert of Gloucester*, edited by W. A. Wright, 2 vols, Rolls Series, 86 (London, 1887), I, 196; for Robert's use of the *Legendary* see Görlach, *Studies in Middle English Saints' Legends*, pp. 48–55; O. S. Pickering, 'South English *Legendary* Style in Robert of Gloucester's *Chronicle*', *Medium Ævum*, 70 (2001), 1–18.