

# Welsh loanwords in the AB Language

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*Ancrene Wisse* 'Guidance of Anchoresses' is a classic of thirteenth-century English religious prose. The writer has even heard it called (by Arne Zettersten, in the IAUPE medieval colloquium at Ystad in 2007) 'the greatest prose work in the English language'. Yet it is important as well for historians of English, because (like its associated texts) it was written near England's border with Wales and contains loanwords from Welsh. The presence of these Welsh borrowings in *Ancrene Wisse* and related works is a rare phenomenon in English, and still awaits full discussion, as is made clear by Richard Dance's glossary to the new EETS edition.<sup>1</sup> Although this is claimed as a 'definitive guide to the language' of the text, some will feel it shows rather how much of its vocabulary still perplexes etymologists. The following note thus sets out current knowledge of the subject, correcting and supplementing Dance's glossary.

The presence of Welsh loans in what J. R. R. Tolkien called the AB Language, the special literary dialect of *Ancrene Wisse* and writings related to it, has long been recognized. Until recent years four such loans were accepted: *baban* 'baby', *cader* 'cradle', *ceis* 'sergeant, beadle', and *genow* 'mouth, jaws'. Others are now added to the list: *bune* 'maiden; beloved'; *cokunge* 'fighting'; *deale* 'take note'; *eden* 'kiln'; *eskibah* 'cinderjack'; *herebarde* 'military poet'; *liðeri* 'trickle'; *nurth* 'uproar'; and *rung* 'arise'. Our knowledge of them can be

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1) *Ancrene Wisse*, ed. Bella Millett, EETS o.s. 325-6 (2005-8).

summarized as follows.

*Baban* 'baby'. This appears in *Ancrene Wisse* and its derived versions only. 'The fourth reason why Our Lord hides himself,' says the author, 'is that you should seek him the more eagerly, and cry out for him and weep for him as the little baby (*lutel baban*) does for his mother.' Here, despite debate, *baban* can be accepted as a direct loan from Welsh *baban* 'baby'.<sup>2)</sup>

*Bune* 'maiden; beloved'. In describing the hound of hell, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* tells each of his female readers of the infinite value of her soul, 'God's dear *bune* which he bought with his blood and precious death on the dear cross.' Here *bune* has been seen as an English word meaning 'purchase'; but it makes slightly better sense as a loan from Welsh *bun* 'maiden, woman; sweetheart'. Carol Hough of Glasgow has suggested that both answers may be correct, with the author making a pun.<sup>3)</sup>

*Cader* 'cradle'. This has long been recognized as a loan from Middle Welsh *cadeir* 'cradle'. It occurs in *Ancrene Wisse* and (twice) in *Hali Meidhad*, which speaks of how virgins are free from all a mother's cares, including feeding the baby and changing its *cader clutes* or baby clothes.<sup>4)</sup>

*Ceis* 'sergeant, beadle' is attested once, in *Sawles Warde*, where the writer speaks of Man's self as a house, guarded by virtues, but threatened by vices led by the Devil. 'Against him and his *keis* the householder, Reason, defends his house.' In medieval Wales the *cais* 'sergeant of the peace, beadle' was notorious for brutality. He was an agent of authority and hangman in one: and so a fit

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2) Arne Zettersten, *Studies in the Dialect and Vocabulary of the 'Ancrene Riwe'* (Lund, 1965), 27; Yoko Wada, 'What is *Ancrene Wisse*?' in *A Companion to 'Ancrene Wisse'*, ed. Yoko Wada (Cambridge, 2003), 1-28, at 14.

3) Carol Hough, 'Two Puns in *Ancrene Wisse*', *Notes and Queries*, 252 (2007), 122-3.

4) *Medieval English Prose for Women*, ed. Bella Millett and Jocelyn Wogan-Browne (Oxford, 1990), 32, 34.

companion for Satan.<sup>5)</sup>

*Cokkunge* 'striving'. This is a more difficult word. In *Hali Meidhad* the writer declares that none is crowned in heaven except she who 'with a hard struggle (*cokkunge*) overcomes herself', where the form may be a loan from Welsh *cyngad* 'battle'.<sup>6)</sup>

*Deale* 'take note' has also been difficult. It occurs three times in *Ancrene Wisse*, always serving to call attention, as in the comment, 'Lo, *deale* what it says, that Christ should suffer to enter his kingdom.' But the form may be a borrowing from Welsh *deall* 'understand' and have an imperative force 'Take Note!' <sup>7)</sup>

*Eden* 'kiln'. In verses at the close of the life of St Juliana, the translator asks that when God at Doomsday winnows his wheat and burns the chaff, he may be a grain in God's golden *edene*. Although this has been taken as 'threshing-floor', the sense is, rather, 'kiln' (where harvests were dried), the form being a loan from Welsh *odyn* 'kiln'. The initial of *edene* is due either to textual error (the scribe being misled by the rhyme with *ledene* 'language') or to raising by following *e*.<sup>8)</sup>

*Eskibah* 'cinder jack' is unique. In a catalogue of the seven deadly sins, the author of *Ancrene Wisse* describes the covetous man as one who tends a fire for the Devil. He 'busies himself with ashes, and busily occupies himself to assemble many great heaps together, blows in them, and blinds himself, pokes

5) Millett and Wogan-Browne, 88; Andrew Breeze, 'Welsh *Cais* "Sergeant" and *Sawles Warde*', *Notes and Queries*, 238 (1993), 297-303.

6) Millett and Wogan-Browne, 42; Andrew Breeze, '*Cokkunge* "Striving" in *Hali Meidhad*: A Welsh Loanword?', *Notes and Queries*, 238 (1993), 294-5.

7) Zettersten, 175; Andrew Breeze, '*Deale* "Take Note" in *Ancrene Wisse*', *SELIM*, 13 (2000-6), 259-60.

8) Andrew Breeze, '*Lidderi* "Trickle" and *Eden* "Kiln" in the AB Language', *Notes and Queries*, 249 (2004), 15-16.

ashes, and makes Arabic numerals therein as these tellers do who have to make many calculations.’ Scholars have tried to relate the form to words for ashes.<sup>9)</sup> Yet it makes better sense as representing Welsh *ysgub fach* ‘little broom’, the one tending the fire being known from the brush he uses.<sup>10)</sup>

*Genou* ‘mouth, jaws’ occurs in the life of St Margaret, where it refers to the terrifying dragon that menaced the saint, gaping with his jaws (*genow*) as if to eat her alive.<sup>11)</sup> This has long been accepted as a borrowing of Welsh *geneu* ‘mouth’, perhaps a term that entered English thanks to hunting.<sup>12)</sup>

*Herebarde* ‘military poet’ is a difficult word, known only as an addition to *Ancrene Riwe* in London, British Library, MS Nero A.xiv. The author compares sin to disease. For a sick person, blood is let not from the part that is ill but from one that is healthy. Christ, who was sinless, in the same way shed blood for sinful humanity. ‘But in all the fevered [Nero here adds *herebarde*] world there was not found any healthy part, among all mankind, which might be let blood, except only the body of God.’ The first part of this word is clearly archaic English *here* ‘army’.<sup>13)</sup> The second may be Welsh *bardd* ‘bard, poet’. The glossator is perhaps thinking of the *bardd teulu*, the ‘poet of the warband’ who accompanied warriors on their forays, inciting them into battle. If so, the fever of a sinful world would be likened to the ravings of a Celtic bard.<sup>14)</sup>

*Lid̄eri* ‘trickle’. When in the life of Juliana the protagonist rejects a pagan suitor, her father orders her to be flogged until her body *lid̄eri* with blood. This

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9) Zettersten, 28-9.

10) Andrew Breeze, ‘A Welsh Etymology for *Eskibah* in *Ancrene Wisse*’, *Notes and Queries*, 254 (2009), 332-3.

11) Millett and Wogan-Browne, 58.

12) Richard Dance, ‘The AB Language’, in *A Companion to ‘Ancrene Wisse’*, ed. Yoko Wada, 57-82, at 77.

13) Zettersten, 76.

14) Andrew Breeze, ‘*Herebarde* in *Ancrene Riwe*’, *SELIM* 14 (2007), 279-83.

has been taken as 'foam' on the basis of a Norse etymology, despite phonological and practical objections (blood clots and stains, but does not readily foam). A borrowing of Welsh *llithro* 'slide; trickle, flow, run; slip', which is used of blood and other fluids, fits better here.<sup>15)</sup>

*Nurth* 'uproar' is attested six times, in *Ancrene Wisse* and elsewhere. The first declares that the three women addressed should not encourage unruly visitors. Even if there is no harm in it beyond their immoderate *nurth* 'noise', it would jar spiritual thought.<sup>16)</sup> This may be another military loan, from Welsh *nyrth* 'host, army': a potentially disturbing entity on the border of Wales, which was prone to attacks from the Welsh in the early middle ages, as attested by the many castles still to be seen there.<sup>17)</sup>

*Rung* 'arise' is known only twice, in *Ancrene Wisse*. At the 'Gloria patri' the three anchoresses should '*rungen* up and bow'; when menaced by the hound of hell, they should '*rung* up', bestir themselves, and lift eyes and hands to heaven.<sup>18)</sup> This may derive from Middle Welsh *rhyng* 'reach (for something)', no doubt a common order to servants.<sup>19)</sup>

What can we gather from this collection of rare Celtic loans in an English dialect of the Welsh border? Two points may be made. First is that of the Welsh as a socially inferior class, who provided servants. So much is suggested by *baban* 'baby', *bune* 'maiden', *cader* 'cradle', *eden* 'kiln', *genow* 'mouth, jaws' (if known from Welsh gillies who helped in hunting), *deale* 'take note', *eskibah* 'cinder jack', *liðeri* 'trickle', and *rung* 'arise'. These are from the vocabulary of

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15) Andrew Breeze, '*Lideri* "Trickle" and *Eden* "Kiln"' in the AB Language', 15-16.

16) Zettersten, 136; Millett and Wogan-Browne, 28, 80, 86, 132; Richard Dance, 'The AB Language', 73.

17) Andrew Breeze, '*Nurth* "Uproar" in the AB Language', *SELIM*, 13 (2000-6), 261-4.

18) Zettersten, 142.

19) Andrew Breeze, '*Rung* "Arise" in *Ancrene Wisse*', *SELIM*, 13 (2000-6), 265-6.

practical daily life. Like words of Hindi known to Anglo-Indians of the Raj, they perhaps entered English because they were used to give instructions to nursemaids, hunters, harvesters, and the like. They were learned by English-speaking masters and mistresses who gave orders. In another group are *ceis* 'beadle, sergeant', *cokunge* 'fighting', *herebarde* 'military poet', *nurth* 'uproar'. Their implications are other. Wales was not completely under English control until 1282, and was liable to disorder until the sixteenth century. Yet these words are also colonial in their implications. Like borrowings from Irish in sixteenth-century English, they show knowledge of a foreign society which is yet regarded with hostility, as a source of danger and disorder: apt for a border area like Herefordshire, which in the thirteenth century remained a military zone.

The various borrowings from Welsh analysed here are thus consistent in their implications, despite their semantic range. They are words of a frontier society, with a foreign people beyond it, inferior in status (and so providing servants) but not completely subdued (and so prone to violence and brutal force). There are obvious parallels with Ireland at a later date, with other parts of the British Empire, and with all places in the world where a conquering people has come into contact with native peoples. So *Ancrene Wisse*, now much read by those concerned with writing for women, is also open to some unexpected postcolonial readings; which will doubtless be confirmed when further Welsh loans in the AB Language come to light.