

Writing Sample

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Introduction

This writing sample is taken from the fifth chapter of my in-progress book manuscript, and looks at the role that eels played in medieval English identity. To help situate readers, I am including the project's table of contents and a quick summary of helpful background.

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Context

The book makes the argument that England had a distinct cultural identity related to eels. The English, as people, ate more of the fish than other Europeans, and more than their neighbors in the Britain. From the early medieval period onward eels were woven into the fabric of England's economic and social history. The fish served as a de facto currency in the early medieval period, with hundreds of thousands of eels moving around the country as in-kind rental payments. While most other in-kind rents disappeared in the twelfth century, eel-rents continued to be employed, though in diminishing numbers, through the sixteenth century. The fish had an important role in the economy beyond the in-kind rents; they were traded in large numbers along the country's highways throughout the period. Beginning in the late fourteenth century the English in London began to import an increasing number of eels from Holland, and the eels would later become an important feature in Anglo-Dutch relations. As the fish's place in the economy suggests, eels were an important part of the English diet. This was most noticeably true during Lent and other feast days, but eel consumption was not limited to those times. Throughout the year English people of all social standings – from kings to peasants – ate eels. Both archeological and textual evidence tells us that the fish were a ubiquitous part of the English diet for most of the Middle Ages, and the earlier chapters of this dissertation argue for a discernable eel-culture that resulted. The present chapter explores more fully the connections between the fish and English identity.

CHAPTER 5

YOU ARE WHAT YOU EAT: EELS AND IDENTITY

Located on an island in the heart of the East Anglian Fens, the town of Ely has a long and well-known association with eels. As we have seen, the Venerable Bede wrote in his eighth-century *Historia Ecclesiastica* that the city took its name from the eels that swam around and through its lands. The monastery at Ely held the earliest extant eel-rent, and as previous chapters have shown, the fish played an important role in the region's economy throughout the medieval and early modern periods. To this day, Ely and its people recognize and celebrate their historical association with eels. The city hosts an annual Eel Festival Weekend, complete with a parade led by a giant eel parade puppet.¹ In 2006 the city used the festival to unveil a nine-foot tall galvanized steel eel sculpture in the downtown Jubilee Gardens (see Fig. 14).² But though modern Ely stands somewhat apart in the degree of ostentatiousness it shows in the embrace of its deep historical connections with eels, the whole Fenland region shares in this heritage. Britain's last remaining professional eel catcher, a Fenman names Peter Carter, only retired in 2015. His family had been catching and selling eels since at least 1475.³ Graham Swift's 1983 novel *Waterland* captures the area's ingrained eel culture, showing the understated but important ways that the fish move throughout



Fig. 14: Eel sculpture in Ely's Jubilee Gardens. Photo credit: Keith Evans, 2009. Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0.

¹ "Welcome," Ely Eel Festival, accessed November 27, 2018, <https://elyeelfestival.co.uk/>.

² "Sculpture Is R-Eel Star of Historic Day," *Ely Standard*, May 4, 2006, <http://www.elystandard.co.uk/news/sculpture-is-r-eel-star-of-historic-day-1-257792>.

³ "Eel Fisherman Quits amid Plunging Eel Numbers," *The Telegraph*, March 15, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/science/2016/03/15/eel-fisherman-quits-amid-plunging-eel-numbers/>.

issues of life and identity in this region where, as recently as the end of the nineteenth century, eel-skin wedding rings were more traditional than metal ones.⁴ Though today the rings are mostly gold and the eel catchers have gone, the Fens and their residents continue to have their identity wrapped up together with the eel.

Such a close and obvious relationship with eels marks the region and its people as distinct, and it has done so for some time. Francis Grose, compiling a collection of English regional words and expressions in 1787, noted that Lincolnshire men were often called “yellow bellies” after the coloring of their eels.⁵ However, this localization of eel culture to the Fens which Grose notes as an othering element was a relatively recent artifact in his day. True, the fourteenth century saw the beginnings of changes to the place of eels in England’s cultural landscape, and the country’s subsequent demographic shifts meant that patterns of commerce and consumption began to center more around London and the Fens than other parts of the country. But England’s true break with its eel culture only came at the end of the seventeenth century. Prior to that, the English relationship with the fish more closely resembled that of the Fens dwellers. Throughout much of the medieval and early modern periods, the English identified themselves and their country with their eels.

Given the sheer quantities of the fish that the English consumed as food and medicine, it should not be surprising that the fish would influence the islanders’ expressions of themselves and their spaces. Incorporation of the fish, both bodily and socially, lead to a regular use of eels as a metaphorical identifier – essentially, in their own telling, the English were what they ate. As scholars like Ann Hagen, Allen, Chris Woolgar, and Paul Lloyd (and, to a certain macabre extent, Geraldine

⁴ Graham Swift, *Waterland*, Reissue edition (New York: Vintage, 1992), passim, but esp. 193-204. For eel-skin wedding rings, see: Walter Henry Barrett, *Tales from the Fens*, ed. Enid Porter (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1963), 172, n. 2; David Righton and Mandy Roberts, “Eels and People in the United Kingdom,” in *Eels and Humans*, ed. Katsumi Tsukamoto and Mari Kuroki, *Humanity and the Sea* (Tokyo: Springer Science & Business Media, 2013), 5.

⁵ Francis Grose, *A Provincial Glossary, with a Collection of Local Proverbs, and Popular Superstitions* (London, 1787), ccxxi. The negative connotation here is interesting, and likely relates to Early Modern efforts at othering residents of the Fens as the space became a site of serious enclosure contestation. This issue will come again in later chapters of this work.

Heng) have noted, food formed an important component of medieval and early modern English identity.⁶ Sometimes, as Lloyd shows, it could mark internal social stratifications. But the insular food cultures that Woolgar highlights, with their rituals of preparation and presentation and their multiple cultural valences, also acted to help construct an affirmative sense of Englishness. And, as we have seen, eels were not merely a foodstuff; they influenced English economy, history, and literature. Eels were a natural sovereign currency, an important commodity, and a valued gift item, and as scholars like Chris Gregory, Nicholas Thomas, and others have shown, exchanged and traded items can act to create and strengthen strands of social relationships.⁷ This appears to have happened with eels. The wide-spread, cross-class consumption and exchange of eels left a lasting imprint on the social landscape that connected the English with the fish. Across a range of media that included not only literature, legend, and art, but also family names and emblems, the English frequently chose eels as metaphors through which to represent themselves. These personal connections spilled over into spatial ones, as well; the English named landscapes and places after the fish, and at times imagined their island nation in anguilloid terms.

The Long History of Æthelwold's Dream

A striking early example of the connection between identity and eels appears in Wulfstan of Winchester's eleventh-century *Vita Sancti Æthelwoldi* (*Life of St. Aethelwold*). Along with Dunstan and

⁶ Ann Hagen, *Anglo-Saxon Food and Drink: Production, Processing, Distribution and Consumption* (Norfolk, England: Anglo-Saxon Books, 2006), passim; Allen J. Frantzen, *Food, Eating and Identity in Early Medieval England* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer Ltd, 2014), passim; C. M. Woolgar, *The Culture of Food in England, 1200-1500* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2016), passim; Paul S. Lloyd, *Food and Identity in England, 1540-1640: Eating to Impress* (London and New York: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2015), passim; Geraldine Heng, *Empire of Magic: Medieval Romance and the Politics of Cultural Fantasy* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003), passim.

⁷ C. A. Gregory, *Savage Money* (Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Press, 2005), 44–45; Nicholas Thomas, *Entangled Objects: Exchange, Material Culture, and Colonialism in the Pacific* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2009), 16; Wim van Binsbergen, “Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities: Introduction,” in *Commodification: Things, Agency, and Identities: The Social Life of Things Revisited*, ed. Wim van Binsbergen and Peter L. Geschiere (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 15–23.

Oswald, Æthelwold was one of the primary leaders of England's tenth-century Benedictine monastic reform movement and he held the office of Bishop of Winchester from 963 until his death in 984. His hagiography, written by his student Wulfstan in about 1000, relays a story that Æthelwold allegedly told his pupils in which he had a dream-vision of the English as eels. Wulfstan writes that Æthelwold recounted finding himself on a beach and coming upon a large ship filled with fish, most of which were eels.⁸ He heard the voice of God, telling him that the eels lack human reason and are dead (in spirit at least, and possibly in the flesh), before ordering the saint to pray over the fish and convert them to men.⁹ Æthelwold did as the voice commanded, and the eels turned into people, many of whom he knew. One of the men was a former monk named Æthelstan, who appears earlier in the *Vita* as someone who was ordained together with Æthelwold and Dunstan, but who had abandoned the monastery and who “finished his life in the stench of luxury” (*in fetore luxuria uitam finiuit*).¹⁰ This fate found a reprise in the Bishop's dream, as Æthelstan alone fell back and turned again into an eel.¹¹ The rest of the men found salvation through Æthelwold's efforts. Wulfstan concludes his tale by noting that the saint's vision has since come to pass, with many men leaving the world behind and taking monastic vows.

Wulfstan's account operates at several levels, as befits a hagiographic narrative. It trumpets the saint's miraculous prophetic powers, while highlighting both his natural holiness and his role as a humble emissary of God. At the same time, the hagiographer's explicit mention of fish (*piscium*) at the beginning of the vision overtly ties Æthelwold to a long Christian symbolic tradition. By reminding his readers that that eels *are* fish (*multitudo copiosa piscium, et maxime anguillarum*), Wulfstan writes the

⁸ “putabam me stare iuxta litus maris, ubi mihi videbatur adesse quaedam maxima nauis, in qua multitudo copiosa piscium, et maxime anguillarum.” Wulfstan of Winchester, *Life of St. Æthelwold*, ed. Michael Lapidge and Michael Winterbottom (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 58.

⁹ Wulfstan of Winchester, 60.

¹⁰ Wulfstan of Winchester, 12.

¹¹ Wulfstan of Winchester, 58.

saint as an allegorical reproduction of biblical actors, making Æthelwold, like Jesus's first disciples Simon and Andrew, a fisher of men.¹²

But Wulfstan's decision to single out eels bears attention; his account does not need them either to make his allegorical connection or to speak to the saint's holiness. The eels matter, though, because they help to explain the scope and context of the vision. That the eels are fish connects the bishop and his vision to exegetical tradition, but the fact that the fish are eels makes the story specifically about the English – a point that fits squarely within the broad themes of Æthelwold's life and work. Throughout most of his career, the saint's motivating interest lay in the expansion of the England's newly reformed monastic order. He focused his attentions and interests at home rather than abroad, and he understood the country's spiritual geography as a contested space, fought over by his monks and the more traditional clergy whom he distained. The *Vita's* dream-vision reflects this worldview, laying out a parable in which Æthelwold leads his people towards salvation. In telling this story, Wulfstan relies on an allegorical tradition, going back to Isidore of Seville, that reads the ocean as a metaphor for the whole of the mortal world.¹³ “This world,” as an anonymous thirteenth-century crusading sermon informs us bluntly, “is a sea.”¹⁴ And within that tradition, Æthelwold's ship floating along in the water likely stands in for the island of England, with the eels as her unredeemed residents. In bringing his countrymen back to life spiritually, the saint leads them from their corporal existence to a perfected spiritual one on the shore of the afterlife. Kathy Lavezzo has written about a medieval English sense of communal identity based on the perception of shared geographic isolation – a people alone on an island at the very edge of the world.¹⁵ We can see that idea at play in Æthelwold's dream.

¹² Matthew 4:18 and Mark 1:17.

¹³ Isidore of Seville, *Sententiae*, ed. P. Cazier, Corpus Christianorum Series Latina 111 (Brepols, 1998), Liber 3, cap. 5 sent. 27; Liber 3, cap. 22, sent. 2.

¹⁴ Jessalynn Bird, Edward Peters, and James M. Powell, eds., “An Anonymous Crusade-Recruiting Sermon, ca. 1213–1217,” in *Crusade and Christendom*, Annotated Documents in Translation from Innocent III to the Fall of Acre, 1187-1291 (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013), 116.

¹⁵ Kathy Lavezzo, *Angels on the Edge of the World: Geography, Literature, and English Community, 1000-1534* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 2006), passim.

Wulfstan's story uses the ship and its eels to set the geographic and cultural boundaries for the saint's divine mission, and he trusted to his audience to see these connections as clearly as they saw the Biblical ones.

In considering the growth of English eel culture, it is important to keep in mind the timing and context of the dream story in Wulfstan's *Vita*. The account did not make reference to eels in a vacuum. Æthelwold was a contemporary of Ælfric of Eynsham, whose *Colloquy* gives us one of the first examples of an active English eel trade, and the two men lived during the earliest period for which we have significant extant records of eel-rents. In fact, as we have seen earlier, Æthelwold himself was personally responsible for two of those rents, having declared that the fishermen of Wyllan and Eollem owed 8,000 eels per year to both Thorney and Peterborough Abbeys.¹⁶ Wulfstan wrote his *Vita* as a part of a culture that was clearly engaging broadly with eels as food, currency, and commodity. That Æthelwold's dream-vision dates from this same period suggests that, by the end of the tenth century, those social elements had begun to cohere into a self-reinforcing narrative of national character.

A version of Wulfstan's account has likely persisted into the present day as part of regional East Anglian legend. Modern tourist guides to the island and city of Ely frequently point to a vague medieval legend about how St. Dunstan gave the region its name by turning a group of impious local priests into eels in a fit of righteous rage.¹⁷ The actual origins of the Dunstan story are unclear; the tourist handbooks do not offer citations. A short article in *Notes and Queries* from 1863 makes a reference to it, quoting from an unnamed older work on marriage and celibacy of the clergy.¹⁸ That work appears to have been a 1712 book by William Nelson about the rights of the English clergy, from a section on marriage and the priesthood. Nelson provides a more detailed telling of the story

¹⁶ Cyril Roy Hart, *The Early Charters of Eastern England* (Leicester: Leicester University Press, 1966), 182.

¹⁷ See, for example: Trudy Ring, Noelle Watson, and Paul Schellinger, *Northern Europe: International Dictionary of Historic Places Volume 2* (New York: Routledge, 2013), 260; Clive Tully, *The Visitor's Guide to East Anglia* (Ashbourne, Derbyshire: Moorland Publishing, 1990), 180; Kimberly Hagan, ed., *Let's Go 2009 Britain* (New York: Macmillan, 2008), 334.

¹⁸ W. Bowen Rowlands, "Strange Derivations," *Notes and Queries* 4, no. 3 (December 1863): 142.

than the present-day chapbooks, writing that Dunstan, as a part of his monastic reform movement, demanded that the English clergy give up their families and possessions and commit themselves to a cloistered existence.¹⁹ A large number of priests defied the saint, who in turn cursed them, transformed them – along with their wives and children – into eels, and cast them into the East Anglian fens.

Nelson explicitly reports his tale as a fiction, saying that it was invented by the tenth-century monks in the wake of the reforms to justify their receipt of the benefices that Dunstan stripped from the uncooperative clergymen.²⁰ This attribution may be correct, but not provably so. The story does not appear in any of the medieval lives of the saint, and Nelson’s commentary seems to be the earliest extant version.²¹ Nelson may have been influenced by a 1688 essay on the history of the celibacy of English clergy by Henry Warton. Remarking, like Nelson, about stories that the celibate monks told to support their position, Warton recounted several stories, including, “the imposture of the Crucifix in the Synod of Canterbury, openly giving its Vote for Dunstan, against the married Clergy; and the whole Colledge of married Priests of Elingen turned into Eels, when by the favour of the Emperour they retained their Wives against the threats and curses of the Pope.”²² Here Warton has juxtaposed Dunstan’s rise to power and a separate tale from Germany, which he cites broadly to the fifteenth-century historian John Capgrave. Nelson may have conflated these two accounts, attributing the German eels to an English saint. Even so, it seems likely is that his Dunstan story has its origins at least in part in Wulfstan’s *Vita*, with the miracle eventually attaching to the more popular saint.²³ The

¹⁹ William Nelson, *The Rights of the Clergy of That Part of Great-Britain Call'd England; as Established by the Canons, the Common Law, and the Statutes of the Realm. Being a Methodical Collection Under Proper Titles, of All Things Relating to the Clergy* (London: J. Nutt, 1712), 378–79.

²⁰ Nelson, 379.

²¹ For the non-presence of this story, see, for example: William Stubbs, ed., *Memorials of Saint Dunstan, Archbishop of Canterbury* (London: Longman & Company, 1874), passim; Bernard J. Muir and Andrew J. Turner, eds., *Eadmer of Canterbury: Lives and Miracles of Saints Oda, Dunstan, and Oswald*, trans. Bernard J. Muir and Andrew J. Turner (Clarendon Press, 2006), passim.

²² Henry Warton, *A Treatise of the Celibacy of the Clergy Wherein Its Rise and Progress Are Historically Considered*, Early English Books, 1641-1700 / 1080:08 (London, 1688), 148.

²³ For evidence of Dunstan’s superior popularity, note that there is no extant children’s poem beginning, “St. Æthelwold, as the story goes...”

similarities between the two accounts are clear, even if their narrative processes are reversed. The disobedient monks in Nelson's version are cast from their positions and essentially revert to plain eels – essentially reverting into ordinary, unenlightened Englishmen – again. Even understood as a wholly different narrative version, however, the story of Dunstan's eels works nicely as metaphorical twin of Wulfstan's.

But taking these two versions as a single, changing narrative is illustrative, because it helps us to see the eels' place in the present-day Fens as a surviving artifact of a much wider historical phenomenon. The story's various iterations, which became increasingly limited in terms of geographic scope and cultural identity, mark the decline and retreat of English eel culture over time. Wulfstan's account, which comes from Winchester, speaks to the kingdom's priests and people as a cultural and geographically-bounded whole – a ship full of eels for the saint to save. Some seven hundred years later, Nelson's telling still encompasses all of the English clergy, but he wrote on the far side of the seventeenth-century break when eels had begun to lose their cultural place, and his account reflects that transition. He limits the space of the eels' confinement to the Fens, and his understanding of the link between the fish and national identity is fundamentally different than Wulfstan's. There is still a permeability between the English and their eels in Nelson's version, but crossing the threshold between man and animal is an othering act that serves to exile the troublesome clergy from their English community. In its modern iterations, the Dunstan story deals *solely* with the saint's disagreement with East Anglian clergy, aligning with the region's current perception of its own cultural past. This is a geographically contained myth about the connections between local people, local places, and local ecology. Even when truncated in this way, though, these later accounts share underlying threads of commonality with Wulfstan's version that twine together the identity of the English and their eels.

One of the curious aspects at play in the stories of both Æthelwold and Dunstan is the lurking

specter of cannibalism. As previous chapters have made clear, underneath all of the other cultural valences eels' ultimate value rested on their edibility, and this creates something of a paradox. Using your food as a metaphorical proxy for your people means that your people are also the food. Æthelwold's ship of eels is a feast at sail, and where Wulfstan saw an island of lost souls in the parable, a king like Henry III might have seen supplies for the his annual celebration of St. Edward. This issue was not unique to eels; anthropophagism is a frequently reoccurring thematic element in a wide range of English literary and cultural productions. Medieval travel narratives such as *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* spend significant time and attention on the cannibalistic habits of the strange peoples at the far edges of the world, and those same cannibals appear on English *mappaemundi* like the Hereford and Psalter maps.²⁴ Scholars have noted a surprising number of instances of cannibalism in medieval English literature, with Geraldine Heng and Heather Blurton each arguing that the scenes were frequently deployed to articulate cultural identity and national character.²⁵ So it bears noting that in both the Æthelwold and Dunstan stories – and in the other examples in this chapter – the issue of identity floats above a riptide of cannibalism: it is not only that you are what you eat, but also that you eat what you are.²⁶ Nelson's later account of Dunstan and the eels plays on this theme as well, but does so with a certain macabre post-Reformation flavor. In his telling, the Catholic priests who will not reform to proper English ways of belief become food for the faithful, in a process that mirrors the way that the Henry VIII consumed the monasteries and other Roman Church properties in the wake of the 1534 Act of Supremacy.

²⁴ John Mandeville, *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*, ed. and trans. C.W.R.D. Moseley (London: Penguin Books, 1983), ##.

²⁵ Heather Blurton, *Cannibalism in High Medieval English Literature* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), passim; Heng, *Empire of Magic*, passim.

²⁶ Wulfstan's account also interfaces interestingly with eels' role as a commodity; Æthelwold's prayers redeem – literally buy back (*redimere*) – the souls of his countrymen.

Eels and Englishness on Murals and Tapestries

Æthelwold's dream-vision may be the first place where we can see connections between eels and English identity, but it was far from the last. Roughly one hundred years after Æthelwold's death, the fish make an appearance on the famous Bayeux Tapestry that may, also, work in this register. The Tapestry, a seventy-meter-long embroidered cloth chronicling the lead-up to the Norman invasion of England, begins by following Harold Godwinson – the English earl who would later be crowned king of England and die at Hastings – as he leaves England on a diplomatic mission to Normandy. Following some misadventures, Harold eventually winds up in the company of Duke William of Normandy and accompanies his host on a military campaign against a rebellious vassal, Duke Conan II of Brittany. After the Norman's victory over Conan, the tapestry shows Harold receiving arms from William in a likely sign of vassalage, and then later depicts Harold swearing an oath to William on holy relics.²⁷ While the tapestry is not explicit about the nature of the oath, other Norman sources recorded that Harold swore to support William's claim to the English throne on the death of the elderly king. There are real questions about whether this part of the story actually happened, or whether Harold's eventual decision to take the throne for himself led to the Norman invasion of England in 1066. Regardless, the story of his foresworn oath played an important part in accounts of the invasion because it provided William with legitimate *causus belli*.

The Norman's campaign against Conan almost ended in disaster before it could get going, however. The tapestry depicts William's army imperiled while crossing of the Couesnon River into Brittany near Mont-St-Michel, with soldiers and horses becoming trapped in the delta sands (Fig. 15). The image shows Harold coming to the Normans' rescue, pulling one man to safety while carrying a second warrior on his back. The caption above this part of the tapestry tells the viewer that "Here

²⁷ David J. Bernstein, *The Mystery of the Bayeux Tapestry* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 20; David M. Wilson, *The Bayeux Tapestry* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 180.



Fig. 15: Harold saves the Norman soldiers from the sands and waters of the Couesnon River. Bayeux Tapestry.

Duke Harold dragged them [the Normans] from the sand” (*hic harold dux trahabat eos de arena*). The scene merges into the border below, showing are a pair of fish and six eels in the water. One of the eels is being grabbed be a man holding a knife, who is himself being seized by a quadruped, which is in turn part of a chain of other beasts.

The scene’s incorporation of the border into the narrative is unique, and consequently has received a fair bit of attention. Jill Frederick notes in her essay on this vignette that the scholarly consensus about the eels has been that they hint at Harold’s forthcoming treachery.²⁸ In this reading, the proverbially slippery eels reveal the true nature of Harold’s character, suggesting that despite his virtuous acts in the main part of the tapestry’s narrative, the Earl is untrustworthy and will try to wriggle out of his obligations. This reading makes some sense; as Frederick notes, the use of slippery eels as a metaphor for untrustworthy people goes back at least to the Romans, and was certainly in use in medieval Europe.²⁹ And the man in the water, if he is attempting to catch an eel, is certainly going about it in a way that invokes the fish’s slippery nature. Holding an eel by the tail is an expression

²⁸ Jill Frederick, “Slippery as an Eel: Harold’s Ambiguous Heroics in the Bayeux Tapestry,” in *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lewis, Gale Owen-Crocker, and Dan Terkla (Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books, 2011), 121,123.

²⁹ Frederick, 123. For a more detailed examination of eels as metaphors, see Ch. 6 below.

with long historical standing, usually used to indicate that someone has unwittingly gone about a task the wrong way. As Havelok knew, you have to catch and hold an eel by the head, or it quickly squirms out of your grasp. The tapestry scene may, as Frederick and others have noted, employ the eels to undercut Harold's bravery on the riverbank with a reminder of his forthcoming faithlessness.

But such a reading rests on a wholly negative perception of eels, engaging only with their modern metaphorical range. As Æthelwold's dream-vision shows us, eels could stand in for English identity in ways that had nothing at all to do with untrustworthiness, and it seems likely that the same thing is true here, as well. If we extend Æthelwold's metaphorical framework to the Bayeux Tapestry, and understand the eels as standing in for the English as a people, then a possible explanation comes clear that encompasses not only the eels, but the scene as a whole. Frederick points out that the man in the water grabbing at the eels is English – his haircut, mustache, and the seax in his hand all mark him as such.³⁰ And, in fact, he looks very much like the images of Harold at the start of the tapestry's narrative; he is dressed in the same style and color of clothes that the English duke wore, and his hair color matches that of the earlier Harold.³¹ A quadruped of some type has the man's foot in its mouth, and the scene plays out under the gaze of a bird, a second quadruped, and a centaur or onocentaur (Fig. 16).³² This chain of beasts has no obvious explanation, and scholars have offered a wide range of possible readings.³³ Though Frederick fails to provide a convincing reading of the whole scene, her



Fig. 16: The border below the scene of Harold's heroics, showing the Saxon man and the chain of animals, ending with the centaur or onocentaur.

³⁰ Frederick, 117, 123.

³¹ While Harold's hair in this scene appears reddish, in the earlier scenes his hair is mostly blonde.

³² Frederick, "Slippery as an Eel," 124–25.

³³ See, for example: J. Bard McNulty, *The Narrative Art of the Bayeux Tapestry Master* (New York: AMS Press, 1989), 40–42; Frederick, "Slippery as an Eel," *passim*; John Marshall Carter, "The Bayeux Tapestry, Bishop Odo of Bayeux, and the

analysis of the individual animals is suggestive. She argues that the quadrupeds – likely wolves – stand for greed, violence, and rapaciousness, while the onocentaur is a marker of hypocrisy and treacherousness, and the bird, which she believes to be an eagle or raptor of some variety, symbolizes royal authority.³⁴ This series of interpretations provides us with a curious constellation of personified characteristics – greed, violence, hypocrisy, and royalty – pursuing an English man looking like an earlier Harold, who is hunting eels and has taken one by the tail. If we understand the eels after Æthelwold’s model, then this border vignette may show us Harold, driven by ambition for the throne, grasping with a naked blade for control of the English. His grip is tenuous and slippery, and he will not be able to hold on for long. Interpreting the scene in this way does not significantly change what scholars have generally considered to be its role in the tapestry’s narrative; the images remain both a commentary on Harold’s character and a foreshadowing of future events. But changing how we think about the eels offers clarity to the role of the other beasts, and brings a rationale to the entire group that has been lacking.

In considering this argument, it bears noting that while the tapestry was most probably commissioned by a Norman – possibly by Bishop Odo of Bayeux – much of the artifact’s detail work points to its production in England, by English embroiderers.³⁵ The English artists who planned out and created the Bayeux Tapestry came out of a cultural setting that relied on eels for food, currency, and metaphor – they were as likely to rely on the fish as a marker of English identity as to use them as an indicator of treachery. And while the tapestry’s narrative has been primarily understood as a

Pastimes of the Medieval Silent Majority,” in *The Bayeux Tapestry as a Social Document: Selected Readings*, ed. John Marshall Carter (Lexington, MA: Ginn Custom Printing, 1985), passim.

³⁴ Frederick, “Slippery as an Eel,” 124–25.

³⁵ For a succinct summary of the argument for Odo as the tapestry’s patron, see: Suzanne van der Raad, “The Influence of Mixed Provenance on the Portrayal of Harold and William in the Bayeux Tapestry” (MA Thesis, Leiden University, 2014), 16–18. For a partial list of scholars arguing for the tapestry’s likely English provenance, see the summary at: George T. Beech, “The Breton Campaign and the Possibility That the Bayeux Tapestry Was Produced in the Loire Valley,” in *The Bayeux Tapestry: New Approaches*, ed. Michael Lewis, Gale Owen-Crocker, and Dan Terkla (Oxford and Oakville: Oxbow Books, 2011), 14–15.

celebration of the Norman Conquest, recent reevaluation of the images suggests a counternarrative that extolls English virtues as well.³⁶ The tapestry paints Harold as a worthy adversary and, as his rescue of the Normans suggests, a valorous man. If the English embroiderers did, indeed, harbor anti-Norman feelings, then we should not be surprised that the tapestry shows Harold, at the height of his powers and potential in the last scene before he swears himself to William, standing above a river full of eels. This is the final instance in the narrative when Harold Godwinson is free and uncompromised – the last moment when England might still have had a native king – performing his greatest deeds. The eels in the water tie together the narratives above and below, as Harold stands tallest as an Englishman in their presence even as we see him laid low in the future by his elusive dream of holding them in mastery.

The Bayeux Tapestry was not the only place where English artists connected eels, river crossings, and Englishness. These same elements also appear across England, in paintings and illuminations of St. Christopher. The patron saint of pilgrims and travelers, Christopher became increasingly popular in England from the mid-thirteenth century onward. Initially, images of the saint appeared primarily in illuminated manuscripts such as psalters and books of hours, but by the end of the century church wall paintings of the saint were becoming increasingly common. The saint quickly became a staple of English local church decoration and adoration, so in-demand that artists often shoehorned his images into pre-existing Passion Cycle paintings.³⁷ By the middle of fourteenth century most English parish churches boasted an image of the saint on one of its walls, with at least 378 murals in England and Wales combined.³⁸

³⁶ Andrew Bridgeford, *1066: The Hidden History in the Bayeux Tapestry*, Reprint edition (New York, NY: Walker Books, 2006), passim.

³⁷ Eleanor Pridgeon, "Saint Christopher Wall Paintings in English and Welsh Churches, c.1250-c.1500, Volume 1: Text" (Doctoral Dissertation, University of Leicester, 2008), 13.

³⁸ Eleanor Pridgeon, "National and International Trends in Hampshire Churches: A Chronology of St. Christopher Wall Paintings (c.1240 to c.1530)," *Proceedings of the Hampshire Field Club Archaeological Society* 68 (2013): 87. Pridgeon cautions that the number is an estimate both because the degraded state of some murals makes them hard to assess, and because there are an unknown number of images still hidden under layers of paint and plaster.

These images of the saint generally focus on the vignette that Jacobus de Voragine made famous in his 1260 hagiographic collection, *The Golden Legend*, where the pagan giant Cristopher carries a disguised infant Christ across a river, thereby earning his name and receiving a blessing from his passenger. The giant then plants his staff in the bank, where it springs into flower.³⁹ Paintings and illuminations of the saint usually capture him mid-stream with the Christ Child on his shoulder, bent under the surprising weight of his burden and leaning on his staff for support.⁴⁰ From the twelfth century onward – both in England and on the Continent – murals and illuminations of this scene frequently include decorative fish in



Fig. 17: *St. Christopher mural at St. Peter and St. Paul's Church in Pickering, North Yorkshire.* Note the eel curling around the saint's leg. Photo credit: J. Hannon-Briggs, 2016. Creative Commons BY-SA 2.0.

the river.⁴¹ In England, however, very often these scenes of riverine life also include eels. They commonly twist in the water around the saint's feet, and in some instances come curling out of the water around his legs or the shaft of his staff (see Fig. 17). Interestingly, these scenes of Christopher, with the Christ on his back and eels at his feet, recall the image of Harold in the Bayeux Tapestry.

Eels make occasional appearances in Continental murals of Christopher, especially in eel-rich regions such as the Rhine Valley or Northern Italy, but the fish are more consistently present in English representations, where they help to make the saint's story relatable to the island's people. Julie Chittock makes this point in her discussion of the fourteenth-century mural of St. Christopher in the

³⁹ Jacobus de Voragine, *The Golden Legend: Reading on the Saints*, trans. William Granger Ryan (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2012), 398.

⁴⁰ For additional work on England's St. Christopher murals, see: John Lewis André, "Wall Paintings in Sussex Churches," in *Transactions of the St. Paul's Ecclesiological Society, Vol. IV* (London: Harrison and Sons, 1900), 297–307; John Salmon, "St. Christopher in English Medieval Art and Life," *Journal of the British Archaeological Association* 41 (1936): 76–109; Ernest William Tristram, *English Wall Painting of the Fourteenth Century* (London: Routledge & Paul, 1955), 114–20; Roger Rosewell, *Medieval Wall Paintings* (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

⁴¹ Pridgeon, "Saint Christopher Wall Paintings," 229.

church of St. Mary and All Saints at Willingham, Cambridgeshire, which includes an eel and other characteristically regional fish in its depiction. Chittock writes that local viewers would have seen their own environment in the image of the saint fording “a river which is marked out by its fauna as being a fenland waterway.”⁴² Eels would have formed an important part of life in medieval Willingham: the village stands in the heart of the Fens, and one of the local marshes had an assessed eel-rent in 1251 of 5,000 sticks of eels (125,000 fish) due to the Bishop of Ely.⁴³ The eel in the mural helps to make the story both local and relevant. Eels in the other church paintings of Christopher serve the same end, bringing the saint’s life home to parishioners and making him, in a sense, English.

The connection between Christopher and eels appears again in the mid-fourteenth-century poem “Satire on Sinful Townspeople.”⁴⁴ One of the so-called Kildare Poems found in British Library MS Harley 913, the work is a tongue-in-cheek commentary on vice in which each stanza pokes fun at the hidden wickedness of its subject.⁴⁵ Likely composed in Norman Ireland, the poem is written in English and – at least in the St. Christopher section – is explicitly about England. The author writes:

7. Hail, St. Christopher with your long stake!
 You bore our lord Jesus Christ over the broad lake.
 Many a great conger eel swims about your feet.
 How many herring for a penny at West Cheap in London?
 This verse is from Sacred Scripture,
 It comes from a noble talent.⁴⁶

The specific meaning of this stanza seems to be something of a mystery. Some of its specifics are

⁴² Julie Chittock, “The Medieval Wall Paintings of St. Mary and All Saints, Willingham,” *Proceedings of the Cambridge Antiquarian Society* 81, no. for 1992 (1993): 78.

⁴³ T.D. Adkinson et al., “South Witchford Hundred: Haddenham,” in *A History of the County of Cambridge and the Isle of Ely: Volume 4, City of Ely; Ely, N. and S. Witchford and Wisbech Hundreds*, ed. R.B. Pugh (London: Victoria County History, 2002), 140–49, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/cambs/vol4/pp140-149>.

⁴⁴ The poem has previously been erroneously titled “Satire on the People of Kildare,” and is sometimes simply titled “Satire.” This title is taken from: Deborah L. Moore, *Medieval Anglo-Irish Troubles: A Cultural Study of BL MS Harley 913* (Turnhout: Brepols, 2017), 73.

⁴⁵ For an extended discussion of the poem and its meaning, see: Moore, 73–77.

⁴⁶ “Ail, Seint Cristofre with thi lang stake! / Thou ber Ur Louerd Jesu Crist ouer the brod lake. / Mani greate kunger swimmeth abute thi fete. / Hou mani hering to peni at West Chep in London? / This uers is of Holi Writte, / Hit com of noble witte.” Angela M. Lucas, ed., *Anglo-Irish Poems of the Middle Ages* (Blackrock: The Columba Press, 1995), 58–59.

confusing – conger eels do not live in lakes – and the poet is not as openly critical of the saint here as he is of other targets in other stanzas. Perhaps for these reasons, scholars who have studied the poem have all avoided discussing this section, beyond noting its West Cheap reference.⁴⁷ Several things stand out in the lines, however. They show a markedly specific knowledge of London’s commercial geography. And, like the English parish churches, the stanza shows a connection between eels and the saint. As much as anything, the poet seems to be making the Christopher into a fisherman who walks with eels and sells herring in Cheapside. If nothing else, the saint appears to be engaged in England’s commercial networks.

There are a handful of examples of Christopher murals that also show the saint as an English fisherman. Three separate church wall paintings – at Peakirk in Cambridgeshire, East Wellow in Hampshire, and Aldermaston in Berkshire – go beyond merely having eels coursing through the waters below the saint and his charge. All three depict the saint holding, instead of his customary staff, a particular type of eel-spear called an eel-glaive. A fourth example, at the Church of St. Edmund in Fritton, Suffolk, show the saint with an eel pick, while in the mural at Willingham the saint leans on a two-pronged fishing spear.⁴⁸ Chittock rightly notes that spears and glaives like these were not useful for catching the quantities that landlords and rental contracts demanded. These were, rather, tools for personal fishing.⁴⁹ This variant on the Christopher scene is wholly English, and there are no matching Continental examples. Across the Channel, images of the saint either include a plain staff, or one sprouting foliage from its top to recall the miracle that occurred after the giant had born the child beyond the flood. If the flora and fauna of these popular images helped to set the scene in England,

⁴⁷ For this absence, see: Wilhelm Heuser, *Die Kildare-Gedichte: Die ältesten mittelenlischen Denkmäler in anglo-irischer Überlieferung* (Bonn: P. Hanstein, 1904), 150–54; Lucas, *Anglo-Irish Poems of the Middle Ages*, 182–84; Moore, *Medieval Anglo-Irish Troubles*, 75; St John D. Seymour, *Anglo-Irish Literature: 1200-1582* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 109–13.

⁴⁸ David Butcher, *Medieval Lowestoft: The Origins and Growth of a Suffolk Coastal Community* (Woodbridge: Boydell Press, 2016), 214.

⁴⁹ Chittock, “The Medieval Wall Paintings of St. Mary and All Saints, Willingham,” 78.

then the eel-glaives acted to render the saint himself as an Englishman, bowed by the weight of the world and leaning for support on his spear (and, by extension, on the eels he might catch for supper). As Chittock writes, these elements painted a saint “with whom the ordinary men and women of the parish could have identified more readily.”⁵⁰ Unsurprisingly, the four extant examples are not clustered in the Fens but are, like the eel-rents and the evidence of tolls and trade, distributed across the country.

Eels and Familial Identity

The type of connection suggested here between identity and the paraphernalia of eel fishing was not confined to church wall paintings. A number of English families took eel-spears as a part of their heraldry, as well.⁵¹ The Strateley family’s arms are recorded as sable, a chevron between three eel-spears argent (see fig. 18). Thomas Moule, in his nineteenth-century book on fish in English heraldry, writes that the Strateley (or Stratele) family likely drew their name from the town of Streatley, in Berkshire on the Thames – not a town with extant eel-rents, but still situated in the middle of historically active eel fishing grounds.⁵² Other families, from across the island, had similar heraldry. By way of example, the Cutlers of Suffolk featured three eel spears on one of their sigils; the arms of the Worthington family in Lancaster displayed three eel-pricks (a variant of eel spear, sometimes also called a pheon); and the Granell family arms showed an eel wrapped around the shaft of a single pheon.⁵³ Eel-spears appear in other emblems, as well: the Soap-maker’s Guild, incorporated



Fig. 18: Strateley family arms: sable, a chevron between three eel-spears argent. Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195.

⁵⁰ Chittock, 78.

⁵¹ John Guillim, *A Display of Heraldry*, 6th ed. (London, 1724), 317.

⁵² Thomas Moule, *Heraldry of Fish: Notices of the Principal Families Bearing Fish in Their Arms* (London: J. Van Voorst, 1842), 195.

⁵³ Bernard Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales: Comprising a Registry of Armorial Bearings from the Earliest to the Present Time* (London: Harrison & sons, 1864), 255; Henry Gough and James Parker, *A Glossary of Terms Used in Heraldry* (London: J. Parker, 1894), 220; Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195.

in 1638, chose a dolphin naiant between three eel-spears or as their sigil.⁵⁴ Glaives and eels spears are not the only pieces of eel-fishing gear show up on family coats of arms, either. Branches of the Folebarn, Wheeler, and Forton families all employed eel traps, called wheels, or eel-pots, in their heraldry, as did the Willard family from Sussex.⁵⁵ John Williams (d. 1559), the first Baron Williams of Thame and Lord Chancellor to Queen Mary, used an eel-pot in his personal coat of arms (Fig. 19).⁵⁶



Fig. 19: Eel pot from the arms of John, 1st Baron of Thame. Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195.

English heraldry did not merely display expressions of eel-capture; eels themselves appear frequently on crests and coats of arms.⁵⁷ The Ellises of Cornwall displayed a shield with three eels naint in pale sable, and other branches of that family bore similar arms.⁵⁸ Likewise, the Eales family arms showed three eels embowed in pale sable (Fig. 20), with a family crest depicting an eagle on an embowed eel.⁵⁹ Other families with surnames specifically linked to the fish, such as Eel, Eales, or Elwis, and also Grigg (grig being a term both for a small eel and for an eel trap) boasted related sets of arms and crests. But heraldic eels were not limited to those families whose names reflected a historic link to the fish, and families such as Boors, Foy, and Matthily all displayed eels as a marker of their identity as well.⁶⁰ *Anguillae* were not the only kind of eels used in English heraldry, either: conger eels also make common appearances on coats of arms and family crests, though more often these



Fig. 20: The Eales family arms, showing three eels, embowed. Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195.

⁵⁴ Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195. A copy of the Soap-Maker's arms may be seen here: William Carew Hazlitt, *The Livery Companies of the City of London: Their Origin, Character, Development, and Social and Political Importance* (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Company, 1892), 140.

⁵⁵ Gough and Parker, *Terms*, 615.

⁵⁶ Gough and Parker, 615. Gough and Parker note that, in their day, these arms were carried by the Earl of Abingdon.

⁵⁷ Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 194.

⁵⁸ Matthew Carter, *Honor Redivivus [Sic] or An Analysis of Honor and Armory* (London, 1660), 150; Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales*, 322–23; Guillim, *A Display of Heraldry*, 238.

⁵⁹ Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 195; Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales*, 312.

⁶⁰ Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales*, 100, 374; Gough and Parker, *Terms*, 219.

images show the fish’s head rather than its whole body.⁶¹ Another repeated heraldic emblem was an eel in the beak of a bird such as a heron or cormorant, with families including the Chicesters of Devon and the Eastoffs using the sign (see Fig. 21 for an example taken from the personal arms of the early sixteenth-century knight, Sir John Styell).⁶² This image mimics a familiar natural scene in England – so much so that, in his *Parliament of Fowls*, Chaucer introduced the heron as “the eles fo” (the eel’s foe) – and one that still repeats in the twenty-first century (see Fig. 22).⁶³ Though a less intimate connection between personal identity as the fish, emblems like this still speak to the formidable presence of eels in the public and personal imagination.

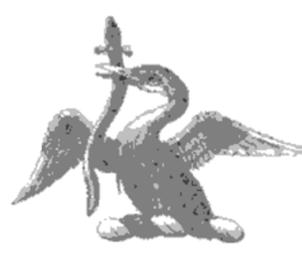


Fig. 21: A demi-stork catching an eel, from the arms of Sir John Styell (c. early 16th century). Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 196.



Fig. 22: A cormorant catching an eel at Lodmoor at Weymouth, in Dorset. Photo credit: Mark Wright, @markwright12002, 2018. Used with permission.

Interestingly, while eels were common adornments in English heraldry, other fish in that same general category were not. Morays are wholly absent, which makes sense given that they do not swim in English waters. More surprising, however, is that fact that lampreys – despite being a valued food and much-traded commodity in their own right, frequently mistaken in written texts with eels – occur “but rarely” in English coats of arms and crests.⁶⁴ Merely being a part of the medieval insular diet was insufficient grounds to be the symbol that represented a family. Eels owned a significant cultural space that lampreys, eel-pouts, sand-eels, and other like fish simply couldn’t match. And the choice of eels as an emblematic proxy – a sign to represent yourself and your house to the world – was a notably English one. Moule points to only a handful of Scottish and Irish examples, and notes that eels

⁶¹ Gough and Parker, *Terms*, 219.

⁶² Burke, *The General Armory of England, Scotland, Ireland, and Wales*, 192, 313; Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 196.

⁶³ Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Parliament of Fowls,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Dean Benson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 390, ln. 346.

⁶⁴ Gough and Parker, *Terms*, 364. Gough and Parker only note two instances of the fish in English heraldry.

featured in a couple coats of arms for important Spanish houses.⁶⁵ James Parker and Henry Gough wrote that, “neither the *anguille* or the *conger* have been observed on French arms;” a point which is seconded by Jean Boisseau in his 1657 work on French heraldry.⁶⁶ Boisseau lists only one example of heraldic *anguillae* across his three books on the subject.⁶⁷

As the families associated with these various heraldic emblems show, eels found their way into surnames throughout this period. Even setting aside associated patronyms like as Fisher, names specifically related to eels like Ellis, Eales, or Griggs were common in England.⁶⁸ And, as with the heraldry, these types of names are far less frequent – and with less geographic spread where they do appear – across the English Channel. Names related to *anguilles*, regardless of spelling, are scarce in France, and mostly occur in the south, along the Mediterranean coast.⁶⁹ In Germany, surnames related to *aal* are somewhat more prevalent, but even so, they are far less common than such names in England, and much less geographically diverse; these family names tend to cluster primarily in the traditional eel fishing sections of the lower Rhine along the border with the Netherlands, and are all but unknown in other parts of the country.⁷⁰ By contrast, English families across the island – from the Fens to Northumberland to Devonshire – took their names and identities from the fish that swam so prominently through their waters and economies.

⁶⁵ Moule, *Heraldry of Fish*, 196–97.

⁶⁶ Gough and Parker, *Terms*, 218.

⁶⁷ Jean Boisseau, *Promptuaire armorial, Où sont représentées les Armes, Noms, Qualitez & Balzons des Prives & principaux Seigneurs du Royaume de France*, vol. 2 (Paris, 1657), 44.

⁶⁸ Richard Coates and Peter McClure, *The Oxford Dictionary of Family Names in Britain and Ireland*, First edition. (Oxford, United Kingdom: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁶⁹ Even today, according to the popular genealogy website *Forebears*, there are something less than 250 people in France with a surname related to eels. See: “Anguille Surname Meaning, Origins & Distribution,” *Forebears*, accessed December 9, 2018, <https://forebears.co.uk/surnames/anguille>.

⁷⁰ “Aal,” in *Digital Dictionary of Surnames in Germany (DFD)* (Digitales Familiennamenwörterbuch Deutschlands), accessed December 5, 2018, http://www.namenforschung.net/en/dfd/dictionary/list/?tx_dfd_names%5Bname%5D=54094&tx_dfd_names%5Baction%5D=show&tx_dfd_names%5Bcontroller%5D=Names&cHash=1bbb5a0c8e6294fdf55e0765cbe8c64a. There is also a corresponding tradition of eels as a part of civic heraldry in cities along the lower Rhine.

Eels in Toponyms and Spatial Identity

The English did not only take eels for their personal or family names; they also used eels for local toponymies. Currently, there are only a small number of English place-names that derive from the country's history with the fish. The most famous, of course, is Ely. As we have seen, the city's name has been tied to eels, in one form or another, since at least Bede. There are other, less well-known examples scattered around the country, such as Eel Pie Island on the lower Thames or Elmore on the Severn, and there are toponyms that retain an echo of eel fishing, such as the islands of Buck Ait and Handbuck Eyot on the Thames in Oxfordshire.⁷¹ The relatively small number of existing modern toponyms is somewhat misleading, however, because historically there were many more. Records of eel-rents often noted specific fishing spaces or marshes named for the fish, such as the fishery of Eale-Set near Smallburgh in Norfolk, Eele Meade in Heckfield, Hampshire, or Eel Croft (Yewcrafte) in Somerset.⁷² But place names – especially local place names – change over time in reflection of changing local histories and needs, and the demise of eel fishing in England has left few clear toponymical traces.

There is, however, a wide catalogue of English place names with uncertain etymologies that may well have a connection to eels. The Old English words for eel (*ael*) is close to the word for running water (*ea*), and gets confused with the Middle English *isle*. We can see the remnants of this confusion in the Northumberland dialect, where the word eel, or eale, means both an island and a piece of low-

⁷¹ Frederick Samuel Thacker, *The Thames Highway: A History of the Inland Navigation*, (London: Fred S. Thacker, 1914), 95–96.

⁷² A.P. Baggs and R.J.E. Bush, “Parishes: Dowlsh Wake,” in *A History of the County of Somerset: Volume 4*, ed. R.W. Dunning (London: Victoria County History, 1978), 151–56, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/som/vol4/pp151-156>; Francis Blomefield, “Tunstede Hundred: Smallburgh,” in *An Essay Towards the Topographical History of the County of Norfolk, Volume 11* (London: W. Miller, 1810), 64–67, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/topographical-hist-norfolk/vol11/pp64-67>; William Page, ed., “Parishes: Heckfield,” in *History of the County of Hampshire: Volume 4* (London: Victoria County History, 1911), 44–51, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/vch/hants/vol4/pp44-51>.

lying ground subject to frequent river flooding.⁷³ This is to say, then, that an eel is a piece of fen-like land where one would expect to find eels in abundance. There are still a handful of examples of these toponyms in Northumberland, such as the Eales (or the Eels) on the Tyne River near Wark, and historically there have been many more. Other parts of England have place name histories with similar levels of ambiguity. Tresillian, in Cornwall, means either “a place of eels” or “in open view,” depending on which etymology you read.⁷⁴ In Essex, the village of Arlesford either finds its name from a man’s name (a ford belonging to Arle), or from the eels in the local creek.⁷⁵ Ellesmere in Shropshire might speak to fish in the local ponds, and in Kent the village of Elham and its local valley may take their names from the eels that run in the nearby Nailbourne River. Perhaps. Or it might be that Elham instead refers to the spot of a heathen temple.⁷⁶ This ambiguity, along with the fact that many names of small places have vanished from the historical record, make it difficult to get any type of sense of the scale of eel toponyms in medieval and early modern England. But we know there were some, and it seems likely that there were many more.

On the one hand, it should be almost unremarkable that England would have a surfeit of eel toponyms. People tend to name places after their important features, and the landscape was crowded with eels providing food, medicine, and currency. But naming practices have importance and weight; how and why we name our spaces matter.⁷⁷ As Paul Carter notes in his analysis of Captain Cook’s

⁷³ John Hodgson, *A History of Northumberland: The Topography and Local Antiquities, Arranged in Parishes*, vol. 1, Part II (Newcastle upon Tyne: E. Walker, 1827), 86–87; Richard Oliver Heslop, *Northumberland Words: A Glossary of Words Used in the County of Northumberland and on The Tyneside* (London: English dialect society, 1892), 261.

⁷⁴ Daniel Lysons and Samuel Lysons, “General History: Gentry,” in *Magna Britannia: Volume 3, Cornwall* (London, 1814), n. 3, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/magna-britannia/vol3/xcviii-cxviii>.

⁷⁵ Caroline Taggart, *The Book of English Place Names: How Our Towns and Villages Got Their Names* (New York: Random House, 2011), 65.

⁷⁶ Edward Hasted, “Parishes: Eleham,” in *The History and Topographical Survey of the County of Kent: Volume 8* (Canterbury: W. Bristow, 1799), 95–110, <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-kent/vol8/pp95-110>; “A Brief History of Elham and The Square,” Elham Valley Website, accessed December 9, 2018, <http://www.elham.co.uk/Elham/IntoHistory.htm>.

⁷⁷ For an introduction to some of the issues around the study of toponyms, see: Jani Vuolteenaho and Lawrence D. Berg, “Towards Critical Toponymics,” in *Critical Toponymics: The Contested Politics of Place Naming* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2017), 1–18.

naming habits in the South Pacific, place-names assign history and value to otherwise “empty” space.⁷⁸ History and meaning accrete in localized spaces, and toponyms tell those stories. Keith Basso writes that place-names are “the most highly charged and richly evocative of all linguistic symbols,” and that they can be used to “summon forth an enormous range of mental and emotional associations.”⁷⁹ The English named themselves after their eels, and they took the fish to represent their houses. By also naming places for their eels they connected personal and regional history, entwining identities of space and self. A countryside full of such toponyms speaks in the language of landmarks to the close interplay between the people and their land.⁸⁰

It was not only local spaces where the English eel culture spilled over into spatial identity, either. As we saw earlier, Bede associated eels with England very early on, and he provided a template for future medieval historians. The twelfth-century writer Henry of Huntingdon, for example, copied Bede’s form verbatim, and began his history of England by noting that the land was replete with eels.⁸¹ Ranulph Higden, in his popular fourteenth-century *Polychronicon*, did the same.⁸² Later regional geographies followed suit; the mention of eels became a standard part of describing English geographies. And while this trope certainly reflected a physical reality, it also indicates a connection between the fish and native ideas about spatial identity.

There is a telling example of this connection in Thomas Bradwardine’s fourteenth-century book *On Acquiring a Trained Memory (De Memoria Artificiali)*, in which eels act as a metaphorical stand-in for all of England. Bradwardine, an English cleric who was King Edward III’s confessor and, briefly,

⁷⁸ Paul Carter, *The Road to Botany Bay: An Exploration of Landscape and History* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1988), 3–33.

⁷⁹ Keith H. Basso, *Wisdom Sits in Places: Landscape and Language Among the Western Apache* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1996), 76.

⁸⁰ Robert Macfarlane lovingly calls these place-stories “topograms.” See: Robert Macfarlane, *Landmarks* (London: Penguin Books, 2016), 6.

⁸¹ Henry of Huntingdon, *Historia Anglorum: The History of the English People*, ed. and trans. Diana Greenway, Oxford Medieval Texts (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 10.

⁸² Ranulph Higden, *Polychronicon Ranulphi Higden, Monachi Cestrensis; Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Churchill Babington, vol. 2, Rolls Series (London: Longmans, Green and Co., 1869), 12.

the Archbishop of Canterbury, wrote a short handbook on the arts of memory in which he details a number of mnemonic techniques. Towards the end of his work, having already shown how to remember individual words and phrases, he walks his reader through a lesson on how to remember whole sentences. Using as an exemplar a Latin sentence about the king of England conquering the Scottish town of Berwick, Bradwardine instructs his readers to replace individual words with familiar, easily associable images that they will be able to call readily to mind. After setting the scene, he tells them to:

bring together a king, resplendent in a crown, and the other tokens of royal majesty, or if you should know well any king, or someone called of surnamed King, or one who in some game was a king, place him there, and let him hold in his right hand an eel [*anguilla*] wriggling about greatly, which will give you ‘England’ [*Anglia*]. And in his left hand he might hold a bear by the tail or foot, which in English would signify the two first syllables of the word ‘Berwicum.’ [Berwick].”⁸³

Three main points stand out in this section. Firstly – and perhaps least importantly – Bradwardine gives us a picture of the king that matches the image of Harold in the border of the Bayeux Tapestry: an English monarch grasping a writhing eel. But where Harold was holding the fish by the tail, Bradwardine’s imagined monarch, who is meant to represent the commanding Edward III, seems to have a firm grasp. Likely his reader would have imagined a king holding an eel by the head (which contrasts nicely with his grip on the bear). Secondly, it is noteworthy that Bradwardine chose *anguilla* here for his mnemonic device, rather than *angel*, which was a much more famous pun. In his *vita* of Gregory the Great, Bede tells a story about Gregory seeing a group of slave boys from Britain in the market and declaring them so fair that they should be called *Angeli* (angels) rather than *Anguli* (Angles).⁸⁴ Bradwardine certainly had this classic joke at his disposal, but he chose to ignore it in favor of eels.

⁸³ Thomas Bradwardine, “On Acquiring a Trained Memory,” in *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, ed. and trans. Mary Carruthers, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 368.

⁸⁴ Bede, *Historiam Ecclesiasticam Gentis Anglorum: Historiam Abbatum, Epistolam Ad Egbertum Una Cum Historia Abbatu Auctore Anonymo*, ed. Charles Plummer (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1896), 390.

Lastly, it is telling that the text only offers one mnemonic substitute for England. For most other words, Bradwardine permits his reader the freedom to decide on the imagined device that best serves their memory. Consider the options for remembering the word “king”: you could simply image a fictitious monarch, or picture a real king if (like the author) you happen to know one, but if you know someone *named* King, or someone who once pretended to be a king, then that would work as well. Bradwardine prods his reader towards a range of options here, and in most other places in his book, because the images that jog the memory of one person may not suffice for another. To be effective the substitute has to be specific, and tailored by its user. But he does not permit this type of freedom when it comes to England. Bradwardine only gives a single possible mnemonic for his country: when you want to think of England, he tells us, you must think of eels.

In discussing this section of the text, historian of medieval memory practices Mary Carruthers writes that this mnemonic works because of the similarity between the two words. She suggests that Bradwardine likely relied on a regional dialect here in order to change the pronunciation of *anguilla* to something more like *angilla*, thereby creating a more exact rhyme with *Anglia*.⁸⁵ Carruthers is not wrong that the Latin words for eel and England need to be forced into rhyming, but she errs in assuming that the mnemonic *only* succeeds to the degree that the words’ relative homophony creates a pun; Carruthers has not considered the eel culture that Bradwardine lived in. The connections between *Anglia* and *anguilla* went deeper than punning, and were centuries in the making. Bradwardine makes the assumption in this passage that eels were so culturally, commercially, and dietarily important to his English readership – a people whom Ælthelwold and Wulfstan described as eels, who saw themselves in the eel-spearing St. Christopher on the wall of their parish church, and who took eels for their family names and emblems – that they would all readily imagine themselves and their country as the

⁸⁵ Mary Carruthers, *The Book of Memory: A Study of Memory in Medieval Culture*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 457, n. 2.

fish. The text offers only one possible mnemonic for England not because there is only one available, but because Bradwardine fully expected it to be the only prompt his readers needed. For the writer and his audience, England in the time of Edward III was a wriggling eel, held fast by a strong and powerful king.

Bradwardine died in 1349, a victim of the Black Death, and in many ways his work stands as a high-water mark for role of eels in the English construction of identity. As pervious chapters have shown, the period around his death witnessed shifts in the English relationship with eels, with declines in rent numbers, and the beginnings of a consistent import economy. Changes in demographics, land use, and habits of consumption brought changes in people's interaction with, and consequently their perceived relationship to, the fish. As we have seen, the English continued to trap, poach, trade, and eat the fish well beyond the fourteenth century. And, as we shall see in the next chapter, they continued to use eels in their language and literature. But fewer English were catching fewer eels, and some of the place-names began to lose meaning. Bradwardine might be the last instance of someone's tying eels to a national sense of identity. Following his death, English eel culture began to fracture, settling slowly in London and the Fens. Eels came to influence identity on increasingly local and personal scales. By the end of the seventeenth century, an Englishman taking Bradwardine's advice and calling to mind an eel was more likely to think of the Netherlands than of England. And by the start of the twenty-first century, eels would only form a small part of the historical identity of people in places like Ely, with their nine-foot eel sculpture and their yearly festival. But Bradwardine, Wulfstan, and others discussed in this chapter make clear that the modern remnants of eel identity in places like the Fens are isolates from a far more pervasive phenomenon – holdovers from a time when to think of the English and England was to think of eels.

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