Avalon
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AVALON

THE meaning and origin of the name Avalon have long been the subject of speculation and controversy among Arthurian scholars, and yet, strangely enough, little use seems to have been made of the standard reference works dealing with the languages involved in the discussion. The following study is merely an attempt to apply to this problem the principles that have already been established by Celtic and Romance philologists.

Holder lists the hypothetical Old Celtic form *ab-állo-s*, which he infers from such actual forms as OC *aball*, W. *afal*, Bret. and Corn. *aval*, and OI *aball*.[1] This form, so far as I have been able to discover, has not been questioned by subsequent investigators. In the same entry he cites the actual Gaulish form *Avallo* with its equivalent *poma* as set forth in Endlicher's *Glossary*, a much-discussed and much-forgotten word-list assigned by some to the fifth century.[2] The significance of this equation for the history of the word Avalon is set forth with telling effect by Professor Cons in an article appearing in this number of *Modern Philology*. Holder also cites the word *Aballo(n)*, an *n*-stem designated as a place-name, and meaning 'the possession of Aballus.' The name Aballus, however, is not found, and Vendryes seems definitely to have established *Aballā/Avallō* as a place-name independently derived from a common noun and meaning 'ville des pommes.'[3] This statement is accepted without question by Pederson, who gives the meaning of *Aballo* as 'Apfelstadt.'[4]

When Latinized, it was inflected like Latin *n*-stems (e.g., *sermo*), and so inflected it appears in the *Itinerarium Antonini*,[5] in the sixth-century *Vita S. Germani* (CASTELLO AVELLONE),[6] in the seventh-

[1] *Alt-celtischer Sprachschatz, s.v.*

[2] *Zeitschr. f. vergl. Sprachf.*, XXXII (1893), 230 ff. See also the discussion by Stokes in *Trans. Phil. Soc.* (1868–69), pp. 251–57; *Beiträge zur vergl. Sprachf.*, VI (1870), 227–31; *Beiträge zur Kunde der indogerm. Sprache*, XI (1886), 142–43.

[3] *Mém. de la Soc. de Ling. de Paris*, XIII (1905–6), 387. The *-o(n)* suffix constitutes, in his judgment, a secondary ending used to form a place-name from a common noun.

[4] *Vergleichende Grammatik der keltischen Sprachen* (Göttingen, 1913), II, 108. He cites as a parallel *Cularo*, 'ville des concombres.'

[5] *Itineraria Romana*, ed. Konrad Miller (Stuttgart, 1916), p. lxiii. Here it appears as *Aballone*. On the interchange of *Aballone* and *Avallone* see Holder, *op. cit.*, *s.v. ab-állo-s.*

[6] *Mon. Germ. Hist. Auct. Ant.*, IV², 17; see also *Avallone castro*, p. 12.

century *Vita S. Columbani* (AVALLONEM CASTRUM),[1] in Frodoard's
Chronicon,[2] and in many subsequent documents. The place referred to
is, of course, the well-known modern town of Avallon (dept. Yonne).
Modern Havelu (dept. Eure-et-Loire, arr. Dreux, cant. Anet) appears
in Venantius Fortunatus' *Vita S. Leobini* as AVALLO VICUS and
AVALLOCIUM.[3] Longnon sees in Valeuil (Dordogne) and in Valuejols
(Cantal) the Gaulish noun *aballo* plus the Celtic-Latin suffix -*oialum*,
which, having become AVALOIALUM or AVALOGILUM, lost the initial *a*
through having been mistaken for a sort of locative. These names, he
thinks, may be considered equivalent to 'pommeraie.'[4] The Celtic
word *Avallo*, therefore, was equivalent to *locus pomorum*, or *vicus
pomorum*, and with this meaning was fairly prevalent in Celtic Gaulish
place-names.

The name as it appears in Geoffrey's *Historia regum Britanniae*,[5]
INSULA AVALLONIS, is linguistically the same thing. The nearest Latin
equivalent would be *insula Pomifera* or *insula Pomorum. Avallonis* is
not here to be considered a genitive in the same sense as *Pomorum;* it is
a place-name *based on* the word for 'apple' and therefore similar in
usage to the genitive in the English expression 'the State of Maine.'

What *insula Avallonis* means in modern language is more difficult
to determine than may at first appear. The vernacular words for
'apple,' Ir. *abhall*, W. *afall*, as well as OE *œppel*, at one time meant
either fruit in general or the fruit of the apple-tree in particular. The
equation AVALLO: POMA as found in Endlicher's *Glossary*,[6] more-
over, would indicate that even the Latin *pomum*, in Western Europe
at least, was beginning to partake somewhat of the same uncertainty
of meaning as the vernacular. That is to say, it might occasionally be
used as the equivalent of *malum*. Further indication of the use of
pomum in the sense of *malum* appears in the work of the fifth-century
Gaulish-Latin writer Marcellus Empiricus. The results of a specific
study of this problem carried on by E. Geyer show that although the
word *malum* in Italy was preserved as *melo* and *mela*, in France it was

[1] *MGH, SS. rer. Mer.*, IV, 92 (cap. 20); see also various occurrences in *Gallia Christiana*,
Vol. XII, Index.

[2] Bouquet, *Receuil*, VIII, 187*b*.

[3] *MGH, Auct. Ant.*, IV, 79.

[4] *Les Noms de lieu de la France* (Paris, 1920), art. 151; see also H. Gröhler, *Französ.
Ortsnamen*, p. 146.

[5] Ed. Griscom, pp. 439, 501.   [6] See above, p. 395.

displaced by *pomum*. Geyer cites in support of his conclusions numer-
ous instances in which *malum* in Gaulish Latin is glossed *pomum*.[1] It is
possible, of course, that later the influence of classical Latin revived
the distinction temporarily. The final outcome, however, leads us to
believe that if the influence worked in this direction it did so in vain,
for *pomum* (through **poma*) inevitably became *pomme*. The same
tendency toward specializing of meaning operated in Irish and in
English. By the twelfth century there are comparatively few cases of
the use of English 'apple' in any but the special sense, except in com-
pounds, although there are occasional instances of its use in the mean-
ing of 'fruit' as late as the seventeenth century.

It is more reasonable to conjecture, therefore, that Geoffrey meant
'isle of apples' than that he meant 'isle of fruits.' Unfortunately we
cannot tell with absolute certainty. We can be fairly certain, however,
that, whatever *insula Avallonis* means in modern language, it meant
to Geoffrey precisely the same as *insula pomorum*.

What sort of place is Geoffrey's *insula Avallonis?* In the *Historia*
it is the place to which Arthur was taken after the battle of Camlann,
and it is the place where Excalibur was forged. This should be suffi-
cient to establish its character; but if we need anything more we find
it in Geoffrey's *Vita Merlini*, where Arthur's place of retirement is
called not only *insula Pomorum* but *insula Fortunata*. It is described
as a place of great fruitfulness and beauty, inhabited by Morgan and
her eight sisters, who are to tend Arthur's wounds and restore him to
health. The guide to this isle is Barinthus, the same who guided St.
Brendan to the Blessed Isle. We may conclude, therefore, that not
only was the *insula Avallonis* the same as the *insula Pomorum*, but
that it was regarded as a sort of earthly paradise. The romance writ-
ers, of course, looked upon it in the same way. There are likewise in
the *chansons de geste*[2] various references to Avalon as a place of great
wealth: We have, therefore, two Avalons. One is a definitely located
town in Burgundy, which, as far as we know, was never regarded as

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[1] "Spuren gallischen Lateins bei Marcellus Empiricus." *Arch. f. lat. Lexicographie,*
VIII (1893), 474.

[2] See the references assembled by Langlois in his *Table des Noms propres,* Paris, 1924.
One of these (that in the *Couronement de Louis*) has been fully discussed by F. M. Warren,
Modern Language Notes, XIV (1899), 94–95.

the abode of supernatural beings or traditional heroes; the other was an earthly paradise. There is nothing particularly curious about this fact. The Valley of the Moon, for example, in one sense is a setting for fairy-tales, and in another sense it is a well-known district in California. In the case of Avalon the very nature of the name, whether it meant 'apples' or 'fruit,' was sufficient to connect it with legends of fairy lands endowed with supernatural abundance.

To these two Avalons we must now add a third. In the *Perlesvaus*, the Isle of Avalon contains a "holy house of religion" and a chapel in which are buried not only Arthur but Guenevere as well. One of the most significant documents in the formation of this new Avalon is William of Malmesbury's advertising tract, *De antiquitate Glastoniensis ecclesiae* (1129–35). A passage in this work describes the secular beginnings of Glastonbury, enumerates the various names by which it was called, and explains that it was designated *insula Avalloniae* from British *aval* because of the abundance of apples found there by Glasteing, the secular founder.[1] The word 'apple' is here used advisedly, for the writer speaks of the fruit as *mala mali*, 'the apples of the apple-tree.' There is no essential difference in meaning between William's *insula Avalloniae* and Geoffrey's *insula Avallonis*. Geoffrey is using the conventional Latinized form of Celtic *Avallo* (cf. *castro Avallone*, etc.), while William is using a re-Latinized form of the French *Avallon* (which is itself probably derived from inflected forms of *Avallo*).

In the last part of this passage there is a statement that has aroused some perplexing questions. The writer offers an alternative explanation of the name *insula Avalloniae*. He says it was so named because of a certain Avalloc who lived there with his daughters, on account of the remoteness of the place. As to the origin of this curious contribution to the development of Avalon tradition we may find a hint in the Welsh *Bruts*. Where Geoffrey reads *insula Avallonis* they read *ynys Afallach*, or *Avallach*. The meaning of *afallach*, as is well known, is 'apple-orchard.' Pederson in his comment on the word[2] speaks of the *x*-suffix in this word as analogous to that in Latin *lumbago, plantago*.

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[1] Although the *De antiquitate* is known to contain interpolations of various ages, there seems to be no compelling reason for concluding that this passage is one of them. See my discussion of Newell's argument for interpolation in *Speculum*, II (1927), 280–81.

[2] *Vergl., Gram.*, II, 25.

The name *ynys Afallach*, therefore, means, like *insula Avallonis*, 'isle of apples.' The author of the *De antiquitate* apparently knew this name. He also knew something of the tradition later related by Geoffrey in the *Vita Merlini* (possibly not in quite the same form) to the effect that the *insula pomorum* was inhabited by certain sisters devoted to magical pursuits. He knew, moreover, the Welsh genealogies, as Baist pointed out a number of years ago, and he used these genealogies in this very passage as the source for his list of Glasteing's brothers.[1] The name *Aballach* occurs in two of these genealogies, and he could hardly have helped seeing it. It seems fairly reasonable to conjecture, therefore, that the name of the man and the name of the island flowed together in his mind, so that he constituted Aballac a sort of Celtic Atlas, dwelling in seclusion with his daughters on the isle of apples. In brief, he says that *ynys Afallach* may mean Afallach's Isle; but he is mistaken.

When the supposed remains of Arthur and Guenevere were exhumed at Glastonbury, in 1191, a cross was found in the grave bearing the famous inscription, "Hic jacet sepultus inclitus rex Arthurus in *insula Avallonia*, etc." Giraldus Cambrensis, writing his report of this event some thirty years later,[2] quotes the inscription and explains the name. In his explanation he follows the *De antiquitate* in saying that the name was derived from *aval*, in which he was almost correct. He also follows the *De antiquitate* in offering the alternative explanation that the place was named for a certain Avallo, in which he seems quite certainly wrong. Guillaume de Rennes, in his metrical redaction of the *Historia regum Britanniae*, is merely perpetuating this mistake when he says that Arthur, after the battle of Camlann, was taken to the court of King Avallo.

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[1] *Zeitschr. f. Rom. Phil.*, XIX (1895), 326–47.
[2] "De principis instructione," *Opera*, "Rolls Series," VIII, 126 ff.