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**Planting the Seeds of Knowledge:  
An Inventory of Old English Plant Names**



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## English and Beyond

herausgegeben von Hans Sauer, Gaby Waxenberger  
und Monika Kirner-Ludwig

Band 8

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## Introduction

**Old English plant names:** Old English plant names are attested in a variety of sources, e.g., in medico-botanical texts, in glossaries, in charms, in charters and place names (for details see, e.g., Bi = Bierbaumer 1975-1979; Cameron 1973: B.21; K = Krischke 2013, 71-88). Old English had a fairly large number of plant names; we have listed about a thousand (more precisely 1022) altogether. Hoops 1889, 71 says that he has collected and listed 500 Old English plant names. Thus the number of known Old English plant names has doubled since Hoops. The number of more than thousand Old Plant names is, however, deceptive because it is not really possible to give a precise number. This has several reasons, for example: Old English had no fixed spelling and it is sometimes difficult to decide whether certain forms should be regarded as variants of the same name or as different names, e.g., we give *crāwan-lēac* and *crāwe-lēac* under one entry, whereas Krischke assigns them to two different entries. With Latin plant names (which in their turn often go back to Greek) in Old English contexts it is occasionally difficult to say whether these should still be regarded as Latin names or as borrowings into Old English, e.g., the loan word *celendre* shows i-mutation and therefore clearly is an Old English word, but we have also listed the form *coliandre* which is much closer to the Latin original *coliandrum*. With some words it is not certain whether they really refer to plants, e.g., *cristalle*, but we have included many of those because they are mentioned in the relevant literature. It is also unclear how far parts of plants and products of plants should be listed, especially since names of trees and of berries often refer to the tree or plant producing them as well as to the fruits which they produce. We have tried to be too inclusive rather than too exclusive, and we list at least the more important parts of plants and products of plants, also with a view to ensure comparability with previous publications.

**Aim:** With our inventory we intend to provide a comprehensive and concise list of the Old English plant names, because, to our knowledge, such a list does not yet exist in printed form. Bierbaumer comprises three volumes and provides detailed discussions, whereas Krischke in her analyses concentrates on the compound plant names. We indicate especially the spellings, the origins (etymologies), and the meanings of the Old English plant names; furthermore the Latin words which they translate (i.e. the pre-Linnéan Latin words) and the compounds and derivations formed with the Old English plant names which are not plant-names themselves. For many plant names these aspects are very complex and accordingly there has been a lot of literature on them, particularly in more recent years. We do not, however, aim at providing a detailed discussion of each plant name. For further information the relevant literature should be consulted, e.g., Bi = Bierbaumer 1975-1979, the *DOEPN*, K = Krischke 2013; see also the bibliography by Bierbaumer 2011.

**Sources:** For compiling this inventory we have used the collections by Bi = Bierbaumer (1975-1979), by K = Krischke (2013), and the dictionary by CIH = Clark Hall. We have checked our entries against the DOE, the DOE CORPUS, the DOEPN, the ThOE and where we thought it necessary, also against other dictionaries, especially BT and BTS (Bosworth-Toller and its supplements).

**Scope:** Plant names can be regarded as a word field. Like many word fields, the field of plant names has a centre and margins. At the centre there are of course the plant names themselves; but even here a distinction can be made between general plant names, such as *trēow* ‘tree’ or *wyrt* ‘wort, plant’, more specific plant names, such as *mapel-trēow* ‘maple-tree’ or *bisceop-wyrt* ‘marshmallow’ literally ‘bishop-wort’ and still more specific plant names, e.g., *rūwe wegbrāde* ‘hairy waybread’. Farther from the centre are for example names for parts and fruits (products) of plants, e.g., *lēaf* ‘leaf’ or *æppel* ‘apple’ (also in the meaning ‘little round fruit’) or names for a collectivity of plants, such as *wudu* ‘wood, forest’ or *mæd*, *mædwe* ‘mead, meadow’. We have tried to include all plant names in the narrower sense and we have also included some words belonging to the more marginal categories in our inventory (1.). It is, however, difficult to define the margins clearly and to be consistent in what should be included and what should be excluded. For example there are many compounds and derivations which contain a plant name but are not plant names themselves, e.g., *cawel-wyrm* ‘caterpillar’, literally ‘cole-worm’ or *wudu-mann* ‘wood-man’. We do not give those as separate head words but we indicate them in the right hand column of the inventory and we have also collected them in our Additional Lists (see 2.).

**Compounds and Syntactic Groups:** Like, e.g., Krischke 2013, we list as headwords not only plant names that are compounds, but also syntactic groups that are plant names (especially groups of ‘noun in the genitive plus noun’ and of ‘adjective plus noun’), and we do not discuss the (sometimes very difficult) distinction between compounds and combinations (syntactic groups). Dictionaries often list only the compounds as separate headwords but not the syntactic groups. The latter are often only mentioned under the first or second element, but we list them as separate entries, if they certainly or possibly constitute plant names and refer to specific plants.

### Arrangement of the Inventory:

The inventory has four columns.

(1) In the first (left hand) column the lemmata (head words) are given in alphabetical order; <æ> has been inserted as <ae> (and not as a separate letter), and we have also added length-marks (at least for the headword, although, of course, there are no length-marks in the manuscripts). Since there was no fixed spelling in Old English, many plant names are attested in a variety of spellings. We have tried to give the most common spellings as head words but we also list other attested forms. Divergent spellings which may not be easy to locate are often also listed separately with a cross reference to the main entry. Beneath the head word cross references are given. From simple names we refer to compounds and combinations formed with them, from compounds, combinations, and derivations we refer to their elements. We also refer to synonymous names (but without claim to completeness). Some plant names are attested frequently, whereas others occur rarely or just once (hapax legomena). We indicate if a plant name is rare (occurring three times or less) or even a hapax legomenon (hap.). We also give a reference to the most recent discussions, especially to K = Krischke (2013); if a name is not dealt with by Krischke, we refer to Bi = Bierbaumer (1975-1979) or to the relevant dictionaries and thesauri (CIH, BT, BTS, ThOE, AEW); for names going back to Latin or Greek we also refer to Wo = Wollmann and to Feu = Feulner.

(2) In the second column we provide etymological and morphological information. Especially with compounds and complex plant names we give their literal meaning. Then we indicate the origin, i.e. whether it is a native word or a loan word and when it was formed or borrowed into English (Old English, West Germanic, Germanic, Indo-European). Where applicable we also indicate loan formations and hybrid formations. The origin of the names is not always easy to ascertain, and the origin of a number of plant names is not clear. With names marked as IE = Indo-European, Gmc. = Germanic, or WGmc. = West-Germanic it is sometimes difficult to decide whether they were formed (or borrowed) during those stages and then lived on in the various daughter languages such as English or German, or whether they were formed (or borrowed) independently in these stages – see Carr 1939, whose criteria for assigning certain compounds to Germanic but labeling others as parallel but independent formations in the various daughter languages are not always clear. The etymological dictionaries, e.g., the AEW, the EWDS, and the ODEE, not infrequently differ in the information they give. Some plant names can be traced back to Germanic or Indo-European roots which were, however, not yet plant names themselves, e.g., *gorst* ‘juniper’ can be connected to an IE root *\*ghrz-do* ‘prickly’. Some names which ultimately go back to Greek (mostly via Latin) were borrowed into Greek from another language; this information has often been taken from Genaust 1983.

(3) In the third column we give the identification, i.e. the corresponding modern plant names: first the Modern English (ModE) equivalent; second the botanical classification according to Linné (L.) and his successors; third the German (G.) equivalent. Here we follow largely the identifications by Bierbaumer and Krischke. But for many plant names several possible identifications exist; usually we have listed those. If the Modern English plant name is the continuation of the Old English plant name or is closely related to it, we print it in capitals (see also ch. 2.1, where OE plant names surviving in ModE are listed). This has also to be regarded with caution. Some Modern English plant names are the direct continuations of the corresponding Old English plant names, e.g., Modern English *apple* continues Old English *æppel*, but others were re-borrowed (or re-inforced) later from French or Latin, for example OE *safran*, ME & ModE *saffron*. Many Old English plant names later died out and were replaced by different names.

For a number of reasons the identification of the plants is often difficult. Botanical knowledge was not as advanced as it is today and similar plants were often not distinguished. Linné invented the modern classification in the 18th century which tries to be unequivocal and to assign just one name (usually in two parts) to each plant. But before that, all plant names (whether Latin or vernacular) were based on what could be called pre-scientific folk classifications and there was a lot of polysemy and synonymy, i.e. many plant names could refer to more than one plant (polysemy); conversely many plants could be referred to by more than one name (synonymy). This state of affairs is reflected in the identification section. We mark doubtful identifications with (?). Furthermore, with loan words and loan-formations it is sometimes debatable whether they actually refer to a plant that existed or was known in Anglo-Saxon England ('real' plant names, according to Bierbaumer) or whether they were just attempts to invent an Old English equivalent for a Latin name, e.g., a name attested in the Bible or in the Latin medico-botanical texts and glossaries which ultimately reflect the Mediterranean flora ('unreal' plant names, according to Bierbaumer). With some plant names it is unclear to which plant they refer or whether they refer to a plant at all, e.g. *bulentse*. But we have listed them if they occur in the relevant literature, especially Bierbaumer (1975-1979), again in order to ensure comparability with previous studies.

(4) In the fourth column (right hand column) we give two kinds of information. First we indicate the Latin plant name if the Old English name renders a Latin name (in glossaries and texts translated from Latin); second we list OE compounds and derivations which contain a plant name but are not plant names themselves; these are also listed in the Additional Lists (see chapter 2.). The Latin names often exist in a variety of spellings; obviously the scribes were not familiar with some of the Latin and Greek names and had difficulties in reproducing them. We have tried to assign variant spellings (in brackets) to a standardized spelling. Often this is unproblematic but in some cases it is difficult. Frequently the gender vacillates, i.e. many Latin plant names occur in two or even all three genders (masc., fem., neut.); moreover, <-a> was the ending of the



nom. sg. fem., but also the ending of the nom.pl. neutr.; <b> and <v> were apparently often exchangeable, and a number of names occur with and without initial <h>, e.g., *helleborum* – *elleborum*.

**Additional Lists:** The Additional Lists (chapter 2.) pull together systematically certain kinds of information given in the Inventory of the Old English Plant Names (especially in the right hand column), but they also include some words which rather belong to the margin of the word field of plant names and which we have not listed in the inventory.

**Indices:** Whereas the main inventory is arranged according to the Old English plant names, the indices (chapter 3) list the names according to the Linnéan system, according to the Modern English plant names, and according to the Modern German plant names, always with reference to the Old English plant names as listed in the main inventory.

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