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“GOOD FRIEND” AND THE GOODWIN SANDS, KENT

The Goodwin Sands are a hazard to shipping in the English Channel. Their name means “good friend” and is often taken as euphemistic or propitiatory. Alternatively, in a legend with Celtic parallels, the sands have been regarded as an island which belonged to Earl Godwine (d. 1053), but was drowned by natural disaster. Science shows, however, that the Goodwins have never been land within historic times. Their name can thus have nothing to do with Godwine of Wessex. Nor is it an attempt to flatter a feared entity. The author argues that the name should be explained instead by reference to the Downs, an anchorage between the sands and the Kent coast. Dangerous to mariners, the Goodwins are nevertheless a natural breakwater; by creating the calm water of the Downs, they really were a “good friend” to seafarers. The interpretation has an equivalent with the Manacles, “stones of refuge,” off the Cornish coast. The Goodwins and Manacles have wrecked many ships, but saved far more, the first as a barrier against storms in the Channel, the second as one against storms in the Atlantic. Their names will hence display the same naming pattern.

Key words: Goodwin Sands, legends of drowned lands, shipwrecks, the Manacle Rocks of Cornwall.

1. Introduction

The Goodwin Sands, off the coast of Kent in south-east England, will be known in Russia and even on the Russian stage, for they are mentioned by Shakespeare. Act III of *The Merchant of Venice* begins with news on a shipwreck. Antonio has lost “a ship of rich lading” on “the narrow seas” at the Goodwins, described as “a very dangerous flat and fatal, where the carcasses of many a tall ship lie buried.” The Goodwins claimed

victims into the twentieth century, one of the last being *Northeastern Victory*, lost in 1946. At low tide in fine weather, onlookers at Deal (this writer’s home town) could for years thereafter see the ship’s masts and spars in the far distance, protruding from the water. Even though the Goodwins might seem no friend to mariners but an enemy, place-name scholars agree that “good friend” is what their name means. The translation is correct; the reasons given for it have yet been defective, as will be shown.

2. A critical look at the sources

We start with Ekwall. Quoting *the Goodwyn* as an attestation of 1513, he cited traditions of the Goodwins as “an island belonging to Earl Godwine that was washed away by the sea in 1097. But Goodwin may be a name of a dangerous shoal meaning literally ‘good friend’ and given for the same reason as the wolf is called *gullfot* (literally ‘goldenfooted’) in some parts of Sweden” [Ekwall, 1936, 191]. Because of the author’s prestige and that of Oxford University, which published his book, the two onomastic myths here have been long a-dying.

Suspicion on the Godwine reference as pseudo-historical might have been aroused by the silence of ancient and medieval sources, mentioning no such island. The tradition was finally discredited in the 1950s, when R. L. Cloet proved that the Goodwin Sands were formed by the action of waves and currents, so that their upper parts are perpetually shifting. There has been no land there since the English Channel was formed in post-glacial times, thousands of years before the earliest historical record [Cloet, 1954, 203–215]. Despite that, the fiction of Earl Godwine’s island has been repeated just the same.

It figures (if with hedging) in an essay “The Lost Island of Lomea” by the poet and critic Geoffrey Grigson (1905–1985). He noted how a “late tradition” represents the sands as Lomea, an island belonging to Godwine, Earl of Wessex. The element *Lom* is obscure, but *ea* represents Old English *eg* ‘island’ (as with *sceap eg* ‘sheep island’ or Sheppey in north Kent). Lost to the sea in the 1090s, Lomea was supposedly renamed after its former owner. Yet Grigson thought the story improbable (despite Ekwall’s support for it), like those of drowned Lyonesse off Cornwall or Cantref Gwaelod off West Wales (all of them “cousins to tales of Atlantis”). He preferred Ekwall’s other suggestion of *Goodwin* “good friend” as “a placatory, complimentary name” (like that of the malicious household goblin “Robin *Goodfellow*”), and further noted how Britain was an island by 6000 BCE, leaving time during which “Lomea” might have “passed inevitably beneath the tide” in the Neolithic Age or later [Grigson, 1960, 55–56, 59].

The Goodwins are defined crisply elsewhere, if without Grigson’s references to science. They lie in “the English Channel, about seven miles east of Deal; east of the Gulf Stream and of the anchorage known as ‘The Downs’. Some thirty-six square miles of sands, and one of the most dangerous areas for shipping on the coasts of Britain, demarcated by the North, South, and East Goodwin light-vessels and by nine

buoys. The upper layer shifts constantly when covered with water. Parts dry out at low tide, exposing up to seven feet of sand, some firm enough to land upon.” After allusion to Earl Godwine and Lomea comes a warning of risks on the east side, with steep banks and tidal surges at high water, plus a final warning that the Goodwins “should on no account be visited without taking local advice” [Newby & Petry, 1968, 39].

Sense and no-sense are mingled in statements that “the Goodwin Sands were land in historic times” (or, after a nod to Earl Godwine, “seem to be a remnant of land rather than an accumulation of sand”) and, for all their tragic history, “serve as a natural breakwater for the channel between them and the coast. This stretch of water is the *Downs*” [Hughes, 1969, 9, 78]. In an article underlining Deal’s maritime past is the remark that offshore are “the Downs, the safe anchorage within the Goodwin Sands, the most treacherous shallows in the English Channel. That governed the siting of Henry VIII’s three castles, on the shore at Sandown, Deal, and Walmer” [Newman, 1969, 268]. The coast at Deal is low-lying. Hence the concern of Henry by 1539 that Continental enemies might anchor a fleet in the Downs and land an invading army (much as Julius Caesar did at the same spot in 55 BCE).

Ghosts of Earl Godwine and Ekwall return in the explanation of *Goodwin Sands* as “possibly ‘sandbank commemorating Earl Godwine’” or else “a placatory euphemism ‘good friend’” [Field, 1980, 78]. They appear again in the assertion that “good friend” is quite possibly “devised in a medieval attempt to ‘placate’ any evil spirit that lived in the waters here” or is otherwise an allusion to “Earl Godwine of Kent, who held the island here that was subsequently drowned by the sea” in 1097 [Room, 1988, 148]. Field and Room together give the form *Godewynesonde* of 1317.

How hard it is to destroy facile and pleasing untruths. Godwine was Earl of Kent (and Earl of Wessex), but did not possess the Goodwins, which were not land for him to own. A little thought disposes of him and sea-devils alike. The Goodwin Sands were a “good friend” because they formed “a natural breakwater for the channel between them and the coast” or the Downs. Mariners sought that “safe anchorage within the Goodwin Sands” from ancient times and still do. In stormy weather, five or six cargo ships may ride at anchor off Deal, sheltering in the Downs from heavy seas. (This writer has seen them.) So we may forget Earl Godwine’s lost lands and Ekwall’s superstitious seamen. The Goodwins were a “good friend” to those at sea because of the Downs, the calm waters created by a prodigious sea-embankment.

3. Supporting evidence of the Manacle Rocks, Cornwall

If this is still denied, there is a test. Off Cornwall’s south coast are the ill-famed Manacle Rocks, east of the Lizard. “The Manacle Rocks, which stretch off due east from St Keverne for about a mile, make a formidable breakwater, and together with Black Head and the Lizard effectively restrain the North Atlantic seas” [Smyth, 1934, 43]. But they also brought ships to their doom. By the village of Coverack are “the dreaded

Manacles, three miles north-east. These rocks accounted in 1809 for two troopships from the Peninsular War with the loss of 200 men; in 1855 for an immigrant ship bound for Canada (196 drowned); and in 1898 for the steam ship *Mohegan* (106 lost); and have caused many lesser wrecks” [Bowater, 1970, 331]. The Manacles preserved life and took it away.

Their name has long been misunderstood as “church rock(s)” [Field, 1980, 112]. Dr Padel records it as *Mannahackles alias Manacles* in 1619 and *Meanacles* in 1808, showing stress on the penult. He imagines that it is either English *manacles* ‘fetters, handcuffs’ or else Cornish ‘church stone(s),’ *men* (or plural *meyn*) ‘stone’ + *eglos* ‘church’ [Padel, 1988, 114]. Both explanations recur in the Cambridge dictionary [Watts, 2004, 395]. Yet neither can be right, for these reasons. The English etymology is fanciful; while Cornish *eglos* does not accord with the regular *ac* of the forms. Nor is “church” a likely term for a reef with neither a church nor any resemblance to one. There is sense only if Cornish *-acles* is instead taken as the cognate of early Welsh *achles* ‘covering, shelter; refuge; support, help’. *Mannahackles alias Manacles* or *Meanacles* will thus be “stones of shelter, stones of refuge”. The Manacles being “a formidable breakwater” against the Atlantic, Cornish mariners identified them as “stones of shelter” behind which their boats found safety. They were “stones of protection” as a natural harbour-wall off Cornwall; the Goodwins were a “good friend” as a bulwark against Channel gales. Each name shows the gratitude of seafarers.

4. Legends of Drowned Lands

We end by listing other legends of cities or domains which vanished abruptly beneath the ocean. In Welsh verses, surviving in the thirteenth-century Black Book of Carmarthen, the attention of a certain Seithennin is drawn to the plain of Gwyddno, now flooded by the sea. An unnamed girl is then cursed as having brought about the catastrophe. With the passage of the centuries, the story accumulated detail on the inundation as one thoroughly deserved, because of the wicked lives of the profligates and drunks who perished [Lloyd, 1911, 5, 25–26]. Later commentators cited similar stories from the Lough Neagh area of Northern Ireland and the coast of Brittany [Chadwick & Chadwick, 1932, 116]. There is a detailed study of the Welsh and Breton legends [Bromwich, 1950]. Grigson, citing work by the geologist F. J. North (1889–1968), showed how these tales of “sunken cities” should be recognized as largely “nonsensical fabrications” of the middle ages and then the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, “with their taste for the falsification and inflation of folklore” [Grigson, 1966, 226–227]. Inventions of this kind go back a long way. The twelfth-century *Four Branches of the Mabinogi* mention how rivers called Lli and Archan “overflowed the kingdoms” to make the Irish Sea [Breeze, 2009, 103, 104–105]. Such “legendary inundations” were a favourite of Welsh and Irish storytellers [Sims-Williams, 2011, 193]. Ker-Is in Brittany, Cantre’r Gwaelod in Cardigan Bay, or Lyonesse between

Cornwall and the Isles of Scilly will be in the same fictional league as Earl Godwine's Lomea. Scholars who relate the Goodwins to Godwine thus themselves come to grief on an untrustworthy narrative. Let us rid ourselves of these wild stories. From now on we should think of the Goodwins not as dreaded by English mariners, but valued. They were a "good friend" that guarded the lives and ships of those in peril on the sea.

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«ДОБРЫЙ ДРУГ» И ПЕСЧАНАЯ ОТМЕЛЬ ГУДВИНА, ГРАФСТВО КЕНТ

Пески Гудвина (*Goodwin Sands*) представляют собой опасную отмель в Ла-Манше. Название отмели означает «Добрый друг» и нередко рассматривается как эвфемистическое или благопожелательное. Альтернативой этому объяснению является имеющая кельтские параллели легенда, согласно которой отмель некогда была островом, принадлежавшим графу Годвину (ум. 1053) и позднее затонувшим по естественным причинам. Однако научные данные говорят о том, что в обозримой исторической перспективе эта отмель никогда не была куском суши, следовательно, ее название не может иметь ничего общего с Годвином Уэссекским. Не является оно и попыткой «задобрить» источник опасности. Автор объясняет этот топоним, обращаясь к особенностям называемой им реалии и анализируя ее связь с Даунсом, якорным рейдом между отмелью и побережьем Кента: Пески Гудвина, опасные для мореплавателей, представляют собой естественный волнорез; однако они образуют тихую заводь Даунса, где корабли могли переждать ненастье. Таким образом, эта отмель действительно была «добрым другом» моряков. Данная интерпретация имеет топонимическую параллель — *Manacle Rocks*, «Скалы убежища», недалеко от побережья Корнуолла. Оба названия реализуют одну и ту же номинативную модель: как Пески Гудвина, так и Мэнэклс погубили много кораблей, но спасли куда больше, защищая их от штормов в Ла-Манше и в Атлантике.

К л ю ч е в ы е с л о в а: Пески Гудвина, *Goodwin Sands*, легенды о затонувших землях, кораблекрушения, скалы Мэнэклс в Корнуолле, *the Manacles*.

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