Old English *hátte/hátton*: Anomalous relic or integrated verbal forms?

Of all the Germanic languages, Gothic is the only one in which synthetic passive inflection is productively maintained, though only in the present tense; for preterite passive forms, a periphrastic construction with the verb *waírþan* ‘to become’ + past participle is employed.

(1) a. sah wairþiþ miki jah sunus hauhistins haitada
   he becomes great and son of-highest is.called
   ‘He will be great and shall be called the son of the highest.’
   (Luke 1:32)

   b. Marja sei haitana was Magdalene
   Mary who called was Magdalene
   ‘Mary, who was called Magdalene.’ (Luke 8:2)

The fact that the passive inflection only exists in the present tense in Gothic, however, suggests that this system is already in the process of breaking down, and the absence of a productive synthetic passive in the other Germanic languages would seem to confirm this. Old English retains only one vestige of this older verbal inflection system, namely the synthetic passive forms of the verb *hátan*, i.e., *hátte/hátton*, which occur alongside the newer periphrastic construction.

(2) a. galbanum hatte superne wyrt
   galbanum is.called southern herb
   ‘A southern herb which is called galbanum.’ (OE2, Laeceboc)

   b. Se æftera wæs Ceawlin haten Westseaxna cyning
   the second was Ceawlin called of-West-Saxons king
   ‘The second king of the West Saxons was called Ceawlin.’ (OE2, Bede)

   c. he bið gehaten Godes feond
   he is called God’s enemy
   ‘He will be called God’s enemy.’ (OE2, Cura Pastoralis)

This synthetic passive form, however, is quite robust, which probably accounts for its survival in Old English. A number of grammars and dictionaries of Old English claim that this synthetic passive form is not limited to the present tense, as it would have been in Gothic, but that it had also spread to the past tense (Moore et al. 1977; Davis 1980; Mitchell 2000; Mitchell & Robinson 2001), suggesting a continuation of the breakdown
of the synthetic passive evident in Gothic. There is not complete consensus, however, in how hātte/hātton were used: Hall (1984) claims these forms were only preterite passive whereas Robinson (1992) claims they were only present passive. Given this situation, one might expect such an anomaly not to be well integrated into the Old English verbal system; instead of a tense distinction, the synthetic passive should appear in both present and past contexts at the same frequency as its periphrastic counterpart. But, in how far had this system actually broken down in Old English? Are the forms hātte/hātton as anomalous as the grammars suggest? Collecting examples of both synthetic and periphrastic passive instances of hātan from the Dictionary of Old English and comparing their distribution and use to those of haitan in Gothic, I show that the passive forms of Old English hātan are used and distributed in much the same way as the equivalent forms of Gothic haitan in Early Old English, suggesting a continuation of this older Germanic system, while it is not until Late Old English that the synthetic passive begins to lose ground.

References