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OE *wearg* in Wanborough and Wreighton

Carole Hough (pp. 14–20)

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ABBREVIATIONS OF COUNTIES AND EPNS COUNTY SURVEYS

Co	Cornwall
Ha	Hampshire
He	Herefordshire
K	Kent
La	Lancashire
Nb	Northumberland
Sf	Suffolk
So	Somerset
Wt	Isle of Wight
CPNE	<i>Cornish Place-Name Elements.</i>
EPNE	<i>English Place-Name Elements, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN BdHu	<i>The Place-Names of Bedfordshire and Huntingdonshire.</i>
PN Brk	<i>The Place-Names of Berkshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Bu	<i>The Place-Names of Buckinghamshire.</i>
PN Ca	<i>The Place-Names of Cambridgeshire and the Isle of Ely.</i>
PN Ch	<i>The Place-Names of Cheshire, Parts 1–5.</i>
PN Cu	<i>The Place-Names of Cumberland, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN D	<i>The Place-Names of Devon, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Db	<i>The Place-Names of Derbyshire, Parts 1, 2 and 3.</i>
PN Do	<i>The Place-Names of Dorset, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Du	<i>The Place-Names of County Durham, Part 1.</i>
PN Ess	<i>The Place-Names of Essex.</i>
PN ERY	<i>The Place-Names of the East Riding of Yorkshire and York.</i>
PN Gl	<i>The Place-Names of Gloucestershire, Parts 1–4.</i>
PN Hrt	<i>The Place-Names of Hertfordshire.</i>
PN Le	<i>The Place-Names of Leicestershire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Li	<i>The Place-Names of Lincolnshire, Parts 1–7.</i>
PN Mx	<i>The Place-Names of Middlesex (apart from the City of London).</i>
PN Nf	<i>The Place-Names of Norfolk, Parts 1–3.</i>
PN Nt	<i>The Place-Names of Nottinghamshire.</i>
PN NRY	<i>The Place-Names of the North Riding of Yorkshire.</i>
PN Nth	<i>The Place-Names of Northamptonshire.</i>
PN O	<i>The Place-Names of Oxfordshire, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN R	<i>The Place-Names of Rutland.</i>
PN Sa	<i>The Place-Names of Shropshire, Parts 1–6.</i>
PN Sr	<i>The Place-Names of Surrey.</i>
PN St	<i>The Place-Names of Staffordshire, Part 1.</i>
PN Sx	<i>The Place-Names of Sussex, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN W	<i>The Place-Names of Wiltshire.</i>
PN Wa	<i>The Place-Names of Warwickshire.</i>
PN We	<i>The Place-Names of Westmorland, Parts 1 and 2.</i>
PN Wo	<i>The Place-Names of Worcestershire.</i>
PN WRY	<i>The Place-Names of the West Riding of Yorkshire, Parts 1–8.</i>

OE *wearg* in Warnborough and Wreighburn

Carole Hough

Smith's *English Place-Name Elements* identifies four place-names containing OE *wearg* 'a felon, a criminal, an outlaw' (Smith 1956, II, 247). These are: Horrell Co, Wreighill Nb, Warnborough Ha, and Wreighburn Nb. The second element of Horrell and Wreighill is OE *hyll* 'a hill'; and both names have plausibly been explained as 'felon hill, hill where felons were executed' (Ekwall 1960, 538). The same formation may occur in Wrelton YN, tentatively interpreted as 'farm by or on the gallows-hill' (Smith 1928, 81). The second element of Warnborough and Wreighburn, however, is OE *burna* 'a stream'; and this is more difficult to account for. These names are usually taken to mean 'felon stream', referring to a stream where criminals were drowned (Ekwall 1960, 498; Cameron 1988, 139; Mills 1991, 346-7). The purpose of this article is to question that interpretation, and to put forward an alternative suggestion.

'Felon stream' is an unsatisfactory etymology for two reasons. Firstly, it is unlikely on historical grounds. There is very little evidence for drowning as a means of execution in Anglo-Saxon England. Only one extant law-code, the fourth code of Æthelstan (c.929-c.939), refers to this type of punishment, and even here it is reserved for a particular type of criminal: free women who are persistent thieves. IV Æthelstan ch.6,4 reads as follows:

Si libera mulier sit, precipitetur de cliuo uel submergatur.

(Liebermann 1903-16, I, 172)

If it is a free woman, she is to be thrown from a cliff or drowned.

There is no record of this law actually being put into effect, and indeed the only documented instance of an execution by drowning is for the

crime of witchcraft. Some time between 963 and 975, an unnamed widow and her son forfeited an estate at Ailsworth for sticking pins into (presumably an effigy of) a man named Ælfsige. A charter outlining the history of the estate mentions that the woman also forfeited her life:

þa nam man þ[æt] wif 7 adrencte hi æt Lundene brigce 7 hire
sune ætberst 7 werð utlah . . .

Then the woman was taken and drowned at London Bridge,
but her son escaped and became an outlaw . . . (Robertson
1956, 68-9)

Even here, it is uncertain whether the woman was executed according to law, or if, as Davies argues, she was "illegally drowned" (1989, 51). In either case, it is reasonable to assume that places associated with the drowning of witches would be designated by the OE term for a witch, OE *wicce* (fem.) or OE *wicca* (masc.), rather than by the general term for a criminal, OE *wearg*. Reliable records of juridical drowning date from no earlier than the thirteenth century (Pollock and Maitland 1898, II, 496; Liebermann 1903-16, II, 393; Bateson 1904, 75-76), and cannot be accepted as evidence for the Anglo-Saxon period.

The second reason for doubting this explanation of Warnborough and Wreighburn is because of the nature of the second element. OE *burna* generally refers to a stream or a brook, not to a river; and the most recent study of the element characterises it as a clear stream with a gravelly bed, often subject to seasonal variations in flow (Cole, 1990-91). It would of course have been perfectly possible to drown someone in a *burna*, but surely a much deeper and more reliable supply of water would have been preferred for a public execution. Ekwall's statement, "In the case of a small stream such as Wreigh Burn or the Waring, a pool would be used or the water held up temporarily by a dam" (1928, 473), is purely speculative, for the late medieval sources from which he appears to derive his information refer to drownings in tidal rivers or the sea (Bateson 1904, 75-76). The widow of Ailsworth was apparently drowned in the River Thames, although Davies (1989, 49-51) argues that the charter reading quoted above may mean 'the bridge on the London road', referring to the bridge across

the Nene on Ermine Street. It is at least clear that the site of the drowning was a major river, not a mere *burna*.

Further occurrences of OE *wearg* identified in later volumes of the English Place-Name Survey shed little light on the problem. The Analysis of Elements for the West Riding of Yorkshire cites the minor name Wareholes (Smith 1961-63, VII, 265), whilst the Cheshire survey adds *Warihull*, *Warrilowhead*, *Warigreene*, and *Warri-*, *Worridon* (Dodgson 1970-81, V.1:ii, 381). In most of these names, the meaning 'felon' seems appropriate. The second element of Wareholes YW appears to be OE *hol* 'a hole, a hollow' (Smith 1961-63, V, 43), and Smith associates this name with others like Feedale, Thief Hole and Thieves Gill, where 'felons are referred to in the names of their lurking places' (*ibid.*, VII, 74). *Warihull* Ch may be analogous to the 'felon hill' names discussed above; and Dodgson explains *Warrilowhead* as 'perhaps 'felon's-, outlaw's mound'' (1970-81, I, 129). The field-names *Warigreene*, and *Warri-*, *Worridon* are recorded too late for any certainty to be possible (1610 and 1843 respectively), but Dodgson's tentative suggestions of 'felon's green' for the former (1970-81, III, 268) and 'outlaw's hill' for the latter (*ibid.*, 138) make reasonable sense.

This still leaves the names Warnborough and Wreighburn for which no convincing explanation has been proposed. The same formation may occur in Weybourne Nf, which Ekwall interpreted similarly as 'felon stream' (1960, 510). In recent years, however, more convincing etymologies have been put forward (Kristensson 1981; Sandred 1981; Arngart 1982-83), so that Weybourne cannot confidently be added to the corpus of *wearg* names.

It may be worth approaching the problem from another direction, by considering the types of first element commonly combined with OE *burna* in place-names. One of the main categories identified by Smith is "An animal, bird or fish-name", and he lists twelve place-names in this section (1956, I, 64). Gelling confirms that "The categories in which the first element refers to vegetation and to wild creatures are roughly equal", and provides a more extensive list of eighteen place-names where OE *burna* is combined with the names of wild creatures (1984, 18). These include names such as Barbon We 'bear stream', Barbourne Wo 'beaver stream', Broxbourne Hrt 'badger

stream', Hartburn Du, Nb 'hart stream', and Roeburn La 'roe stream'. It seems to me that Warnborough and Wreighburn may well fit into the same category. Although OE *wearg* is recorded only with the meaning 'a felon, a criminal', cognates in Old High German, Old Saxon, and Old Norse were also used of 'a wolf'. OHG *warg* and OS *warag* occur in both senses (Holthausen 1974, 386), and so does ON *vargr*, cited as "'a wolf', also 'an outlaw who has violated a holy place'" on another page of Smith's *Elements* (1956, II, 229). The etymology of this group of words is disputed (Pokorny 1930-32, I, 273; De Vries 1977, 646; Lehmann 1986, 229), but it seems likely that the primary meaning was 'wolf', since a development from 'wolf' to 'criminal' is more logical than a development from 'criminal' to 'wolf'. Cleasby and Vigfusson relate both ON *vargr* and OE *wearg* to a root-word preserved in German *er-würgen* 'to worry' (an animal of its prey), and define ON *vargr* as 'a wolf', with the secondary, legal sense deriving from a metaphorical usage: "an outlaw, who is to be hunted down as a wolf" (1957, 680).

If this is correct, OE *wearg* must originally have had a similar semantic range, whether or not the meaning 'wolf' had fallen out of use by the later Anglo-Saxon period from which most written records survive. It may be significant that although neither Warnborough Wa nor Wreighburn Nb is recorded in early sources, the second element, OE *burna*, has been identified as one of the earliest place-name-forming elements used by the Anglo-Saxon settlers in England (Cox 1975-76). It is therefore fully possible that these names preserve an early sense of OE *wearg*, and thus represent additional instances of *burna*-names referring to wild animals.

The plausibility of this suggestion may be tested by comparison with place-names formed from the more common word for a wolf. OE *wulf*, sometimes interchanging with its ON cognate *úlfr*, gives rise to a number of place-names such as Wooldale YW 'wolves' valley', Wolford Wa 'place protected against wolves', and Woolley Brk, Hu, YW 'wolves' wood' (Smith 1956, II, 281). Woolmer Ha 'wolves' pond' (*ibid.*) is particularly interesting, as the second element is again a word for water: OE *mere*. This may present a direct parallel to the twelfth-century name *Wargemere* Mx, which Ekwall cites as "probably 'lake in which felons were drowned'" (1960, 502). Further instances

of OE *wulf* in combination with words for water occur in charter-bounds: *wulfa broc* (Sawyer 1968 Nos. 531, 666), *wulfwælles heafod* (*ibid.* No. 298), *wulfwylles heafod* (*ibid.* No. 704), and *wulf flodan* (*ibid.* No. 469). Indeed, the occurrence of place-names like Wolborough D and Woolow Db, both meaning ‘wolves’ hill’ (Gover 1931-32, II, 524; Cameron 1959, I, 97), and Wolfridge G1 ‘ridge haunted by a wolf’ (Smith 1964-65, III, 121) raises the possibility that some of the ‘*wearg*-hill’ names mentioned above may similarly mean ‘wolf hill’ rather than ‘felon hill’. So too Wareholes YW, supposedly ‘felon’s lurking place’, could be analogous to Winfold C ‘wolf hollow’ (Reaney 1943, 186). I am grateful to Ann Cole for pointing out to me in a private communication that Wreighill and Wreighburn are only about three miles apart, and that it is unlikely that two places of execution would be sited so close together. As she goes on to comment: “It seems more likely that wolves were to be found in the whole area—and the names would offer some warning to travellers on the Roman road to the north and on the Flotterton *weg*.” The same purpose may well have been served by other place-names in *wearg*-.

It is well known that place-names provide many instances of bird- or animal-names unattested in literary sources, or only recorded with other meanings. Examples include OE **bagga*, almost certainly meaning ‘a badger’ (Smith 1956, I, 17-18), OE **bula* ‘a bull’ (*ibid.*, 56-57), OE **cā* ‘a jackdaw’ (*ibid.*, 75), OE **padde* ‘a toad’ (*ibid.*, II, 58), and OE *pīc*. The latter is recorded in the literature only with the sense ‘a point’, but evidently refers to a fish in place-names like Pickburn YW and Pickmere Ch (*ibid.*, II, 63). I suggest that OE *wearg* is another word for which place-names preserve a meaning unrepresented in the small corpus of extant literature. Comparison with cognates in other Germanic languages indicates that the primary meaning of the word was not ‘criminal’ but ‘wolf’, whilst a consideration of the legal evidence and of other occurrences of OE *burna* in place-names suggests that ‘wolf stream’ is a more convincing interpretation of Warnborough Ha and Wreighburn Nb than ‘felon stream’.

While this article was in press, I came across a paper by James E. Anderson which discusses word-play in the Old English poems *Deor*, *Wulf and Eadwacer*, and *The Soul's Address*, and asserts that in the latter poem "OE *wearg*, *werg*, the soul's bad name for the body in l.16, means both 'outlaw' and 'wolf'" (1983, 221). I was not previously aware of this suggestion, which would appear to support my interpretation of OE *wearg* in place-names. The reading is not, however, firmly established. The authorities cited by Anderson are Toller (1898) and Grein (1912). The former does not include the definition 'wolf', but the latter, which I had overlooked, gives "1) *Wolf*. 2) *geächteter friedloser Verbrecher*." Anderson's reading is repeated by Aertsen (1994, 129), but has otherwise largely been ignored by literary scholars. The latest edition of the poem translates as 'accursed one' (Moffat 1990, 50); and indeed Griffith states categorically that "OE *wearg*, 'criminal', 'outlaw', never acquired the meaning 'wolf' in Old English (cf. ON *vargr*)" (1993, 188). Whether or not such a meaning is represented in the extant literature, I suggest that this statement is effectively refuted by the place-name evidence.

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